

Been There, Preached That
Today's conservatives sound like yesterday's liberals.
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I'm a mainline-liberal-Protestant-Methodist-type Christian. I know we're soft on Scripture. Norman Vincent Peale has exercised a more powerful effect on our preaching than St. Paul. Listen to us on Sunday, and Leo Buscaglia or Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood may come to mind before you think of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

I know we play fast and loose with Scripture. But I've always had this fantasy that somewhere, like in Texas, there were preachers who preached it all, Genesis to Revelation, without blinking an eye, straight from the Scofield Chain Reference – just like Jesus said it.

I took great comfort in knowing that, even while I preached a pitifully compromised, "Pealed" – down gospel, that somewhere, good old Bible-believing preachers were offering their congregations the unadulterated Word, straight up.

Do you know how disillusioning it has been for me to realize that many of these self-proclaimed biblical preachers now sound more like liberal mainliners than liberal mainliners? At the very time those of us in the mainline, old-line, sidelined were repenting of our pop psychological pap and rediscovering the joy of disciplined biblical preaching, these "biblical preachers" were becoming "user friendly" and "inclusive," taking their homiletical cues from the "felt needs" of us "boomers" and "busters" rather than the excruciating demands of the Bible.

I know why they do this. After all, we mainline-liberal-experiential-expressionists played this game before the conservative-evangelical-reformed-orthodox got there. It all starts with American Christians wanting to be helpful to the present order, to be relevant (as the present order defines relevance). We so want to be invited to lunch at the White House or at least be interviewed on "Good Morning America." So we adjust our language to the demands of the market, begin with the world and its current infatuations rather than the Word and its peculiar judgments on our infatuations.

Next thing you know, the Bible becomes a merely helpful commentary upon our various fixations, and the line between church and Rotary gets blurred. (At least Rotary meets at a convenient hour of the week and serves lunch.)

Here are two of my disillusioning discoveries about "biblical" preachers.

1. Psychology is God

If you listen to much of our preaching, you get the impression that Jesus was some sort of itinerant therapist who, for free, traveled about helping people feel better. Ever since Fosdick, we mainline liberals have been bad about this. Start with some human problem like depression; then rummage around in the Bible for a relevant answer.

The problem is, we're starting with our current definitions of our problems. Maybe the Bible couldn't care less about our problems, as we define them. Where did we get words like *depression*, *anxiety*, *self-esteem*, *felt needs*? Not from the Bible. In regard to depression, I can name you passages where the Bible appears to *provoke* depression rather than cure it! And my "felt needs," before I meet the Bible, are usually the result of sin rather than the path to salvation.

I can just hear Jesus saying, “Look, if you’ve got a two-hundred-thousand-dollar mortgage, you’re *supposed* to be depressed!”

The Bible doesn’t want to “help people.” It wants to help people *in the name of Christ*. Christ has a much different notion of our problems than we do. The Bible doesn’t just want to speak to us; it wants to change, convert, and detoxify us.

Each time we let the world set our homiletical agenda, scaling down our speech to that which anybody off the street can hear and understand without conversion or training, we lose the battle before it begins. We concede too much territory to the enemy.

A recent book called us *The Psychological Society*. We Americans tend to reduce all human longing, all human problems and their solutions to the psychological. As one of my students put it, “Modern American people tend to have psychological problems because that’s the only kind of problems we’re permitted to have.”

The psychology of the gospel – reducing salvation to self-esteem, sin to maladjustment, church to group therapy, and Jesus to Dear Abby – is our chief means of perverting the biblical text.

2. Politics is God

But there’s a second way in which preaching wanders off the straight, narrow path: politics.

Pat Robertson has become Jesse Jackson. Randall Terry of the Nineties is Bill Coffin of the Sixties. And the average American knows no answer to human longing or moral deviation other than legislation.

Again, I ought to know. We played this game before any Religious Right types were invited to the White House. Some time ago I told Jerry Falwell to his face that I had nothing against him except that he talked like a Methodist. A Methodist circa 1960. Jerry was not amused.

We were there first. Our church built a four-story office building on Capitol Hill whereby we could lobby Congress more efficiently. As the largest Protestant church in America (some of you are old enough to remember when there were ten million of us Methodists) it was our duty to run the country for the rest of you. So we talked a great deal about politics.

Now, it’s the Religious Right, but it’s essentially the same project we abandoned twenty years ago. It is a politicized project, and most biblical preachers, once they get infatuated with politics, don’t stay biblical long.

Let’s face it, the Bible is downright nasty toward folk in power, particularly if they work for the government. Remembering what Caesar did to Jesus, we should get nervous around Washington or Moscow. Even when Paul tells us to obey Caesar’s functionaries, it’s more along the lines of “go ahead and obey these people because, when Christ returns, he’s going to give them what they deserve anyway.” It isn’t just that power corrupts, it’s that the gospel tends to be so prejudiced against our power and those who use it, that the less said, the better.

The New Testament has virtually nothing to say to folk who enjoy a majority but everything to say to those who are a minority. I find no scriptural help for how to run a multi-million-dollar political action group but lots of verses about what to do when you are in jail.

Politics does come up on a few rare occasions in the New Testament, like the time we asked Jesus, “Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (Note that this was *our* question, not Jesus’.)

Jesus answers, “Whose got a quarter?” (Note that Jesus’ pockets are empty.)

When a coin is produced, Jesus asks, “Whose picture is on it?”

We answer, “George Washington.”

“Well, if he needs the stuff enough to put his picture on it, then you give it to him,” says Jesus. “But you be careful and don’t give to Caesar what belongs to God.”

Okay, we give up. Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?

From this we learn that a primary biblical way of treating politics is a joke. Certainly, politicians can make much mischief, but they must never be taken too seriously. We need biblical preachers now, more than ever, to remind us that “He who sits in the heavens laughs” (Psalm 2:4) over our kings and kingdoms. God, not nations, rules the world.

Last fall, as I was preparing in my office for the Sunday service, the telephone rang. “Who’s preaching in Duke Chapel today?” asked a nasal, Yankee-sounding voice.

I cleared my throat and answered, “The Reverend Doctor William Willimon.”

“Who’s that?” asked the voice.

“The Dean of the Chapel,” I answered in a sonorous tone.

“I hope he won’t be preaching politics. I’ve had a rough week, and I need to hear about God. My Baptist church is so eaten up with politics, I’ve got to hear a sermon!”

When you have to come to a Methodist for a biblical sermon, that’s pitiful.

I could go on about our unbiblical “biblical” preaching: the way we use the text as mere pretext, or the way the culture captures us on our way from text to sermon, or my lust to be merely interesting rather than peculiarly biblical. But, as Luther often said at the end of his pulpit diatribes, that will be enough of that for today.

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