

Preaching From the Old Testament

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A recent edition of the *Charlotte Observer* carried two articles of interest to the religious community, though neither were in the religious section. The lead article on the front page reported that Jim and Tammy Bakker of the PTL Club had recently acquired a \$449,000 condominium in Palm Springs, California. In addition, Jim Bakker had also purchased two new cars: one a Mercedes-Benz; the other a Rolls Royce. The surprising aspect about all of this was not the purchases themselves (which are consistent with what Jim and Tammy have been doing all along the way), but rather the timing of the purchases. The reporter noted that the purchases were made shortly after the Bakkers had announced to their audience that they had "sold all they had" to help insure the continuance of the PTL ministry.

The second news item was found in a more obscure place. Buried within the "Local News" section was the report that a traveling evangelist named "John 3:16 Cook" had chosen to make Charlotte his home. Complaining that all the Charlotte churches were spiritually dead, Cook had purchased the Old Astor Theater (formerly a theater catering to homosexuals) and was converting it to a church. Listed among Cook's past record was the fact that he had had a "brush with the law in Florida" and that previously he had carried on a "ministry to domestic animals."

These two incidents simply document the fact that the times in which we live are filled with religious ferment. Harvey Cox, in his recently published book, *Religion in the Secular City*, points out that the society in which we live is not one in which religion plays no significant role.¹ Rather, religion has made a dramatic resurgence into modern life and the political arena. Cox believes that we are entering a "postmodern" period of religion which goes beyond the religious expressions of the past several decades. Cox asserts that the resources for a postmodern theology will not come from the center but from "the bottom and the edge" which he identifies, in part, as the resurgence of fundamentalism and third world theology, respectively.

Whether Cox is right in his description of postmodern theology remains to be seen. It is clear, however, that there is a resurgence of religion on "the fringe." All around the signs are ominous: the emergence of a large number of television evangelists who are part of the inner circle of the White House, evangelistic prima donnas whom John Killinger once called, "shallow and a historical like waterbugs skating on the surface of the pond, with little or no acquaintance in the ecclesiastical or theological depths."

Along with the rise of these religious celebrities, there has also been a resurgence of fundamentalism - even dispensational theology. It is small comfort to read in *Time*, that a number of persons in important government positions today, including the President himself, are intrigued by, if not wed to, the

premillennialist view that nuclear war may be a part of God's plan for Armageddon.² All of this must be seen in the context of a deeply troubled world: the assassination in India, the killing of a priest in Poland, the starvation of thousands in Ethiopia, the covert war in Nicaragua, the support of the Reagan administration for the present regime in South Africa.

In times like these we are apt to remember the lament of Jeremiah:

“Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable . . . ?
Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail?” (Jeremiah 15:18)

Somehow, when the answer comes, our hearing breaks down.

“If you have raced with men on foot, and they
have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?
And if in a safe land you fall down,
how will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?” (Jeremiah 12:5)

So how will we do? How are we doing? In the jungle of the Jordan? The footmen and the horses are still with us. But they have been joined by Pershing Twos and MX Missiles, which threaten to put Utah and the Bekaa Valley into Jeremiah's backyard.

I.

This article is an apology for preaching in the life of the church and particularly for preaching that is rooted in the Old Testament. For well over a decade now, we have heard reports about the demise of preaching.³ Numerous books and articles have lamented the decline of good preaching. Sociologists and communication experts have warned that preaching cannot stand its ground in a mass-media society.

Yet Protestants have historically cherished the place of the sermon in the worship of the church and have nurtured the practice of preaching as a primary function of the ministry. This has been so partly because of the Protestant emphasis on the service of God in the life of the mind; partly because of the conviction that only such faith as can be critically thought through and articulated with some degree of clarity can claim allegiance upon a person's whole being; partly because of a certain respect in the Protestant tradition for the potential power of human language as a vehicle for the Word of God. The Augsburg Confession of 1530 declares that the church exists as a holy community wherever the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered (*Est autem Ecclesia congregatio Sanctorum, in quo Evangelium recte docetur et recte administrantur Sacramenta.*) For Calvin, the word in Latin is *sincere*, rather than *recte*, but the emphasis is the same. “Wherever we see the Word of God purely (*sincere*) preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”⁴ The emphasis of Augsburg and Calvin is not simply on

the existence of sacraments and preaching, but on the rectitude or integrity of preaching. That is to say, the church manifests its true and lively existence only and insofar as the Word of God is spoken with clarity in human language, understood by people as crucial for their lives, and made concrete in the world of human affairs. The sermon and preaching, therefore, and the integrity by which they are done, are simply nonnegotiable matters from the Protestant point of view. The perspective of this article is that the sermon and preaching, when undertaken with rectitude, still have the power to shape the life of the church and society, and that preaching coupled with teaching and pastoral care remain the essential and most important tasks of the minister today.

