

Preaching in a Secular Context

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“Contextuality” has become an accepted term in theological language. This is a welcome development. The significance of the context of a biblical text should have always been emphasized. The challenge represented by the two horizons—the time of the birth of the biblical text and the era of the theologian interpreting it¹—is fundamental to the whole of the theological enterprise. These horizons are fundamental for preaching as well. In my view both of the time-frame horizons are important for preaching, and between the two there is both an interrelatedness and a dynamic interaction. The faith “once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3) is to be proclaimed to women and men in the “secular city” that it might be understood. And in order for that faith to be understood, the *original context* of the biblical text must be seriously examined.

Contextuality, thus understood, has often been disregarded with harmful results for the cause of the proclamation of the gospel. I recall the experience of some of us in Hungary about forty years ago, which was a time of renewal in the life of the Reformed Church there. At that time the words of St. Paul in I Corinthians 1:18ff were very popular texts for preachers. Many preachers brought these words together with Acts 17:16ff, giving the following explanation:

In Athens Paul was confused by Greek culture. He gave up the preaching of the cross of Christ and preached philosophy instead. The results were miserable. There were practically no conversions in that city. The apostle, having realized his disobedience, returned to the simple message of the cross (I Cor. 2:2).

This interpretation betrays a complete disregard of the context in terms of both the events and the history of literature. Consequently, because the importance of contextuality had not been discovered, rich dimensions of the proclamation were lost, and people were not guided in urgent issues of the life of the church. Thank God the importance of contextuality was discovered!

From the point of view of our present topic of contextuality, Acts 17:16ff is of particular significance because it is the report of the first sermon of some length which was preached in a context outside the communities influenced by Hebrew-biblical traditions—in a *mutatis mutandis* or “secular context.”² Here we have an audience which was familiar with the way of thinking and literature of ancient Hellas, a way which, if anything, represented the *aion houtos* (the *saeculum praesens*, cf. Gal. 1:4, Vulgate) of those days. Therefore, a detailed study of this passage yields good fruit for contextual preaching in general and for preaching in a secular context in particular.

I am a preacher. It is my conviction that the preacher’s task is the most

humble of all.³ The task is not to show forth one's own learnedness and wisdom. The preacher is not to be a genius whose ideas are to shake the earth. The one who preaches is not to send off spectacular fireworks or to present entertainment of any kind. Rather, a preacher is to testify to an event.⁴ Indeed, the culmination of this event is the cross of Christ and his resurrection. This event embraces the whole of history. In it the Creator, the Redeemer of Israel who rent the heavens and came down (Is. 64:1) to be incarnate in Jesus Christ and to die on the cross, brought salvation for humankind by his sufferings, death, and resurrection. In Christ we have all the wonderful deeds of God summed up from creation to the final consummation.

The report of this event comes to us in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The holy men and women of God were inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:21)—the spirit of freedom who endows the prophets and the apostles to be human and to serve God's glory in the fullness of their humanity. Thus, the Word of God is also the word of man and woman. There is an analogy between the relationship of the two natures of Christ, as it was clarified and validly stated at Chalcedon by the Ecumenical Council, and the relationship of the divine and human sides of the Scripture. There is one way open for us to God; that way is Jesus Christ, God Incarnate. There is no other mediator, no other access. Similarly, there is no other way to hear God's Word than through the human speech of the holy writers of the Bible who were under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We are absolutely dependent on the Bible and absolutely dependent on the Holy Spirit in our witness to the Christ-event. Dependence on the Bible can be understood only in terms of dependence on the text, as we have access to the Bible at one point which is the text. The humility of the preacher as witness is that he or she preaches, proclaims, and interprets biblical texts, not personal thoughts.

At this point we have to distance ourselves both from fundamentalism and "classical" liberalism⁵ because each one of the two takes into consideration only one aspect—the former the divine, the latter the human—of the Holy Scriptures. Thus, we have to say with one breath that the text, including every "iota," is extremely important in its full historical context. The words of the text are not above history—as in the fundamentalist understanding of the words as "unerring" statements and timeless truths—because they are deeply rooted in and are a part of the history in which they were said and written. Therefore, if I want to understand the text in depth, I have to investigate it with all human (scientific) means including textual, literary, and historical criticism. The more I understand the grammatical composition, the literary form, and the original life situation (*Sitz im Leben*) of the text, the nearer I get to the deepest possible understanding. However (and this is why we have to say no to a "liberal" understanding of Scripture), by these human means of investigation we cannot get hold of the Word of God. To think that we can master the text is self-deception and deception of the people whom we address. We might have mastered the human situation, but not the Word. In the process of understanding, we need the power of the Holy Spirit that we might be under the power of the Word.

