

The Problem of Clergy Misconduct: Preaching Liberation from Bondage to Sin in an Age of Moral Freedom

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Introduction

In the opening pages of his *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero hopes that he has not been “moved by the hope of gain or desire for glory.”¹ I share in his prayer – seeking in this endeavor not my own glory, but the glory of the Lord Christ. This essay is therefore offered not as a weapon of retribution, or to indulge in self-righteousness – but as a means of engagement for some difficult and profound issues that face the church in her third millennium.

I begin by laying out several brief narratives, as illustrations of some of the kinds of moral baseness that appear to infect some of the clergy. I then cite Paul Tillich’s 1963 work on the *Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, to set this ethical conversation in the context of the vocation to preach the good news. Then, Augustine of Hippo provides the underpinning for a discussion of the dangers of such behavior and the need for a corrective. Clergy whose words are at odds with their behavior serve only their own desires and not the will of God, I will argue.

The phenomenon of clergy preaching at odds with their behavior stems from an embrace of secular culture, and a distortion of the divine image in the culture’s zones of great power: economics and sexuality. Having jettisoned shame – due to past abuses – as a possible corrective, contemporary culture wallows in the self-deceit of prideful ambition. Only through true humility and modesty – virtues that shame returns us to – can we preach the gospel with integrity and fidelity to the word made flesh.

Illustrative Scenarios

From the very nature of their conduct, may be estimated the quality of their doctrine.² The following scenarios are offered to provide a setting for the essay that follows. Each is, to some degree, based in fact – although many of the pertinent details have been altered to protect those innocent victims of the behaviors described. Each anecdote concerns a member of the clergy – or a potential future member of the clergy – and a situation of some moral or ethical concern.

Since spoken words cease to exist as soon as they come into contact with the air, and their existence lasts no longer than their sound,³ I have here resorted to the use of written words as a means of preserving, continuing, and furthering a conversation. My hope is that the scenarios offered will not, in and of themselves, be considered factual information – but that they may connect to similar experiences in the mind of the reader. Thus, I pray, these illustrations may proclaim a kind of archetypal or mythical truth, pointing to a reality beyond themselves.

Scenario One: Misconduct Prevention?

A highly placed official in a major metropolitan diocese has dinner with several

clergy friends, at which a liberal quantity of wine accompanies a rich and sumptuous meal. The mood is congenial, and the discourse light. At one point, the conversation turns to preventing sexual misconduct among the clergy, an area for which this priest has oversight. He describes a series of difficult situations, mired in accusations, lawsuits, and injury, and he grieves the pain caused on the whole church and individual members as a result of such misconduct.

The priest then admits to having sex with parishioners while he was rector in a previous cure. “You’d have to be gay to understand,” he says, describing the experience as part of his pastoral ministry – a way of communicating God’s loving touch, as it were.

Scenario Two: A Misunderstanding

A seminary student has a disagreement with another person in the community – but this other person is unaware of the problem. Rather than speak to this person directly and expeditiously, the student lets the matter fester for some months – until he is seriously upset about what probably was, at worst, a minor misunderstanding. The seminary has a number of people – including a chaplain, the dean, and at least five faculty – who have appropriate oversight of these two people, yet the student seeks the intervention of a member of the administrative staff – someone who knows neither of these people.

After rescheduling a proposed meeting many times, the seminarian simply fails to show up at the appointed time. When asked about his apparent lack of responsibility or courtesy, the seminarian says, “Oh, it’s not important any more.”

Scenario Three: A Chronic Liar

A young and ambitious priest has a series of sexual affairs – mostly with older, influential people who can be helpful to her career. Although she lives with someone she introduces as her “partner,” she is frequently seen in the company of others, in compromising situations. When confronted about her behavior by her partner, she replies, “I’m a chronic liar, and I like to toy with people’s emotions.” This insight, apparently, has come to her in her course of seeing a mental-health counselor.

The spouse asks what she intends to do with this new information about herself, wondering how she means to change her behavior. She replies, “Can’t we just pretend everything is okay?”

Scenario Four: Misuse of Funds

As part of his regular responsibility, an ordained minister has exclusive control over a small bank account whose funds are designated for a particular ministry. For a variety of reasons, this account has never been subject to the kinds of fiscal oversight and careful audit that other similar accounts receive. The minister is the sole signatory of the account. Because of a personality conflict with the church treasurer, the minister finds that his legitimate claims for reimbursement of expenses are being over scrutinized and rejected by the treasurer. The treasurer questions whether a trip to a central church office is not one-half mile less than claimed, and why a two-dollar bridge toll has no accompanying receipt. These trivial matters add up over the course of several months to a sum of several hundred dollars.

So the minister writes himself a check from this unsupervised bank account,

figuring that it's all the church's money, after all – what does it matter what account it came from?