II.

But what about the task of preaching from the Old Testament? Does one consciously attempt to preach from the Old Testament? How is that balanced by the Word of God in the New Testament, and specifically the Word of God as it is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? How does one do this today? Should one follow the lectionary, or should there be more freedom than the lectionary provides? Now, of course, there are not easy answers to all these questions. They will be answered differently by different people in different places, but there are some things that appear to be clear.

First, the recovery of the preaching of the Old Testament is related to the recovery of biblical preaching in general. Leander Keck, in his book *The Bible in the Pulpit*, speaks of what he calls the “malaise of biblical preaching today.”⁵ Keck cites several factors in this. One is the fact that the use of the Bible has been a source of controversy in the history of American Protestantism. From the “Bible vs. Babel” controversy in the early part of this century to the present debate over the interpretation of the Bible in evangelical circles today, the Protestant church has been plagued by disputes about the Bible. A second factor for Keck is the way that the Bible has been controversial in social and moral matters. Whether the issue be temperance, civil rights, abortion, or homosexuality, the Bible has been used to support a number of varying views. This has led to the conclusion by some, that the Bible really isn’t authoritative in these matters. A third factor is the preacher’s own ambivalence toward the Bible and toward biblical criticism. By this Keck points to the fact that many ministers, trained in historical critical methods of interpreting Scripture, are at a loss to relate the positive results of biblical studies to their preaching and teaching ministry. Some retreat into a safe, conservative approach to Scripture, while others feel called to share with their parishoners the good news that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, or that the words of the gospel of John do not really reflect the sayings of the historical Jesus.⁶

The net result of this malaise is the church’s indifference to the Bible. As Elizabeth Achtemeier has so well put it:

It is now possible in this country to carry on the expected work of a Protestant congregation with no reference to the Bible whatsoever. The worship services of the church can be divorced from biblical models and

become the celebration of the congregation's life together and of its more or less vaguely held common beliefs in some God. Folk songs, expressive of American culture, can replace the psalms of the church. Art forms and aesthetic experiences can be used as substitutes for communion with God. The preacher's opinion or ethical views can be made replacements for the word from the Biblical text. The sacraments can be turned into expressions of simply the congregation's fellowship together. But the amazing thing is that no one in the pew on Sunday morning may notice. Indeed, such a worship service may win praise from some quarters as "contemporary" and "relevant."⁷

At stake here is the very vitality and authenticity of the gospel. The recovery of biblical preaching is a central issue for our times as well as for our ministries themselves.

Secondly, the recovery of authentic preaching of the Old Testament is closely related to the realization that biblical preaching is profoundly part of the larger discipline of theological discourse. Preaching, rightly understood, is a theological discipline. The purpose of preaching is to explain the Bible, but unless one believes that the words of the Bible are the very words of God, the explanation of the Bible quickly becomes a theological enterprise. Theology is contextual in character. It is the attempt to speak of God in Christian community in terms of the language and events that make up the contemporary historical setting. Theology, according to Karl Barth, is the church taking her measure, facing herself with the question of truth, measuring her action and her metaphors of faith, by the biblical witness to God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁸

Recent biblical scholarship has focused on the importance of the entire canon in the process of the interpretation of scripture. It has emphasized that the text to be interpreted, be it an Old Testament text or a New Testament one, is part of a wider context, namely the theology of the church. As Achtemeier points out, by being a church theologian, the preacher often preaches a more biblical sermon than do those homileticsians who concentrate on a single biblical text, but who ignore the text's context in the total Scriptural witness, which is distilled, in turn, in the church's theology.⁹

Preaching as a theological discipline has several basic functions in the life of the church. First, it is the means by which the church acquires, develops tests, and reforms its language. Christian people in every generation need to develop a language about God, a language about peace, justice, and love. Preaching is one of the ways that language in the church is shaped and formed. Secondly, the sermon and its preaching provide the means of traditioning the faithful, thus making visible the church's faith in the communion of saints. The Pentecostal expression, "God has no grandchildren," is appropriate for our time. Apart from the church's education and nurture of its members, the faith is extinguished. Thirdly, the sermon and its preaching are the means to understand contemporary events in light of the past. Authentic preaching has a way of interpreting contemporary events in light of the God who brought Israel out of Egypt and who raised Jesus from the dead. Apart from the understanding of the biblical tradition, the church falls easy prey to every wind of

change which the culture produces.

