

The Task of Preaching in the U.S. in the Early 21st Century: A Word from a Lebanese Orthodox Friend

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As an Orthodox Christian from Lebanon, when I attend worship in U.S. churches I sometimes feel that many members of the congregation consider me part of the “old” while thinking of themselves as “new.” In my understanding, such a distinction should be overcome since we all are in Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8). Moreover, whatever culture we come from, we are called by Christ’s love of all humanity to accept each other. For these reasons, I would like to mention some ways U.S. preachers could help their congregations deepen their knowledge of the Middle Eastern context, realize that their mission depends on the quality of their spiritual life, and review their mission at home and abroad.

Knowledge of the Middle East Context

Christian Presence. Many Americans ignore the reality that there have been Christians in the Middle East since Pentecost. About 15 million Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants continue their presence and witness in the region despite problems faced throughout their history. Yet Americans appear to think that Christians disappeared from the Middle East after the Islamic military expansion. Today some evangelical Christians, particularly so-called “dispensationalists” or “Christian Zionists,” want the U.S. to ignore the presence of Middle Eastern Christians who, for them, are not “born again” and therefore not Christians. Some dispensationalists also come to the region in support of the idea that reestablishment of the state of Israel will bring in the Kingdom of God.

Emergence of Ethnic and Religious Nationalism. The Zionist Movement established Israel as a Jewish ethno-religious state. Accordingly, the Jews of the Middle East withdrew from the nationalist movement to join their Jewish home, convinced they were the “chosen people” of the “promised land.” Israel thus promoted the concept of *divine right* over and against the *human rights* of the Palestinians. For their part, Muslim fundamentalists are now spreading the idea that Arab nationalism is a secularist movement that Muslims should abandon in favor of a return to an Islamic state.

Impact of U.S. Policy on the Middle East. Instead of helping to relieve tensions in Middle East, the American superpower is exploiting them for its own economic and strategic purposes. In this regard, many Muslims consider the ongoing American pro-Israel policy, with its call for a “crusade” or war against “terrorism,” as a war against them and their religion. At the same time, the globalization process seems to be the extension of a western, mainly American, ethos aimed at opening access to resources and markets everywhere. The result is that people who used to go to temples, mosques, and churches to feel a sense of spiritual security are now called to embrace a materialist path to happiness and a kind of secular salvation. Many resist by trying to articulate an alternative value system that would lay the foundation for an order whose primary goal is not the maximization of profits, but submission to God’s will.

Church Mission

Spiritual Requirements for Mission. Some parishioners seem to act as if mission is only the fruit of human intelligence. Accordingly, they fail to give room to the surprising interventions of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Consequently, the quantitative growth of the church becomes important while its qualitative development is overlooked. They should be helped to realize that their mission could be oriented toward deepening the quality of the faith of those who believe, not only simply the addition of new people to their numbers. They should also be reminded that the power of the Church is not political or military, but is that of the Holy Spirit, the power of God's kingdom, which is not of this world.

Through the sacrificial love shown on the cross, Jesus Christ reconciled creation with God. This means that Christian love cannot be selective. On the contrary, it extends to all people, regardless of their faith and culture. This kind of love may appear illogical to human reason, and its reconciling power may be inconceivable to the human mind. However, it tells us that God's election does not mean superiority or privilege for "chosen people," over and against other human beings or nations. On the contrary, it enables us to be a loving and reconciling power within humanity.

Mission at Home. Many parishioners seem to forget sometimes that mission is a dimension of their personal life and the life of the local ecclesia. Accordingly, they are tempted to lose awareness that their own society needs to be evangelized, and that they, too, need to be reminded of the imperatives of the gospel. Without such perspective, U.S. congregations take for granted the rightness of their own society and its actions abroad. For this reason, they should be reminded always to be salt and leaven—the qualitative dimension of the life of faith—to help transform the religious and cultural ethos of their own society into the reality of the New Covenant.