Scenario Five: Forsaking All Others

A newly ordained priest confesses to his spouse that he has little interest in their sexual relationship. “I guess I just have a low libido,” he says. He claims that his needs are satisfied vocationally, in pastoral encounters and, particularly, in preaching. A sermon given at a recent wedding, for instance, serves as but one example of his God-given gift for rhetoric – and his satisfaction with his use of this gift. In this sermon, he preached that “saying ‘yes’ to each other means saying ‘no’ to everyone else – and that is good news.” He tells his spouse that he is well pleased that God has given him the gift with which he is able to communicate such a traditional orthodox belief as fidelity in marriage in a manner appreciated by others.

Later, it comes to light that he has been stopping in pornography shops and highway rest areas for anonymous sex, with some considerable frequency.

Scenario Six: Committed Relationship?

A young pastor is considered energetic and gifted. One particular aspect of her success lies in her ability to remember not only people's names but also a large variety of other information: details as minute as the names of pets or one's birthplace. As flattered as her congregants are at her use of this phenomenal facility, they are also concerned about her apparent lack of faithfulness in holy matrimony. She is now entering her third marriage, promising once again to be faithful unto death. How can she reconcile this commitment with her recurring breach of it?

When questioned, she replies that there is no cause for alarm; her behavior is really quite simply explained and best understood as “serial monogamy.”

The Relevance of This?

In his 1963 lectures at the Pacific School of Religion, theologian Paul Tillich addressed the risk of the irrelevance of the Christian message in a culture he describes as one of dehumanizing scientism and existentialism.⁴ He laments the relatively small amount of interest and passion American society invests in Christianity, as compared with the investment made into other realms of culture.⁵ This disinterest has allowed the Christian church to totter on the brink of irrelevance, he says, citing six specific examples.

First, is the irrelevance of the Christian language, in which state we risk confusion between faith and belief. “Faith is the state of being grasped by something that has ultimate meaning, and acting and thinking on the basis of this as a centered person,” he says. “Beliefs are opinions held to be true, which may or may not really be true.”⁶ Without an understanding of the language of the tradition, he argues, we fail to comprehend Christian symbols, which lose their power to “pierce the soul.”

His second example of irrelevance lies in the content of Christian preaching. Such preaching no longer preaches the good news of a new kind of being, and fails to proclaim a present reality “which gives before it demands, which accepts before it transforms.”⁷ The lack of any real content in preaching, Tillich says, tends to “make what the New Testament calls the ‘assembly of God’ (*ecclesia*) into a club for social activities.”⁸ A minister, as director of these activities, has little time for study or sermon

preparation – and thus the resultant loss of significant content.

Third, there is irrelevance through a “traditionalist attitude toward the Christian tradition.”⁹ Here, a lack of questioning and the avoidance of serious issues has condemned the church to a slow and inevitable decay into stasis and death.

His fourth example of irrelevance stems from the “emotional corner” into which religion has been pushed.¹⁰ From this point, the church no longer has an impact on thinking or action, and it – like all emotional states – will soon disappear.

Fifth, he cites the polite indifference or “proper” status of some churchgoers as evidence of the irrelevance of the Christian message for various social classes.

Finally, he notes how few in the culture pay any serious attention to the churches – except when they have “tragic and ridiculous heresy trials.”¹¹

Calling for church leadership by the “strongest, most dynamic, and most daring kinds of people,” Tillich cautions that their “high vitality [must be] balanced with profound spirituality.”¹² It is this kind of careful balance of “profound spirituality” that is missing in lives of each of the clergy described in the preceding scenarios. Without such a grounded, centered life of prayer, Tillich claims, we risk losing sight of what is of ultimate concern, floundering in a meaningless existence of empty cynicism and habitual sin.¹³ This meaningless is abundantly clear in the examples given.

Yet the church of the early twenty-first century seems unconcerned with the private lives of her clergy—even clergy like those described above, who once might have suffered punishment for their chronic and notorious sin. Instead, the contemporary church mostly seeks at any cost to avoid conflict, and by that avoidance we risk slipping into the very kind of irrelevance that Tillich prophesied against in 1963. Nearly forty years later, we can well imagine clergy such as those depicted in the opening scenarios as agents of midwifery for the promulgation of the very kinds of moral depravity that led to Tillich’s modern-day Jeremiad.

The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom

Saint Augustine of Hippo, in his fifth-century treatise on Christian doctrine,¹⁴ anticipates three kinds of critics: those who cannot understand his advice, those who fail to apply it, and those who consider it unnecessary.¹⁵ I, too, imagine similar categories of criticism to my endeavor. In a like manner to blessed Augustine, however, I remain committed to the truthfulness of my claim: preaching is not just another kind of speech – but a way in which the people of God, including and especially the preacher – are formed in the Word of God.¹⁶ You cannot preach what you do not show forth in your life, I will argue.

