

PROPHETIC DISCIPLINE: SOME TASKS FOR AMERICAN MINISTERS IN THE 'EIGHTIES

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As the opening chapters of *Amos* vividly suggest, the prophets of Israel and Judah called their neighbors to "know the Lord" against their own lifelong background of knowing these neighbors, too. They had a keen eye for the specifics of the culture of their time and place. Their ability to combine the two sorts of "knowledge" marked their integrity, their uniqueness as religious leaders: born into a certain culture, they brought to its criticism standards of judgment that transcended the culture. And they subjected themselves to those standards.

Prospective prophets among American church leaders do well to covet for themselves the same two sorts of knowledge of their Lord and their own national culture; and, for one side of this equipment, readings in history, social science, and contemporary journals will always be requisite. There is such a thing as "the American character"; and our sermons, even our prayers, must take its specifics into account. For this purpose one of the books that we should read and re-read is the classic early account of who Americans are: Alexis DeTocqueville's *Democracy in America*, written in the 1830's but pertinent to the human reality of American culture right down to our late twentieth century. DeTocqueville was alert to the fact of certain cultural continuities in the trek of many nineteenth century immigrants from Europe to the new United States. We must not be deceived by the outward contrasts between lifestyles in the two places.

But one should not assume a connection between the pioneer and the place that shelters him. All his surroundings are primitive and wild, but he is the product of eighteen centuries of labor and experience. He is a very civilized man prepared for a time to face life in the forest, plunging into the wilderness of the New World with his Bible, ax, and newspapers.¹

One could define "culture," on a first analytical cut, as the intersection of the world of the ax—economics—with the world of public affairs—politics—and the world of the Bible—values, beliefs, ultimate measures of meaning. Addressing the one in its connections with the others is the task of the culture-interpreter; and addressing the worlds of the ax and newspaper from the perspective of the world of the Bible is the specific task of ministers in the Christian churches of this and every other land. It is a large task, more

formidable than the one facing the missionaries and circuit riders who followed the early pioneers to their "isolated dwellings" in the great continental forests of America. Complex as was the milieu in which that pioneer struggled to survive and to build a society, his and her late twentieth century successors live in much greater complexity. For us, the worlds of ax, newspaper, and Bible seem radically more remote from each other and the task of relating them more forbidding. The very idea that there is a profession—the ministry—charged with the task of making sense of all these worlds, fitting them conceptually and practically into *one* world—seems increasingly absurd. No wonder that Kenneth Underwood, in the late 1960s, should observe that:

Our time is characterized by a dearth of men and women who are able to formulate new policy and to fight for it through all the mass media of persuasion, who see the community or nation as a total enterprise, who give form and expression to the aspirations of a people, who discern the permanent forces which move history, who exact pain and sacrifice from us for high purpose, who practice at once firmness and restraint.²

In his reading of the American social-personal character, DeTocqueville was astutely aware of the threat of such quietude from many sides of the split-up, individualistic, mobile culture evolving here. He had an equally astute appreciation of the reasons for our institutional severing of religion and politics. But precisely because both the governmental and the economic systems of democratic America are designed to respond to the contemporary self-interests of their participants, DeTocqueville saw a great danger from another direction than the re-establishment of a state religion: all these forces connive in American culture to destroy "powerful public emotions."³ Democracy brings out the trivial, not the profound, in human nature. "Democratic society (has) much less to fear from boldness than from paltriness of aim."⁴

The prospect really does frighten me that they may finally become so engrossed in a cowardly love of immediate pleasures that their interest in their own future and in that of their descendents may vanish, and that they will prefer tamely to follow the course of their destiny than make a sudden energetic effort necessary to set things right . . . I fear that the mind may keep folding itself up in a narrower compass forever without producing new ideas, that men will wear themselves out in trivial, lonely, futile activity, and that for all its constant agitation humanity will make no advance.⁵

DeTocqueville could be describing the cultural lethargy of Americans in the 1970s! The "agitations" of evangelically-inclined church people, such as make up the Moral Majority, represent some stirring from that lethargy; but an inadequate stirring by DeTocqueville's standard: In his rejection of "secular humanism," where in Jerry Falwell's rhetoric has there been room for the *Christian* humanism that understands "humanity" as the object of God's love and a disciple's proper concern? Where among the churches of America are the voices that speak on behalf of the *comprehensively* human, supra-American humanity, the humanity of all? Where are the voices that cry out against the

“cowardly love of immediate pleasures” that afflict all human societies from the time of Jeroboam to the time of Ronald Reagan? Where are the humanists, as distinct from the specialists, in the world of religion, “who see the community or nation as a total enterprise” in a globally human context and “who exact pain and sacrifice from us for high purpose?” Where, in a word, are the prophets to this American society? How, in this particular society, in this particular decade, might an ordained minister, or any faithful member of the church, practice the vocation of the prophet?