Mission Abroad. Parishioners in the U.S. tend to see mission abroad as the special task of people who have been trained for that purpose. Conceived this way, mission becomes only a department or a parachurch organization. With regard to the Middle East, they do not know that once mission efforts failed to convert Muslims and Jews, they became oriented to local Christians. Through such misguided proselytism, Middle Eastern Christians have been converted to respective evangelical denominations, further dividing the local churches. Also, because much mission work in the region took place during the period of western colonialism, many people there now regard some local Christian communities as "fifth columns" of the western political and cultural powers. For these reasons, I advise U.S. parishioners to give serious attention to the following:

a. Mission in Partnership. Middle Eastern Christians are strongly asking American Christians to transform their mission abroad from proselytism into partnership with churches in that region. Such a partnership would help local churches secure the continuity of their presence and witness on behalf of the Church Universal.

b. Mission and Christian Unity. In American society, where denominationalism is taken for granted, Christians are tempted to overlook the biblical call for unity within the one body of Christ, the Church Universal. In fact, Jesus Christ commanded us to be one as he and his Father are one, so that "the world will believe that he had sent us" (Jn17: 23). In the face of emerging of ethnic and religious nationalism, Middle Eastern Christians are promoting dialogue toward Christian unity for credible witness within monotheism. U.S. congregations must be helped to realize that mission must promote

Christian unity in the body of Christ; otherwise it is anti-mission.

c. Mission and Interreligious Dialogue. Middle Eastern Christians are promoting interreligious dialogue within monotheism with the aim of liberating all communities from past traumas and misconceptions about each other, and discovering in their respective heritages values conducive to common living in a form of state that is neither secular nor theocratic or ethnocentric, but respectful of religion, equality, and freedom as well as religious, ethnic, and cultural differences. U.S. partnership with Middle Eastern Christians will help promote and facilitate dialogue between the monotheistic religions with the aim of helping Jews, Christians, and Muslims find the proper solution to the present ideological and spiritual crises expressed through religious violence toward each other and in the world. If Americans increased dialogue between Jews and Muslims, they would project a positive image in the Middle East.

d. Mission through Service. Some Middle East states are rich because of their oil resources. Much of this income, however, is invested in the military arms needed for the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. Another substantial portion is deposited in banks in Europe or the U. S. The remaining amount is unjustly distributed, and many people in the region are very poor. Unfortunately, this process is being exploited by the superpowers for their self-centered economic and security interests. American Christians could help the ongoing witness of Middle Eastern Christians by working for just development and humanitarian service for refugees and the poor.

e. Mission as a Prophetic Voice. The American government seems to have a double standard of behavior, one that favors Israel and opposes the Palestinians. This duality projects a wrong image of the American people in the Middle East. American churches have to demonstrate that the ethical values of their people are not compatible with the biased objectives of their government. This does not mean they should be disloyal or unfaithful to their nation. On the contrary, as Christians, they must prophetically challenge their government through deeds and not only through words. The purpose would be to ask the government to adopt an impartial policy, which should be based on dialogue instead of the elimination of the “other,” who is now called *terrorist*, and should aim at securing the just development and peace for all.

f. Mission and Work for Peace. The Middle East has always borne the seeds of physical and human destruction through wars. At the same time, as the cradle of monotheism, the region possesses an extraordinary creativity with regard to reconciliation and peace—in the region and in the whole world. Middle Eastern Christians believe that Christ’s incarnation occurred in their divided region in order to transform hatred into love, division and war into reconciliation, establishing unity and peace between all human beings. Such transformation was evoked by Isaiah (2:4) when he declared, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Of course this makes us think of the possibility of peace with justice, which should be promoted with courage and wisdom between the Israelis and the Palestinians. In this regard, American Christians and people of other beliefs should abandon Anti-Semitism against the Jews and war against Islam, which is considered to be a source of further violence. Jews and Muslims are neither supermen nor subhuman, but fully human.

g. Mission and Pilgrimage. In order to know better the Middle Eastern ethos, American Christians should be encouraged to go on pilgrimage to the Middle East. This would help them rediscover Christian presence and witness where it began and

also allow them to meet people of other religions. Consequently, their visits to the region would help them toward fair judgment of its people.

Christians of the Middle East are hoping that American churches will transform their mission into *partnership* and help in the ongoing effort to promote an ethos of cooperation through *dialogue* instead of domination and elimination of the “other,” whoever the “other” is. Accordingly, we could help each other fulfill peace in the world at a time when religion is being used and misused as a factor of violence and war. I hope we will continuously revive in our conscience the idea that we are sent to the world not to be factors of war, but agents of reconciliation and peace. May the Holy Spirit deepen our hope in the resurrection of Christ and—through your efforts—make all things new and keep us together in the bond of peace.