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Preaching on Social-Ethical Issues

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There is still difference of opinion as to the legitimacy of preaching on social-ethical issues as overagainst individual-ethical issues. Typically, both pro and con voices have based their argument on the *gospel*. It is not my intention to enter this argument, except to acknowledge that in my reading of the New Testament I find Jesus always knee-deep in social issues. David Buttrick has made the necessity of social-ethical preaching as clear as anyone:

A few years ago two Christmas cards arrived at my home on the same day. One, all pink and blue, pictured Mary cradling the baby Jesus, with a caption beneath: May Christ be born in your heart this Christmas. A nice card. The other was also a baby picture. The card showed a bloated baby rocking in the dust of Bangladesh. Save the children! read the caption; it was an appeal for funds. There is the problem. If Christ is no more than a "heart" savior, who on earth will save the children? If we must seek some other savior for our social problems—to feed the hungry, curb economic greed, or stymie an arms race—then Jesus Christ is not the savior of the world, he is a half-savior and we are only half-saved. In the second century, gnostics celebrated Jesus Christ as a soul savior but either wrote off the world as a lost cause or prudently honored a second savior, hedging their bets. How easily we can stumble into the same trap! We have Jesus as a savior in our hearts, but when it comes to the social world, we back the most incredible pseudo-saviors, from communism to capitalism to the Liberty Foundation of Jerry Falwell. No wonder the early church fathers fought off the gnostic heresy; ultimately it revered two saviors, one for the soul and one for society. If we embrace a second savior, inevitably its name will be spelled *I-S-M*, "ism." The issue is christological: Jesus Christ is the *only* savior of the world.¹

I want to take up seven dimensions of the task of preaching on ethical issues: (1) creating a climate and a context; (2) developing the mind of Christ; (3) studying an issue; (4) sermon

objectives; (5) stances the preacher may take; (6) sermonic movements; and (7) following-through.

1. Creating a Climate and a Context

Some years ago I was invited to conduct services in a church whose pastor was on vacation. I prepared my sermon, and on Saturday evening relaxed with a magazine—but not for long. It contained a graphic article on world hunger. At the end of it I looked to the next page and there was a glitzy ad for cosmetics. I was shocked and infuriated by the juxtaposition: had the magazine no sensitivity? After a searing article, were we back to business-as-usual? I could scarcely sleep. A new sermon shaped in my mind, but it was only when I stood in the pulpit next day that I set aside my prepared sermon and preached “from the heart” about world hunger and how we are insulated from it. It felt good!

Later I considered the whole experience. What effect had the sermon had? Certainly it had had a compelling immediacy about it; it had been a passionate and graphic image of our society overagainst the realities of the world. But I reluctantly realized that unless the congregation already had a “mission” consciousness and a “social” consciousness, the sermon had been sound and fury; and unless the congregation was already engaging in social ministry the sermon had been a flash in the pan. Without doubt it created wonderment at the preacher’s personal passion, and without doubt it created guilt to which there was no resolution.

Thus the need, before launching into sermons on ethical issues, to till the soil and prepare the seed-bed. A climate of mission and a context in which issues can be heard and discussed and actions considered are both a pre-preaching as well as a continuing concern.

In our consumer-oriented society it is difficult to create and sustain a commitment to mission in a congregation. People come to church to satisfy certain needs and to receive certain services. For these they will pay: partly in money, partly in voluntary help. But the perception of the larger church, and the perception of the mission of the church—not even to speak of the church *as* mission—is caught and held only by a minority.

To create a climate of mission is difficult work. At least four elements are involved: a pastor who is visibly interested in and concerned about social-ethical issues; programs which reach into the community and the world; liturgy which refuses to float into otherworldliness; and preaching which, as Edmund Steimle expressed it, though it starts in the Bible does not stay there.²

The preacher must be *visibly* interested in and concerned about ethical issues. While she or he may have some "pet" issues, it is important not to concentrate exclusively on a select few, lest they become "causes". Kelly Miller Smith, in a book devoted to social crisis preaching, advises:

Effective proclamation is greatly dependent upon what the function of the preacher has been prior to the crisis proclamation. Communication is facilitated by the consistent function of the minister in the direction of justice and liberation of the oppressed. When members of the congregation understand that their minister is usually on the cutting edge of constructive change, the crisis proclamation delivered at the time of a particular crisis will be expected and generally well received. It should be clear that if the sermon is the minister's first and only indication of concern, there is likely to be difficulty in getting the message across. Communication actually begins not when the text and the sermon title are announced, but when the minister functions in the community in relation to critical social circumstances and shows social sensitivity prior to proclamation.

Smith recommends the following "peculiar responsibilities" to preachers, all of which contribute to a climate of responsible mission:

- (1) Encouraging the congregations over which they preside to welcome into their membership all persons regardless of their race, national origin, socioeconomic status, educational achievement, and the like.
- (2) Giving consistent attention to social concerns before they reach crisis proportions.
- (3) Acquainting the congregation with enlightened pronouncements and documents produced by their denominations as well as those of others that address social concerns from within the context of the Christian faith.
- (4) Embarking upon periods of study that point out the urgent contemporary social issues even before they have reached crisis proportions.
- (5) Reflecting in their preaching an understanding of the social relevance of the Christian gospel before a specific crisis arises.³

This kind of leadership is imperative not only for good communication but to establish and build the preacher's credibility and integrity. Jesus could speak authentically because he washed feet. Samuel D. Proctor remarks,

In a society that tolerates retired army generals selling weapons to the government, corporations hiding contributions made to political candidates, tobacco companies hiring celebrities to deceive the public about the effects of smoking, banks laundering money for crime syndicates, medical doctors padding charges to Medicaid for treating the nation's poorest, athletes gambling on their own games, and police involved in drug traffic, anyone found holding fast to moral integrity, to consistently reliable and predictable behavior, turns out to be a rare creature. It is a blessing to any community to have the word leak out and circulate that the Christian minister is one such person who can be trusted.⁴

