

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

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My theological conviction, affirmed by years of experiences of preaching in various critical situations, has been the amazing relevance of an ancient text for contemporary situations.

1.

After a long period of rationalistic religious speeches within European Protestant liturgies, the fundamental Reformed conviction about the relevance of text for preaching has been brought to light and reaffirmed in the twentieth century by the theological renewal described as the rediscovery of the Word-Event character of theology.¹ That brought about a change of course in the churches of the Reformation, with an impact on the Roman Church as manifested in the decisions of the second Vatican Council. That also included a new emphasis on preaching the texts of the Scripture.

Along with the renewal of preaching as an essential part of the Word-Event has come a deeper understanding of sin and sinfulness. Humans have always been fully sinners, selfish, aggressive, and aiming at the destruction of others.² This also means that people today are not more sinful than they were thousands of years ago. Cruelty, hatred, and murder have always been facts, just as they are today at the beginning of the twenty-first century—particularly after 9/11, Baghdad, and Gaza—and we continue to be horrified as we see how humankind is flooded with cruelty and death.

The difference between today and the ancient days lies with the amazing technological development in producing weaponry.³ Cain killed his brother probably with a beetle, not with a laser revolver. Humankind has been able to produce the most sophisticated weapons of destruction. Furthermore, the healthy balance between industrial development and keeping the environment sustainable has long been overturned with disastrous consequences for the environment.

Technological development has included a rapid growth in building up worldwide means of communication. The result is that we know of many things that could not be seen by the masses in the past. Today, with great accuracy, we are able to cause destruction of life, property, and human dignity. Worldwide information exchange has often been exposed to manipulation. Information, misinformation, or purposeful withholding of the same has often been side-by-side in order to serve the interest of powers-that-be in politics, environment, and economics. That has developed a vicious circle of interaction between evil deeds and their being broadcast all over the place.⁴

Church history has shown that churches have not been able to keep themselves afar from this evil dynamics of manipulation. Even the pulpit has been sometimes a means of misinformation. There is no Reformed *ex opere operato*: no human guarantee that I put on my robes and the Word of God is bound to come upon my lips. That means that the preacher is absolutely dependent on the enlightening power and

guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have to offer ourselves to be servants of the Word in full dedication (see Romans 12:1-2), particularly in the light of Romans 15:16.

2.

As for the contemporary political-societal and spiritual situation in the U.S., I am not in a position to give an accurate summary of it. However, I have been asked to share my views about preaching there. Certain facts of the context must be known to the preacher. I also feel indebted to churches in America where I have found friends, inspiration, and means of study and research. Furthermore, I know we are united in the One Body of Christ. Thus every joy and every pain experienced by one part of the Body has an impact on all.

With this spirit and understanding, I want to make a few remarks about how a Hungarian Reformed preacher sees the state of affairs in American church and society. In the past, and also in the present, the churches have shown respectable signs of responsibility for society, coupled with the readiness for critical self-examination. There have been “prophets” in proclaiming the will of God to situations that demanded remorse and obedience.

In the time of the cold war, when the world was divided into two—in a certain sense three—parts, the churches of the U.S. stood beside those of us living under Soviet domination, offering encouragement and critique that have proved to be extremely helpful.

Then came the collapse of the “evil empire,” with the U.S. becoming the only superpower of the world, accompanied by all the challenges and temptations that the position of superpower brings. Out of the interesting and manifold ways of thinking, as far as I can see, three tendencies developed.

1. *The inheritance of the Enlightenment with its secularized eschatology.* The hopeful expectations passed on the promises of God have been turned into an unlimited optimism that regards history itself as producing salvation.⁵ With a certain amount of generalization it can be termed as a capitalist version of secularized eschatology. (There had also been a Communist kind in the U.S.S.R. that failed totally.)

