

PREACHING ON PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

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Full of faith and rage, American preachers have mounted pulpits for hundreds of years to join lament and celebration in reaffirming America's sacred and God-given mission. From John Winthrop's cosmic vision of the tiny Puritan outpost in the New England wilderness as "a City set upon a Hill" through Lincoln's invocation of this nation as "the last, best hope of earth," as he summoned God's New Israel to the "irrepressible conflict," to Billy Graham's "presidential golf theology" to the recent charge by Bill Bright that the 1962 Supreme Court decision on school prayer is responsible for "crime, racial conflict, drug abuse, political assassinations, the Viet Nam War, sexual promiscuity and the demise of American family life,"(1) Americans have somehow believed that there was something boundless and unprecedented, providential and prophetic in the republic's destiny.

We have inherited this tendency. The leaders of New England's Puritan theocracy inculcated in generations of Americans—including many who have explicitly repudiated many more important elements of Puritan theology--the implicit idea that America is a chosen nation. Americans of the colonial and revolutionary era, and to some extent their descendants, have interpreted the history of the United States as having a religious meaning. We have often seen ourselves as being "a people" in the classical and biblical sense of that word, and have too easily assumed that we were a people of God. Or, perhaps, "the" people of God.

The early settlers were fond of comparing themselves to the people of Israel. John Rolfe, for example, could say from seventeenth century Virginia that the citizens of that commonwealth were "a peculiar people, marked and chosen by the hand of God."(2) And no less a secularist than Thomas Jefferson (who proposed a picture of Moses leading Israel across the Red Sea for the Great Seal of the United States) declared in his second inaugural address:

I need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with his providence, and our riper years with his wisdom and power.(3)

It was fairly easy for earlier Americans, to whom the bible was common currency and biblical imagery normative, to make direct correlations between ancient Israel and their own history. Their ocean voyage became the Red Sea. Their wilderness adventures were similar to those of Israel. Their land became the symbol of God's providence to them and the vehicle by which God blessed them. Like Canaan of old, however, the land was not empty when they arrived, and their relationship to the locals who met them on the shore also bore a striking resemblance to the Old Testament accounts of the divine mandate to assimilate or slay the Canaanites.

John Winthrop, the great Puritan lawyer, articulated the relationship between Massachusetts and biblical Israel even before landing in Boston in 1630. Preaching aboard the Arabella from the Deuteronomic text: "Therefore, let us choose life, that wee, and our Seede may live," Winthrop spoke of the covenant enacted between God and the colonists:

Wee are entered into Covenant with him for this Worke, wee have taken out a Commission . . . Now if the Lord shall please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place wee desire, then hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission [and] will expect a strickt performance of the Articles contained in it, but if wee shall neglect the observacion of these Articles which are the ends wee have propounded, and dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intencions seekeing greate things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us, be revenged of such a perjured people and make us knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant.(4)

The jeremiad became a standard homiletic device, and subsequent Puritan preachers regularly equated the moral lapses of the community with "wilderness temptations" or golden calves and predicted that God in his righteousness would punish the nation for its sins. Sometimes these sins were the conventional ones of Puritan piety: sabbath-breaking, profanity and drunkenness. These were more likely to be denounced than ill treatment of the Indians, for example. But the same theological technique led the better preachers, from Increase Mather in 1676 to Theodore Dwight Weld in 1836, to raise the really serious questions about the basic structure of the American society. In the first instance Mather denounced the people of Massachusetts for taking more land from the Indians than they really needed. In the second, Weld, standing in a long tradition of evangelical abolitionism, declared that God would surely destroy a nation that tolerated slavery. It is fascinating to speculate on who might be the contemporary heirs of this tradition; one suspects that both Daniel Berrigan and Jerry Falwell would claim the mantle.

Puritanism deserves a much better press than it has received from those of us who owe so much to its theology and even to its institutions. But two of its characteristic theological emphases are at least partly responsible for the problem that modern Christians have inherited and that gives us so much trouble in trying to say something helpful and theologically valid on the first Sunday in July each year or during a period of national election. The first was its ecclesiology which despite occasional early protestations to the contrary was, in fact, independent. The second was the principle of "federal theology" which so greatly emphasized the idea of the covenant.

Lacking any proper theology of the church as the people of God, the Puritan preachers all too easily identified the community as the people of God and the heirs of the covenant. Though they rarely quoted any theologian between Paul and Calvin, the Puritan concept of the Holy Commonwealth bears a striking resemblance to Augustine's City of God and the contrast between it and the earthly city. Augustine's imagery, in turn, was drawn from the Revelation with its contrast between Babylon, the city of the beast, and the New Jerusalem. The difference, of course, is that in neither the New Testament nor in Augustine is the New Jerusalem located spatially or politically in the world. Calvin follows Augustine in even

making a distinction between the church on earth and the people of God, and he created an invisible church which alone is qualified to bear the promises of perfection and holiness.

