

Preaching Lenten Repentance to Church and Nation: Deep Memory and the Catechesis of Repentance

David B. Miller

University Mennonite Church, State College, Pennsylvania

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes (Luke 4:1-42).

As those entrusted with bringing to public utterance the Word and vision of God, we must ourselves be alert to the moment in which we live and attentive to the moments, both *chronos* and *kairos*, that have preceded and give definition to our moment. If we are inadequately cognizant of our moment, our rehearsal and repetition of Lenten cycles of texts and services and the donning of attitudes and ashes presumed appropriate to the season will run the risk of inoculating us—ourselves and our congregations—against the newness of the reign of God. In the repetition of liturgical seasons, we can too easily reduce religious ritual to cultic cycles that do little to anticipate newness or alternative vision, serving rather to ensure the perpetuation of life as it is until, dulled by familiarity, we and our congregations mistake the great doxological declaration "as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end" as statement of fact concerning the present state of affairs—a stabilized world kept in balance by ritual repetition.

The legitimizing and safeguarding of such a "stabilized world" is the task that established governments have always asked that religion play. The sanctioned role of religion is to make populations moral, civil and satiated. These are not inherently evil qualities, but as goals, they subsidize an unthinking compliance with unjust structures. Religion in service of state then functions as a stabilizing influence that helps to perpetuate the current regime regardless of political system. However, if the faithful perchance find in their sacred texts—more than instructions for private morality—the word of prophetic critique and dare to bring this to public utterance, they will soon be reminded that it is not the task of religion to meddle in politics. Vocalizing such utterance is likely to result in dis-invitations to sanctioned prayer breakfasts. Rarely do authorized "national days of prayer" take as their pattern the Isaianic (Isaiah 58) critique of ritualized worship and engage in an acceptable fast that alone will gain God's attention.

The church need not and should not discard her great doxological affirmations, but she must learn to vocalize them not as priestly canticles, but with the cadence of the prophets.¹ In our post-Christendom era, we are reminded that the church is no longer viewed as an essential institution to the society.² While many are desperately grasping for methods to reclaim a by-gone prestige, let us be cautious of such rear guard action that is a design for great compromise and complicity. What if instead we receive our diminished *sitz im leben* as gift? A gift that shrinks the existential, if not the chronological, distance between ourselves and the world of our forbears of the first three centuries, thus permitting a living conversation between our moment and their

moment, to perceive and receive from their worship that made the audacious and risky claims that redirected allegiance and funded a visible, messianic community, a renewing pattern for our own. What might we learn from their utterance of Christian doxology when it was perceived by the empire as a treasonous act—enthroning the way of Jesus in the world, and de-throning the way of Caesar? Theirs was no cultic ritual to secure the status quo, but a prophetic critique that destabilized the world as it was in favor of the world intended, the only world that was, is, and shall be “without end.”

As the lenten season unfolds, I find no better position for perceiving such a world than at the side of Jesus overlooking Jerusalem. A word of warning is due here. If we would stand at Jesus’ side seeking to see what he saw, we would certainly come to know the anguish he knew. It is a deep and dislocating anguish, not unlike Jeremiah’s fire in the bones (Jer. 20:9). It is the anguish of an alternative vision whose realization and promise have been rejected (see Psalm 122:8, Matt. 21:42), yet whose path must still be traveled. You have been warned.

The son of man stands looking over the city and he weeps. He sees beneath the surface of the holy city into the deep recesses of aspiration, affection and faith, where a betrothal has already taken place in which national indignation is preparing to marry holy war. The warrior has sung seductive songs of God’s triumph and favor, asserting a long and happy future together if only his lover will join in valorous sacrifice of the outsider, the enemy. The warrior suitor cites chapter and verse that promises God’s presence to assure victory and vindication. The promise of a future rid of evil and fear has won her heart. The ceremonies solemnizing this union will wait for some three and a half decades, but the guest list has already been drawn up, and the invitations are being prepared. So consumed are the young lovers with the promises they have made to each other that they have already blinded themselves and their invited guests to an alternative future. It is indeed “hid from their eyes.” Meanwhile, the other potential bridegroom, now jilted for offering too little security, too much uncertainty, too little vengeance, stands weeping over the beloved city, yearning for her to turn (repent) and know “the things that make for peace.”

