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## FOREWORD

The experimental liturgies and liturgical reforms so widespread in the sixties can now be seen as attempts to "save the house by moving the furniture." These efforts were but symptoms of a deeper problem for Western society. In a "disenchanted world" (Max Weber) or a secular world, it is increasingly difficult to invest meaning in the concept of worship. In a world with countless superstitions but without true mystery, awe, or reverence--a world without transcendence--there can be little appreciation of what worship is about. Not surprisingly, some seek to reinvigorate worship by attaching it to the almost guaranteed acceptance of popular psychology in modern society; others openly abandon the importance of worship, preferring political action and other forms of involvement.

The essays in this issue of the Faculty Bulletin are presented with a view toward encouraging serious reflection on the nature and meaning of Christian worship.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

HOLDING THE AUDIENCE OR PROCLAIMING THE MESSAGE:  
THE WORD IN WORSHIP

by James W. Thompson

Of the many changes which accompanied the Protestant Reformation, probably none were more immediately apparent to the observer than the developments in Christian worship. Among the churches of the Reformation, the rediscovery of the centrality of the Bible resulted in the replacement of the sacraments by the sermon as the center of Christian worship. As the sacraments declined in importance, the Protestant worship service increasingly became focused on the ministry of the word, which involved both the public reading of Scripture and the sermon. Protestant architecture, with its elevated pulpit, later reflected this changed emphasis in public worship. The sermon was clearly the center of activity when the community assembled.

These changes reflected the new theological insights of the Reformation. The reformers insisted that grace is fully mediated through the ministry of the Word, and not through the sacraments alone. The sermon became so much a focal point of worship that Protestants have been accused of minimizing the sacraments in the life of the church. Protestant worship services, with the emphasis on the sermon, often resembled the academic environment.

Protestants sometimes spoke of "going to the sermon." Indeed, this minimizing of the sacraments was to be seen especially in the lack of frequency with which the Lord's Supper was celebrated in some traditions.

In some respects, the Churches of Christ have not been totally the heirs of this Protestant emphasis. The weekly observance of the Lord's Supper in the Churches of Christ suggests a greater sacramentalism than in the major Protestant traditions. In addition, the belief that the purpose of the assembly is "to break bread," which has often been expressed in the Churches of Christ, suggests a renewed focus on the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, in other ways the Churches of Christ are heirs of the Protestant tradition, for the worship service focuses on the sermon. The major portion of the worship service is devoted to it. Our houses of worship are called auditoriums, and the architecture reflects the significance of the pulpit. Both morning and evening services are devoted principally to preaching.

What is the relation of preaching to the service of worship? One might ask if the Protestant emphasis on preaching has been a genuine recovery of something that had been lost from the ancient church. Or was it actually the introduction of an emphasis which resulted in a distortion of Christian worship? A reexamination of the life of the early church and of ancient Israel may provide some models for the experience of worship in the contemporary church and the place of preaching in this context.

#### Sermon and Worship in the Early Church

The New Testament offers little direct evidence about the

place of preaching in early Christian worship. Indeed, the direct evidence about preaching in the New Testament involves missionary preaching. Acts records sermons from both Peter and Paul, but they are all missionary sermons. When Paul refers to his preaching, the missionary situation is regularly in view. Indeed, C.H. Dodd, in his influential book, The Apostolic Preaching, has defined preaching as "the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world."<sup>2</sup> The verb kērussein ("preach") and the noun kērygma ("preaching," "proclamation"), according to Dodd, were used for the proclamation to those who had not heard (cf. Rom. 10:8, 14). Churches were formed in response to preaching, but we have little direct record of the place of preaching within churches which had assembled for worship.

Because the New Testament never provides a detailed order of worship, our knowledge of early Christian worship is necessarily based on the scattered allusions to the worship service and expressions which are undoubtedly derived from the worship service. The doxologies, hymns, and confessional statements which appear within Paul's writings are apparently taken from the worship service.<sup>3</sup> On numerous occasions Paul speaks in the poetic language which probably reflects the rich and moving expression of early Christian hymnody. The epistle to the Ephesians is so filled with the elevated speech that does not fit easily with normal prose that its setting must be in early Christian worship. References are made to the congregational cry, "abba" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), which comes from the corporate prayer of the church. The congregational "amen," to which Paul

refers (1 Cor. 14:16; 2 Cor. 1:20), also comes from congregational worship, as does the cry, "Maranatha" (1 Cor. 16:22), which is apparently known in the Greek-speaking church at Corinth.

