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HOMILETICS

PREACHING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE AQUARIUM ON SOCIAL ISSUES

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This little essay is an attempt to help the pastor think through some of the things that may be required of him when preaching to audiences rather than congregations of the faithful. It is also an attempt to add a few more words to the already overgrown material about preaching on social issues.

Assuming that a pastor desires to move Christ's people to act and witness in secular society, he must realize that his example in this is as important as would be his conduct as husband and father in moving his members to enrich their Christian family life. Christian people are to be led and empowered to act for the common good in the whole society, led and empowered to bear witness to the whole society for God and Christ. For this they will need the example of a pastor who, in keeping with his gifts and special calling, acts and speaks on social issues.

In fact, the preacher's most powerful words, especially in a day of too many words, are his actions. It can be assumed by now without particular defense that such actions will include not only open hospitality and visitation of the aged, the infirm, and the sick, but also public espousal of good social causes and personal involvement in public "warfare" with those social evils that degrade the whole society and often directly cause the ailments which afflict the persons he visits. Such actions, for whatever other reasons they are undertaken, can be powerful sermons addressed to the congregation. The preacher will shortly discover that his congregation "hears" such action-sermons, is powerfully moved by them, and is often angered by them, especially if parochial interests do not coincide with those of "outsiders." Furthermore, he will discover that his spoken sermons are the better heard when his actions supply the context and the visual aids for his preaching with words. The byproduct of this action-preaching may often be that the audience of the preacher is considerably broadened. He may, in fact, find

himself with more opportunities than he can handle to preach "outside the aquarium."

During the street riots in his city and neighborhood in the summer of 1967 the writer's earlier involvement with neighborhood people and in city affairs became of value to both militant blacks and established whites. After the riots he was invited to speak to a wide variety of civic and church groups throughout the region. Previous involvement, in which he was known not as an expert but as a helpful person, had been an action-sermon enlarging the audience which was "hearing" through his actions: "This priest cares." The occasion of the riots and the speaking which followed made it possible for the writer to interpret his actions and to say to that larger audience: "God has cared and cares in Jesus Christ."

But many in this readership may feel unable to speak or to act on social issues. "Leave that to the politicians, government authorities, sociologists, experts," is the attitude. "I'll preach sin and grace." The question is: Who will hear the preaching?—only the congregation? It is true that most pastors have neither the time nor the ability to double as politicians or sociologists. Their job is to *preach* to politicians, government authorities, sociologists, and experts. For that they must get a hearing, be able to name the sin, and be able powerfully to proclaim the Gospel of God's grace in Christ as apposite to the human need.

This means that the pastor is called upon to speak and act on social issues as a pastor and not as a politician, sociologist, and so forth. He may or may not be able to develop the special skills that will make his contribution to the solution of social problems valued by his fellow citizens. Nevertheless he is called upon as part of his vocation as a Christian to give what he has for the common good. But he exercises his special vocation as preacher by contributing the insight he has into the human and social condition as a disciple of Christ and as an "expert" on Holy Scripture. It seems to be the peculiar failing of many contemporary social activist preachers that they are anything and everything but preachers. It seems that it is the peculiar failing of most contemporary "quietist" preachers that they are able and willing to deal with personal sin but not social injustice, with private morals but not public immorality. The expertise needed for such deal-

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ings comes chiefly from knowledge of the Scripture as Law and Gospel and from a mind steadily nourished by the life of the Spirit. *Ability* to speak and act on social issues grows from this, and *confidence* comes from the same Spirit and from one's growing ability.

Before a non-Christian audience or in a secular setting, the preacher is tempted to speak rather than preach. The writer must confess that, especially when speaking to secular or non-Christian or mixed audiences, he is always sorely tempted to forget about the Gospel and to enhance his own reputation as a "with-it" person or as an eloquent speaker able to make significant social comment. In other than churchy settings, the pastor does not have the support and participation of the liturgical assembly, nor can he operate with the assumptions of faith he shares with the community of the baptized. But God saves us in the time of trial, and the Holy Spirit gives the right words to say. Besides, the problem of unfaith isn't all that unfamiliar; the preacher knows it in himself and in his fellow believers and can preach with an urgency appropriate to the need about the richness of the new life and power available to those who believe in the risen Christ.

Furthermore, the preacher may discover, as this writer has discovered, that secular or at least non-Christian audiences look to the Christian witness to preach the Christian message, to say what he is qualified to say. Less and less, before such audiences, will he be accepted if he equivocates. Few may be converted if the preacher proclaims the Gospel, but many more, even in secular audiences, will be disappointed if he fails to affirm what he believes: the kingdom and the power and the glory belong to God in Christ. Of course, the preacher will affirm what he believes whether or not his audience welcomes his message.