Lest this be misconstrued as plotting a course toward an anti-Semitic blaming of the Jews for Jesus’ death, let me clarify. This marriage of frustrated national hope and holy war has recurred again and again throughout history. It is not a unique failure of Judaism; rather it is, perhaps, the most common denominator (and seduction) to religious faith across creeds and centuries. But so inattentive are we to the moments that have preceded our moment that we easily fall into the same union with its same seductive promises. We fail to discern the same rationalizing hope that has characterized the centuries before us, believing against all evidence that this time our use of lethal force will make things right, this time we will eliminate evil, this time we can bring peace (and democracy) at the point of a bayonet. We join with the first century inhabitants of Jerusalem and willfully refuse those things that make for peace.

The task assigned for this article was preaching lenten repentance to church and nation. I start with the conviction that the preaching and practice of repentance must begin within the church before the church can credibly raise its voice for the nation. This is not to say that preaching repentance does not address public performance of the faith nor that God cares not for the repentance of nations. Indeed, God may yet again raise up Jonah to go to Ninevah and shame us all with Ninevah’s repentance and trust.

But, the church cannot point the way toward a repentance which the church itself has refused. The first call of repentance is to the church concerning its life in the world and the congruence of that life with the life and teachings of the Lord of the church. We live and minister in a context in which mindfulness of history is de-valued and memory of a faith that preceded empire is dim. Without significant memory of crucial prior moments, repentance is easily reduced to a call to return not to the reign of God announced by Jesus, but to an old time religion that has done its share to fund a future that has now become our present. Deep memory is needed for the proclamation and work of repentance, but such deep memory is rare among us.

As an example of the absence of deep memory, witness a religious dispute that played out in the U.S. press in the summer of 2005. Reports of an investigation into attitudes and practices of religious bias at the United States Air Force Academy made headline news in the United States. *The Washington Post*³ reported that an official investigation by the Air Force found a “perception of religious bias that favors evangelical Christianity over other expressions of religious faith or the absence of such faith.” Those on the “religious right” characterized the investigation as one more sign of the near triumph of secularism and the infringement upon the freedom of Christian religion by government. Voices on the “religious left” complained about government-sanctioned proselytizing by evangelical Christians and the apparent climate of intolerance.

Strikingly absent from the public debate was any question concerning the appropriateness of Christians teaching at the USAF Academy. Both mainline and evangelical Christians, as well as the reporters and editorial writers of the secular media, have easily assumed the “givenness” of such a vocation for one who professes a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Similar assessments were made in the religious press. The issues of concern noted in the *Christian Century* (June 28, 2005) and *Christianity Today* (July 7, 2005; October 6, 2005) were predominately questions of first amendment freedoms, the problems of proselytizing, and the potential for religious discrimination. To this reader, the concerns articulated over separation of church and state appeared to be rooted more in jealousy over whose version of Christian faith will enjoy the favor of the government than in clarifying boundaries that may be necessitated to secure coherent and credible Christian confession. If there remained any vestige of tension about submitting oneself to the military oath subsequent to the vows taken in baptism and/or confirmation, it did not appear in print.

There was a moment and context when such silence would have been deafening. Early in the emergence of the Christian Church, deep in what should be the shared memory of all Christians, prior to Protestant Reformation, before East-West divisions and ex-communications, prior to the firm establishment of Roman hierarchy, such tension would have been the core question for deliberation and discernment by the church. Rather than battling to secure privilege over which brand of Christianity would have ascendancy at a military academy, the questions would have been framed with relation to the core confession that Christ is Lord. Is it possible for one having so committed to Christ to then bracket out ethics of violence and lethal force from the command of Christ and yield discernment and authority on these matters to the state? We have ample record that such questions were faced by early church leaders such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Hippolytus.⁴

Their words and example stand in stark contrast to the contemporary American

Christian silence on these matters. The silence is even more striking when one considers that we are at the midpoint of the World Council of Churches declared “Decade to Overcome Violence,” and over six years into an era of “endless war.” Is this not a disturbing insight into the perception of the content and meaning of Christian faith in the United States held both by “believing communities” on the left and the right? What alternatives might deep memory of our common Christian origins offer us at such a moment?