The most complete description of early Christian worship within the New Testament is recorded in 1 Corinthians 11-14, in response to questions which had been raised about the exercise of the spiritual gifts (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1). Paul assumes that worship will include the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34), and that the members will spontaneously offer "a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation" (1 Cor. 14:26). Apparently no leaders exercise the authority of planning or presiding in the worship service, which consists of the sacraments, singing, and the various forms of teaching. While we do not know the precise distinctions between teaching, prophecy, and revelation in 1 Corinthians 14:26, together they constitute a ministry of the word which edifies the whole church. Indeed, Paul offers the major criterion for public worship when he indicates that the edification (oikodome) is indispensable to Christian worship. Only intelligible speech meets Paul's requirement for the edification of the church.

The other parts of the New Testament leave only indirect evidence about early Christian worship. The lyrical language that is scattered throughout 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation is probably derived from early Christian worship. The singing of the heavenly worship in Revelation probably bears some resemblance to the singing of the church at the end of the first

century. However, little record is left of the sermon as a part of Christian worship.

### Paradigms for Christian Worship

The scattered references to worship in the New Testament suggest the importance of the community's response to God in its hymns, prayers, confessional statements and doxologies. Worship was the community's response to the saving deeds of God. The frequency in the New Testament epistles of poetic language suggests that the church's experience of salvation was the occasion for the new expressions of faith which could only be expressed in music. These references suggest that early Christian worship was filled with praise and adoration, and that one would not have mistaken it for a lecture room atmosphere. Through prayer, praise, and the sacraments, the saving deeds of God were remembered and celebrated.

The significance of praise and adoration in the worship does not suggest that the sermon was a dispensable part of Christian worship. Indeed, Paul's insistence that intelligible speech be given in the form of prophecy and teaching is a reminder of the importance of the ministry of the word in the worship service. The task of the prophet was to communicate a word from the Lord in the assembly.

Without the spoken word, the community's own response in worship would lose its significance. The community's response in prayer and song is possible only if it is sustained by the spoken word, which declares what God has done. The spoken message presents the words from the Lord and tells the Christian story.

It is the spoken word which illuminates the Lord's Supper and provides the church's memory.

While the respective tasks of prophets and teachers is never provided in detail, we know that prophets addressed the community with words from the Lord. Through the gift of the Spirit, they communicated God's mysteries. There were some in the early church who transmitted the words of Jesus, and there was intense activity in interpreting the Scripture for the church. This work was probably the task of prophets and teachers, who offered words in church which shaped the identity of the church.

#### Other Early Christian Paradigms

Although the New Testament leaves us no order of worship with a record of the sermon, it offers other important paradigms which suggest the importance of the ministry of the word in worship. Paul's epistles offer one very important model, for they were intended to be read in the assembly. As substitutes for Paul's personal presence before an assembled community,<sup>4</sup> they are not literary works. They bear the characteristics of oral communication. Amos Wilder has written,

Even in writing he falls into the style of direct oral plea and challenge. The very nature of the Gospel imposes upon him ways of expression that suggest dramatic immediacy: devices and rhythms of the speaker rather than the writer; imagined dialogue; the situation of a court hearing or church trial with its accusations and defences; the use of direct discourse; challenges not so much to understand the written words but to listen and behold; queries, exclamations and oaths.<sup>5</sup>

Paul writes to his churches, not as an essayist, but as one who must respond to the crises of the church. He is the anxious parent who struggles to see that Christ is "formed" in the

community (Gal. 4:19). In his absence, the letters serve the purposes of community formation. At times he reminds his readers of the very proclamation which originally called the church into being (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-25; 15:3). He does not hesitate to recall what was apparently already known to his readers: that he preached Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2); that he preached "Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5); and that his words were nothing less than the actual word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). In the context of responding to concrete situations facing the community, Paul holds before his community the gospel. He himself is only the steward of this message which he hands on (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1).

As one who speaks for God, Paul also writes to hand on ethical instruction (1 Thess. 4:3-8), to encourage, bear witness, and teach his communities (cf. 1 Thess 2:12). His ethical instruction places before the congregation concrete advice about their relationships to each other, to the world and government (cf. Rom. 13:1-7). Community formation thus depended on words which recalled the good news and instructed the community in its duties. These words were passed on when Christians assembled for worship.

Although Christian assemblies were distinguishable from the lecture halls of the philosophers, they were nevertheless characterized by the spoken word. Indeed, E.A. Judge has written that ancient people would have perceived early churches as "scholastic communities" because of the place of written texts in their worship. The amount of time devoted to the ministry of the word was unique among ancient religions.

