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FOREWORD

In times of moral confusion, sensitive persons are tempted to denounce the perversity of their fellows. Some are tempted to nostalgia for bygone days; others, in despair, simply yield to hysteria. What the present unsettled age needs, however, is neither moralistic condemnation nor pious exhortation to the good. Rather, in the first instance, what is needed today is a clear vision of the good.

In many ways it was in a similar climate that the early Christian movement experienced rapid growth. Men like Justin, Tatian, and Tertullian indicate that the moral earnestness of Christians first commended Christianity to them. It may well be that in the present age that it will be the moral vision of Christian faith--and the faithful lives of individual Christians--that commend themselves to those whose lives are without meaning and direction. These essays are directed toward clarifying that vision and the situation which it illuminates.

A word of thanks is due to groups in Dallas, Houston and elsewhere who aided in the developing of the ideas here presented. Special thanks is also due to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, Faculty Secretary, for her invaluable aid in preparing these manuscripts.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE PREACHER: MORALIZER OR MORALIST?

By James W. Thompson

According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, one definition of "preach" is "to exhort in an officious or tiresome manner." The definition of "sermon" is "an annoying harangue."¹ Our experience confirms the negative connotations that are associated with preaching, for we commonly hear the exclamation, "Don't preach to me." This exclamation occurs when we expect to hear moral judgments that involve castigation and condemnation. Our common usage of the terms "preach" and "sermon" suggests that public proclamation is widely considered distasteful because of its connection with moralizing and condemnation.

These common definitions of preaching are undoubtedly caricatures, but, like all caricatures, they distort what is present already. There is, especially in America, a long tradition in which the sermon has been a forum for moral judgments. Matters of public policy have often been debated in the sermon, and concrete moral advice has been given on such matters as slavery, equal rights for women, civil rights, and the issues of war and peace.² The rhetoric of the sermon was distinguished by the

liberal use of imperatives, prohibitions and appeals.

There is also a long tradition in which the sermon was the forum for discussing issues commonly described “private morality.” The caricature of the sermon as an “annoying harangue” may be based on the use of the sermon as the forum for the preacher’s personal moral judgments on topics ranging from card-playing to modesty. Indeed, in many instances, the entire “nutrition” provided by the sermon over an extended period of time was the moral judgment. The “canon” of the moralistic sermon was limited to the commands, prohibitions, and wisdom sayings in the New Testament. In some instances, even the narrative texts were examined for the primary purposes of discovering a moral injunction. This tradition of preaching, like the sermon on public policy, has been distinguished by its liberal use of the imperative and the prohibition.

It is appropriate to ask, against this background, what role the giving of moral advice legitimately has in preaching. Professor Edmund Steimle has said that the sermon should be given in the indicative mood. Homiletics professor William D. Thompson has criticized “straight, finger-pointing moralism.” In Preaching Biblically, he warns against the misuse of legal material in the Bible, but discovers no positive way of using the legal material without falling into legalism.³ Thus, in contrast to a tradition for which the commands are the primary source of preaching, a preaching tradition heavily influenced by a particular understanding of justification by faith argues that preaching is the occasion for announcing the acts of God, and not for

“finger-pointing moralism.”

Other factors in addition to a theology of justification have contributed to a disdain of moral exhortation in preaching. Undoubtedly one factor is the experience of both preacher and audience of listening to condemnatory harangues which led to a reaction against all moral advice. Such an experience easily leads to an “allergic reaction” to every word of judgment. In addition, the preacher is likely to be influenced by a common unwillingness to pass judgment on or prescribe a particular behavior. This unwillingness to condemn or prescribe has its roots in forms of popular psychology that argue for diminished personal responsibility and make a questionable use of Jesus’ command, “Judge not that ye not be judged” (Mt. 7:1).