Such pastors can, with patience and sensitivity, nurture congregations which reach out into their communities and the world. We have had the privilege over the past few years to observe pastors and churches in Eastern Europe, South Africa, Namibia, and Central America actually *do* what they "say with their lips and feel in their hearts". Samuel Proctor observes:

It says so much for Christ when someone passing by a brick colonial church, a stone Gothic edifice, or a wooden structure with a spire pointing toward heaven on a lonely road can feel deep within that what goes on there can be believed and trusted, because what the people there say with their lips and feel in their hearts, they do, and they live with the results.⁵

A congregation that lives the gospel in all its dimensions will be a force in the community. Are there such congregations? Can they be created? In our consumer-oriented society the church as an agent of service is known, but it is not so well known as an agent of change. Is it a forum where issues are discussed and debated? Is it a pioneer of social ministries? Is it a prophetic presence and voice? Thankfully, we can begin to answer with a guarded yes. As congregations have become involved in support for aboriginal peoples, in refugee work, in soup kitchens, in clothing and food collection drives, day-care, care of the elderly and infirm, counselling and addiction centres, chaplaincy work, and other social ministries, the concept of "mission" has been broadening significantly. When our "foreign missionaries" write of violence, terrorism, cholera, and hunger in the lands where they serve, congregations are

drawn willy-nilly into national and international politics and economics. A few years ago a Canadian Lutheran missionary in El Salvador was abducted and imprisoned, and over night the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada became a political lobby. Brian Rude, the missionary, by the way, was not a traditional missionary, but was working in a social service project.

A third element in creating a climate of mission and a context in which social issues can be examined is liturgy which persistently places the worshippers not into some never-never land of spiritualism but again and again into the world which "God so loved". Especially important is the prayer of the church. Intercessory prayer for all the sorts and conditions of humankind is a huge part of faithful discipleship. While it is an abuse of prayer to use it to make announcements or reinforce the message of the sermon, prayer nevertheless has an "impressive" as well as an "expressive" effect: as we pray for people caught in oppressive conditions and situations, and as we confess our complicity, we are alerted as well as convicted. And, perhaps most importantly, as we pray for the victims of social forces and conditions and for the victimizers we are beginning to take responsibility.

A fourth element in creating a climate of mission and an open ear to social-ethical issues is preaching that is consistently aware of the world in which people live and which is concerned to deal with it theologically. Karl Barth's image of having the Bible on one knee and the newspaper on the other is exactly the right image. But the newspaper is not merely the source of illustrations of the sinfulness of the world; the newspaper represents the world in which God is at work, providentially and redemptively, in judgment and in mercy. The preacher, by definition, is the one who can perceive that active God, even as Second Isaiah could perceive (and dare to assert!) that the Lord had anointed Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1). One ought to be able to date sermons by their contents and references.⁶

Preaching that is open to the world, done by a visibly involved preacher, in the context of a congregation and a church that are also visibly involved in ministry, can create a climate of mission in which social-ethical issues can be discussed and actions planned.

2. Developing the Mind of Christ

Creating a climate in which specific social-ethical issues can be heard, discussed, and acted upon is already a long step toward developing "the mind of Christ" in the community of faith. But sooner or later we must reckon with the fact that there are underlying structures and pervasive orientations in our society which unconsciously shape our perception of issues and thwart our preaching and hearing as well as our efforts to redress unrighteousness. Bonnie L. Benda puts it this way:

I propose that what social justice preaching must do, if it is to address the problems of our present world, is to facilitate a transformation of consciousness, a change in our underlying philosophy and world view.... It involves a whole new way of thinking about ourselves and the world.⁷

In short, we have to work at transforming the worldview of the congregation. St. Paul expressed it succinctly in Romans 12:2 which, in J.B. Phillip's startling translation, admonishes: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the Plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves toward the goal of maturity."⁸

Our congregations, usually unknowingly, are so squeezed into the moulds of the world they cannot hear the radicalness of, say, Jesus' words to the so-called rich young ruler, "Sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me." Nor can preachers hear the radicalness long enough to preach it. Our secularized worldview needs to be exposed. So our preaching, writes Walter Brueggemann, "is aimed not simply at this or that ethical issue, but seeks to cut underneath particular issues to the unreasoned, unexamined, and unrecognized 'structures of plausibility' that are operative in the congregation."⁹ These must be exposed so that, freed from their bondage, we may develop the "mind of Christ", i.e., a Christian worldview.

What are these "unreasoned, unexamined, and unrecognized structures of plausibility"? A very good place to look for them is television. William Kuhns said it bluntly, "People today live 'by the media' whereas once they lived 'by the book'."¹⁰ And what does living by the media mean? William

F. Fore, assistant general secretary for communications of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A., lists a few of the central myths and values cultivated and propagated by television:¹¹

(1) *The fittest survive.* The fittest, in Western culture, are not lower class nonwhites, because our social Darwinism holds that genetic differences between ethnic groups are "large enough to justify programming for unequal natural capacities for responsible decision making, specifically in the interests of the group one represents."

(2) *Power and decision making start at the center and move out.* "While watching television, one gets the sense of personally existing at the edge of a giant network where someone at the center pushes the right button and instantaneously millions of us 'out there' see what has been decided we will see." This is, of course, the model of the industrial revolution with its principle of mass production which requires standardization, synchronization, centralization, and advertizing campaigns that convince us of diversity even as we get more and more of the same (ten boxes of detergent, twenty of wheat cereal).