If Paul's letters have the characteristics of oral

communication while they are clothed in the form of letters, the epistle to the Hebrews is even more a paradigm of the ministry of the word. The author describes his work as a "word of exhortation" (13:22; cf. Acts 13:15), which was an ancient term for the sermon. Indeed, this book is probably the oldest recorded sermon to a Christian audience. The book is addressed to the concrete needs of a church which is struggling with the problems of the second generation. The author does not identify himself, for his personality is of far less significance than the words which he presents. What the author presents is the interpretation of Scripture. The community is confronted with the word of God, which remains "living and active" (cf. Heb. 4:12-13). The memory of past traditions belongs to the church as it addressed through the Scripture. Through this memory, the church recalls its own past (cf. Heb. 11). The Old Testament presents words which remind the church of the promises of God and of those who struggled to obtain them. At the same time, the words from the Old Testament are like a "two edged sword" which summon the church to obedience. Thus through the Scripture, the church is reminded of its past and confronted with the holy God who is a "consuming fire." The author of Hebrews is the preacher who addresses a gathered community with the words which alone can sustain it in moments of crisis. Old traditions are alive for the church.

#### A Legacy of Centuries

In summoning his community to recall its story, the author of Hebrews is continuing a legacy that extends for more than fifteen hundred years before him. The Old Testament canon came

into being through a long process in which communities were sustained by the stories which gave them their identity. Before written texts were delivered, sacred and authoritative traditions were preserved to remind God's community of their vocation. Israel approached God in song, prayer, and sacrifice, but Israel's worship was always accompanied by the words which preserved her memory. In 1 Samuel 12:7, Samuel is the spokesman who, in the context of a festival (cf. 1 Sam. 12:17), recites "all the saving deeds of the Lord which he performed for you and your fathers." At the feast of harvest, the Israelites were taught to recite their story, which included the mighty acts of God at the exodus. In Joshua 24, the people listen as their story is recited again. These recitals provide Israel's story, a summary of the entire Torah.

When Israel's institutions were destroyed, her story remained. She took it with her to captivity in Babylon. The story was the sustaining power which continued to form the community, give her an identity, and provide hope that the God who had acted before would act again. Just as Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof could keep his balance under the extreme duress of persecution because of the tradition which he could take with him, Israel maintained her identity through her story.

James Sanders has commented on the power of the biblical story to sustain the people of God. "While it is undoubtedly true to say that the Bible has survived because of the church and synagogue, it is also in varying measure true to say that these institutions have survived because of the Bible."<sup>7</sup> Even before

the shaping of the canon, sacred traditions reminded the people of God who they were.

God's servants, the prophets, remind Israel of the mighty acts of God and summon Israel to return to the covenant. In moments of despair, the prophetic voice recalls the sacred traditions in order to say that "God's word will not return empty" (Isa. 55:11). In periods when the community has forsaken the covenant, the prophets indict and threaten with a word from the Lord (cf. Jer. 7). Thus when the author of Hebrews relies on the ancient stories to encourage and to warn, he stands in a prophetic tradition which extends to the Old Testament.

#### The Closing of the Canon

For centuries, the people of God maintained their identity through the power of a story. When the law and the prophets were placed in their final form, the text itself became the normative word from the Lord, and the task of the interpreter was to demonstrate the continuing power of these texts in new situations. Thus when Jesus spoke at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30), he spoke to the community from the text of Isaiah 61, and he demonstrated that the text was a living word which addressed his generation. His words were delivered in the context of worship, and they were based on the interpretation of Scripture. The fact that the crowd was outraged by Jesus' message suggests that he challenged the prevailing understanding of the text from Isaiah 61. The community was confronted with the old text in the new situation. Like the Israelites who were reminded of the ancient traditions which challenged their easy assumptions about the ways

of God, the synagogue at Nazareth discovered that the words from the text continued to speak to them.

Y. Brilioth has suggested that Jesus' sermon in the synagogue is the essential link in the "golden chain which unites the Jewish proclamation and the Christian sermon." The sermon of Jesus had, according to Brilioth, three distinguishing features which characterize Christian preaching. Jesus' sermon was distinguished by the liturgical element, as it was delivered in the context of worship. It was also distinguished by the exegetical element, inasmuch as it was based on an authoritative text. Finally, it was distinguished by the prophetic element in its declaration that the old text continued to speak to Jesus' own audience. ("Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.") Throughout the ages, these elements have been the distinguishing characteristics of Christian preaching. Where they have been omitted, Christian preaching has lost its essential character.

#### Paradigms for Today

Preaching has indeed lost its essential character when it has been dominated by paradigms of oral address which have omitted these distinguishing characteristics of Christian preaching. From the time of Augustine, who wrote the first textbook on homiletics, classical rhetoric has been an alternative paradigm for preachers. Homiletics textbooks, in the tradition of Augustine, have been modeled on classical rhetoric, and the teachers of preaching have come from that tradition. While the art of rhetoric may serve as an appropriate handmaiden for the preacher,

he must recognize that the distinguishing characteristics of preaching must be discovered in the liturgical, exegetical, and prophetic aspects of preaching. P. T. Forsyth was correct when he wrote,

The Christian preacher is not the successor of the Greek orator, but of the Hebrew prophet. The orator comes with but an inspiration, the prophet comes with a revelation.<sup>8</sup>

The preacher thus comes with words that are not his own, and, like Paul, he recognizes that it is God who makes his appeal through the medium of preaching.