Among those who argue vehemently against a moralizing kind of preaching, there is frequently no distinction given between morality and moralism. The fear of the latter produces an uncertainty about the preacher’s role in addressing important moral issues of the time. Is the pulpit the appropriate place for specific advice on greed, premarital sex, divorce, and community obligations? The diverse expectations of the preacher and his audience suggests the importance of discovering in the roles of biblical proclaimers a paradigm for the contemporary preacher.

The Rhetoric of the Bible

Amos Wilder has called attention to the aspects of the rhetoric of the Bible which serve as a paradigm for the preacher.⁴ “The character of the early Christian

speech-form,” he argues, “should have much to say to us with regard to our understanding of Christianity and its communication today.”⁵ While the modern communicator should not be enslaved to the biblical speech-forms, Wilder argues that we have much to learn from the vehicles of Christian speech that are used in the Bible. The preacher is aware that the very act of preaching is the legacy of a biblical history which places primary emphasis on hearing rather than seeing.⁶ The spoken word, understood as a message entrusted to the speaker from God, was the instrument to elicit faith (Rom. 10:17). While the words of the prophets and the apostles were later committed to writing, they bear the characteristics of the spoken word. Neither the gospels nor the epistles is very literary in style. The epistles of Paul comprise what the apostle would have declared if he had been present with the churches under his influence. The various literary genres of the Bible together reflect the importance of a distinctive form of communication that the Christian story elicited.

The dominant mode of speech in the Bible, as Wilder and others have observed, is narrative. Indeed, according to Wilder,

If one looks at other religions and philosophical classics the story aspects may be relatively marginal. Their sacred books may often rather take the form of philosophical instruction or mystical treatise of didactic code or oracular vision.⁷

The Bible, by contrast, is a continuous history that is composed of many subplots and episodes. Even those parts of the Bible which are not specifically given in the

narrative style presuppose Israel's story. The legal materials and the poetic sections of the Bible frequently recite the narrative of Israel's history or refer back to the main events in the story.

The transmission of the story of God's deeds shaped the identity of the hearers and provided continuity in Israel's corporate life. Successive generations could see their own stories reflected in the narratives about Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The midrash on Scripture that was practiced in the synagogue allowed the speaker to contemporize the old story and treat it as a living word for his own time. Jesus, in his proclamation at Nazareth (Lk. 4:16-30), takes the prophetic hope of Isaiah 61 and narratives of Elijah and Elisha and contemporizes them for his own time. The "good news for the poor," described in Isaiah 61, is given a new meaning. When Paul and the author of Hebrews refer to Israel's experiences, they assume that their readers can identify with the Israelites and their experiences of doubt, faith, hope and fear.

The narrative mode is dominant throughout the New Testament. Jesus opened the eyes of his hearers to the reality of the kingdom through the medium of parables. The parables were extended metaphors which revealed the "new world" of the kingdom where human standards are no longer operative. The gospels, with their unique arrangement, are evidence that the Christ even led to a new form of communication. The gospels expand the earliest Christian kerygma by providing sub-plots illustrating the good news that came in Jesus Christ. The epistles interpret

the kerygma for the changing needs of early Christian communities. They contain hymns and references to God's saving deeds. Indeed, the presence of four gospels and epistles written to widely scattered communities suggests that the kerygma had to be retold to the changing circumstances where the story of Christ intersected with the stories of local communities. The Book of Acts, as Martin Hengel has shown, is modeled on the historical narratives of the Old Testament.⁸ This book, like others, enabled the ancient author to shape the vision of his audience by introducing them to a story that provided a means of identification with the past.

The use of narrative as the dominant form of speech in the Bible provides a useful paradigm for the preacher. The narratives were instruments of revelation, and not of persuasion.⁹ The message, as Paul announced to the Corinthians, was not subject to the criteria of human wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6-16). The story, precisely because it was God's story, had cosmic dimensions.¹⁰ Thus it was not a possession which the preacher could "tamper with" (2 Cor. 4:2) or "peddle" (2 Cor. 2:17). Early Christian preaching consisted in the telling of a story which culminated in the cross and resurrection. Paul summarized his preaching frequently, describing it as "the word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18), "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23), and "the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). The goal of early Christian preaching was the announcement of a story.