(3) *Happiness consists of limitless material acquisition.* This means that "consumption is inherently good" and that, ultimately, "property, wealth, and power are more important than people".

(4) *Progress is an inherent good.* We expect, at least annually, a "new and improved" product. Beneath this may well lie a doctrine of Inevitable Progress related both to Darwinism and capitalism. There is a dreadful feeling, voiced by community planners and chambers of commerce, that unless we are going forward we will go backward—and to go backward (which seems to mean to stop growing, stop development, stop consuming, stop wasting) is disastrous.

(5) *There exists a free flow of information.* Sometimes this is true, of course, but only up to a point. We thought we were getting first-hand information when the Gulf War started, but we soon discovered that military control of news was tight and managed. The consternation of newspeople themselves at this fact was as good evidence as any that the free flow of information is largely an illusion. The truth is extremely hard to come by. "When," asks Fore, "was the last time you saw a long-haired, radical hippy anchoring the evening TV news?" The

fact is, he asserts, "that instead of a genuine free flow of information there is consistent, pervasive, and effective propaganda and censorship...."

(6) *The values propagated by such a worldview are easily identified.* "Power heads the list: power over others; power over nature. As Hannah Arendt pointed out in today's media world it is not so much that power corrupts as that the aura of power, its glamorous trappings, attracts."¹² Next come *wealth* and *property*, with their assumptions that anything can be bought, and that consumption is an intrinsic good. Personal well-being and gratification follow easily.

Fore sums up:

Thus the mass-media worldview tells us that we are basically good, that happiness is the chief end of life, and that happiness consists in obtaining material goods. The media transform the value of sexuality into sex appeal, the value of self-respect into pride, the value of will-to-live into will-to-power. They exacerbate acquisitiveness into greed; they deal with insecurity by generating more insecurity, and anxiety by generating more anxiety. They change the value of recreation into competition and the value of rest into escape. And perhaps worst of all, the media constrict our experience and substitute media world for real world so that we become less and less able to make the fine value-judgments that living in such a complex world requires.¹³

Children now drink in this worldview with their surrogate mother's milk. We, preachers and hearers alike, act upon it day after day.

So there's the challenging task: to transform that conformed mind into the mind of Christ, that is, to get them out of that worldview into another worldview. Brueggemann explains:

This means that the purpose of interpretation and preaching is to present a world-view that is credible, that can be appropriated, out of which the community is authorized and permitted to live a different kind of life. As the text itself is a responsive, assertive, creative act, so the interpretation of the text is also a responsive, assertive, creative act. *The purpose of the sermon is to provide a world in which the congregation can live.* Indeed, the preacher is intentionally designated precisely to mediate a world that comes out of this text which endures through the generations. The world which the preacher mediates is one possible world out of many that could be offered. The offer of this world competes with other offers made by capitalism, by militarism, by psychology of various kinds, by health clubs, by automobiles, by beers, and so on.¹⁴

This "new world" disclosed in the text is not an "other-worldly" world or a "spiritualized" world; it is what Jesus called the Kingdom—that is, the Rule or Reign or Dominion of God. "It refers to the present Rule of God," writes Brueggemann, "that calls us to a new obedience now and that releases us from every other obedience in the here and now, for the sake of God's sovereign rule."¹⁵

A wonderful example of this call and release was Desmond Tutu leading South African Blacks onto whites-only beaches. As camera- and tape recorder-laden reporters scrambled to keep up with him, he chortled, "The beaches belong to God!" That statement opened a whole new world: it undercut apartheid, banished possessiveness on the part of both Whites and Blacks, and liberated the beaches and the Whites and the Blacks. And it invited Blacks and Whites together to enter this new world. This, of course, is exactly what our own Native people have been trying to tell us from the beginning: no one *owns* the land or the water or the air.

We can appreciate now why the biblical text is imperative for ethical preaching. Of course, it gives the preachers authority: they are not speaking out of their own authority or wisdom. But chiefly the texts are important—essential in fact—because only there is the new world of God's Rule disclosed. Consequently, in Brueggemann's felicitous words, the texts characteristically "invite the listening community out beyond the presumed world to a new world of freedom, joy, and obedience."¹⁶

Perhaps the key to the "mind of Christ" in our era is the regaining of the *communal* nature of the church. Reginald Bibby and Robert N. Bellah¹⁷ have underscored the inveterate individualism of North American religion, yet St. Paul's great image of the church is that of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12:27). Arthur Van Seters observes,

(The body of listeners to the preacher) are a corporate entity belonging to one another and to Christ. But they desperately need to know and feel what this means. They need the activity of covenant-making, which week by week invites them further into the bonding of covenant.... Within this bonding the community can then truly hear what God requires of them to live as faithful disciples: do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8).¹⁸

No doubt what this will increasingly require is the congregation's participation in preaching, not only in the preparation of

sermons (e.g., group study of the text) but also in the delivery of sermons (e.g., as done in some of the "base communities" in Third World countries).¹⁹

3. Studying the Issue

Since truth is so hard to come by in our media driven culture, and since so much of our worldview is illusory and propagandistic, it is imperative that a preacher speak truth. That is what the prophets did, and that is what Jesus did. Both demonstrate that telling the truth is dangerous, and therefore takes courage. The more specific one becomes, the more offensive one may become. When Jesus said, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a publican and the other a pharisee," the atmosphere went electric.

