

Calvin Worship Symposium: Workshop C17

Redeeming the Time: Homiletic Theology for a Pilgrim People

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The idea for *Redeeming the Time* has emerged during more than twenty five years of leading worship according to the rhythms of the Christian Year and preaching from its common lectionary. In following these “traditioned” practices, I have often thought there is need for a fresh understanding of the Christian Year that will demonstrate the theological and pastoral wisdom of ordering a *congregation’s ministry of the Word and its life* by means of the narrative of salvation proclaimed in the liturgical reading and preaching of Scripture.

In my work with seminary students, I have become keenly aware of the powerful and pervasive influence, in both mainline and evangelical churches, of what I would describe as a pragmatic model of preaching. This popular approach, which has encouraged preachers to use the Bible as a sourcebook for highly individualized and idiosyncratic abstract, topical “talks,” has also failed build up the Church as a holy people called by God on a pilgrimage through time to the City of God, a communal journey which end is to be made holy, as God is holy, and which is their witness to the world.

Just as troubling is the way in which this popular, marketing/managing pastoral paradigm alters Christian proclamation into flattened, trivialized truth by taking categories of biblical faith and representing them in manageable shapes without the material substance of the Word, Christ himself, incarnating either the preacher or the people. Discrete abstract topics packaged and transmitted through presumably “value free” methods of delivery, reduce the mystery of God to problems and solutions, spiritual

help and techniques that reinforce self-interest and stimulate human restlessness for certitude and control. “How to” strategies for the “effective communication” of closed, managed, useful truth easily subject the Word to uncritically examined ideologies that legitimize the cultural status quo, the marketplace of needs and desires, and support the powers of this world, the power of the speaker; and the powerlessness of listeners.¹ In the end, marketing privatized religion transforms Christian proclamation into the work of Gnostic technicians which creates an incongruity between theology and pastoral practice that depersonalizes God, displaces the work of Christ and the Spirit, and diminishes the God - given identity and tangible witness of the church in particular times and places.²

In light of the church’s calling to become an offering of praise to God for the life of the world, I believe we need to recover the liturgical and homiletic significance of the Christian Year. Re - thinking the identity and mission of the Church, as it is formed in the worship of God, and through the activity of preaching - a liturgical ecclesiology - will help us to reorient the practices of interpretation and proclamation in a manner more congruent with the embodiment of theology, or Christian wisdom, leading to the fullness of salvation.

Liturgically the Scripture functions not as text but canon. Yet in our seminary classes we treat the Scripture primarily as text, and then as those responsible for the training of ministers we are puzzled why Scripture plays so little part in the life of most Protestant congregations. A more truly personal and participative way of knowing,

¹ See the extended discussion in Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech For Proclamation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989). Idem, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); See also the excellent discussion in Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eedmans, 2003) 38-47.

² Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1996) 34-36, 205-208.

speaking, and acting is required if we are to imagine an alternative to what may be described as a “grammar of representation”: those modern and early modern tendencies toward skills of negotiating new products, new texts, and introduction of new technologies for organizing words and related techniques for realizing these texts.

This helps us in understanding certain tendencies within modern homiletic practice that have also affected the other theological disciplines. In the case of preaching, a “grammar of representation” is closely related to a “technology of Scripture,” the “freezing of words” on the written page of “the text” which, in recent years, has also appeared on the wide screen of the PowerPoint presentation. Yet on either the book or the screen, the “freezing of words” underwrites the privileging of mathematical accuracy and universal methods for arranging and transmitting knowledge, creating new dualisms, between reader and text, preacher and preaching, God and the church, which end in deistic and theistic discourse, or Christian language and life without God.

Such popular dualisms have contributed to a “hypostatization” of the sermon - the literalization of Scripture’s words in abstraction from its liturgical and ecclesial use – which has helped to marginalize the church’s visible participation in the life of God. When the life and work of the preacher is reduced to a technical, theologically - neutral medium, and separated from what is preached, the language of the church is redefined as a - temporal, timeless “words about words” that “stand for” something else: i.e., an event relegated to the past, a “meaning” behind the text, an experience within the listener’s psyche, or a preacher’s favorite program or agenda. In other words, our words lack presence when abstracted from things, places, people, and deeds.