Nevertheless, the unequivocal proclamation must be shaped to the audience being addressed. This takes nothing away from the Christian Gospel but rather sharpens its focus. It is faithful to patterns of New Testament preaching to show how gods are taken up into our God and how other messiahs find their fulfillment in Jesus, the Christ, rather than to lash out at idols or false messiahs. Thus, to a secular audience concerned about the massive social and political structures which have such pervasive power to shape the lives of people for good or ill, it would not only be unwise but wrong — as Gospel unapplied is wrong — to offer as a Christian solution: "If only individuals will

change their ways and turn to Jesus as their personal Savior, all will be well." A better approach might be: "See how all forms of human justice, all human institutions, all human kingdoms and powers and glories eventually come to nothing. Let me tell you about a better justice and an enduring kingdom, a justice and a kingdom not unaware of human suffering and death but rooted in and established through suffering and death itself, the death on a cross." If such an approach, clearly explained and applied, is rejected, at least it will be rejected on good grounds.

A careful assessment of the preacher's audience is helpful in another way. It is futile to proclaim the Christian Gospel to goals which are beyond the reach or capability of the hearers. Many preachers are disappointed when they have powerfully preached the Gospel to goals of social change yet discover no action forthcoming from their own congregations. This may be because most members of the congregation have little or no access to the means for effecting such change. They can only feel guilty at their inaction, while the fact is that they are being called upon to do what they are unable to do. Similarly, it is futile if not wrong to proclaim the Gospel to goals which fall far short of the reach or capability of hearers. It is one thing to preach the Gospel so as to empower John Doe, laborer, to do justice to his wife, in his family, and with his employer. It is another thing to preach the Gospel so as to empower city councilmen and major industrialists to achieve goals which will not fall far short of their capability and responsibility.

The message should be shaped by the audience. The church calls upon her children to give liberally and sacrificially: Christians are asked to sacrifice personal financial goals for the sake of the good of others. That same church finds itself capable of establishing its policies so as to protect its own assets, making only leftovers available for the needs of others. Many a preacher is able to use the Gospel to effect growth in liberality among the members of his church; he may be totally ineffective in helping those same members, sitting together as a church council, to be liberal with the church's money. The message should be shaped by the audience. The preacher will remember that sometimes the same persons, grouped together in a different setting, become a different audience.

Ultimately, when preaching on social issues in a way that fits any audience, the goal is not the conversion of individuals so that the society

will be improved. We know enough about the strife in and among churches to know that the conversion of individuals does not necessarily insure a better social order. Nor, however, is our goal the development and implementation of another scheme to change the social order into something modeled along the lines of the City of God. We desire the City of God, but it comes down from heaven by God's giving and not by our scheming. One plan for a more just social order may be better than another, but Christians have no special wisdom that makes any plan of theirs the superior candidate. Rather, the saving grace which the Christian Gospel offers man in society is rescue from deifying either the status quo or the scheme for change. The former is not the kingdom of God, and the latter will not bring in the kingdom. The sermon which follows is an illustration of how one might proclaim the grace that saves from either idolatry.

This sermon was preached to an audience of Christians and non-Christians in the chapel of a secular university. University students and faculty had come together not only because it was Sunday, certainly not because it was the Sunday After Ascension Day, but partly because it was two days after the beginning of the university chaplain's trial for alleged conspiracy to aid draft resisters.

REVOLUTION, INSTITUTION, AND ASCENSION

A sermon on the Sunday After the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord, May 26, 1968, Battell Chapel, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

MATT. 28:18 *"All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Me."*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Being totally unaware of the reasons behind your invitation to me to address you from this pulpit today, I began to make headway on this sermon only when I stopped guessing about those reasons and began to write what I know, and not what I might be expected to say.

By my own choice I live in the heart of the city, and I am committed to the cause of justice for the black people and the poor who live there. In this respect I am on the side

of the "revolution." I am a pastor of the church, and thus I am at the same time inevitably a part of an institution and am on the side of the institution. The older I get, the more I find myself (in spite of myself) living by (and under) the Gospel of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the more my thought and work in the revolution and the institution is coming under the influence of that Gospel.

So I come to you today with a word to those who fight in the revolution, against the institution; with a word to those who fight for the institution, against the revolution; and with a word to all of the good news of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ as it applies to the revolution and the institution.

Revolution AGAINST Institution

Revolutionaries should remember that while they celebrate the secular and the city of man with de-churched Christians and de-universitied intellectuals as the omnicompetent avant-garde to lead in a takeover, announcing the death of the principalities and powers — that we have heard such celebrations before, at the tower of Babel and in ancient Babylon, and that we have seen their results from the city of Tiberius (secular enough to be built on a cemetery) to the cities of modern states, built by the filling of cemeteries. (Let the revolutionaries be warned!)