Prior to Constantinian⁵ favor and Roman legal legitimation, before the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, there was a moment (lasting nearly three centuries) when our forebears reasoned in ways that were starkly different. I speak not of differences between pre-modern, modern, and post-modern world views, but of their concept of the vocation of the church and believers in the world. Illustrative of this difference was their understanding of the “swords to plowshares” texts (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-4). Gerhard Lohfink has conducted a significant study of the prevalence, distribution, and interpretation of these passages in the writings of the early church.⁶ This text was cited in apologetic literature as a proof that Jesus was the Christ/Messiah of God. So reasoned Justin and others that the fulfillment of this vision among the Christians, and their accompanying refusal to bear arms against their enemies, was proof that “the latter day” anticipated by the prophet had come. They were willing to let this repentance accomplished among them be set forward as authentication of the gospel. They argued that for them to turn again and take up the sword would be both impossible (It had already been converted to an implement of agriculture.) and unfaithful. (It would deny the way taught by Jesus.) Those posing this argument did not naively deny that evil persisted, but simultaneously refused to suspend the vision of the prophet for a future fulfillment, thereby freeing themselves from its present demand. Rather they tenaciously maintained that the only answer Christ had given to evil’s persistence was a greater persistence in doing good and the faithful embodiment of the instructions of their Lord.

Lohfink notes that this text, prevalent in the writings of the pre-Constantinian church, disappeared from the writings of church leaders after Constantine. Even Augustine, for all his volumes, did not comment on this text. Rather, he, albeit reluctantly, filled the silence with the justification of the use of torture⁷ and the case for just war.⁸

Let us take another glimpse into this pre-Constantinian moment as provided by the *Didache*.⁹ Likely dating to the early second century, it demonstrates that the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount held a central and determinative place in Christian catechism. Neither foil for grace nor description of life after the parousia, the *Didache* tenaciously teaches the words of Jesus as “the way of life.” Its normative view of the teaching of Jesus is in keeping with the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:21-29), that great exclamation point to the sermon on the mount, concluding, lest Matthew’s readers should miss its import, “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (v 26). Yet in the interlude between that moment and our moment, how many volumes of commentary and Christian ethics have been written with the (seeming) express purpose of reducing the audacious, explicit teachings of Jesus concerning love of enemy and prayer for those who persecute us (among other things) to general principles that become less demanding and less threatening to the logic of

redemptive violence. Is not such reductionism a threat to the integrity of the gospel and the alien newness of the reign of God?¹⁰ When the church engages in such domestication of the gospel, are we not begin building sand castles whose ultimate collapse is certain?

If we are attending to the moment in which we are living, we must be painfully aware that those who come inquiring in our congregations are well formed (misshapen) by a culture of violence and the justifications for meeting danger with overwhelming lethal force. They have been taught by euphemism, legal opinion, and signing statement to view the life of an American citizen as of greater worth than those who are citizens of another nation. Yet, some come among us, war weary, hoping against hope that they will find a community of repentance where they might be mentored in turning away from such attitudes and turning around toward the way of Jesus. Will they find in us communities of repentance, schooled in the discernment and setting aside of the false deities that would capture allegiance?

Others come seeking religious sanction for the world as it is. They adhere in thought and practice to the nationalism and the might-makes-right logic that is rehearsed and promulgated implicitly and explicitly by politician, commentator and, most sadly, Christian broadcaster and preacher.¹¹ We should not be surprised by their misconception, for in too many instances, rather than standing as a signpost directing to another way, Christian congregations are sponsoring Halo 3¹² parties and nationalistic rallies as tools of evangelization. But, we must ask, evangelization to/toward what? Have we the clarity of confession and the courage of conviction to name such distortions as alien to the gospel? Have we the resources and courage to preach and embody repentance toward the reign of God (Mark 1:15) in this our moment?