Augustine seeks to develop in his students an ability to arrive at their own interpretations. But he hoped that his arguments would persuade them to follow a line of thinking similar to his own. Like Augustine, I pray that my readers’ interpretations may well bear a certain similarity to my own – or that readers who feel at odds with me will feel at liberty to discuss and debate a possible corrective to my thinking.

Augustine describes a life of spiritual growth and development, in which Christian people progress not only by reading the work of others or by hearing the preaching of clerics, but by finding illumination themselves.¹⁷ He envisions this mortal life as one of travel, in a land away from God. “If we wish to return to our homeland where we can be happy,” says Augustine,

“we must use this world, not enjoy it, in order to discern ‘the invisible attributes of God,

which are understood through what has been made,' or, in other words, to ascertain what is eternal and spiritual from corporeal and temporal things."¹⁸ In this journey of sanctification, we must seek not the advice or mentoring of humans but the true council of the unchangeable God, who *is* the truth.¹⁹ And this truth is manifest to us primarily through the symbol set of language. For Augustine, language and grammar are part of the divine creation, signs given that we may learn through them.²⁰ While language is earthly and temporal, it points to divine reality. All teaching concerns either things of the temporal order or of signs of the divine order, but even the things of this world are learned through signs;²¹ "nobody uses words except in order to signify something."²²

He uses the example of the name of God to illustrate the concept, for "God" is not a means of truly knowing the divine but of pointing us toward that ultimate reality. God has, however, sanctioned the homage of the human voice, Augustine proclaims, and that we should derive pleasure from our words of divine praise. Our words serve not as a means of knowing the divine, then, but as a sign. Hence, says Augustine, "the fact that he is called God: he himself is not truly known by the sound of these two syllables, yet when the word strikes our ears it leads all users of the Latin language to think of a supremely excellent and immortal being."²³

In speaking praise of the divine, we are drawn toward our true home, with God. Thus, our words and actions serve not only as signs of other and deeper realities but our means of approaching these realities more closely. By praising God, we are drawn more deeply into the mystery of love. This spiritual journey is not one of time and space, but a process of cleansing that Augustine calls us to consider "a trek, or a voyage, to our homeland; though progress towards the one who is ever present is not made through space, but through goodness of purpose and character."²⁴

Yet sometimes good Christian people are "blown away from their homeland by the adverse wind of their own perverted character," Augustine claims.²⁵ In other words, we sin. And this is where what Augustine calls the "foolishness of preaching" comes to bear.²⁶ Preaching persuades, converts, and transforms; it chastises and cajoles; it reminds us again and again of God's love for us – and it calls us back to the path leading toward that true homeland.

Augustine posits that human beings, from time to time, forget the essential truths of Christian faith – or fail to believe them fully. The message preached and heard is simply not understood, or internalized, or digested completely. Augustine gives a particular example: "A person who does not believe that his sins can be forgiven is made worse by despair, feeling that nothing better awaits him than to be wicked, since he has no faith in the results of being converted."²⁷ Here, we see a possible – and quite plausible – explanation for post-baptismal sin: a lack of faith in the forgiveness of sins given through grace in baptism. To believe in the gift of salvation and everlasting life, but not to claim it as one's own as a Christian: this is a life of deep despair indeed.

Such despair leads inevitably to what Augustine calls "spiritual fornication"²⁸ – a life in which "those who have a desire for evil things are handed over to be deluded and deceived according to what their own wills desire."²⁹ This is a life of control and dominance, of power and status, of wealth and material gain: a life of lust in which the Christian message is irrelevant. To avoid such a fate, Augustine describes to us the archetypal holy person, someone with "a heart so single-minded and purified that he will not be deflated from the truth either by an eagerness to please men or by the thought of avoiding any of the troubles which beset him in this life."³⁰

This kind of person – the only *true* Christian – is always working through a series of stages. Augustine’s stages begin with the *fear* of God,³¹ and continue with *holiness* – in which state we become docile, accepting that what is written in Scripture is better and truer than any insights we may gain on our own.³² Augustine’s next stage is *knowledge*, in which a person with “good reason” is not boastful but remorseful, obtaining by constant prayer the encouragement of divine assistance, so as to be spared the crush of despair.³³ From there, Augustine leads on to *fortitude*, when we hunger and thirst after righteousness – a stage in which we first “behold the light.”³⁴ Then there is the resolve of *compassion*, in which the mind – which is always feuding with itself because of the impurities accumulated by its desire of what is inferior³⁵ – is purified in order to become perfect in the love of self and neighbor.