Thus, the preacher has to be involved in the mighty movement of the

Spirit who was at work at the time of the biblical event and who makes the preacher—as it were—“contemporary” of the same event (Gal. 3:1b). Such an understanding of the preacher’s task excludes the legitimacy of taking the text as a springboard from which the preacher can jump into the world of personal wisdom. The text must also not be used as a quarry from which the preacher can extract ideas and concepts to be fit into the framework of his or her own thinking. The preacher has to follow the dynamics of the text, the events described in it or reflected upon by the holy writer.⁶ At the same time, the preacher has to interpret the movement in the text for present-day contemporaries. The preacher must not forget, however, the responsibility to preach Christ, following the way he presents himself in the text. The preacher must follow the principle of Luther—was *Christum treibet*.⁷

It is equally important to point out that the preacher is a child of his or her time. The preacher cannot be anything else without deliberately withdrawing from life and existing as a living anachronism in a kind of ecclesiastical cyclorama which tries to bring alive things of the past, just as the cyclorama of Atlanta brings to us the battle of a last-century war. It seems to be possible to turn our churches into living museums. The preacher should consciously accept the fact of living in this world and sharing its burdens. In addition, the preacher lives under the threats and hopes of humanity at the threshold of the twenty-first century. The Christ-event must be proclaimed, according to the text, for the women and men of this present age. Therefore, the preacher must be familiar with the problems of the day. Following the saying attributed to Karl Barth, the preacher, after reading the Bible, should study the newspaper every day.

Thus, in absolute opposition to some kind of pietistic withdrawal into one’s inner world (German: *Innerlichkeit*), the world must be taken very seriously. The preacher must have a certain amount of knowledge about the sociological, psychological, economic, and political facts of life. Proclaiming the Word with authority is not possible without the awareness of human need. Humanity is struggling with many problems today. There is the all-embracing issue of the wealth of the affluent nations growing at the expense of the “developing” world, the former consuming sixty to seventy per cent of the energy and products available for the whole of humanity.⁸ Related to one another are other burning problems: that two people die of hunger every minute while in certain countries farmers get premiums for producing less, that missiles with nuclear warheads are aimed at the cities and institutions of many nations, that the immense amount of military expenditures would solve many of the problems of today.

The global problems are matched by the particular issues of individual nations and smaller communities, issues which also demand the attention of the preacher. It is very important that awareness of the world situation should not be a substitute for attention to local problems of which even affluent societies have many. Speaking about the problems caused by an anonymous system is relatively easier than speaking about particular evils of a smaller community. Since the church relies on donations in most cases, the servant of the Word of God is always tempted to speak according to the liking and tastes of the

congregation (I Kings 22:11ff; Ezek. 12:24, 33:30ff) or to speak only of the sins of others. This temptation must be resisted.

Most important, the challenges presented by the context in which the preacher and the congregation live must not be left unattended. In the Middle Ages, well-fed priests praised the glories and joy of poverty to the poor and outcasts. Unfortunately, such things happen, even if not often, in our own days, too. I myself witnessed a clergyman with a fat salary scold African ministers with very small incomes not to be bothered with things of this world. Biblical scholarship has clearly shown that contempt of this world—the context in which we live—comes from the cosmological and anthropological dualism of Hellenism and is completely alien to the biblical understanding of spirituality.⁹ In the Bible “spiritual” refers to the person or even the thing led by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

What has already been said does not mean that the minister of the Word of God should give lectures on the world situation. Still, the question arises: is there not a contradiction between the binding power of the text and the demands of the needs of the world? Let me emphasize that there is *no* such contradiction because of the very nature of God’s Word which does speak in, from, and to the human situation. The experience of many of us confirms this. If we faithfully do our homework in terms of exegesis and of opening our eyes to the needs of the day under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will be amazed at the depth of the relevance of a given text for the contemporary situation. An example of this occurred the other evening as I watched a television news report from Tashkent, USSR, by an American correspondent. According to his opinion, apart from the basic physical needs there is nothing in common between the American and the Russian people. On biblical grounds this statement is unacceptable, for we are all sinners in ourselves, in our relationships with other people, and in our relationship with our environment. That is why a biblical text born in a completely different culture will render analogies with our world today, both East and West. During the last fifty years or so, my country and my church have gone through several crises. In the midst of these, we often experienced the ancient texts speaking to us.

