



# FACE . . .

## Politics in the Pulpit? No! A Sermon Must Do More

GRACIA GRINDAL

**F**rom my recollections, God was a Republican until 1968 when he became a Democrat. Until then, Lutheran pastors, at least, could have been accused of using the pulpit to support the Republican Party, as my own father did in the 1960 election when he warned against electing a Catholic president. After a member of the congregation upbraided him for being inappropriately political in the pulpit, he decided that he had been wrong to do so. Like many of his generation, however, he became more liberal in his politics as the Vietnam War raged, and like many of the pastors of the day he grew less reluctant to express general liberal sentiments in the pulpit, though he never gave advice on how to vote.

A good many of the mainline sermons I have heard since 1968 have assumed that the platform of liberals is privileged because it is Jesus' platform. Sin doesn't matter, as long as you stand for the right social programs and candidates. (Before that, the platform of the conservatives had been privileged.) From a good many Lutheran pulpits now (as well as those of many other denominations), the boilerplate political sermon goes something like this: Jesus is for the underprivileged and the conservatives are not, so we have to be against them. What remnants of law and gospel preaching endure are based on a diagnosis that if you are conservative, you need to be changed into a liberal by the gospel.

This has turned the typical law and gospel sermon into an us vs. them diatribe: We are on the side of the poor, so we are good. Nothing in such a sermon exposes my own most grievous fault. There are apparently few sinners left in the congregation; it is the militaristic or industrial complexes out there, somewhere, making cruel designs on the underprivileged, who have sinned. Not us. Christianity is presented as a social program to help the underprivileged. Instead of working in our various ways to alleviate the problems of the poor and promote peace, we privilege a certain means to the end of eradicating poverty or war.

What this has created is self-righteousness. We, at least, are not like them. It has had the curious effect of changing our image of God. Instead of a holy God, who hates our sin and loves us for Jesus' sake, we have found a God who comforts us for all the abuse we are taking from the establishment. God has become not a burning fire, but a warm lap where I can be indulged and affirmed for who I am.

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# TO FACE

## Politics in the Pulpit? Yes! Because God Loves the World

DAVID J. LOSE

**G**iven the impending war with Iraq, preachers are again divided on whether one should address political and social issues from the pulpit. While there may be numerous good reasons not to preach on controversial issues, I believe there is at least one good reason to risk such speech: *God loves the world!*

This central affirmation of the Christian faith—that God not only created the world but loves it—finds significant expression in the world’s most famous Bible verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” While John 3:16 is usually interpreted to stress the importance of faith in Jesus, it is striking to note that at almost every other instance in the Fourth Gospel, κόσμος—“world”—has a negative connotation. Most frequently, κόσμος refers to a creation that is dominated by the evil one, hostile to believers, and at enmity with God. Nevertheless, it is precisely this world that God loves so extravagantly.

Christians therefore cannot afford to erect barriers between faith in God’s Son and commitment to—and action in—God’s world. Similarly, those who preach Jesus Christ and him crucified would do well also to risk a word on behalf of the world God loves enough to send Jesus to die for. (See Luther’s numerous sermons on political and social issues for examples of this affirmation put into homiletical practice.)

There are hazards to such speech, to be sure. But to remain silent on issues of social justice is to risk betraying God’s fundamental commitment to the world. The question, therefore, is not *whether* social issues should be addressed from the pulpit, but rather *how* and *when*. As to the first—how?—allow these seven brief shoulds and should nots:

1. Preachers should invite, and provide the opportunity for, response to the sermon. This may be through an adult forum or other study, a formal conversation after the service, or merely an invitation to informal dialogue. Though preaching is most often a monologue, it is, to borrow the phrase of Mikhail Bakhtin, a provisional monologue, intended to prompt and nourish the conversation of the faithful throughout the week. To attempt to have the only, or the last, word from the pulpit is an abuse of the office.

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Ironically, listening to such sermons, my need for the warm lap decreased as my sense of my own sinfulness declined. Since so little was at stake for my own salvation, it was easy to lose interest in the whole affair.

While this is admittedly a caricature of the past thirty-five years, it is easy to see how both the two great Reformation themes of law and gospel and the two kingdoms, when collapsed, make preaching irrelevant. The main task of preachers in the Reformation tradition is to diagnose sin and point to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. If the sin we diagnose is not the sin of the people before us, pointing to the one who takes it away will be for naught. When we assume that we know how God wants us to vote, then the sermon will only reach those who agree with us. A sermon should seek to do much more. ⊕

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2. Preachers should speak with a modicum of modesty. Preachers, as justified sinners, will err in their judgments, and although they may speak with great conviction they may also profitably acknowledge that they do not have a direct revelation from God.

3. Preachers should keep in mind that their primary responsibility is to preach the gospel so that the Holy Spirit may create justifying faith. Whatever education or exhortation a sermon may include, its primary function is proclamation, in some cases helping listeners to perceive the explicit link between that proclamation and events in the world.

4. Preachers should have clear—and modest—expectations. However good your sermon, it won't save the world—that's God's job anyway! Decide ahead of time what impact you hope the sermon will have—prompt a congregational conversation, raise the issue in public consciousness, invite some tangible response from the congregation like signing a petition—and be clear about and satisfied with that end.

5. Preachers should not use the pulpit to settle an argument. That is as unfaithful as it is unfair.

6. Preachers should not abandon the biblical text when addressing social topics. The most effective sermons on social issues derive directly from the biblical witness, not simply citing the obvious passages relating to a topic but rather creatively lifting up a text of reference that provides the theological background by which the preacher and congregation may assess the issue.

7. Preachers should never assume that even the best preaching is a substitute for faithful pastoral care. The pastor's presence at the hospital and in the home in times of need will do more to ensure a good hearing from the congregation than even the most eloquent rhetoric.

Having taken up briefly the question of how, I must admit I find the question of when more daunting. Deciding whether there is need or cause to raise potentially controversial issues from the pulpit is a challenging, but important, instance of pastoral judgment. Is the impending conflict with Iraq such an instance? Here, as with most such issues, no generic prescription will do. Individual preachers, in consultation with colleagues, their congregations, and the larger church, must prayerfully address this question themselves. But our discernment may be aided by phrasing matters differently: Is the prospect of this war—including its motivations, goals, and costs—something that Christians in the United States should discuss? Put even more strongly: Is this war something God cares about and would have the church care about as well? I believe it is, but finally only your own response to these questions will lead you to discern if such preaching is at this time as needful as it is faithful. ⊕

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