Then, and only then, comes the sixth stage – a place in which we are full of hope, full of strength, in which God may actually be seen.³⁶ And this vision comes only to those able and willing, to the best of their ability, to die to this world. When we have done that, our heart may be so pure as not to place a higher priority on anything but the truth, and then we may ascend to the seventh and last stage: *wisdom*.³⁷ Such wisdom will purify and console its devotees, and it demands, in return, self-sacrifice and moral adjustment.³⁸

In his seven stages from fear to wisdom, Augustine has laid out a strategy for the journey to the homeland. This process of sanctification begins with an acknowledgment of God’s righteousness judgment and ends with praise, from fear to praise via wisdom and understanding. Thus, Augustine cites Psalm 111: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; those who act accordingly have a good understanding; his praise endures for ever.”³⁹ This seven-stage process is not, for Augustine, an optional means of deepening one’s spiritual devotion; it is *the way, the truth, the life*. Without an ongoing commitment to this process, one risks intolerable arrogance, ingrained habits of sin and injustice, and continued delusion – a life of ongoing and unrelenting despair. Wending one’s way through these seven stages is the meaning of life, the very point of the journey. For Augustine, it is *not* an option to stop, for instance, at the *fear* stage – for the commitment to love God and one’s neighbor is absolute. Of this commitment in Scripture, Augustine says, “when it says ‘all your heart, all your soul, all your mind,’ it leaves no part of our life free from this obligation, no part free as it were to back out and enjoy some other thing.”⁴⁰ The process of sanctification Augustine lays out requires our ongoing willingness to keep the faith, to be open to transformation, and to lay earthly concerns aside. In this journey, the more the realm of lust is destroyed, the more the realm of love increases⁴¹ – a result of seeking God’s will in the Scriptures and of living in gentle holiness.⁴²

At Odds with Their Behavior

It may, at first glance, appear to be odd to argue for clergy who seek God’s will, who study Scripture, and who seek a life of holiness. These are all, of course, commonly attributed to all Christian people, not just those ordained for particular ministries. The baptismal rite of the American *Book of Common Prayer* welcomes the newly baptized into the household of God, calling on them to “confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share ... in his eternal priesthood.”⁴³ Clearly, the texts employed emphasize the solidarity of all people in Christ. Further, in the Episcopal Church’s rite for the ordination of a priest, the texts proclaim that “All

baptized people are called to make Christ known as Savior and Lord, and to share in the renewing of his world.”⁴⁴ Yet the language of this rite – and those of rites more frequently celebrated and presided over by a priest – speaks of the clergy as if they fall in a category *outside* that of the “people of God.” For instance, priests are charged “to nourish *Christ’s people* from the riches of his grace, and strengthen *them* to glorify God...”⁴⁵ Hearing this language, one could well imagine how a priest might imagine herself presiding over – and thus outside of – the *laos*, the people of God, the body of Christ. Weekly and even daily celebrations of the Holy Eucharist present mutually exclusive categories of “celebrant” and “people,”⁴⁶ and call upon the priest to proclaim the assurance of God’s pardon to others – but not himself.⁴⁷

Is it any wonder, therefore, that the clergy may be inclined to behaviors that they would exhort their parishioners to abandon – the very folk who proclaim anew the call to that baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that John the Baptist proclaimed at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan? And yet to blame their unfortunate behavior on some semantic issues in the typography of a book – even a book as integral to denominational identity as the prayer book – oversimplifies a more complex situation.

Yet, there is the simple dichotomy: these people preach the good news on a regular basis, often to acclaim and with great success, and still they persist in habits that draw them away from God. And how can this be? Can these people – who themselves exist in delusion and chronic sin – really proclaim the good news of Christ? For Christ *is* the truth, not a sign pointing to it. How can you point to Christ and not point to truth? Still, according to Augustine,

The truth can be proclaimed even by untruth, in the sense that things which are right and true may be proclaimed by a wicked and deceitful heart. It is in this way that Jesus Christ is proclaimed by those who seek their own and not the things of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

They speak well, seeming to proclaim God’s love, but live evil lives that seem to be the product of their own brains – and are certainly not of God. They live in the despair of a divided and hypocritical existence. Augustine ends this discussion with a rhetorical question:

The good things they say seem to be the product of their own brains, but are at odds with their behavior. Those who, as God said, steal his words are those who want to appear good by saying the things of God when in fact they are evil, doing their own thing. But if you think carefully, it is not they themselves that speak the good things they say. For how can they affirm in their words what they deny in their actions?⁴⁹

Who Speaks?

In a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, author Alan Wolfe posits that, in the United States, the nineteenth century was about economic freedom, and the twentieth about political freedom. This first century of the new millennium, he claims “will be about Americans deciding for themselves what’s moral and what’s not.”⁵⁰ The quest for moral freedom – as “inevitable as it is impossible,”⁵¹ according to Wolfe

– now dominates our civic discourse. We live in an age of moral freedom, Wolfe says,

...in which individuals are expected to determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life. We decide what is right and wrong, not by bending our wills to authority, but by considering who we are, what others require and what consequences follow from acting one way rather than another.⁵²

Although Wolfe does not assert a spiritual aspect to his claims, one can easily imagine not only how such a process might be at odds with much of the religious tradition of Western culture but also how such a tradition might be co-opted to serve as its underpinning. Passages such as “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged”⁵³ come to mind – as well as the many fine sermons preached on such texts.

