

Preaching Lenten Repentance to a Nation and a Church

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Age after age their tragic Empires rise,
Built while they dream, and in that dreaming weep....¹

A hundred questions crowd the mind that contemplates a topic like this. Is repentance just contrition, or does it involve radical transformation? How does *metanoia* apply to social entities or institutions? What does a nation or a church repent of? Is the call to repentance the same for both nation and church? Can a *nation* repent? And are we speaking here of nations and churches in general, or of a specific nation and church?

For me, in addition to these and similar questions, there is another preliminary problem. *Journal for Preachers* is a U.S. Christian publication and is rightly geared to the particular—and today, daunting—challenges facing serious Christians in the United States of America. I am a Canadian, and though I have dared to write about theology in “a North American Context,”² when I consider a piece like this, I have to wonder again whether I have any right to speak for two countries that, while sharing a great deal of history, language, and culture, are also—and despite the efforts of “continentalists” on both sides of the border—still significantly different.

In particular, Canada and the U.S.A. differ in terms of global power—*immensely so!* It is all too easy for Canadians, living as we must on the edge of empire, to point the finger of guilt, scorn, and shock at the great, chaotic but world-dominant political monolith on our southern, once-undefended border. In *The Decline of the American Empire*, the almost demonically satirical film of Quebec producer, Denis Arcand, a group of clever, cynical and sex-obsessed Montreal intellectuals present themselves as all-knowing observers of the decline and fall of the U.S. From the ivory towers of Montreal Academia, they look over into nearby Plattsburg, N.Y., and remark sardonically on the moral and physical disintegration of the republic-become-empire. The religious version of this secularized Canadian view of the “elephant” with whom the Canadian “mouse” has to sleep (Pierre Trudeau) could well be, and often is, to announce how greatly in need of *repentance* is both nation and church in the U.S.A.

Over against such naive Canadian self-righteousness, I stand with my teacher, Reinhold Niebuhr, who in the mid-1950s quipped from the pulpit of James Chapel in Union Seminary, “The Canadians are not less vulgar than we are—only less powerful.” As a beginning student in theology at that time, finding myself for the first time in the “strange land” that both fascinates and frightens Canadians, I heard this assessment of my country with some chagrin; but I have since learned to appreciate its perspicacity. Canada’s future, like its past, is inexorably linked with that of the United States, and the Sin (of pride *and* sloth, *superbia and* vulgarity) of which we must repent both as nations and churches in these nations amounts to variations on *the same themes*. The only advantage that Canadians *may* have (though very few of them make good on it—least of all our present “Conservative” government!) is a certain

distance from the command-centre of the North American political-technological imperium—a little once-remove that may, if exercised both modestly and seriously, permit a modicum of wisdom (as it did, for instance, with Canadians like George P. Grant, Northrup Frye, John Kenneth Galbraith, and some of our more perceptive novelists and artists, including Denis Arcand).

Preaching Repentance to a Church

I will separate—at least temporarily—nation and church in this topic, because while (for reasons to be discussed) I believe they cannot be separated in reality, only in theory, there are aspects of the subject that apply quite differently to the two entities addressed by the preacher of repentance. Chiefly, I take it as a Protestant that repentance is not an option for the church, but an assumption of faith and life “in Jesus Christ.” Every time a congregation confesses its sin, it declares to God and all the world its intention to repent—with God’s help to “begin again.” The Reformation concept *semper reformanda* implies that repentance and the determination to “lead a new life” is not an unusual or occasional emphasis—a bit of extraordinary piety reserved for Lent—but an ongoing and permanent dimension of the life of the Body of Christ. Classical Protestantism rightly rejected the notion that, while individual Christians and even popes may sin, “the Church” cannot. The judgement [*krisis*], declares the first epistle of St. Peter, begins at the household of faith!

Of *what*, in particular, ought the churches in the North American context repent? I answer: we must repent of our foundational, “constantinian” assumption that it is our vocation to be the “spiritual” dimension of an historical project variously designated “Western Civilization,” “Democracy,” or simply “America.” While it is obvious enough that Christianity has contributed a great deal (both good and bad) to this historical project, and while Christians ought certainly to be grateful for the humane virtues of “the West,” it is *not* the mission of the Body of Christ to represent, defend, and foster the avowed values and pursuits of any particular culture—even (and perhaps especially!) when that culture, its conspicuous secularity notwithstanding, still somehow covets the designation *Christian* culture.