A prophet of an earlier day, seeing his nation and its leaders accept a false foundation for security decried her "covenant with death" (Isaiah 28:14 ff), a covenant that most surely will be abrogated and annulled by YHWH and replaced with a sure foundation, "a precious cornerstone." Does not such description and judgment generate at least a modicum of angst among us? Our coinage may boast "in God we trust," but in that grand statement of faith, our national budget and our commitment of our national treasure for military spending now equals the combined investment of the rest of the world!¹³ If we are skeptical about making too easy a leap from sixth century BC to our day, perhaps we will hear a prophetic critique of our conditions from which we are only half a century removed:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.... This, I repeat, is the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.¹⁴

This was the utterance not from an ancient prophet of Israel nor a pastor of America, but from a president and retired general of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Eight years in office would only increase his concern, and he would conclude his

administration with a farewell address in which he would warn that this nation faced a desperate future if it left unchecked the expansion of the military-industrial complex.¹⁵ Ah, what whirlwind shall we reap?

So, where do we begin our preaching of repentance? Within the church, we might start with a thorough going reassessment of our practice of catechesis. Do we spend as much time forming “followers of the Way” as we do finding perceptible analogies for explaining the Trinity? What would happen to our curricula of instruction if it were to begin with taking seriously the so-called “hard sayings” of Jesus, presenting them as the way that Jesus offered us for the healing of the world rather than reducing them to a device designed to lead us to grace? Most certainly we shall find that any attempt to seriously follow in this way will make us a people well prepared for God’s grace, but let it be a grace that equips us for vocation rather than simply assuaging our justly pained consciences. We will not need to be convinced of sin in the abstract from which we need saving; we will know all too soon how we stand exposed and haunted by the demand of an obedience that is beyond our nationally formed habits of reason and action. Let us learn how to weep tears of anguish, as Jesus over Jerusalem, as we face and begin to name what we have in our fear been willing to accept as necessity—incarcerations without charge or hearing, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, cluster munitions, depleted uranium, hiding the bodies of the dead from public view, the repetition of lies, forgotten veterans, extended deployments, increased divorce and suicide rates among veterans, over four million refugees and displaced persons, countless and unaccounted for civilian deaths—in our covenant with death. Seeing how fear-warped are even our best intentions, let us repent and turn from our willful notions that we know how to make the world safe and secure.

Then, let us learn how to pray, but not the prayer of easy gratitude for a full plate at supper or the guilty gratitude that God has placed us here with all these blessings. (Please don’t notice what we have stolen.) No, let us learn to pray as the widow before the unjust judge (Luke 18:1ff), demanding tenacious prayer:

God, we tried to fix it, we thought we knew how, we wanted to end the evil and get on with life, but now we hear the blood of a hundred thousand Abels crying out to you. It is more than we can bear. We have tried to hide our eyes, but you have made us see what we did not want to see! We have tried not to know, but you have made us know! Yet you still put this vision before us, this announcement of Good News. If you are going to continue to taunt us with this dream of another way, grant what we need in order to do what you have commanded. Deliver us from evil and from the perpetuation of evil. Turn us around, let the things that make for peace no longer be hidden from our eyes. By the way, Lord, we will keep coming back until your kingdom comes, until your will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

For all the grossly distorted and truncated versions of the gospel that surround us, the Spirit of God has breathed life, has sown the seed of the Word, in some fertile soil. These test plots of the kingdom in our moment, like the pacification of the early church, are a credible apologetic of the gospel. In our repentance we must learn to spread rumors of the kingdom. This will be the form of our preaching repentance to a watching world—rumors such as the Reconciliation Walk.