Oscar Romero, like the prophets and Jesus, was astonishingly specific. Leo Sands describes his preaching:

He was constantly commenting on political events. Some of his homilies sound as much like news broadcasts as preaching. For instance, his last Sunday homily, for the 5th Sunday of lent, begins with the introduction of several Americans... and then comments on the return of the archdiocesan radio station which was at last broadcasting again after having been blown up about a month before. The first half of the homily consists of what might be considered more sermon-like material, teaching and exhortation on preparation for Holy Week and Easter, exposition of all three readings and the basis in them of such themes as the dignity of the human person. But the second half of it is of a very different character. It is mainly a chronicle of the news both good and bad. Of the bad he reports, for example, of soldiers raping four women at a village feast, the false denunciation of a priest, the decapitation of a young reservist by members of the National Guard, the assassination of 6 peasants by one of the popular organizations, and of March 17, a "tremendously violent day" entailing 50 deaths, concerning all of which the preacher gives some account. In each case, if the information is available he supplies the name of the town, the date, and the names of those involved. Of good news there is some but not much. He refers for instance to an impressive confirmation ceremony at which he presided in one of the villages, and to the growth of a new parish. But the most inflammatory section of the homily is its conclusion. There he exhorts the police and the military. How can they kill their brother peasants! The law of God says: 'Thou shalt not kill.' "No soldier is obligated to obey an order contrary to the law of God... It is high time that you recovered your consciences and obeyed your consciences rather than a sinful order." This seems to

have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Dermot Keogh maintains that "the appeal was seen as an act of sedition."²⁰

Romero's extraordinary specificity was, he felt, called for by the extraordinary circumstances of his times. He had to name the evils bluntly, and reckon on the consequences: it was "show-down" time.

The circumstances of our preaching are not usually so urgent and immediate. Nevertheless, the demand for truth calls for specificity, and that calls for *research*.

A helpful place to begin studying an ethical issue is to "track" it. This is done by building a current file on it which contains newspaper and magazine clippings, notes from media programs, articles, church statements, and notes of what people are saying about it. The idea is to observe and record how the issue is developing in the public forum: who is speaking out, who is taking what action, what attitudes and feelings are being expressed and generated, what biases and stereotypes are being propagated, what resources are emerging. A crucial part of "tracking" an issue is to note what kind of "clustering" is going on. Almost any issue will generate—and also attract—tangents and side-issues and "causes". One of the genuine services which preachers can perform, as we shall see, is the clarification of just what the issue is.

A second important research step is the development of an existential contact. Is it possible to meet and speak with a person suffering from AIDS? an alcoholic or other substance-abuser? an economist who knows the operation of the International Monetary Fund? a refugee? a Native person? Is it possible at least to visit an agency that deals with the issue? Is it possible to speak with the family of those affected by an issue—poverty, lack of housing, unemployment, senior care-givers? Is it possible to experience first-hand the effects of an issue: recently a Toronto reporter lived for a week with a pregnant single mother with two children on welfare; many people have travelled to El Salvador and other parts of the world under church auspices.

A third step in research, of course, is the examination of the literature on the issue, and biblical-theological study. Not to be neglected here are the studies and statements issued by churches.

How shall one organize the resulting mound of data? Sider and King suggest that an issue has four dimensions: the transcendent, the structural, the personal, and the interior.²¹

The transcendent dimension they describe as "openness to the divine". This means, for one thing, that even with "all the facts in hand" (supposing, of course, that that were possible!) the issue is still not fully defined because, broadly speaking, there is the utter reality of Evil on the one side and the Lordship of Christ on the other, and beyond all that the Eschaton. Furthermore, openness to the divine means that an issue is never simple, if only because an issue occurs in a context and has implications and repercussions and consequences. We can, I believe, see the transcendent dimension best in Jesus as he kept placing present issues and problems into the context of the Rule of God.

The structural dimension recognizes that human life is ordered to permit living together without chaos. Every ordering of life becomes a structure which both facilitates and limits life together. Not only so, but, given the fact of sin, structures can become oppressive, exploitative, and demonic. Thus they take on a life of their own and usurp the place of God, becoming the "principalities and powers" against which, says St. Paul, we are struggling. Sider and King identify four broad structures of human life together: religious, moral, political, and intellectual. Since we are incorporated into structures we are usually unaware of what they are doing to us and the deleterious effects they have on people often far removed from us. This dimension is relatively new for our hearers who have been used to defining sin and morality in individualistic terms.

The personal dimension is the experiential dimension of an issue: the broken story told by the battered spouse or the homeless person sleeping on a grate or the Kwakiutl matron blocking the logging road. This is often the best place at which to begin a sermon on a specific issue, not only because such an account humanizes the issue but also because it opens the complexity of the issue.

The interior dimension is less clearly articulated by Sider and King. I think they mean the inner struggle of confronting one's own "dark side", one's own guiltiness and duplicity, one's own involvement and "caught-ness" in structures which oppress, as well as one's own call to repentance, faith, and discipleship.

Such a four-fold scheme can not only help us organize data but can push us to include in our research all the pertinent areas.

4. Objectives for Preaching on a Social-Ethical Issue

4.1. *An immediate motive.*

Identifying a reason or reasons for preaching on just *this* issue *at this time* may go a long way toward establishing objectives for the sermon:

Is it being debated in the congregation, the church, the community, in the media?

Is it being brought forward by the church's "calendar of emphases" (e.g., world hunger)?

Is it raised by a lesson in the lectionary cycle (e.g., marriage and divorce)?

Does it provoke you personally?

Should the church provide moral leadership?

Does the issue need theological interpretation?

Should the church help? What kind of help should it provide?

These questions are only a way of beginning to determine objectives for the sermon. More specifically, we may identify three categories of objectives: consciousness-raising, teaching, and mobilizing to action.

4.2. *Consciousness-raising:*

4.21. To "un-numb" people.

Sider and King point out that people have gone numb because they are "faced with a world filled with actualities and possibilities too frightening to bear." Perhaps they care too much, and thus do not dare confront an issue lest their feelings drown them, whether feelings of compassion and empathy or rage at injustices.²² Many people do not read newspapers or listen to news reports because they get too disturbed or distraught or frightened.