Speaking about the situation and role of the church in today’s world, Jurgen Moltmann reminds us of the necessity of a balance between our Christian identity and our involvement.¹¹ The guardian of this balance is the Holy Spirit, who uses the written word, that is, our particular text, to discover the balance and maintain it. In terms of the human need for salvation, there have been no changes since the days of the prophets of the Old Testament, in either what is today the United States or the Soviet Union.

No doubt, humanity has developed greatly in terms of science and technology. However, technology has not become the savior of the world as most people thought at the beginning of the present century. At that time Leonard Ragaz, the Swiss theologian, wrote that the whistle of the railway engines would proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God in Africa. At the news of the Wright brothers flying across the English Channel, others thought that the airplane would make war impossible because people would be closer to one another. However, technology has made killing and destruction more efficient

in spite of the many good things it has brought for humanity or for a section of humanity. For example, more energy and resources are spent on means of destruction than on care for the oppressed and the poor. In the carelessness and greed which have resulted in the pollution of the air, the waters, and the soil are the first warnings that the whole civilization is being threatened. If we look at the social and psychological problems of the "secular cities," of the high-rise apartments or other forms of modern slums even in some of the affluent countries, we may come to realize with the Psalmist centuries before the coming of Christ that "the cords of death encompassed me and the pains of hell got hold upon me" (Ps. 116:3). The snares of sin and of death surround us. These facts also demand our involvement in and through the preaching of Jesus Christ, who is our salvation *vis à vis* the contemporary expressions of human sinfulness. Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit makes us both Christian and relevant.

Consequently, Christ must be preached. In Christian pulpits there should be no room for sermons which are extremely relevant but, under the assumption that the sermon is preached within the context of a Christian worshipping congregation, are not directly related to the cross and the resurrection of Christ. The Name must be proclaimed—Christ must be named.¹² The text and its dynamism—if faithfully followed—will take care of saying the same thing, naming the same Christ in a completely new way. This christological principle must be followed as well in preaching the Old Testament. Bonhoeffer said that we see and interpret the story of creation in the light of the cross and resurrection of Christ.¹³ Thus, after having discovered the movement of the text, we have to answer the question of how we see the event or hear the message knowing that Christ was crucified and has risen.

What does it really mean to discover the movement of the text? The text is a living organism and a unity which should not be torn apart according to the liking and manipulating capacity of the preacher. The text should not be manipulated according to some rules of rhetoric which might be forced upon it like a kind of straight jacket. As Karl Barth puts it in his *Homiletik*, "The matter is not so much what the preacher should speak about at the first, then the second, and then the third instance. He has to repeat [to follow in speech] the one thing that is in the text."¹⁴ Thus, the unity, sequence, and division of the sermon is constituted by the wholeness of the given text.¹⁵ The sermon becomes one living organism which, again according to Barth, has "members" and not parts. From the point of view of the division of the sermon, then, the struggle for understanding the text is identical with the finding of its divisions. This work cannot be done without great humility, without intellectual dedication, and—last but not least—without expectation of the enlightenment of the Spirit (Ps. 123:2).

This obedient listening is also the clue to relevance. The analogies of life situations which we recognize after careful analysis of both the text and our situation will constitute the application. The application is not only the "moral" of the story but also the transfer of the original event to the level of our days. Fundamentally, application is the biblical event or reflection on the event taking place in the midst of today's congregation. At this point—apart

from the fundamental significance of a thorough theological learnedness of the preacher—there is a deep-going analogy between the task of theology and that of preaching. One of the major tasks of theology is to express that content of faith “which was once delivered unto the saints” in relation to the challenges represented by the day using a language which is understandable and meaningful to the contemporaries but which does not alter the content of that faith. This difficult, dangerous, yet absolutely necessary and thrilling enterprise is to be undertaken whenever we set out to preach.¹⁶

If these two analyses—that of the text and that of the contemporary situation—are carried out, the application is not going to be the “second part of the sermon” after explication or merely something put at the end of each paragraph; the application is going to be an organic part of the sermon as a whole. In that case the congregation will understand that the sermon is not a journey in the past (though perhaps an interesting journey); rather, the sermon is God acting and speaking in their midst, urging people to make decisions for obedience in faith.