2. *A kind of eschatology built upon a full misunderstanding of the Scriptures that completely ignored its historical character.* This becomes particularly visible in taking the Book of Revelation as a kind of eschatological timetable that expects the Heavenly Host to interfere when the “evil empires” are gaining control on earth. Then comes Armageddon. This view is characterized by a total lack of the spirit of the prophets, which has always watched events within history very carefully (cf. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, etc. and listened to God’s interpretation of the same: Hab 2:1). We can see the “interaction between social realities and its impact upon the way in which literature functions.”⁶

3. *An American version of the Word-Event.* Atheology and attitude based upon Trinitarian Christology and pneumatology that takes the unity of Creation and Redemption as its basis has been present. The climax of the Word-Event is the Incarnation of Christ, in which God entered history created by Him to save *by means of restoring and using humans* (Hos 11:4). This fact makes history essential that demands historical research of Scriptures. God’s Word is to be received and seeks a

response. God initiates a dialogue with humans within history,⁷ exemplified in John 4 as God the Creator and Redeemer opens up a dialogue with a woman at Jacob's well. After Pentecost, this event continues in the Church as the Creator Spirit uses Scripture as the document of the dialogue. This view is by nature filled with humility and readiness for self-examination. This approach to Scripture is strongly present in the U.S., with encouraging examples for teaching and preaching resulting from it.⁸

The practical consequence of this view is to take the context of both the text and our own environment seriously. The two must not be mixed up: we must not read into the text our experiences and ideas of our context as it has often happened. That is how the Scriptures have been and are being read in the light of Greek cosmological and anthropological dualism being enforced upon biblical view of the unity of life. The interaction without confusion of the two horizons has helped me, for example, to see the relevance of the Book of Daniel for our existence in the party-state. Daniel speaks about the ancient "globalization" and offers us guidance to find the right way in the twenty-first century.

Coming back to the three approaches to understand the situation of the U.S. today, I sense a certain amalgamation of the first two views: *We are the chosen people with the task of bringing salvation and democracy to the world. We have our faith and the mightiest army of the globe.* This conviction, however, lacks humility and readiness for self-examination, which are essential elements of dialogue with God and with others regarding the slogan: "we can do it alone." The fate of Superpowers have been sung in the U.S. congregations:

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,
Like earth proud empires, pass away,
But stand and rule, and grow for ever...⁹

The message of this hymn should not be forgotten. When a society, not to mention a church (Rev 3:1b), is so beguiled by its own importance that it forgets it cannot do things alone, it is bound to go into disaster (Dan 4:19-27).

Samuel Huntington has written about the clash of civilizations.¹⁰ While to a certain extent he is worth listening to, he shares with many others a distorted view of Christianity. According to the Scriptures, there is not a certain area of the globe that is Christian. The people of God are placed in the midst of other peoples for whom it carries the blessing from Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) up till today. What is called the Christian world is not a realization of Christ's command, but that of Theodosius I, "the Great" who made the Trinity into imperial dogma (381). From that time on, the power of the states interfered with the life of the church in various ways. This state of affairs has come to an end. The biblical pattern has been more or less restored: the people of God are witnesses to God's salvation (Ex 19:5-6; 1 Pet 2:9-12). No culture, not even the American or European one, is to be identified with Christianity. This biblical view judges the crusades and all other attempts throughout the ages to solve problems with the might of weapons. This applies to both Baghdad and Jerusalem, and all places where violence and overkill rule, where actions seem to be supported by reliance on military technology and unhistorical eschatology.

3.

Naturally, in making such concise statements about issues so important and significant for preachers there is an inherent danger of being misunderstood. For the sake of clarification, to conclude I want to refer to two homiletical attempts:

During academic year 2003-2004, students in a preaching workshop at *Komarno* Seminary, Slovakia, preached sermons on Gen 1-15. The preparation, including exegesis, was done together. Then one of the students preached. It was amazing to see the relevance of the ancient stories for the contemporary scene. One sermon was on Gen 11:27-12:6, where we read about the migration of *Terah*, *Abram's* father, his attempt to go to Canaan, and his settling in Haran instead. What he could not do was done by his son, because he was led by God's word. The Word reached him in Haran to take him into a new situation where they would be blessed in order to pass on blessings to the other tribes around them (12:36). Later history takes some sad turns concerning the relationship of Abraham's descendants with the other nations. However, they were to be a challenge for one another right through. To analyze this text, especially in the context of Jerusalem and Gaza in 2004, is a great challenge for the church.