I have a few suggestions. To the mind of almost anyone likely to read this journal, they will seem ordinary, familiar suggestions. That is their merit: they are old in the Hebrew-Christian prophetic tradition. They are like the ancient word of the Lord: “It is a thing very near to you, upon your lips and in your heart ready to be kept.” (Deuteronomy 30:14).

1. *Tell the truth and tell it publicly.*

In his recent book, *Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer says that he thinks of the church as “a school of the Spirit” where “God is continually drawing me out of myself into the larger life.” As such a school, the authentic church will “correct and upbraid and uproot us, introduce us to the strange and unfamiliar, teach us a truth larger than our own.”⁸ Sociologically considered, such a school is not an enlargement of the natural family but a linking of families with each other in “unnatural” *public* encounter. Much talk about the “church family,” in this sense, is sociologically and theologically deficient. It took twelve tribes to make Israel, many more to make the Pentecostal beginning of the Jerusalem church, and all the tribes of earth to make Augustine’s *Civitas*. If one has to choose a secular analogy for the church, says Palmer, it is the city and pluralistic, public, democratic culture that will do better than the family. Early and later in the history of the Christian movement, the church has been a bridge between the worlds of the person, the family, and the politics of public life. The new Testament origins of the church suggest clearly that the church was a *tertium quid* between the privacy of family life and the rough structures of Rome-dominated politics. Around the public announcement, “Jesus is risen, and Jesus is Lord!” the faithful congregated; and in their congregation they produced a new public structure and experienced public life in a new, exposed way.

There is a discipline and a vocational clue for church leaders here. The teaching and preaching of the church is a public ministry, carried on in public and directed to a portion of the public, the church, in anticipation of mission to a larger public and in full awareness of that larger public. To this public, the minister in particular, is regularly called to speak truth, whole truth, about the wholeness of human being.

Now, few of us need reminding that the mortal who steps up to a pulpit on a Sunday morning has no access to “the truth and nothing but the truth.” But when all due qualifications have been granted, the fact remains that the American church pulpit has at its disposal one of the great regular opportunities for the utterance of the *public truth*, greater and more regular than many another

agency of our pluralistic society can lay claim to. It is a fact frequently overlooked by both the friends and the enemies of religion in America. I had a politician friend in North Carolina, a state legislator and a Presbyterian, who shrewdly appreciated this fact. "I have sometimes wondered," he said, "if ministers understand what power they have in the mere fact that at least once a week a sample of people from the community come together for an hour or so, and for twenty or thirty minutes of that hour the minister has their *attention*. If once a week I could do that with the same fifty people, I might win almost any election!"

It is a demanding, strenuous task, sometimes far beyond our ministerial powers: to preach the word as alive now, illuminating the public world as surely as it was illuminated then by the public ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There is little obvious concern in the New Testament for "public affairs" and "public policy." It took centuries for the church to develop a wide-ranging "social ethic" by modern standards. But the early church "preached Jesus and the resurrection" with enormous public consequence over the centuries. Its sole collision with public authority, in those first few centuries, was on the point of the Lordship of Jesus against the lordship of Caesar. Consistently for almost three hundred years, church leaders kept pounding away at the point: this world has one Lord, and Caesar is subject to Him. So preaching, the early proclaimers of the Gospel linked a revealed truth to a common truth of their age. They conveyed to their hearers the seed of a new public policy for relating religious and governmental institutions.

Most ministers do not need large new infusions of scholarly research to make them prophetic public preachers. What they need is the courage of what they believe combined with confidence in what they know. Illustrations abound: I can still remember my shock in 1967 hearing Senator William Fulbright, in the Senate's hearings on the Vietnam War, asking the same questions about the war that I had been asking for months. The questions were "common-sensical" in that they involved national self-interest in that war, the pride and humiliation of the nation, and the difficulty of convincing young people that they should die in Vietnam for their country. Almost any of us ministers, in that era, had before our eyes enough information and enough knowledge of good and evil to raise the same questions as were being raised by the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Similarly, it takes no large experience of national fiscal affairs to perceive the fundamental policy at work in Federal budget-making in the first year of the Reagan era, 1981: shift resources from human services to the military, talk about waste in the one, but not about waste in the other. This simple perception, undergirded by certain principles of social compassion and peace-keeping as old as Amos and Isaiah, should be purveyed—frequently—to congregations of worshipping Christians so long as this policy prevails in our national government.