Preaching takes place in the liturgy when the People of God assemble to glorify, adore, and praise God and to receive strength and direction for life as a royal priesthood among the nations. Preaching’s primary task is the “equipping of the saints for the work of service to the upbuilding of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). Preaching is the proclamation of God’s saving presence among God’s people for service to the other nations and peoples. God’s people are not to live for themselves but for others, that the others might come to the knowledge of God the Savior (I Peter 2:9; I Tim. 2:4). This understanding of the role of the People of God, that is, the role of the royal priesthood of all believers,¹⁷ is one of the basic facts concerning the mission of the Old Testament People of God (*gahal Jahwe*). They were called to be the kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex. 19:6), who were to be in communion with the Creator and Redeemer by means of listening to God’s Word (Ex. 19:5a). They were the very own people of God in the world which was also God’s own (Ex. 19:5b). They were there to be a blessing for all the nations in accordance with the promise given to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). The pattern of existence for the People of God was thereby set. Israel lived among the nations (*goim*) who belong to this world (*saeculum*) and who represent a wholly different order of things and a wholly different way of life in order to be a sign of God’s saving presence (*signum salutis*). Continuing as a sign is the Body of Christ which knows about the fullness of salvation coming for all nations and proclaims it with its very existence. This existence is “preaching” in a secular context. Christ is there in his Body through the members’ love practiced in family, work, and society, a practice which, naturally, includes the word of witness to him. Thus, in the unity of proclamation by word and deed, the Body of Christ lives out of the powers of the world that is to come.

The preacher’s task is, therefore, to prepare the People of God for this ministry. But along with the witness of the congregation as a community and with the witness of individual members, the Word of God should “sound forth” (I Thess. 1:8a) from the congregation. According to the Old Testament understanding, witnessing by means of action is also a part of the Word,¹⁸ which

does not exclude the absolute necessity of oral proclamation.

As St. Luke reported, St. Peter stood up "with the eleven" on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14); the other disciples' witnessing to Jesus' proclamation in the unity of word and deed, as it were, supported the sermon. Missionary preaching—preaching to those who have not yet known Christ—is essential. In our day, in consideration of the complex nature of the post-Constantinian secular societies, the preacher has to reckon with the presence of non-Christians or nominal Christians at many of the regular worship services. To get the Word outside the liturgical services, modern means of communication should also be used, but with utmost care and responsibility. This communication is not easy because of the inflation and consequent devaluation of biblical language in the media.

However, the main task of the preacher is to prepare the People of God for their ministry of proclaiming the Word—as this is fundamentally the task of the whole People of God—by loving one another, by bringing up their families in decency, by contributing to the welfare of the secular community in working for peace and justice. Without these acts the speech flies away. It was again a result of the dominance of Hellenistic philosophy that words and deeds were separated—and the latter were regarded as of lesser value because they had to do with matter. On biblical grounds this dichotomy is unacceptable. That has been made clear by biblical research of the last decades. The New Testament must not be seen and interpreted through the distorting spectacles of Hellenism but, rather, from the opposite side of the Old Testament in order to see the unity of God's creation and to act accordingly. Such unity is seen and acted upon in the Gospel of St. John, which uses the language of Hellenism to guard us against Hellenism itself. Thus, that Gospel proclaims that the Word became flesh and set up his tent among people (John 1:14). Here the Word is not only a thought or an idea; it is not just a message. The Word—which has been involved in creation—walks around, preaches, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, dies on the cross and rises again. These acts are the Word of God. They must continue in the church and in the human community within which the church is settled. When the People of God assemble, they follow the example of their Lord and Head in word and action.¹⁹ Preaching is an essential element of that event. The life lived within the church must go out—like the streams of living water in the vision of the prophet (Ezek. 47)—in order that women and men of the secular society might come to the knowledge of God who in Christ is the Savior of all.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

² I am aware of the discussion on secularization in the United States and elsewhere. I think secularization is the direct result of the *Corpus Christianum* (Constantinian Christianity) in which Church and State are one, and members of the church have been recruited mostly by force and compulsion or by birth. According to the biblical view, the people of God live among other peoples. This pattern could be changed only by force. Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1966) and *The Other Side of 1984* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983).