Revolutionaries should remember that any understanding of revolution is always faced with the threat of being revolutionized itself, and that a revolution against the seeming absolutism of our institutions is in danger of absolutizing itself. (Let the revolutionaries be warned!)

Revolutionaries should remember the danger of giving ultimacy to anything in the here and now, whether it be the end of one war or the ending of war, whether church reform or underground churches, whether it

be communal ownership, international treaties, civil rights bills, whether free-money systems, free universities, or free love, whether black power or multicolored power — as if man were not from the beginning of history in *bondage* to sets of values that made religious, social, racial, or economic status paramount; as if it mattered ultimately where a man stood in socioeconomic or religious matters. (Let the revolutionaries be warned!)

Revolutionaries should remember that things are not always better after revolutions, and that the dismantling of one society is no guarantee against the rise of tyranny in the new society, and that there is a difference between a changing of the political guard and the arrival of the kingdom of God. (Let the revolutionaries be warned!)

Revolutionaries should remember that not only in our bureaucratic institutions are the poor forgotten, the prophets silenced, and the aspirations and imagination of the individual squelched, but that revolutionary movements have been known to be decidedly closed to criticism, callous to old and young, and exploitative of the poor.

Revolutionaries should remember that poor people and black people are not inevitably the salt of the earth and the light of the world by virtue of their poverty or color or culture — or in spite of them.

Revolutionaries should remember that the truth by which they live has come to them most often not in dreams or as divine revelation but through the institutions which have preserved and refined the thought and faith of countless heroes before them. (Let the revolutionaries be warned!)

Institution AGAINST Revolution

The revolution is upon us because our boldness of speech and depth of feeling and breadth of understanding are squelched

because too often our preachers' tongues are tied to their salaries and professors' pens to their pensions. (Let the institutions be warned!)

The revolution is upon us because of our paltriness and mediocrity; because the institutions on which our society depends too often seem able to attempt only those things which will work, and those alone. (Let the institutions be warned!)

The revolution is upon us because we have missed the day of our visitation time and time again; because we have forgotten (in spite of a yearly Lent) that *now* is the fitting time, *now* is the day of salvation; because we have missed the distress signals and are surprised when tragedy comes first and we arrive second. (Let the institutions be warned!)

The revolution is upon us because too long have our churches smelled of sauerkraut or pasta while their neighborhoods smelled of chitt'lins and greens.

The revolution is upon us because we have stood as rich men among the poor, as blind rich men seeing no one to enrich, as those who have everything and yet possess nothing, as men giving alms from their riches instead of returning to the poor what too often was really theirs. (Let the institutions be warned!)

The revolution is upon us because we have considered *our* hunger a spiritual matter and the hunger of *others* a material concern; or because we have defended and rationalized our materialism while demanding spiritual and moral reform of the poor.

The revolution is upon us because students and professors are reading Marx and Mao when churchmen are debating the authenticity and integrity of the gospels instead of reading them, or having read them, do not act on what they have read; or because neither academician nor churchman, keep-

ing up with the reading, will speak to the other.

The revolution is upon us because the children of our institutions desire that those who pay our institutions' bills live out the integrity, honesty, and love that the institutions teach. They have discovered that the pillars of our universities support perfectionists at equivocation and that the steeples of our churches symbolize the towers of Jello-like preaching beneath them. (Let the institutions be warned!)

The revolution is upon us because we have proclaimed the superiority of our civilization, forced it upon others, killed and swallowed up the enemy in its name, forgetting that even cannibals do not claim to eat men but only animals, since real men are to be found in one's own tribe alone! (Let the institutions be warned!)

Revolution, Institution, and Repentance

The fact of the matter is that man needs his institutions to create his revolutions. The church, one of the oldest and creakiest of institutions, still preserves and proclaims a most revolutionary teaching and Gospel—and has done so even when grossly unfaithful in practice to the tradition it was preserving. But the tradition preserved by the institution produced the very revolutions which reformed the institution itself and the world the institution's tradition was meant to reform. As with the church, so with the university. Librarians, not generally known as revolutionaries, preserve the books which produce the intellectuals who shape the revolution—and the institutions.

It may surprise us to discover that the Christian Gospel does not wag a prophetic finger at the revolutionist and say, "You are too revolutionary." Rather it says, "You are not nearly revolutionary enough." Nor does it shake its head over the institutions and say, "You are too much bent on preserving

the past." Rather it says, "You do not preserve enough of the past."