2. *Organize for justice.*

The power of the church as a "free space" for truth-speaking is great, but it must not be taken for granted by any Christian. After a visit to a country

like South Korea, after attendance at some of the overflowing worship services of its rapidly-growing Christian congregations, one returns to the U.S.A. newly appreciative of the social-political context of religious freedom that the early church took centuries to wrest from its society. Agents of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency attend most services of worship in South Korea. They monitor the content of sermons, even prayers. You can go to jail in South Korea if you raise intercessory prayers for the people of North Korea or its government, or if you pray for dissident, already-jailed Christians by name. South Korea is the only country that I have ever visited where the word "prayer meeting" has a revolutionary, sinister political connotation. The government takes prayer meetings seriously, not because Jesus promised to be in the midst of two or three disciples gathered in his name, but because the government has learned from experience that even two or three people can engender a political movement for change. At stake in the Korean church struggle is the elementary issue that has always divided Jews and Christians from totalitarian governments: Shall government be ceded control of all *social* space, including the space worshipping the God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

A society as a whole answers this question, and the answer gets structured into social habit by laws, policies, and covenants of mutual respect which Americans take for granted. Less perceived by most of us, inside the American churches, is the necessity of such free association for the nurturing of DeTocqueville's "energetic effort to set things right" in society at large. Again, DeTocqueville feared that Americans in the future would fall captive to the individualism of their culture and social order, to the detriment of organized, purposive "public agitation." Americans at their unique best, said this French visitor, are the great voluntary organizers of their public concerns.⁸

They do so for reasons basic to human personal existence, which requires social rootage and support in every way. Some years ago in Raleigh, North Carolina, in a social research program we asked a thousand carefully selected persons what kept them "going" in their lives as *citizens*. Only a minority of folk in any community, we found, can be called "active citizens." Only a minority show up at a city council meeting at least once a year, or go to a party precinct meeting, or join the Sierra Club to protect the public future of eagles. Who, in fact, are the folk who "keep at it" in matters related to justice, liberty, and compassion in this democratic society? The answer, we found, is people with three characteristics: (1) conviction, (2) friends, and (3) political experience. They are people with religious beliefs about what is right and wrong and needing to change in the world. They are people who embrace these convictions in common with at least a small group of friends who hold up each other's spirits when the winds of opposition and contradiction blow cold from society at large. But finally, they are folk whose very experience of public conflict apparently nerves them for the endurance of more conflict in even firmer commitment to their beliefs about justice, liberty, and compassion. Not more than a fourth of the public displays these three characteristics in combinations, we discovered; but the three fortify each other in essential, complementary ways. Political work without political faith dies quickly; equally so, personal faith and public work unsustained by friendship. Among the most hapless folk

in our survey were a group of individualistic "liberals" who had high hopes for justice in the world but whose lifestyle involved few fast friends for the nourishing of those hopes and no long-term track record of political involvement. No wonder this sort of liberal gets "tired"! Personal faith dies quickly when unsustained by *both* friendship and politics.⁹

The church congregation is a prime matrix for the cultivation of just such a lifestyle among parishioners in their various degrees of readiness for public life. To study the biographies of church leaders as diverse as St. Francis, John Calvin, John Wesley, Richard Allen, and Martin Luther King, Jr. is to understand that politics, as well as piety, begins when two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus.

In American history no strain of church history illustrates all this so vividly as the history of the Black church. No group of American Christians has been clearer about the intimate link between church organization and the pursuit of justice in society. Parker Palmer tells of a conversation with an activist Black minister in Washington, D.C. "What is the primary task of your ministry?" Palmer asked. "To provide my people with a rich social life," replied the minister. "Do you mean parties and pot-lucks and socials and things like that?" "Of course," came the answer, "things like that give my people the strength to struggle in public."¹⁰ Many of us in the so-called white churches of the land need to go to school at the feet of the Black church experience in our midst. There we will find some amazing integrities of personal faith, church community, and political witness, all of it fused together by the fires of common suffering.