The key ingredient here is *fear*. So the objective of the sermon is to expose and defeat the fear. Essentially this is done

by “naming the monster”. This is a technique familiar to parents who have had to deal with a child’s fears. Having heard the grim description of the nightmare monster, the parent observes, “Oh, that’s Herman. I remember him...” The monster is identified, and the fear becomes manageable. “To name the monsters that terrify our people,” writes Joseph R. Jeters, Jr., “is to lay the groundwork for understanding them... and having power to overcome [them].”²³ A fine example occurred at the Church-wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in August 1989. The Rev. Judith Gerlitz of New York supported the inclusion of the issue of sexual harassment and abuse in a social statement on sexuality. After citing statistics of sexual assault on working women and children she asked those who had experienced harassment to stand if they were comfortable doing so. Forty women and two men stood.²⁴

4.22. To counter the “media effect” with respect to values.

The media, especially TV, reflects the values of society, and, by the very act of reflecting them, establishes them. William F. Fore writes:

In many ways television is beginning to *replace* the institution that historically has performed the functions we have understood as religious. Television, rather than the churches, is becoming the place where people find a worldview which reflects what to them is of ultimate value, and which justifies their behavior and way of life. Television today, whether the viewers know it or not, and whether the television industry knows it or not, is competing not merely for our attention and dollars, but for our very souls.²⁵

4.23. To keep an issue alive.

Here again we are countering an effect of the media, namely, that when an issue disappears from the TV screen and the front page it is solved. Neil Postman points out that in TV it is the *picture* that is the medium of information. That being so, we have to note that people respond to a picture not logically but emotionally. Past, present, and future melt into one; a critical function is *not required*—we “like” one of three political candidates in the debate and “don’t like” the others. Furthermore, viewers expect that everything will be immediately understandable; that which is not is assumed to have been badly represented or is a problem not important enough

to be pursued, and *so it is forgotten*, i.e., erased. After all, new images burst upon the screen every few seconds. The consequence is that raising a problem is itself the solution to the problem. Problems are raised, discussed, and then can be put aside. The moment the problem disappears from the screen it has disappeared in reality. When the starving children no longer peer at us from the screen, they no longer exist.²⁶ So preaching keeps an issue alive. (Note, of course, that preaching itself is liable to the same “dismissal”; therefore the need for follow-through.)

4.24. To alert people.

In spite of unparalleled news gathering resources and communicational media, parishioners remain ignorant of many societal issues. There is great ignorance of what is happening to people even in the congregation, much less in the community and the world. How much *do* people know of Native issues, for example, or governmental defence policies in Labrador? Part of people’s ignorance is legitimate: no one can be “on top” of all issues; part of it is the result of numbness; and surely part of it is also due to the selectivity and biases of newsgathering services.

4.3. *Teaching*

A second major category of objectives is teaching. We may identify four dimensions of teaching.

4.31. What does it have to do with the gospel?

Whatever may have prompted the preacher to tackle an issue, and whatever specific objectives may focus the sermon eventually, this question must be dealt with. Earl H. Brill makes the point:

The congregation wants to know by what right the preacher is dealing with this issue. What does it have to do with their Christian faith? In what sense is the issue a theological one? Here the generalized claim that “God is concerned for everything in the world, not just religion” or that “religion affects all areas of life” simply will not do. The preacher needs to be able to make clear just what in the Christian heritage bears on the particular issue at hand so that the congregation can perceive the religious dimension of this “secular” issue.... In point of fact, most people are not at all clear about

how their religious faith relates to the world of secular concerns. If a preacher can help his [sic] listeners make these connections, he will have done the most important part of his job.²⁷

Brill notes that making the connection between the issue and the gospel is a step most frequently omitted by preachers in spite of the fact that it is critically important.

4.32. What is the heart of the issue?

Next to making the theological connections, identifying the heart of the issue is the most useful contribution a preacher can make. Again Earl H. Brill:

In situations of serious conflict, a number of issues usually get lumped together, with the result that people mostly talk past each other. Identifying the point at issue—and the reasons for the controversy—sharpens people's awareness and enables them to slough off the subsidiary issues. In doing this, the preacher needs to be scrupulously fair to both (all) sides. It's easy to ridicule, exaggerate, and distort the view of the opposition, but that's bad faith.²⁸

Ways of doing this include establishing priorities (e.g., it is a fact that AIDS sufferers need to be cared for quite apart from the debate about whether they are more sinful than others); showing how clustering occurs (e.g., abuse of women—sexuality—concepts of family—male and female roles); establishing relevance (e.g., child abuse is most often perpetrated by persons known to the child; Sunday shopping requires that *some people* will have to work: who are they?).

4.33. What is the history and present status of the debate?

Questions such as the following need to be investigated: How did the issue emerge? What are its roots? What positions have been taken? What solutions have been suggested or tried? Who is lobbying? What has the church said about it? What attitudes and feelings are being expressed? Clarification of such matters affords precious perspectives, and shows that responsible people have been and are on both (all) sides of the discussion. Samuel Proctor observes:

It is very tempting to rush toward single solutions for complicated problems, to be swept up by the rhetoric of political partisans, by emotional, uninformed views that often evoke irrational and instinctive behavior, instead of the pursuit of the facts *and the application*

of the mind of Christ to even the most bothersome, unpopular, and controversial issues. Passion, inflamed by ignorance and hate, has never solved anything. Lasting and purposeful answers may require time and patience, but they have integrity and they endure.²⁹

4.34. Where do you stand?

At some point personal honesty and integrity require the preacher to “come clean”. This should be done with far greater deliberateness than is usually the case. Indeed, the “telling of the story” of how the preacher has come to a stand on an issue can be a model of responsible decision-making, provided that factual information and serious theological reflection as well as personal experience and feelings are integral to the story. It is permissible, of course, for preachers to admit they have not yet made up their minds; many hearers will take comfort from that, while others may be offended. Having or not having made up one’s mind will have a direct bearing on the approach or “stance” the preacher may take (see below, no. 5).