The first calling and allegiance of the Church is to its “Head,” Jesus the Christ, and therefore its mission is at once more exclusive and more inclusive than were it bound to a particular civilization, nation, society, race, or political ideology. It is more exclusive because loyalty to the Christ severely restricts the kinds and extent of allegiance that Christians are permitted to give to other entities which claim their attention as human beings, citizens, members of certain ethnic groupings, creeds, genders, etc. But it is more inclusive because life *en Christo* necessarily exposes otherwise chauvinistic souls to all sorts and conditions of human and creational concern. Paul (in Romans 13) and the early Apologists urged Christians to pray for and, under most circumstances, obey “the governing authorities”; but there can be no question that the biblical and most authoritative representatives of church/state theology throughout history taught that allegiance to the Christ precedes and conditions every other real or potential claim to allegiance to which Christians may be subjected.

To state the matter in other words: the churches in today’s post-Christendom epoch are being called to repent of their long embrace of the whole idea of Christian “establishment.” For at the heart of that idea lies a deeply fallacious assumption that

obedience to Christ and obedience to a culture, state, or political ideology can be synthesized. Recent history has taught some of us how dangerous, theologically and morally, this assumption can be, for we have been shocked at the ease with which even a Christianity as sophisticated as that of German Protestantism could be co-opted by an ideology as crassly racist as Nazism. But relatively few North American Christians have applied this lesson in practical theology to our own context. Even among the remnants of classical Protestantism on this continent, still far too many assume that Christianity is inextricably linked with “our way of life,” and in the noisier forms of American Christianity, this assumption is raised to the level of an article of militant faith.

Repenting of our embrace of Christian establishment is not a merely theoretical or “theological” gesture. It means letting go of the alleged “privileges” we have enjoyed because of our favoured-religion status. It means relinquishing our cosy arrangements with political, economic, educational, and other groupings in our society from which we have gained social stature. It means a new willingness to share the “spiritual” dimension of public life with faiths that, heretofore, we have belittled or ignored. It means a new resolve to *listen* to our world, and not simply to announce, declare, and declaim. It means developing a theology of reasoned and compassionate discourse and eschewing reliance on mere custom, bombast and creedal tradition.

In short, the repentance asked of the churches in our society is their relinquishment of all the forms of reliance on *power* that they have exploited over fifteen or sixteen centuries of “Christendom”; for Christendom, at base, is nothing more nor less than the habit of seeking power through proximity to power. Repentance, when it is genuine, means for Christian individuals and churches, risking the Christian future on the grounds of faith alone—*sola gratia, sola fide*. It is a radical turning away from other principalities and powers and a radical trust in the power of the divine Spirit *alone*.

And the reason why it is not possible in practice as well as theory to separate nation and church in this kind of discussion about repentance is that the churches, with a very few exceptions, have not (yet) shown a clear resolve of that character. We are all still clinging to the empty promises of Christian establishment, even when we have begun to recognize that they are indeed empty promises. Even when we lament and apologize for our continued dependence on the myth of a *Christian America* and a *Christian Canada*, we are still bereft of the faith—and the theological imagination—that is needed to contemplate possible alternatives to the condition of establishment.

We are hardly in a position to demand of our *nations* that they repent of their greedy bid for greater and greater pre-eminence and glory, when we ourselves on the whole are parasitically dependent upon their power. The church can engage in a credible prophetic critique of its host nation only when it ceases to rely on its host for its own well-being and status. Too much ecclesiastical carping about state and society amounts to biting the hand that feeds us. Prophetic faith is authentic only where Christian individuals and churches have sufficiently detached themselves from the power structures and dominant culture of their society to assume a new kind of responsibility for them. Will a time come when the churches in North America are ready to meet that condition?

Can Nations-Become-Empires Repent?