Not far back into the pre-9-11 world, a small group of Christians, under the auspices of Youth With a Mission (YWAM), were seized with a call to repentance. Discerning the call had grown out of international engagement and bumping up one too many times with the storehouse of animosity that had been sown in relationships between Christians, Muslims and Jews during the crusades, long memories of wrong that continue to fund violence today. They embarked on a three year pilgrimage on the millennial anniversary of the first crusade. Setting out from Cologne, Germany, they retraced the crusaders footsteps, offering to Muslims and Jews along the way an apology for the evil that had been perpetrated against their communities and ancestors. In part they declared:

Nine hundred years ago, our forefathers carried the name of Jesus Christ in battle across the Middle East. Fueled by fear, greed and hatred, they betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to His wishes and character. The Crusaders lifted the banner of the Cross above your people. By this act, they corrupted its true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness and selfless love. On the anniversary of the first Crusade, we also carry the name of Christ. We wish to retrace the footsteps of the Crusaders in apology for their deeds and in demonstration of the true meaning of the Cross. We deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors. We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ. Where they were motivated by hatred and prejudice, we offer love and brotherhood. Jesus the Messiah came to give life. Forgive us for allowing His name to be associated with death.¹⁶

The Turkish Muslim Imam of Cologne received their apology and declared, "When I heard the nature of your message, I was astonished and filled with hope. I thought to myself, 'Whoever had this idea must have had an epiphany, a visit from God Himself.' It is my wish that this project should become a very great success."¹⁷ One can only imagine where we might be today if this disciplined and substantial repentance had become the principal Christian response to Islam and Judaism to overcome violence.

In the fall of 2006, the world was aghast at the violence that beset the Amish Community of Nickel Mines. The horror of the murders is well known, but long after the gun was silenced, the story of Amish forgiveness continues to reverberate around the globe. In awe and reverence, the question continues to be asked, how is such forgiveness possible? The grief is still raw for the Amish community; the sadness for parents, siblings and classmates remains. But in extending forgiveness, the Amish jammed a stick in the wheel of the cycle of retribution. In a statement released on behalf of the Amish community, they noted: "The Amish did not wish such publicity for doing what Jesus taught and want to make sure that glory is given to God for that witness. Many from Nickel Mines have pointed out that forgiveness is a journey, that you need help from your community of faith and from God, and sometimes even from counselors, to make and hold on to a decision to not become a hostage of hostility. It is understood that hostility destroys community." The Amish response to these tragic events had been prepared in advance by centuries of life-forming catechism. In their

forgiveness they have preached repentance to the world. Are we so formed to join in such proclamation?

Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).
2. Darrell L. Guder, *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending Church in North America*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
3. *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2005.
4. Justin's "Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter 110" *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol 1 - The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 253-254.
Clement of Alexandria, "Exhortation to the Heathen (Protrepticus): Chapter 10." in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol 2 - The Fathers of the Second Century*, ed. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994): 202-206.
Tertullian, "On Idolatry: Chapter XIX - Concerning Military Service" and "De Corona: Chapter XI," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol 3 - Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994): 73 & 99-100.
Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*. xvi.17-19. Full text available on line: <http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html>
5. John Howard Yoder, "The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 242-261.
6. Gerhard Lohfink, "Schwerter zu Pflugscharen, Die Rezeption von Jes 2:1-5 par Mi 4:1-5 in der Alten Kirche und im Neuen Testament," *Theologische Quartalschrift*. 166, 84-209.
7. Augustine, *City of God*, XIX. 6. Full text on line at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm>.
8. Augustine, *The City of God*, XIX. 7,15. Full text on line at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm>.
9. *The Didache*. Full text online at: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/didache.html>.
10. Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). See Guder's discussion of the problem of reductionism on pages 97-119.
11. As an example, see Charles Stanley's sermon, "A Nation at War." Available at: <http://www.rapturealert.com/warfaq.html>.
12. Matt Richtel, "Thou Shalt Not Kill, Except in a Game at Church," *The New York Times* (October 7, 2007).
13. On line at <http://www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/ArmsTrade/Spending.asp>.
14. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The Chance for Peace" (April 16, 1953). Full text available at http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/ike_chance_for_peace.html.
15. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Farewell Address to the Nation" (January 17, 1961). Full text available at: <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/ike.htm>.
16. SOON Online Magazine: <http://www.soon.org.uk/page15.htm>.
17. SOON Online Magazine: <http://www.soon.org.uk/page15.htm>.
18. Full text of the Amish statement is available at: <http://www-tc.pbs.org/moyers/journal/10052007/statement.pdf>.