4.4. *Mobilizing to Action*

4.41. Guiding decision-making.

The obdurate stance encapsulated by the popular phrase, “I’ve made up my mind; don’t confuse me with the facts”, is borne out by observation and personal experience. Even major decisions are based as much on emotion as on research—especially in our individualistic culture in which the major principles for decision-making are: “Be your own person”; “Feel good about yourself”; “Take care of yourself”; and “Live and let live”.³⁰ People need help in decision-making, especially as the complexity of issues increases and the stability of former bench-marks decreases. Thus the sharing of the preacher’s decision-making process, referred to above, can be of immense value, especially as it demonstrates the *communal* nature of decision-making that is inherent to the Christian community.³¹

4.42. Opening the issue for discussion.

This is probably the least threatening action. It will accomplish the consciousness-raising objectives (cf. no. 4.2 above) as well as some of the teaching objectives (cf. no. 4.3 above).

Plans for following-through need to be in place, especially if the issue is a "hidden" one, like abuse and addiction, because persons will inevitably begin to reveal their often long repressed experiences once a listening ear is offered.³²

4.43. Selecting various options for participatory action.

As it is utopian to expect 100% of the congregation to mobilize for action, so is it utopian to expect that all members will mobilize to a single course of action. It is wise, therefore, to offer a variety of options, such as financial contributions, letter-writing and other lobbying, congregational project or program, support of agencies, study, field trips, prayer disciplines, new sensitivity in work places, deepening of the Christian vocation.

4.44. Encouragement in the struggle.

The slogan, "Think globally; act locally", is an attempt to counter the prevailing sense of impotence over against ethical issues while encouraging the conviction that local effort does make a difference. Christians tap into a considerably greater source of strength, conviction, and hope. Especially hope! Norman Theiss writes:

Our task as preachers is not to cultivate despair over public life but hope for public service, enabled by God's covenant in Christ that draws humankind into community. We have learned how unproductive and damaging it is to lay guilt on people for their personal faults. People cannot overcome their personal faults without the conviction that they are the redeemed and forgiven people of God. Likewise, excoriating people for their participation in the evils of our society will only make them despondent and finally angry at us for increasing their feeling of paralysis. Our people cannot engage in responsible service to society unless they have profound hope for it as a society that God has redeemed and renews in Christ.³³

Very important in encouraging the faithful in the struggle for justice and compassion is the demonstrated fact that they are not alone in their concerns and efforts. Church periodicals are generally full of examples of the church active in the world; it is important to report these regularly to the congregation. The conviction that they are part of something much bigger than their congregation is essential if despair of contributing anything at all is to be countered. It is invigorating for members to know again and again that through

their own denominations and through world-wide communions and alliances (like the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches) *they* are present and active in countless places in the world. Norman Theiss, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C. observes, "I am struck by the number of people who come to the church because they want to be involved with its social programs, to be connected with other people of faith, and to participate in a church community that links them to a global family for which they are deeply concerned."³⁴

5. Preaching Stances

A number of stances or approaches may be adopted by the preacher in addressing a controversial issue. The stance selected will depend partly on the sermon's objectives, partly on the text, and partly on the personality and experiences of the preacher. Robert G. Hughes has articulated the following stances:³⁵

5.1. *The Prophet.*

Amos is the angry prophet ("I hate, I despise your feasts..."), and Second Isaiah is the "promising" prophet. An injustice or entrenched pattern may be so evil the preacher is moved to righteous indignation; yet again the suffering may be so immense that the preacher weeps and consoles. The preacher who adopts a prophetic stance must beware both of personal pique and overwhelming empathy. If listeners feel attacked they become defensive and resistant; if they feel drawn into an emotional morass they will struggle for dry ground. Still, the prophets and Jesus risked it; sensitive judgment of time and occasion needs to be made.

5.2. *The Parent.*

Hughes does not recommend this stance. It tends to move the preacher to adopt the tactics of a parent seeking to dominate the child, while the hearer resents being treated like a child. Squirming to get out of that role leads to the dismissal of the parent and thus the dismissal of the problem.

5.3. *The Teacher.*

No doubt this is a primary stance, and a part of every stance. Preachers are “theologians in residence”. Teaching need not be—and ought not be—“didactic”. “Teach-ins” were used by the civil rights movement not only to inform but also to excite and mobilize people. The inductive approach recommends itself. A dialogical style is mandatory (e.g., “Is that so? I never thought about it that way before!” “That’s an interesting conclusion.” “But you may say....” “But you’ve heard people say—in fact, you may have said it yourself...”). Audio-visual materials are useful. Lyman Lundeen advocates the technique of *description*, that is, “reporting observations from several different points of view. Description answers the question, ‘What do you see if you observe something from this angle?’ Such observation makes no immediate demand for action”, but creates points of entry into an issue, opens perspectives, shakes loose attitudes, and moves to discussion.³⁶

5.4. *The Learner.*

Hughes argues that sharing what one is learning dissipates some of the resistance the teacher stance generates, gives the preacher credibility as an honest learner, communicates some of the excitement and urgency of learning, and allows the hearer the freedom to learn and to decide.

5.5. *The Shocked Innocent.*

Hughes cautions that “the role of shocked innocence is authentic *only* when the preacher has discovered the depths of a social issue or some disgusting facet of it *for the first time*.” Perhaps this was Jesus’ reaction to discovery of the money-changers in the temple. While this stance is emotional, biographical, and vivid, its two dangers are that of phoniness and “mood separation” (i.e., the people observe the preacher getting excited).