The detachment to which I am referring here implies neither passivity nor the abandonment of civic responsibility. To the contrary, it means the acquisition of a profound sympathy and compassion for the tragic dimension of all historical existence, beginning with the church's own social and political context. No reasonable observer of human communities would dispute the fact that nations have a hand in shaping their own destinies. But Christians who live out of their own biblical and theological traditions know that "freedom" is not the only word that applies to the human condition—the condition of "life in a fallen world." There is a lot of loose talk about freedom in our context. Canadians, for instance, regularly talk of "becoming the kind of country we want to be," as if the future were a *carte blanche* and the past non-existent. Nations, like individuals, inherit the decisions and actions—and the indecision and inaction—of their founders, forebears and successive generations. Silently, inconspicuously, the past lays upon the present and future a logic that transcends a people's volition. This applies also, and with poignant, if not tragic, consequences, to the logic of empire.

The application of the concept of "empire" to the United States of America has lately become fodder for the chattering classes of our society as well as for the critics and enemies of America. Especially since "9/11" and the Bush administration's open and crass embrace of imperialistic policies, most of the now-nearly-ubiquitous denouncement of America's imperialism is wholly devoid of any appreciation for the tragic dimension of the path that the United States has taken—the path that its own evolution has long exhibited, the path that most of the nations of the "free world" (including Canada), whilst complaining about U.S. naiveté and aggressiveness, continue expecting and wanting America to take. It is implied, if not actually argued, in many analyses of the global scene today, that American political, economic, military, and technological imperialism is an invention of the Bush administration. As if, in the wake of the failure of the other superpower and the new readiness of a wounded population to seek out and destroy all threats to itself, a particularly belligerent U.S. government had discovered, *de novo*, the idea of global control.

This simplistic analysis is, of course, aided and abetted by the Bush administration's exaggerated deployment of the word "freedom," its naive belief that "terrorism" can be erased by war, its grade-B movie division of the world into good and evil parts—in short, its apparent incapacity for nuance. The dream of empire has an impressive history also in America; and here too, it is a dream that is accompanied by quiet weeping on the part of the most knowledgeable dreamers. But such self-knowledge is sadly lacking in Washington's present-day dreamers. The tragic dimension, as Reinhold Niebuhr and many others noted, has never been part of the American vocabulary; but the powers charting the course of America today seem devoid of any sense that their actions and decisions represent a playing out of the logic of empire that has been enacted many times in history and has a long, if covert, evolution in America's own history.

Following the thought of George P. Grant³ and others, I have been using the language of "empire" for decades,⁴ but I have yet to find a more persuasive illustration of the application of the logic of empire to the U.S.A. than Gore Vidal presented in his historical novel, *Empire*. Towards the end of the novel, Vidal creates a scene in which Henry Adams is in conversation with John Hay. The President (Theodore Roosevelt,

1901-1909), says Adams, “wants a war, anywhere will do, as long as we end up as custodian of northern China....”

Adams smiled, showing no teeth. “You can say that the most marvellous invention of my grandfather, the Monroe Doctrine, originally intended to protect our—note the cool proprietary ‘our’—hemisphere from predatory European powers, has now been extended, quite illegally, by President Roosevelt to include China and, again by extension, any part of the world where we may want to interfere.”

Hay counters with the familiar image of America Protector of the Weak: “Surely we have a *moral*—yes, I hate the word, too—duty to help less fortunate nations in this hemisphere....”

“And [quips Adams ironically] sunny Hawaii, and poor Samoa, and the tragic Philippines? John, *it is empire that you all want, and it is empire that you have got, and at such a small price....*”

“What price is that?”

“The American republic. You’ve finally got rid of it. For good...The republic is dead; long live the empire.”

What would it mean for the nation called the United States of American to *repent*? The most cogent answer, I think, lies precisely in this distinction: it would mean for this nation to repent of its imperial ambitions, take its rightful place as a nation (an important one) among nations (including full support of the United Nations), and try to play its laudable role as defender of the weak without resorting to the temptation of the strong to *dominate* the weak. In short, it would mean becoming in truth the *republic* that America has intended, at its best, to be.

Too many Christians in the United States want their nation to be *Christian*! Even where this does not translate into petty bourgeois self-righteousness and moralism and liberal sentimentalism, even where it is informed by an ethic of *social* responsibility, the insistence that America ought to be more “Christian” is a questionable approach to the “repentance” that is desirable. For one thing, it ignores the very real religious and cultural pluralism of the United States. For another, such a preachment of repentance presupposes the continued dependence of the preacher on the condition of cultural establishment and privilege. But at the deepest level, the expectation that a nation should be “Christian” is a counsel of despair; for no nation, least of all a nation-become-empire, can realistically embrace the ethic of suffering love and the concomitant renunciation of power that that ethic demands.