Rhetoric is not the only tempting paradigm for the preacher, especially in today's culture. In a world where the congregation is shaped in an extraordinary way by the media, the tempting paradigm for the preacher is offered by entertainment. Neil Postman has convincingly demonstrated that television has altered our way of knowing.<sup>9</sup> Many of the religious programs on television demonstrate some of the more distasteful and egregious examples of the attempt to communicate the gospel through entertainment. The public worship service also offers the tempting invitation to follow the model of entertainment, for the ingredients of the entertainment world are present: the "audience," the high profile "personality," and the "program." Where entertainment is the dominant paradigm, the purpose of the assembly will be to satisfy the consumers. The purpose of the sermon will be to amuse and entertain.

The danger for Christian preaching is in following the wrong models. P. T. Forsyth said, "Where your object is to secure your audience, rather than your Gospel, preaching is sure to suffer."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Paul faced audiences which preferred

oratory to the word of the cross. The modern preacher will undoubtedly face a culture which prefers models from entertainment to the presentation of the prophetic voice which comes with a word that has addressed assembled communities for centuries, an old word which nevertheless speaks to the present moment.

The ancient paradigms suggest that preaching, together with the reading of Scripture, should be central to Christian worship, for the ministry of the word provides the story and the memory for the community. Without the memory, praise, singing, prayer, and the reenactment of the story through the Lord's Supper would have no meaning. Although the other parts of the worship service are not to be considered the "preliminaries" for the sermon, the ministry of the word is the part of the Christian worship which provides interpretation for the rest of the service. Just as the ancient Passover meal was accompanied by words of interpretation, the sermon is an indispensable part of the worship service. Indeed, John Knox has correctly said that preaching in itself is worship.

Unless we conceive of preaching as being itself an act of worship, we miss what is most essential in it and what distinguishes it most radically from other kinds of teaching, religious or secular. The real truth of the matter is not that preaching merely happens usually to be set in a context of worship or that it is most effective when it has that kind of setting. Rather, it cannot be really preaching except in that context. If the context of worship is not there already, the true sermon creates it. Either preaching contributes to, provides a medium of, worship, or it is not preaching at all.<sup>11</sup>

If the preacher and the congregation together understand that preaching is an act of worship and that it has continuity with the work of God's spokesmen in the past, profound

consequences should follow. The preacher who understands his role as a "steward" of the word of God (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1) will take seriously the time spent in preparation. He is likely to be, especially in the modern church, the primary if not the only source of the church's memory and identity. This self-understanding should reorient his priorities toward the study of the text. Even if the ministerial task has moved in recent years toward administration and management, the preacher will recognize the awesome responsibility of providing a word that is "sharper than any two edged sword." He will come to his congregation neither as master of ceremonies nor as manager, but as a spokesman for God. Congregations which recognize the importance of the ministry of the word will reorient their expectations in such a way that they are prepared for a word based on Scripture that will challenge the way their priorities and the way they will see the world.

If communities maintained their identity in moments of despair and captivity only through the power of the words from God, the church today will maintain its own identity only when the Sunday sermon exists in continuity with the prophetic voice of the past. This prophetic voice today is allowed to speak only when the sermon is deeply rooted in rigorous study of the text of Scripture. Churches may prefer "junk food" to rigorous study of their heritage, but only the word from the Lord will sustain the church into the future. Only the word which addresses the assembled community in worship shapes a common identity and a common mission for the church.

Notes

1

Peter van Ness, "The Proclaimed and Visible Word," Word and World 7 (1987) 180.

2

C. H. Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) 7.

3

On doxologies, cf. Rom. 1:25; 9:5; on confessional statements, cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; on hymns, cf. Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16.

4

Cf. Gal. 4:20, "I could wish to be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you."

5

Amos Wilder, The Language of the Gospel (New York: Harper, 1964) 22-23.

6

E. A. Judge, "The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community," Journal of Religious History 1 (1960) 135; cf. Y. Brilioth, A Brief History of Christian Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 2: "The use of the oral lecture in the service is a trait that unites Judaism and Christianity. Where, in the world of religion, can we find a counterpart? . . . Only Judaism and Christendom make the freely spoken word, the personal testimony, an essential portion of the holy acts of the cult."

7

James Sanders, Torah and Canon (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 5.

8

P. T. Forsyth, Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1964) 1.

9

Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves To Death (New York: Penguin, 1985) 16-29.

10

Forsyth, 2.

11

John Knox, The Integrity of Preaching (New York: Abingdon, 1957) 76.

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