John Leith has pointed out that John Calvin combined in a remarkable way the abilities of biblical interpretation, theological reflection, as well as a comprehensive vision of what Christian society and practice should be. Recent research on Calvin's life and influence has recovered a new sense of the importance of preaching to Calvin's ministry in Geneva. As Leith points out, "It is not enough to speak of Calvin only as a biblical preacher. He was that. He was also a theological preacher who understood human existence in the light of a clearly conceived theological framework and who had a vision of a holy community which fulfilled God's purposes in history."¹⁰

Thirdly, right preaching of the Old Testament for our times will take seriously the rich resources that historical critical methods have made available for the preaching ministry and for the life of the church.

Several examples can be given to illustrate this. One is the advent of form criticism and redaction criticism. Form criticism is the attempt to determine within a unit of scripture the literary genre or type and to see that type in a particular setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) in Israel's history. Redaction criticism, on the other hand, deals with the unique way authors or redactors have incorporated the pieces of material into a whole. For example, the so-called Yahwist (J) writer has incorporated into his history of Israel certain original material that has been edited for his purposes. A parallel phenomenon in the New Testament is the way each of the gospel writers used the oral and literary traditions available to them to portray the life of Jesus.

The use of form criticism can be helpful for the preacher in a number of ways. For example, recent studies of the Psalms have identified a rich number of literary genres within the Psalms: Hymns of Praise, Enthronement Psalms, Messianic Psalms, Laments, Wisdom Psalms, etc.¹¹ Studies of the lament have shown that it was one of the basic ways that Israel fashioned its own prayer life. The lament has a clearly identifiable form of its own: a) an address to God, b) the complaint to God about some specific activity or hurt, c) the confession of trust of confidence that in spite of the problematic situation God is able to intervene, d) a petition asking God's intervention, e) the words of assurance that prayer will be heard, f) and the concluding vow of praise. Walter Brueggemann has shown that the lament of Israel was a powerful voice of protest about the way things are in the world. Brueggemann compares the form of lament to the stages of grief and death identified by the clinical psychologist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her work *On Death and Dying*.¹² On this classic study Kubler-Ross identifies five stages which terminally ill patients often experience: 1) denial and isolation, 2) anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression, 5) acceptance. In both the lament of Israel and the stages of dying which Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified, there is a movement from negation to affirmation. Brueggemann also points out that there are dissimilarities as well. Kubler-Ross' form is more a yearning for covenant rather than an affirmation of it. The role that a friend or listener plays in Kubler-Ross' model is certainly not consistent with the faith in Yahweh which sustained Israel in the face of suffering. Moreover, it is often uncertain as to the level of acceptance that contemporary people are able to find.¹³

The significance of this kind of research into the form of the lament, however, goes beyond whatever similarities it may have with the finding of modern clinical psychologists. It speaks to the honesty with which Israel confronted the incongruities of life. The lament was Israel's way of taking seriously the justice and sovereignty of God. In a time in which the language of the church in prayer is so docile and weak, it is well to hear the great anguish and faith of the prayers of Israel.

Another example of the way historical critical method has added rich insight into the Old Testament to aid the preacher is in the wisdom literature. For a number of years the wisdom literature (Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes) has occupied a no-man's-land in Old Testament theology. Gerhard von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* was built on the model of Israel's salvation history, in which there was simply no place for the wisdom literature. Likewise, since Walter Eichrodt's *The Theology of the Old Testament* saw the theme of covenant as the underlying theme of Old Testament theology, it had no real place for the wisdom literature. A recent study of Old Testament theology which seeks a corrective of the approach of Eichrodt and von Rad is found in *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* by Samuel Terrien. Terrien shows how the wisdom literature is consistent with Israel's overall search to affirm both the absence and the presence of God.¹⁴

Study of the wisdom literature reveals two distinct strands. One is the popular folk wisdom of the Book of Proverbs. It seems to reflect the theology of a Norman Vincent Peale or Robert Schuller. The theological premise of Proverbs is that human existence in the world makes sense. Proverbs echoes the belief that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished. This neat relationship between an individual's moral life and what happens to him finds expression in such proverbs as "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but thwarts the craving of the wicked" (Proverbs 10:3). Or again, "The Lord tears down the house of the proud, but maintains the widow's boundaries" (Proverbs 15:25).