³ Yet the preacher's task is to be described dialectically. The preacher must be very humble

because he or she has the most glorious task to perform:

How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace and brings good news of happiness
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion: "Your God reigns!" (Is. 52:7)

⁴ Bertel Thorvaldsen's famous painting shows John the Baptist pointing at the crucified Christ with a proportionally very large finger: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

⁵ The reference is to nineteenth-century liberalism which looked at the history and context of the Bible and thought—erroneously—that by doing so it mastered the Word. The reference is not to what is called "liberalism" in the USA today.

⁶ Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (Munich, Chr. Kaiser: 1964), p. 186.

⁷ Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament: the Book of Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

⁸ Cf. Charles Elliott, *Patterns of Third World Poverty* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

⁹ Cf. the papers of Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue Debrecen III held at Budapest in 1979 under the title *The Complementarity of Spiritual Values and Social Responsibility According to the Doctrine at Chalcedon*. Available at the General Synod Office in Budapest or at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Geneva.

¹⁰ The Pauline understanding of *oneumatika* (1 Cor. 12:1, etc.) is very important here as an expression of the Old Testament understanding of *ruach*.

¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974).

¹² Kornelius Moskotte, *When the Gods Are Silent* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 73f, 65ff.

¹³ Kuske, pp. 53ff.

¹⁴ (Zürich, EVZ-Verlag, 1966), p. 101. Translated by the writer. English edition: *The Preaching of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 81f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Two examples: (a) Judges 11:29-40 has often been misinterpreted: Jephthah as the example of a righteous father whose word stands and has no regard for persons foreshadowing the Heavenly Father's love in giving his Son. This is bad exegesis. This text speaks about the effect of the environment which was an important characteristic of the times of the *amphityonia* (Judges 21:25). Even the ones standing up for the Lord were permeated by the spirit of the environment: the superstitious regard for human utterances (cf. Matt. 14:9) and desire for human sacrifice. All these are extremely relevant in an age which is characterized by a student of American society—or any of the twentieth century's technologically developed societies—as the time of the "other directed" person. Cf. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd, a Study of Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 17ff. This text also cries for the liberating power of the Word of God appearing in Christ to save us from the binding power of our own speech which also gives us power to resist being other directed (Rom. 8:14). The innocent and obedient attitude of the nameless daughter does speak about the willingness and obedience of the Son.

(b) Joshua 7:1 with the problem of the *cherem*. Things under the *cherem* were taken for the Lord out of normal order of life and—persons and property alike—were to be destroyed. If the two horizons are confused and *cherem* is not seen in its *Sitz im Leben*, Thomas Münzer's understanding prevails: let us kill the godless people. If the *cherem* problem is seriously analyzed, this text will speak to us about the significance of devoting people and things to God and of the collective responsibility of God's People in the light of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Cf. G. F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898), p. 13.

¹⁷ In light of the Epistle of the Hebrews, it becomes clear that the most comprehensive description of the duties of priesthood is representation. The priest represents God towards people and people towards God. The priest is a representative who offers sacrifice, prays, teaches, and pronounces benediction. The People of God in their collective priesthood represent God toward the people and the people toward God. The authority and the power is rooted in the perfect priesthood of the one High Priest, Jesus Christ, who as God of God and Light of Light represented God perfectly and as a real human represented humanity perfectly. M. Noth, *Exodus* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 157.

¹⁸ According to dictionaries, *dabar* means word and deed. This twofold meaning can be traced through the prophets to the life and teaching of our Lord and to the role of the eucharist in the ancient church.

¹⁹ In the “old” liturgy of the Church of Scotland, the minister says before the fraction and elevation: “. . . let us follow his blessed example in word and action . . .” *The Book of Common Order* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 118.