This may well be the triumph of the individual, in which no one may judge or set a standard for others. People are now merely consumers, customers, or clients. They are disconnected, private units – and their actions are not accountable to any higher authority. The church no longer serves a prophetic role, and has happily accepted the precepts of secular society. In the words of one theologian,

A comfortably domesticated church has abandoned theological language, and the way of understanding the world that the language represents, for the language and world of therapy. ‘Unhealthy’ and ‘healthy,’ for example have largely replaced ‘sinful’ and ‘righteous.’⁵⁴

Categories of health are mostly personal, and vary with the individual – what aggravates one person’s allergy may increase another’s immunity. So, without sin and righteousness, we cannot judge. And, in the absence of judgment, the church risks proclaiming a gospel without demand – a notion that “plays well in a ‘therapeutic’ society.”⁵⁵ The church is tempted to adopt some half-digested pieces of the therapeutic disciplines, and then use – or misuse – them for other purposes.

This tendency to identify aspects of the wider culture and appropriate them into church practice extends well beyond the language of therapy. For instance, are Christian priests now considered “professionals,” who serve the needs of their “clients,” accepting payment for services while maintaining – or not maintaining – “healthy boundaries”? This notion would be repugnant to Augustine, and to most in the Christian tradition. The managerial model, no matter how helpful it may be in some settings, poses significant problems for the Christian community. According to Leech,

It reduces ministry to a secular model, and the Church, itself dominated by secular notions, has fallen in with this model. We see it, for example, in many of the responses to clergy sexual abuse where it is assumed that clergy are ‘healing professionals.’ There is no reference to God, and it is taken for granted that there is a financial transaction. I believe this whole approach to Christian ministry brings it into disrepute, and may well bring it to and end.⁵⁶

Defining the church's ministry on the basis of culture may seem convenient or appear to be expeditious to evangelism efforts, but it neglects a fundamental precept of Christian faith. "The gospel is an intrusion among us, not something arising out of us," says Brueggemann.⁵⁷ The Christian life is not primarily about *us*, not a celebration of our incarnation, not a means of making ourselves feel good – but a life of praise and thanks in worship and adoration of the Triune God.

In his essay on practicing the art of preaching, Hauerwas reminds us that the entire Christian existence is an ongoing process of transformation and change. Not "getting it right" and therefore finding value in our life, but continuing in the sometimes-frustrating struggle toward holiness. He says, "Christianity is not so much a set of beliefs that are meant to give our lives meaning, but rather to be Christian is to be initiated into a community with skills, not unlike learning to lay brick, that are meant to transform our lives."⁵⁸ Without an ongoing process of transformation, the living reality of faith becomes ossified. It may last for ever, but it will never grow – remaining instead an idol to today's culture. This idol may help people feel good, but it also the means by which they are "handed over to be deluded and deceived according to what their own wills desire."⁵⁹ This kind of religion gives people what they want, but it cannot respond to human needs at any deep level. Instead, it distracts us away from the will of God, preferring instead the false gods of self-gratification, consumerism, and control. This "developmental triumphalism"⁶⁰ has led us to abandon not only the rhetoric of sin and righteousness but also the moral underpinning of these words.

A Place for Shame

To those outside the Christian community – as well as to many *inside* it – the general impression left by the teaching of the church is that physical relationships are "unworthy, if not shameless and obscene."⁶¹ Right or wrong, the church simply has a reputation for hostility toward the material world – and not just the temptations toward evil within it. For a long time, says Countryman, "Christians have tended to treat the created order as if it were primarily a problem or a temptation rather than a gift."⁶²

Seeking to reclaim the goodness of creation, our culture has denied the potential for sex, wealth, and power to enslave and destroy. We are distressed by the Cartesian divide between soul and body; we refuse to believe that God's decision to create us as sexual beings was an error; we question any approach to the spiritual that denies the fleshly dimensions of human existence. And rightly so, for we are the people who proclaim that the word became flesh, and dwelt among us.

But in this celebration of the incarnation of the divine, we have sometimes mistaken the signs and symbols of God's love for things to be revered in and of themselves. These are but temporal things, which lose their appeal when attained, for they do not satisfy the soul.⁶³ Used to assist us in feeling good, these material things we consider spiritual aids may be simply "acting as a sedative which dulls the awareness of the need to dismantle the structures which perpetuate the distress."⁶⁴ The gospel calls us to question these very structures, to fight for justice and challenge oppression, to mediate with and give offense against the great powers that enslave us.⁶⁵ And the gospel call us to seek the eternal – those things "loved more passionately when obtained than when desired."⁶⁶ We are told we can find satisfaction for our longings.