While Christians and others of good will may reasonably expect nations to act *justly*, they should not expect nations to *love*—not, at least, in the sense in which love is commanded of the Christian person and the Christian community. What Christians and others of good will *may* expect, or at least hope for, on the part of their host nations is that they will be true to their own best ideals and visions and not give way to sheer *hubris* and the domination of others. Instead of chiding the United States for its “secularity,” its lack of “spirituality,” its “immorality,” its lapsed Christianity, and the like, prophetic Christianity—*when it is ready to give up its own reliance on power and privilege*—ought to join with others who point out the discrepancies between America’s vision and rhetoric and its actual behaviour and do whatever they can to help the U.S.A. become the beacon of civilization that it claims to be and, at its best, really is. In short, they ought to help it recover its genuinely *republican* roots.

But the question, of course, is whether, having once set out in pursuit of empire,

there can be any turning back—any “repentance.” Gore Vidal’s novel cleverly illustrates what many historians and other observers of American history—and of history generally—have shown in other ways, namely that there is a logic of empire that must always, or usually, be played out to the end, which means, of course, the decay and destruction of the experiment itself. History seems to demonstrate with a wearisome regularity that empires always self-destruct—that the decline and fall of imperial peoples is already embedded in their beginnings, a point that was argued not only by Gibbons and other historians, but also by theologians from Augustine onwards. Journalistic treatments of American imperialism give the impression that pretension of empire in the United States is a very recent thing—that the charge of imperialism is to be laid at the doorstep of the present U.S. administration, the Grade C Yale students, as the late Kurt Vonnegut called them in his last book,⁶ who took over in the wake of 9/11. But more sober analyses, including Vidal’s, recognize that the impulse to imperial power lies much deeper than that; that it is by no means a merely political thing in the first place, but a corollary of affluence and technological cleverness; that it must finally be traced to the mystery of human pride and fear that biblical faith has named “Sin” and “the Fall.”

The great question with which we North Americans, and all the world, must live today and tomorrow is whether this one remaining Superpower, the greatest in history, can seriously alter the trajectory of its history or whether it must pursue the logic of empire to the very end. Some think, rather flippantly it seems to me, that the American empire has already fallen. No, we have not yet seen what very great technical skill combined with anthropocentric bravado can do by way of self-preservation! But we should know at least this: that if America does self-destruct, we are all going to go down with that ship—Canadians in the first lot!

Reinhold Niebuhr believed, or tried to believe, that a people can change even at the eleventh hour. One hopes (most days hoping “against hope”) that this is right. Empires are not all the same, nor do they all suffer exactly the same fate. The ending of some is less catastrophic than that of Rome, with which the U.S.A. is often compared today. The British Empire, in which Canadians of my generation grew up, managed an ending that was at least more like a fizzle than a bang—or, to be fair, more like death-with-dignity. It did so by calling on its reserves of experience and tested knowledge, its studied remembrance and reworking of all good things it could find in its long and ambiguous history—including the idea of parliamentary democracy, of social compassion, of basic human rights, of the corrupting tendencies of power and wealth, of decency and duty and other much-derided “Victorian” virtues. That England survived its once-vast empire, and (for example in the person of the present monarch) can still show up in the world with a lot to teach the rest of us about human dignity and responsibility, ought to embolden all who fear that the loss of power necessarily implies the loss of influence. With the *decline* of empire—as, sometimes, with the decline of health and vigour in individual life—new wisdom and new courage may emerge: the wisdom to recognize our common and shared creaturehood, the courage of truth and service. Let us hope that such wisdom and such courage will inform, with greater consistency, the future of our two “New World” nations.

Notes

1. Clifford Bax, "Turn back, O Man, foreswear thy foolish ways," 1919.
2. The subtitle of my three volumes of "contextualized" systematic theology: *Thinking the Faith; Professing the Faith; Confessing the Faith*, all published by Fortress Press of Minneapolis.
3. George P. Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969).
4. See, e.g., *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*, first published in 1976 by Westminster Press of Philadelphia and republished in an enlarged and revised edition by the Academic Renewal Press of Lima, Ohio, in 2001.
5. Gore Vidall, *Empire* (New York: Random House, 1987), 108f.
6. Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 99.