5.6. *The Fellow Victim.*

Being the victim of a social issue affords a splendid opportunity to raise the issue and to pursue it, as well as to model a responsible process of decision-making. The dangers here are the same as in the “shocked innocent” stance, except that the danger of “mood separation” is greater: identification is

made with the preacher's loss and grief rather than with the issue, and so analysis and theological reflection are hindered or aborted. Still, the preacher's experience of victimization can lead to a powerful testimony of the victimization experienced by, say, women and minorities.

Perhaps the most important question to ask in order to determine one's stance is, How can the hearers be *liberated*—liberated from fear, ignorance, prejudice, -isms, etc., for responsible discipleship? Thomas G. Long records the observation of a pastor, "If I make a strong theological and ethical case for the liberation of the oppressed, my people shrug and yawn, but if I tell them stories of Jesus caring for the poor and hungry, they ask, 'What can we do to help?'"³⁷

6. Sermonic Movements for Ethical Issues

While the movement of the sermon (how it proceeds from "here" to "there") will depend on its objectives, the text, and the stance of the preacher, it is necessary to remind ourselves that what is in preparation is a *sermon* and not a lecture or presentation of some kind. This means that its root movement will be theological. Reformation theology has typically expressed this with the terms "Law", "Gospel", and "Discipleship". Richard Lischer has identified the basic four-fold movement of the prophetic preacher as follows:

1. He or she sketches the vision of justice or peace (and its ancient perversions) as it is outlined in scripture.
2. Next the preacher names the public evil and notes its manifestations in the midst of the congregation.
3. He or she then announces God's interruption of the cycle of sin in the event of Jesus Christ.
4. Finally, the preacher imagines for the congregation an alternate vision of a new way for the people of God.³⁸

David Buttrick has articulated the same theological movement in a series of scintillating dialogical "schemes" useful in the making of what he calls "situational sermons".³⁹ The following is a parallel to Lischer:

Here is what the gospel declares;

But, yet, look at our human situation.

See the result of our understandings in action.

There can be a new way to live in the gospel.

A variation starts at a different place:

Christians can be in conflict over an issue,
Because we have different worldly ideas;
But we are to be a new people in the world,
And, in the gospel, there is a new way.

Still another entry:

We face a moral dilemma.
These are our alternatives.
But does the gospel show us a new way?
Yes. Let us so live.

While this last scheme emphasizes discipleship, it runs the danger of turning the "Gospel way" into a new Law. Lischer's "four-fold movement" holds Law and Gospel in their appropriate roles.

7. Following Through

I began with an account of an impromptu sermon preached out of righteous indignation. I was an angry prophet as well as a shocked innocent. Even supposing I had succeeded in carrying off these approaches so that the hearers were moved to decision and action, the sermon failed because there was no opportunity for following through. I don't believe there were even "world hunger" offering envelopes in the pew racks. Equally significant, the sermon may have come like a bolt out of the blue if no climate or context for ethical issues had been nurtured in the parish.

Unless there is opportunity for following-through, a sermon on a specific issue or even on "developing the mind of Christ" will leave people frustrated and guilty. That's a potent mix for the growth of resentment, anger, and resistance to social ministry.

Following-through requires preparation and planning. Depending upon the issue, the preacher should know what resources (persons, material, agencies) are available. If the issue of violence to women is to be taken up, for example, the pastor must be prepared for counselling, know where and to whom counselees may be referred, what community shelters and support groups exist, what the law says, who in the congregation

and community can be of help.⁴⁰ The lone-wolf syndrome is to be severely avoided!

At a more public level, an immediate following-through possibility is another sermon and even a series of sermons. One of the deleterious effects of the lectionary is that it keeps rushing the preacher on to different texts each Sunday. A text may raise an issue (e.g., the texts on divorce and marriage) but the lections the next week do not allow us to linger. Thus inadvertently we are encouraging the “media effect”—to raise a problem is to solve it; yet to raise an issue that is troublesome and painful for some hearers, and yet not deal with it adequately, is enormously frustrating.

An obvious following-through possibility is a process for discussion. These may include forums with resources and resource persons (don’t forget that victims are resource persons!), sermon feedback sessions, study groups, visits to agencies, films and videos, availability of educational materials (locations of agencies and phone numbers, meeting schedules of support groups, etc.).

A process for decision and action may be a natural outgrowth of the above as well as an avenue for participation in its own right. Many of these activities are already in existence in the denomination, in local councils of churches, in public advocacy and support groups. Not least in this process is the incorporation of concerns and actions in the parish’s liturgy. For example, victims of violence and abuse need healing; can healing services be introduced?⁴¹ Again, since offerings are crucial in the social ministry of any denomination, can offerings be tangibly connected to specific peoples and places and can they be liturgically acknowledged and blessed?

Conclusion

Years ago Joseph McCabe entitled a chapter “The Pastoral Precedes the Prophetic”.⁴² “The most decisive movement in the churches of America in this century,” he wrote, “may well be their recall to a prophetic ministry.” The call to the prophetic, he argued, has always been necessary to save the church’s soul; but to be effective prophetically the prophet must first be a *pastor*. That takes time, he admitted, but he insisted that “the pastor earns his [sic] right to be a prophet

by the faithful fulfillment of the pastoral office. The prophetic without the pastoral is ineffective. The pastoral without the prophetic is a betrayal. The pastoral with the prophetic is the Biblical calling."

So, in fact, it is!