3. *Teach and preach public repentance, forgiveness, and hope.*

That is, preach a *Gospel-combination of ethical empowerment*, and give that preaching a public, not only a private, face. This is the most complex prescription for spiritual discipline in the 'eighties that I know. "Preaching a'gin sin" is an old evangelical habit in the churches of America. The current television-preachers, with their judgments against pornography, abortion, evolution, and communism, have the moralistic Protestant tradition behind them. Often lacking in their preaching, however, is any vivid personal or social expression of forgiveness and repentance. How often does one hear a story that begins, "Ten years ago I thought this about our country's stance towards the Soviets . . . but I have come to see that I was mistaken then." Church leaders might serve the public in rare, even unique ways if they would tell more such stories in public. "How I Changed by Mind on the Vietnam War" . . . "What I Now See about the Gospel and the Public Welfare System" . . . Such testimony might be powerful expressions of the New Testament call for *metanoia*—a changing of mind—in relation to social need and public policy in our time. Neither before nor after conversion are Christians expected to have arrived at a state of pristine righteousness. Neither in their personal nor in their social ethics are they expected to be exemplary to all their neighbors. They would cut a more evangelical example, in fact, if they merely exposed themselves to the very humanizing experience of changing their minds on a political

issue or two. (That is one of the vulnerabilities of actually getting into the political process: it may change your mind on some things, because you learn to listen to your neighbors). In this connection people of my political disposition should celebrate the recent mind-changing of Billy Graham on the matter of the world's preparation for nuclear warfare. Graham now calls that preparation a sin, and he has confounded those liberals and conservatives in the churches who thought that world peace and national defense policy were agenda items reserved for one class of Christians. It is possible to change one's mind, one's whole orientation, on a *lot* of things. Is that not one of the promises of the Gospel?

We need to hear, understand, teach, and preach that Gospel so that its transforming power over our sins private *and* public, present *and* past, present *and* future are evidence to ourselves and all who hear. Again, this is a large discipline. We need for example, to keep preaching the forgiveness of sins in relation to the multitude of this nation's sins that, a psychiatrist might say, are "unresolved" in the public memory. Throughout the Civil Rights era of the 'sixties, most pastors knew that resistance to it was super-powered by the guilt that white Americans have inherited from their ancestors' way of dealing with relations between the races on this continent. Liberal, individualistic guilt was not the enemy. National guilt was the enemy, and the inability of many Americans to confess simply, "On the race question, we have tolerated a vast flaw in our democratic institutions. It is time to admit that neither Thomas Jefferson nor Abraham Lincoln was immune to the flaw. Let us repent by remedying the flaw." Neither has the nation concluded its due work of *metanoia* regarding the Vietnam War. Here, as in all such tangled political issues, the Gospel-preacher will have to labor long and hard to overcome the instinctive moralism that will resist even the good news of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a painful gift. It requires the low stoop of confession, the unfamiliar new standing ground of repentance, the eye-stinging light of new possibility spread out in the future.

One of the great blessings of life in the United States, DeTocqueville observed in the 1830's, is the young nation's "chance to make mistakes that can be retrieved." Neither the people nor the leaders of a democracy can afford to assume that anyone among them knows enough to present the next generation of citizens with a precedent of unimpeachable public righteousness. All do sin, persons and collectivities alike. Time and the will to experiment are the essential resources here, said DeTocqueville.

A democracy cannot get at the truth without experience, and many nations perish for lack of the time to discover their mistakes.¹¹

But time and the experimental spirit do not alone yield change if they are not infused with the shared public spirit of repentance: Human beings repent of past mistakes only when their eyes have been focused on new, future possibilities in their liberating, alluring power. As William Miller once put it, "High politics is *not* the art of the possible; it is the art of enlarging what is possible and making what has heretofore been impossible come in the range of what can be considered." So when we preachers commend repentance for past social sins to our congregations, we must open the doors to concrete new principles

and policies for the society: "A rich country can feed its own poor and many of the world's . . . A strong economy will be a better answer to the Soviet threat than a nuclear umbrella . . . The preservation of our soil and our rivers is an act of love for our grandchildren; it is in our power to hand them this heritage . . ." So the preaching of forgiveness, repentance, and hope must proceed if we are to be true to the Gospel, the times, and the personal-public whole of us.

The wholeness, the publicness, the concreteness recommended here *is* spiritually threatening. It *is* a hard discipline for the 'eighties or any other decade. But it is divinely promising, for God is on the side of such preaching as its Empowerer.

¹ Alexis DeTocqueville *Democracy in America*, a new translation by George Lawrence, edited by J.P. Mayer (Anchor Books; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1969), p. 303.

² Kenneth Underwood, *The Church, the University, and Social Policy* (The Danforth Study of Campus Ministries), 2 vols., (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), Vol. II, p. 238.

³ DeTocqueville, p. 297.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 632.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 645.

⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 123-124.

⁷ DeTocqueville, p. 314.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 513.

⁹ Cf. Donald W. Shriver, Jr. and Karl A. Ostrom, *Is There Hope for the City?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), especially chapters 5-7.

¹⁰ Palmer, p. 28.

¹¹ DeTocqueville, p. 225.