So we look for relief from our affliction. We seek and we search, but we never find – because what we seek cannot feed us. We seek relief from our symptoms, rather than

a cure for our diseases. We long for a super-highway from infancy to maturity, rather than embrace the “country roads with detours, dead ends, even places where we have to scout our own trail across untrodden country.”⁶⁷ We figure that we are searching, at least: that’s a good thing. As Augustine says, “Those who fail to discover what they are looking for suffer from hunger, whereas those who do not look ... often die of boredom.”⁶⁸ And yet, while never bored, we are chronically hungry – because we are held captive to powers that cannot satisfy our deepest yearnings. It is not sex or money that holds us captive; but “sexuality and economics, zones of great power, are also the most likely candidates for distortion and loss of the very communion for which we so yearn.”⁶⁹ This distortion substitutes wealth for riches, sex for sensuality, control for communion – and it deprives us of our only true fulfillment: communion with God.⁷⁰

Without real humility, modesty, and a profound sense of our finitude, we mistake our own ambition for glory and self-aggrandizement with the fulfilling of God’s purposes. Even the pagan philosopher Cicero understood this need for the preacher, the orator, to avoid showing herself off, positing that only a “sense of shame” keeps us from following such practices.⁷¹ In our culture, we have jettisoned all shame: not only the shameful accommodation of oppression and the misguided shame at the open and honest embrace of sensuality, but also the kinds of shame that prevent the self-deceit of pride.

And the clergy are particularly susceptible to self-deceit. As Willimon put it, “If you are feeding hungry children, none of the moral rules apply to you which apply to other mere mortals.”⁷² All that matters is *my* happiness, as defined by the satisfaction of all my desires. This is the danger that confronts twenty-first-century clergy, being, as Brueggemann put it, so “preoccupied with self so that one cannot get outside one’s self to think, reimagine, and describe a larger reality.”⁷³ And yet we cannot simply declare some behaviors wrong, and somehow remove the perpetrators from their positions as preachers, for

There is a danger of an aggressive, crusading approach to sexual morality which is almost always damaging both to its victims and to its perpetrators. But there is also the privatising of sexual behavior, associated with the tradition of liberalism – a tradition which, by failing to see the social and political dimensions of sex, erodes the potential for a social ethic in this area.⁷⁴

We need a social ethic, a Christian moral, a standard for acceptable behavior – otherwise the clergy continue in a downward spiral, in which a pastor may well do great works of righteousness, but, as Willimon summarizes it, “before long the pastor meets a parishioner who is lonely and needs love and then, when caught in the act of adultery, his defense is that he is an extremely caring pastor.”⁷⁵ This is exactly the kind of situation described in Scenario 1; this sort of defense simply can not stand in the face of the gospel message, for it speaks of the kind of individual moral freedom that our culture demands – and not of the love of God. People deciding for themselves what is moral and what is not: this kind of life-in-isolation is hardly a Christian concept. And yet true Christian morality comes not from a legislative body or a book of rules, but from the fount of life; it comes, says Willimon, as “a gracious by-product of being attached to something greater than ourselves, of being owned, claimed, comman-

deered for larger purposes.”⁷⁶ Without this sense of connectedness, we become autonomous individuals, with the illusion of complete control over our life and our destiny. In American culture, we have lost our sense of historical continuity, so that many separate individuals now live for the moment and for themselves alone.⁷⁷ We have lost our sense of shame, in part because of a previous oppressive emphasis on guilt. We want to forget the past ever happened – because it brings to mind things we would rather leave behind us.

As Christians, however, we are called not to forget the past – but to *remember*. As Hauerwas says, “we Christians remember, not because we like to wallow in guilt, but because we know we have been forgiven and thus have been made truthful rememberers.”⁷⁸ Truthful remembering will include shame, and this leads to a sense of modesty and humility. Without the kinds of modesty and humility that such shame fosters, we risk the hubris of a Timothy McVeigh, who self-righteously proclaimed, even as he awaited execution for his 168 murders, “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.”⁷⁹

Conclusion

It is curiously ironic that, in his biography of St. Augustine, Brown speaks of Augustine’s later reminiscences on his Manichean phase – of his coming to terms with the “elaborate avoidance of any intimate sense of guilt.”⁸⁰ In spite of Augustine’s impassioned pleas, this kind of delusional endeavor still exists, as evidenced by the scenarios at the beginning of this essay – and it has nothing to do with individual needs or emotional intelligence. Willimon suggests that a clergy person’s descent to the level of a rather common adulterer, for instance, is

...related to his inability to be attached to his vocation as a preacher. When that vocation becomes a mere means to an end, flaws in the preacher’s character, which may have been overcome by the preacher’s commitment to the ethics of good preaching, are magnified.⁸¹