If the speech forms of Scripture provide a paradigm for the modern preacher, the goal of preaching is to tell the story in such a way to allow the audience to

share the impact of the lesson with the ancient listener. The contemporary preacher is one in a long succession of storytellers repeating the story for the needs of his audience. The goal of preaching, as William Thompson has written, is to move

a congregation back through history to the east bank of the Jordan, for example, to feel despair at the untimely death of Moses, and to wonder if this Yahweh who led us out of Egypt and through the desert even knows how desperate is our pilgrimage through the streets of Seattle or Pottstown. It is biblical preaching when we hear him speaking through the centuries to us: 'Be strong and of good courage--for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go' (Josh. 1:9).¹¹

Preaching is biblical also when the audience feels the anguish of Simon Peter at the denial of Jesus or shares the experience of disciples when they foolishly ask for the positions of power in the kingdom.

The dominant role of narrative in the Bible suggests that the indicative mood is the primary form of speech for the preacher. Preaching that is based on imperatives alone distorts the biblical message.

Haggadah and Halakah: Story and Demand

The fact that narrative has the predominant place in the Bible raises questions about the place of commands in Christian preaching. Does the importance of narrative in the Bible exclude the appeal to commands as a legitimate form of preaching? Amos Wilder, who recommends the Bible's own speech forms as a model for preaching, has chapters on the genres of dialogue, poem, story, and parable as models for the sermon, but does not treat the commands in Scripture as

a legitimate model. Books on preaching commonly warn against the misuse of the legal material by taking it out of context. However, for various theological reasons, few have offered constructive suggestions for the sermon as the occasion to preach law.

In both testaments, the story (haggadah) was never far removed from the moral demands (halakah). The Torah, for which the psalmist could express his devotion (“O how I love thy law”), consisted of the revelation of God in events and his call for a faithful response. Haggadah and halakah comprised the two elements of the Torah.¹² The two parts together answered the questions, Who are we? and What are we to do?¹³ The prohibitions and commands gave concrete examples of the response required by the gracious God.¹⁴ The God who revealed himself at Mount Sinai, creating peace and well-being for Israel, established the conditions for continued harmony. The intricate details of the Torah express concretely how the individual places his entire life under God’s authority. The gift of salvation creates a new mindset, making possible the ordering of the entire life under God’s command. Gospel and law are thus inextricably intertwined.

While the New Testament is primarily the narrative of God’s saving acts, the preaching of good news does not preclude the concern to link haggadah and halakah. In the ministry of Jesus, the announcement of the kingdom implies a “better righteousness” and rigorous demands. The epistles of Paul include “halakah” alongside “haggadah.” While Paul argues that the law no longer bestows righteousness (cf. Phil. 3:9), he appeals to the law frequently when giving moral

advice (Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14). His letters contain moral advice describing the life that is “worthy of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). His frequent exhortations, introduced by “I appeal to you” (parakalo), indicate that Paul’s preaching included the presentation of commands that are implicit in the gospel story. The righteousness of God, which is God’s gift in Jesus Christ, was a power to which the Christian may give his life in obedience (Rom. 6:18).

Reflection on the place of law in the rhetoric of the Bible should provide insights that will prevent modern preaching from distorting and diluting the biblical message. Preaching is distorted which loses the interconnection of gospel and law. The model for the sermon is to be found in the way story and moral demand, *haggadah* and halakah, are held together in the Bible. Paul used the imperative to say, “Become what you are in Christ.” His indicative, “We died to sin” (Rom. 6:2), is followed by the imperative, “You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11-12). His recitation of the story of Christ (Phil. 2:6-11) is followed by his imperative, “Work out your own salvation” (Phil. 2:12).