The other example of relevance comes from the Book of Revelation. In its very center there is the Christ-Event that determines the dynamics of history. The most important characteristics are the Worship of the Lamb and the bluster and fury of the beast. In the middle of the book, chapter 12 gives us a deep insight into the relationship of the two.

Here "the great wondrous sign" is a woman clothed with the sun." She is to bring forth a child who will bring salvation.¹¹ He is under deadly threat even at his birth. Obviously it is a reference the Incarnation and Herod. However, the woman is a symbolic figure with a crown of twelve stars that represents the Old Testament people of God in which the Child was to be born at a particular time through a particular woman: Mary, the *theotokos*.¹²

As for the people of God, the Church is there in every age to deliver Christ into the middle of societies in which the beast is filled with fury. That is the content of mission, and it includes the words of the preacher and the existence of the community. It is the continued privilege and duty of the Church to present Christ with her whole existence among joy, fear, pain, and all sorts of tribulations and temptations. According to vv. 13-15, the dragon persecutes the child in every epoch of history. However, God's power is with him and with her. It is obvious that this delivery cannot be carried out by means of the Beast: The Church must not and cannot fulfill her mission by means of political power, military or diplomatic, but by being present for others.¹³ The struggle is on, in the course of which the church experiences both trials and salvation. That is why she is able to praise the Lord, joining in the heavenly choir, empowered in worship, and so she can rejoice in the anticipation of the final victory. Worship enables her to face the fury of the Beast.

This is not meant as the outline of a sermon, which has to be found and elaborated by the preacher. However, it may give some insight into how to discover the dynamics of the movement of the text. This is very important for preaching that conveys to the congregation that they are part of what was happening centuries ago. American Christians have a particular responsibility to speak about these things, not only for

their congregations, but also for the whole society. I wish all who preach in America the empowering joy of participating in God's praise and the One Church that, by nature of the Word Incarnate, takes you into the center of events of today.

Notes

1. Built on the fact that God has spoken, *Deus Dixit*. Karl Barth, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1925), 193f. The expression Word-Event (*Wort-Ereignis*) is frequently used in German theology; see Janos D. Pasztor, "The Heritage of the Reformation: Word-Event for Church and World," Warfield Lectures I. Princeton, 1992.
2. "By nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor." (*Heidelberg Catechism* 5).
3. The God-given human ability to construct, coupled with sinfulness, produces destruction. "I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not listened to my words" (Jer 6:19).
4. Cf. the rapid growth of suicide killings communicated by the media.
5. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
6. Brueggemann, op. cit. p.13, footnote 15.
7. Ervin Vályi Nagy and Heinrich Ott, *Church as Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969).
8. I refer here to three publications of many: Erskine Clarke ed., *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998); *For Such A Time As This*, papers reflecting on the impact of 9/11 for the church, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XXIII. No.1. 2002; Walter Brueggemann, "The Totalizing Context of Production and Consumption," and "Communities of Hope midst Engines for Despair" in *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 55-57, 151-158.
9. "The day Thou gavest, O Lord is ended..." Evening hymn of John Ellerton.
10. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
11. In v. 10 we read a doxology that is right in the very middle of the Book: 205, verses come before it, and 207 after. In the symbolic language of the book, that is the very heart of all events. Jacques Ellul, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes-Enthüllung der Wirklichkeit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 245, footnote.
12. There has been much debate: Is the woman the people or Mary? Actually it is both.
13. Bonhoeffer wrote, "Das >Für-andere-da-sein< Jesu ist die Transzendenz-erfahrung!,,Glaube ist das Teilnehmen an diesem Sein Jesu." (Jesus' presence for the others is the experience of transcendence....Faith is participation in this presence of Jesus.) My own translation from *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Hamburg: Siebenstern Verlag, 1971), 191.