Being a preacher, a priest, a pastor, a minister: this requires more than simply wearing a collar or a stole, more than charming people with clever oration on Sunday mornings, more than uncritically adopting the precepts of a secular culture. To preach is to lead, and to lead as an exemplar – to “pattern your life in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example....”⁸² For most of us, this requires more than individual discernment of good and evil, more than the delusion of autonomous individuality. It requires what William Temple called “a new mind” – a deep, profound, and unequivocal acceptance of God’s forgiveness for our inability to live up to the standard of perfect love set by the gospel:

John [the Baptist] came, and after him Jesus came, saying, ‘Change your way of looking at life; the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’ But we lowered the term ‘repentance’ into meaning something not very different from remorse, though, of course, we are well aware that is not true repentance unless the wrong-doing is abandoned. As the old verse tersely put it –
It’s not enough to say,

‘I’m sorry, and repent,’
And then go on afterwards
Just as you always went.

Repentance does not merely mean giving up a bad habit. What it is concerned with is the mind; get a new mind. What mind? The mind of Christ – our standard of reference; learn to look at the world in His way. To repent is to adopt God’s viewpoint in place of your own. There need not be any sorrow about it. In itself, far from being sorrowful, it is the most joyful thing in the world, because when you have done it you have adopted the viewpoint of truth itself, and you are in fellowship with God. It means a complete re-evaluation of all things we are inclined to think good. The world, as we live in it, is like a shop window in which some mischievous person has got overnight and shifted all the price-labels round so that the cheap things have the high price-labels on them, and really precious things are priced low. We let ourselves be taken in. Repentance means getting those price-labels back in the right place.⁸³

The re-evaluation Temple calls for is *not* one of individual self-assessment, but a community norm, a group standard, the vision of God. But how do we nurture and strengthen the goodly ministers, priests, and pastors that they may find the strength to get a new mind? Kenneth Leech suggests one possibility:

A large part of the answer lies in the recovery and development of some very traditional themes – the spirit of sacrifice, the theme of priesthood as an interior life rather than a job, the emphasis on ascetical discipline and on the practice of the Christian life, and, most importantly, on the place of the priest within the larger priestly body.⁸⁴

Here is a call to radical resistance to the pressures of our secular age – to hearty repentance, true faith, and a new mind. As in the time of Augustine, every evil act can be amplified and transformed by memory and repetition – and soon become a compulsive habit.⁸⁵ And yet the vocation to preach the gospel’s good news calls us to change those evil ways. As Snow says,

The primary purpose of preaching is to let the Gospel be known, apprehended, and taken as the good news of our salvation through Jesus Christ, the news that love has overcome death and we are ultimately safe. But if we begin to accept this good news as true, then it has consequences for how we live our lives together. Our liberation from bondage to sin and death not only makes us feel good, it also affects our corporate life.⁸⁶

Accepting God’s grace through faith: here can be a disciplined, supportive, corrective, and critical community, one that enables virtues to flourish.⁸⁷ Here will be true preaching of God’s word. How do we get there? Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor, we remember that “the first step toward preaching a lively word is living it.”⁸⁸

Notes

- ¹ Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans Harry Caplan (1954, reprint Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 1999), 5
- ² Tertulian, "On Prescription against Heretics," 43 in A Roberts and J Donaldson, eds, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 3 (1885, reprint Peabody, Massachusetts Hendrickson, 1994), 264
- ³ A concept attributable not only to Augustine, but also to Plato
- ⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, ed Durwood Foster (Cleveland Pilgrim Press, 1996)
- ⁵ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 21
- ⁶ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 15
- ⁷ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 17
- ⁸ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 17
- ⁹ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 17
- ¹⁰ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 20
- ¹¹ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 21 And this was some thirty-five years before the Walter Righter incident in the Episcopal Church!
- ¹² Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 19
- ¹³ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 57
- ¹⁴ Completed in 426 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, ed and trans R P H Green (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1995)
- ¹⁵ As summarized by R P H Green in his preface to Augustine, *doctrina*, xiv
- ¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, "Duty as Delight and Desire Preaching Obedience that Is Not Legalism," in Erskine Clarke, ed, *Exilic Preaching Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Trinity Press International, 1998), 65
- ¹⁷ See Augustine, *doctrina* (preface 1), 3
- ¹⁸ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 9), 17 Augustine makes numerous allusions to Scripture here, including "while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5 6, NRSV), "those who deal with this world as if they have no dealings with it" (1 Corinthians 7 31), and "eternal power and divine nature [are] seen through the things [God] has made," (Romans 1 20)
- ¹⁹ Augustine, *doctrina* (preface 15), 9
- ²⁰ See Green's preface in Augustine, *doctrina*, xvii
- ²¹ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 4), 13
- ²² Augustine, *doctrina* (1 5), 15
- ²³ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 14), 19 In Latin, of course, the word for God – *Deus* – has two syllables
- ²⁴ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 22), 23
- ²⁵ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 21), 21
- ²⁶ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 25), 23
- ²⁷ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 35), 29
- ²⁸ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 88), 99
- ²⁹ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 87), 98
- ³⁰ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 23), 67
- ³¹ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 16), 63 Fear, I submit, is the stage that Augustine describes for the person unable to believe in the forgiveness of sins – for such a person also fears God's punishment, and cannot imagine a life of grace
- ³² Augustine, *doctrina* (2 17), 63
- ³³ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 20), 65
- ³⁴ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 21), 65
- ³⁵ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 21), 65
- ³⁶ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 22), 67
- ³⁷ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 23), 67
- ³⁸ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo A Biography* (1967, rev ed Berkeley University of California Press, 2000), 29
- ³⁹ Psalm 111 10, trans in *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979] (New York Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), 755
- ⁴⁰ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 43), 31