Paul used both the imperative and the frequent “I appeal to you” (parakalo hymas) to describe concretely the moral life as it pertains to marriage and divorce, sexual behavior, work, and relations within the family. The demands implicit within the gospel are a significant element of each Pauline letter. In each instance, the letter functioned in the place of Paul’s personal presence and proclamation. Thus moral demands were an important element in Christian preaching.

Because the function of the sermon is to reproduce the impact of the ancient text for the contemporary situation, moral advice has a legitimate place in preaching. Paul gave moral advice without moralizing. Moral advice becomes moralizing where the connection between the story and the moral demand is lost. A moralistic sermon on marriage and divorce, based on 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, would repeat the prohibition on divorce, for example, without reference to the larger story: the new situation in Christ, the new possibility of glorifying Christ “in our bodies” (1 Cor. 6:20), and the new situation of grace. The indicative (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11) has created a new mind-set which makes obedience possible. In biblical preaching, the proclaimer will not hesitate to confront the hearer with the moral demand for permanent marriages and sub-mission of the body to God’s service. But valid moral advice must be based on the larger story in which the Christian “is bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20).

A sermon on the family might be based on the imperatives of Colossians 3:18-4:1, which lists the duties of husbands, wives, parents, children, slaves and masters. Such a sermon reproduces the impact of the original text only when it demonstrates the aware-ness of the story which precedes it. That husbands should love their wives and wives should submit to their husbands becomes less an onerous duty when we recognize that love and submission have been demonstrated by Christ. Furthermore, these duties in Colossians 3:18-4:1 are based on the fact that

“you have been raised with Christ” (Col. 3:1) and may now “seek the things that are above” (Col. 3:2). The duties within the family are not, therefore, “mundane” duties. They grow out of the story, which has produced a “mind-set” leading to obedience.

Without reference to the story, the moral advice would be reduced to moralizing.

Moralism holds up the virtues, be they yesterday’s piety, courtesy, and cleanliness, or today’s openness, frankness, and freedom, and makes a deadly transposition. Instead of offering lists of virtues as possible goals or consequences of the gospel, moralism subtly prescribes them as the means by which the grace of God is apprehended.¹⁵

Moralism, therefore, distorts the biblical message, while moral demands constitute an important element of the biblical message. Thus the preacher not only wishes to bring his audience to hear with ancient Israel the voices of hope and announcement of victory. He also allows his congregation to identify with the Corinthians as they heard moral demands that challenged their way of life. The appeal of Paul not to be “conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:1) is restated in biblical preaching to a community that is constantly enticed by the lax moral standards of its own culture.

An overreaction to “finger-pointing moralism” could produce a crippling distortion of the gospel as total as the legalism which the preacher abhors. The result would be a community sustained on “cheap grace” and unaware of the demands implicit in being “bought with a price.” The moral confusion which characterizes our present situation places the preacher in a context analogous to

Paul's in the first century, when the cultural situation demanded that he tell his congregations about the lifestyle that grows out of being "washed, justified, and sanctified" (1 Cor. 6:11).

Notes

- ¹ Cited in Richard Lischer, A Theology of Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 62.
- ² See DeWitte Holland, The Preaching Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 69-76.
- ³ William D. Thompson, Preaching Biblically (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 111.
- ⁴ Amos Wilder, The Language of the Gospel (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
- ⁵ Wilder, 13.
- ⁶ Wilder, 18.
- ⁷ Wilder, 64.
- ⁸ M. Hengel, Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 32.
- ⁹ Wilder, 29.
- ¹⁰ A. Wilder, Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths (New York: Harper, 1981), 59.

¹¹ Thompson, 11.

¹² See James Sanders, "Torah and Christ," Interpretation 29 (1975), 372-374.

¹³ Sanders, 378.

¹⁴ H. Gese, Essays in Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 71

¹⁵ Lischer, 62.

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