For in the death of Christ the revolutionary's love for dying has been made unnecessary. Since Christ's death is once and for all and justifies man's existence completely, one does not *need* to justify his existence by dying in a noble cause that will bring in a new and glorious future. In the resurrection of Christ the institution's love for the preservation of life has been made unnecessary. Since Christ is risen and death has no more dominion over Him—or over us—one does not *need* to preserve life by clinging to it or by holding to the past as a guarantee against the future.

On the other hand, the death and resurrection of Christ are monstrously abused if they become for Christ's people no more than a labor-saving device. For by His death we who no longer *need* to die for a better future are now *free* to do so. By His resurrection we who no longer *need* to preserve life or the past by clinging to it are now *free* to preserve life and to celebrate the past as a prelude to the future.

The one response called forth from us by Christ's life and death and resurrection is that of repentance. If His life, death, and resurrection are to be remembered, we shall need the institution to preserve that memory in history. But if the institution preserves that memory, it will produce a revolution, a revolution of repentance—which is just the opposite of wallowing in guilt, for it is nothing less than a dismantling of the past in order to construct the future in the present.

Revolution, Institution, and Power

The battle between the revolution and the institution is centered in the matter of power: who shall have how much of it, how shall it be used, and toward what goal? The Christian Gospel, the good news for you today, ends the battle between revolution and institution, not by finding a middle ground

between the two but by putting both under the lordship of Him who was crucified and is risen, who is ascended into heaven, and to whom alone all power is given in heaven and on earth. Here is the question of power settled once and for all: the One who ascends into heaven is the One to whom all power is given. This confession, preserved in the Scriptures and creeds of an institution, is a revolutionary word that smashes the idolatries of all institutions and revolutionaries.

For the superpatriot it means separating allegiance to Christ from allegiance to the flag. For neither Kosygin nor Mao nor Lyndon Johnson has ascended into heaven, but Christ — and to Him all power is given.

For the leftist or rightist or centrist it means closing his little world of political passions and opening himself to the humanity even of the enemy. For ideologies have not ascended into heaven, but Christ has ascended — and to Him all power is given.

For the racist it means emancipation from the tyranny of race supremacy and freedom for truth and reconciliation.

For the churchman it means distinguishing allegiance to the church from allegiance to Christ. For not the church but Christ has ascended into heaven — and to Him all power is given.

But He ascends into heaven to send the Holy Spirit to create the church as that institution which is to produce — and protect — revolutionaries; revolutionaries because by the Holy Spirit they live *now* under the sign and by the power of Christ's resurrection and ascension, His pledge to us that we may hope to rise and ascend with Him to the Father. To live with that hope, and with the awareness that all power is Christ's, leads each of us to discover when and where in our lives we must break with the culture that made us what we are in order to be free to be what the Gospel calls us to be. No more burning of incense to demonstrate loyalty to an emperor trying to consolidate the realm

into a consensus for the good of all! He alone has ascended, and He alone is Lord who sends us out as sheep among wolves, being wise as serpents and innocent as doves, to be dragged before governors and kings to bear testimony before them.

He to whom all power is given gives power to those in whom His Spirit dwells to be co-workers together with God — a God who, in the words of that great revolutionary, the Blessed Virgin Mary, "scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts, who puts down the mighty from their thrones and exalts those of low degree, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away."

This Jesus, to whom all power is given, who alone has ascended to the Father, He is the One who says that our salvation is in jeopardy because we obey the commandments but are rich and do not make our cause with the poor. Yet He is the same One who, though He was rich, for our sake became poor.

The One who calls us to leave houses and family and money and lands for the sake of His name is the same One who, "though He was equal with God, did not cling to His equality with God, but emptied Himself, assumed the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as men are, He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross."

The One who calls us to bear the burdens of sinners is the same One who "bore our own sins in His body to the tree."

The One who calls us to plead the cause of the poor for social justice is the same One who, at the Father's right hand (that is, everywhere) pleads our cause with the Father.

The One who calls us to lose our life for His sake is the same One who lost His life for our sake.

The One who says that we do not have to be anxious about what will happen to us

tomorrow if we do these things is the same
 One who makes it possible for us to lose
 our anxiety by sending His Spirit to us
 today.

It was, you remember, a rather corrupt institution which produced a disobedient son named Luther, whose revolution 450 years ago produced another institution—the corruption of which, as a Lutheran, I can vouch for—which preserved the words of a hymn he wrote as a revolutionary call to those who in heart and mind have ascended with Christ to God:

And take they our life,
 Goods, fame, child, and wife,
 Let these all be gone,
 They yet have nothing won;
 The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Some of us are called to be revolutionary heroes. May we give faithful testimony before kings! Some of us are called to support the institutions which produce the heroes. May we at least not sit in the king's lap!

New Haven, Conn.