- ⁴¹ Augustine, *doctrina* (3 37), 149
- ⁴² Augustine, *doctrina* (3 1), 135
- ⁴³ 1917 BCP, 308
- ⁴⁴ 1979 BCP, 531
- ⁴⁵ 1979 BCP, 531 Emphasis added
- ⁴⁶ See 1979 BCP, 355 ff
- ⁴⁷ The complete formula for absolution in Rite II is "Almighty God have mercy on *you*, forgive *you* all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen *you* in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep *you* in eternal life" – 1979 BCP, 360 Emphasis added
- ⁴⁸ Augustine, *doctrina* (4 151), 277
- ⁴⁹ Augustine, *doctrina* (4 151), 281
- ⁵⁰ Alan Wolfe, "The Final Freedom," *The New York Times Magazine*, 18 March 2001, 48
- ⁵¹ Wolfe, "Freedom," 51
- ⁵² Wolfe, "Freedom," 48
- ⁵³ Matthew 7 1 (NRSV)
- ⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching to Exiles," in Erskine Clarke, *Exilic Preaching Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Trinity Press International, 1998), 3
- ⁵⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "Duty as Delight and Desire Preaching Obedience that Is Not Legalism," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 43
- ⁵⁶ Kenneth Leech, *The Sky Is Red Discerning the Signs of the Times* (London Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), 230
- ⁵⁷ William H Willimon, "Easter Preaching as Peculiar Speech," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 135
- ⁵⁸ Stanley M Hauerwas, "Practice Preaching," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 63
- ⁵⁹ Augustine, *doctrina* (2 87), 97
- ⁶⁰ Leech, *Sky*, 17
- ⁶¹ Leech, *Sky*, 29
- ⁶² L William Countryman, *Forgiven and Forgiving* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 30
- ⁶³ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 92), 53
- ⁶⁴ Leech, *Sky*, 123-24
- ⁶⁵ Tillich, *Irrelevance*, 23
- ⁶⁶ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 92), 53
- ⁶⁷ Countryman, *Forgiven*, 17
- ⁶⁸ Augustine, *doctrina* (1 14), 63
- ⁶⁹ Hauerwas, "Practice Preaching," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 63
- ⁷⁰ Leech, *Sky*, 46
- ⁷¹ Cicero, *ad Herennium*, (4 1 1), 231
- ⁷² William H Willimon, quoting an anonymous friend, in "Preaching in an Age That Has Lost Its Moral Compass," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 119
- ⁷³ Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching to Exiles," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 22
- ⁷⁴ Leech, *Sky*, 28-29
- ⁷⁵ Willimon, "Easter Preaching," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 120
- ⁷⁶ Willimon, "Easter Preaching," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 120
- ⁷⁷ Leech, *Sky*, 121
- ⁷⁸ Stanley M Hauerwas, "Embodied Memory," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 74
- ⁷⁹ The quote is from William E Henley's poem "Invictus," and attributed to McVeigh in "The Rights and Wrongs Should America Kill the Oklahoma City Bomber?" *The Economist* 359 8221 (12 May 2001), 33
- ⁸⁰ Brown, *Augustine*, 39
- ⁸¹ Willimon, "Easter Preaching," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 123
- ⁸² From the examination at the ordination of a priest, 1979 BCP, 532
- ⁸³ William Temple, *Christian Faith and Life* (1931, reprint London SCM Press, 1963), 73-74
- ⁸⁴ Leech, *Sky*, 242
- ⁸⁵ Brown, *Augustine*, 142

⁸⁶ John H. Snow, "Preaching and Pastoral Care," in Carl P. Daw, Jr., ed., *Breaking the Word: Essays on the Liturgical Dimension of Preaching* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 169-70.

⁸⁷ Leech, *Sky*, 242.

⁸⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Preaching to the Next Millennium," in Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 97.