Notes

- 1 David G. Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 49. For an earlier but no less cogent defence see Harold A. Bosley, *Preaching on Controversial Issues: A Free Pulpit in a Free Society* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953) 16. A valuable contemporary resource is Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983). A helpful "role" study is Earl F. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland, eds., *The Pastor As Prophet* (New York: Pilgrim, 1985).
- 2 See Edmund Steimle, "The Fabric of the Sermon", in Edmund Steimle et al, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).
- 3 Kelly Miller Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984) 80-81.
- 4 Samuel D. Proctor, *Preaching About Crises in the Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 42.
- 5 Ibid. 81.
- 6 For further elaboration see Eduard R. Riegert, *Imaginative Shock: Preaching and Metaphor* (Burlington, Ontario: Trinity Press, 1990) 111ff.
- 7 Bonnie L. Benda, "Social Justice Preaching: A Transformation of Consciousness", *Papers of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics*, San Anselmo, CA, December 4-7, 1985, 29.
- 8 Cf. John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982) 170.
- 9 Walter Brueggemann, "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching", in *Preaching As A Social Act: Theology and Practice*, ed. Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 148.
- 10 William Kuhns, *The Electronic Gospel* (1969), quoted William F. Fore, *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 55.
- 11 William F. Fore, *Television and Religion*, 64-67.
- 12 Hannah Arendt, quoted *ibid.*, 66.
- 13 Fore, *Television and Religion*, 67.
- 14 Brueggemann, "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching", 143. Emphasis added.
- 15 Ibid. 148.
- 16 Ibid. 150.
- 17 Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin, 1987); Robert N. Bellah et al,

- Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
- 18 Arthur Van Seters, "The Problematic of Preaching in the Third Millennium", *Interpretation*, XLV/3, July 1991, 270.
- 19 See Robert M. Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible Through Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); J.L. Gonzalez and C.G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).
- 20 Leo Sands, "Oscar Romero and the Social Implications of the Gospel", *Papers of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics*, Princeton, NJ, December 5-8, 1984, 4. The quotation is from Dermot Keogh, *Romero, El Salvador's Martyr* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1981) 96.
- 21 Ronald J. Sider and Michael A. King. *Preaching About Life in a Threatening World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) ch. 2.
- 22 Ibid. 10-11.
- 23 Joseph R. Jeters, Jr., "Crisis Preaching: Some Preliminary Reflections", *Papers of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics*, Madison, NJ, November 30-December 3, 1988, 202-203.
- 24 *Lutheran World Information* 34/89, September 7, 1989, 6-7.
- 25 William F. Fore, *Television and Religion*, 24.
- 26 Hartmut C. Horsch, "From Print to 'Image Media': Neil Postman's The Disappearance of Childhood", *Consensus* 15/2, 1989, 95-103. The article is a reflection upon Neil Postman's book, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1982). See further, Donna Woolfork Cross, *Media Speak: How Television Makes Up Your Mind* (Coward-McCann, Inc., 1983); John W. Bachman, *Media—Wasteland or Wonderland?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).
- 27 Earl H. Brill, "Preaching on Controversial Issues", *Newsletter*, College of Preachers, Washington, D.C., 21/3, Fall, 1975, 2.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Samuel D. Proctor, *Preaching About Crises in the Community*, 37. Emphasis added.
- 30 Norman Theiss, "Preaching for Public Life", *Interpretation*, XLV/3, July 1991, 254, drawing from Robert N. Bellah et al *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
- 31 Helpful bibliography includes Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen. *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) ch. 6; Paul Jersild, *Making Moral Decisions: A Christian Approach to Personal and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Lewis B. Smedes, *Choices: Making Right Decisions in a Complex World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).
- 32 An excellent example of "opening an issue for discussion" is Patricia Clarke, "Euthanasia: Finding a Way through the Shadow of Death",

The United Church Observer, 52/11, May 1989, 24–29. Two very helpful articles on sensitive listening to stories of sexual abuse are Trish Patrick, “When a Survivor Calls”, and Anonymous, “The Secret is Out: The First Steps of the Wellness Journey”, both in *The Practice of Ministry in Canada*, 9/2, May 1992.

- 33 Norman Theiss, “Preaching for Public Life”, 260.
- 34 Ibid. 261.
- 35 Robert G. Hughes, “Preaching to Social Issues: Roles Preachers Play”, *Academy Accents*, newsletter of the Academy of Preachers, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 2/3, Spring 1986, 1–4.
- 36 Lyman T. Lundeen, *Preaching on Economic Justice*, Division for Mission in North America, Lutheran Church in America, 1986, 33. See further, John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 175ff. for an appropriate educational concept, namely, that of problem-solving.
- 37 Thomas G. Long, *The Senses of Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 46.
- 38 Richard Lischer, “Preaching About Race Relations—The Hope of Reconciliation”, in *Preaching In and Out of Season*, ed. by Thomas G. Long and Neely Dixon McCarter (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 24.
- 39 David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 430–431.
- 40 An example of an extensive as well as intensive follow-through (on the issue of family violence) is provided by Melissa Miller, “Breaking the Silence”, *The Practice of Ministry in Canada*, 9/2, May 1992, 33. The *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, on Saturdays, publishes a list of community support services and government/community agencies; these range from suicide support groups to “Messies Anonymous” (a support group for those who find it difficult to keep their house clean and organized), and from Pastoral Counseling Centres to Ontario Legal Aid. A congregational project could be the compiling of such a resource list to share with members and the community.
- 41 See, for example, Jane A. Keene, *A Winter’s Song: A Liturgy for Women Seeking Healing from Sexual Abuse in Childhood* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1991); Joanne Ross Feldmeth and Midge Wallace Finley, *We Weep for Ourselves and Our Children: A Christian Guide for Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).
- 42 Joseph McCabe, *How to Find Time for Better Preaching and Better Pastoring* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) ch. 2. 1