The Puritans, of course, accepted this theology in theory, but in fact they equated the church with the community. Indeed, they created--for the first time, as they saw it, since biblical Israel--a "holy commonwealth" located in the American wilderness, in which "the people" and the community were essentially co-terminus. And we know with what results. Naturally such a community, based on a voluntary "owning of the covenant," could exist only one generation, especially among people who believed in original sin.

But we never got over the idea that the nation was the heir to the promises of God made to the people Israel and fulfilled, according to Paul, by the church. It is this confusion between the church and the nation--and the proper relationship between them that must necessarily exist in a pluralistic and secular society--that leads so many preachers to read the promises and commands to the ancient people of God as though they were promises and commands to America. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord!" (Psalm 33:12) is a favorite text. Even better is the quotation, from Solomon's vision at the dedication of the first Temple--and last seen during the 1980 election plastered on the side of a city bus in Louisville, Kentucky--"If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14).

The proper Christian interpretation of these and similar texts is, of course, the church, the "New Israel," the people of God under the new covenant. But does that leave us nothing to say to the nation on the Fourth of July and during national elections. Must we retreat into a quietism and an individualistic piety that is a denial of the heritage of the reformed theological tradition? Must we heed the voice of those who insist that preachers must not "meddle" in politics (by which, until recently, they always meant liberal politics)? Do we simply arrange with our sessions to be on vacation in early July to avoid the problem? Or do we simply ignore the occasion and preach about something else altogether? (Even the lectionary does not help here. In 1980 one of the readings for July 6 was Galatians 5, "For freedom, Christ has set us free" And in 1981 one of the appointed lections is from Exodus 19, "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation . . .")

We must face the problem head on. Christians are citizens and voters. It is irresponsible and irrelevant to ignore the problems of public life when we are in the pulpit. The church has the right and the preacher has the responsibility to proclaim the word of God as it speaks to the issues which are before the public--issues of the relations between the races and the genders, issues of war and peace, issues of pollution and stewardship of the planet, issues related to the mal-distribution of wealth in the world--these are legitimate concerns of the pulpit today as Indian rights were in the 1660's and slavery was in the 1840's. That these issues are also controversial political problems does not require that the church be silent. And, of course, we must grant to others--including those whom we know to be wrong--the same rights we claim for ourselves.

At the same time we must acknowledge that the community is not the church, and we ought to rejoice--publicly and often--in the tradition in this land that absolutely separates them. The tradition of separation not only frees the state from domination by the church (no doubt the original intention) it also gives the church

the freedom to speak its conviction on matters of public policy and/or private morality.

Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloan Coffin, Archbishop Humberto Medeiros, Campus Crusader Bill Bright, all stand in this tradition of separation when they state their own convictions, or those of the communities they represent, on matters of public policy. The Christian Century forgot its place in 1964 when it editorially endorsed Lyndon Johnson's reelection, and it quite properly lost its tax exemption for a few years. Jerry Falwell and his colleagues also forgot their place in the election of 1980 when they endorsed candidates in order to force the states to enforce their ethics and inculcate their piety on the whole community. The future of church-state relations in the present administration is not a hopeful one.

But church leaders certainly have a right to have political convictions, and to express them openly. As citizens they have the right to engage in political activity on the same basis as other citizens. As ministers, however, we must carefully distinguish our own political convictions from the legitimate message of the gospel we preach. The best way to do this is to be candid and forthright about our own political opinions, and to base our ethical and moral expressions on careful and accurate exegesis and on a valid interpretation of the theological tradition in which we stand.

A sermon during an election or on the occasion of a public holiday might properly acknowledge the rule of God in the world and the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ, and might say that this is the ground of the Christian's hope. It should not instruct parishioners on how they should vote. It might speak of the providential hand in the history of this nation and of the other nations of the world, rejoicing in the traditions of freedom, generosity, and democracy that have characterized our history and lamenting the traditions of racism, jingoistic nationalism, and economic imperialism that have regrettably not been absent. But it would not equate America with God's chosen people. It might speak of the preacher's conscientious convictions on the subjects of abortion, pornography, homosexuality, race relations, prayer, and a whole host of other subjects. The preacher might be right or wrong, and hopefully would be tentative in making conclusions. But the sermon will not advocate the use of the state to enforce private morality or piety, and the church will not attempt to enforce its convictions or doctrines or practices on the whole population.

This nation has been richly blessed. Christians believe that God has richly blessed it, and has laid upon it great responsibilities as a result. Maybe Lincoln was right, and America is the "last, best hope of earth." But the preacher must be wary of saying so.

(1) The Christian Century, September 10-17, 1980, p. 863.

(2) Quoted in Conrad Cherry, God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny, (Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 26.

(3) Quoted in Robert N. Bellah, The Broken Covenant, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 24-25.

(4) "A Modell of Christian Charity," The Winthrop Papers, vol. II, (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), pp. 294-295.