However, investigation into the wisdom literature also reveals a radical break with this life-affirming, sometimes shallow, view of Israel's life. The events of the exile did much to cause Israel to question the easy assumptions of the Book of Proverbs. Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job are part of the revolt which took place in the wisdom material. The Book of Job, in dramatic fashion, calls into question the whole notion that God is in charge of the world, as well as the idea that there is any correlation between human behavior and divine favor. The Book of Ecclesiastes, often viewed as on the fringe of the canon, also must be seen as a powerful theological protest of the easy assumption that God is on the side of the faithful. For Ecclesiastes the problem is more epistemological. God is in charge. Problem is that man cannot know the ways of God.

Both Job and Ecclesiastes are important to the life of the preacher. They keep both minister and congregation honest about the tragic dimension of life. They are an important corrective against the easy religion that threatens the very fabric of the church today.

The fourth premise of this paper is that preaching from the Old Testa-

ment is crucial for the times in which we live. Whatever else one may say about the campaign of 1984, it is clear that it will be remembered as one in which the issue of religion played a significant role. In a recent article of *Sojourners*, Jim Wallis points out that in American political life there are two kinds of civil religion: the priestly and the prophetic.¹⁵ Both appeal to transcendent faith and moral values, but each has a very different orientation. The more common form of American civil religion has been in the priestly variety. Here religion is used to comfort the people, to assure them of their goodness and the soundness of their institutions, to assert the righteousness of the national purpose and destiny. The appeal here is to pride, and to the glory of the nation's past, present, and future. This is the religion of the prayer breakfast, where religious and political leaders gather, not to affirm their accountability to the Word of God, but to engage in mutual affirmation and outright political campaigning.

As Wallis so ably points out, it is clear that Ronald Reagan has emerged as the current high priest of this kind of religion. Others have gone before him, and, doubtless, others will come after him. The religious themes in this kind of religion are clear: America is a chosen people, blessed by God and set apart for his purposes. This type of religion finds it easy to identify evil in others, but never sees evil within itself. The message of this kind of civil religion is found in expressions such as "America is standing tall again" or "America is still the last and best hope of mankind."¹⁶

Over against this kind of priestly civil religion stands the prophetic version. The prophetic religious tradition, rooted in the Old Testament prophets, invokes the values, ideals, and faith that stand above the behavior and practices of any one nation. This is the religion of Amos who prophesied the Word of God not only against Damascus, Tyre, Edom, and Ammon, but also against Israel and Judah as well.

Martin Luther King, Jr., stood firmly in this tradition when he challenged the nation to live up to the challenge of both biblical faith and the best ideals and aspirations of America. Dorothy Day, in questioning the values of a hypocritical nation that exploits the poor in the name of the rich, also stands in this tradition. Even a President, Abraham Lincoln, called for national repentance for slavery as well as for a war which divided a nation. Lincoln reminded the people of his day that "it is better to hope that in the end we will be found on the side of God than to say 'God is on our side.'" The function of this kind of prophetic literature is to bring a nation under judgement and to call the people to repentance.

In closing, it may be well to remember that the election of 1984 came in the 50th year of the anniversary of the signing of the Barmen Declaration. That Declaration reminds the church in our age as in all ages that "Jesus Christ, as He is attested in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust in life and death." Prophetic religion, as it is found in Amos and in Micah, reminds us that what God requires of us is "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God."

These are words for the church in all seasons.

NOTES

- ¹ Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 12-19.
- ² Richard N. Ostling, "Armageddon and the End Times," *Time*, (November 5, 1984): 73.
- ³ See James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).
- ⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV, 1, 9 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).
- ⁵ Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 11-37.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 13.
- ⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I, 1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), 2.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching as Theology and Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 13.
- ¹⁰ John H. Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in Light of Recent Research," Paper presented at Calvin Society, Davidson, N. C., January, 1984.
- ¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984).
- ¹² Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969).
- ¹³ Walter Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Interpretation* 31 (July 1977): 263-275.
- ¹⁴ Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 350-380.
- ¹⁵ Jim Wallis, "The President's Pulpit," *Sojourners* (September 1984): 17-21.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.