



Politics in the Pulpit: A Way to Supplant the Gospel

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In the branch of Lutheranism where I was raised, instructed, and ordained, the sermon was an exposition of the Word of God that declared the forgiveness of sins. The gospel was the message of the love of God in Jesus Christ, of Jesus' gracious and merciful act which has purchased, freed, and redeemed people in their lostness and guilt. It was a message that called forth faith. The gospel was not an appeal for a budget, a report from a church convention or church auxiliary, an environmental, political, social or educational commercial, or a travelogue by the Bishop or a missionary on furlough; nor was the pulpit time to be taken over by a clown show, musical presentation, or some other form of show and tell.

My preachers and teachers believed that people were created to be in a certain relationship to God, and they wanted everyone to know assuredly how that relationship came about. They knew, as Saint Paul has taught, that if a person were in that right relationship to God the right relationship to one another would inevitably follow.

My mentors were not isolated or insensitive to the ills and meanness of life on this planet. They lived in it. One set of my grandparents lost seven children in five weeks to diphtheria. My grandfather found his greatest consolation in his belief that Jesus, as the Scripture told him, had ascended to the right hand of the Father. He could never understand why the Lutherans he knew in America didn't make much of a fuss over Ascension Day.

My father left seminary to join the Navy Medical Corps in W.W. I and spent his time with the wounded and dying. In my childhood home my parents provided shelter for an uncle ruined by the depression, numerous girls who were moving out into society from a Wisconsin orphanage, and an invalid grandmother whose witness to the gospel had great inspiration for our lives. My father believed the pulpit was too important a place to discuss anything but what Saint Paul told the Corinthians: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” My father and my professors believed the point of departure in time was the cross of Christ and not the amoeba. The call of Christianity was not first and foremost a call to good works, to do away with evil, to straighten out

either Caesar or Caiaphas, not even a call to faith. The call of Christianity was a call to what Saint John fingered as the Life—Jesus the Life of people.

I have never seen, read, or heard anything that convinces me that politics has any place in the pulpit. I do believe that it is the church's assignment to make conditions in this world as good

as possible and to do that by honorable means. It is also the church's assignment not to associate those conditions with the Kingdom of God. I recall C. S. Lewis once remarking that political sermons teach the parishioners nothing except what newspapers are taken at the rectory.

The gospel has exclusive rights to the Sunday morning pulpit. The preaching of the gospel is important because it is the power of God unto salvation. In every assembly of hearers there may be one or several who will be in a traumatic situation or be dead before the next Sunday. They need to be clearly reminded of the comfort of Christ's resurrection. On a recent Good Friday, I went to a church home for the infirm to visit several parishioners. In the worship space of that place, a congregation had gathered. The preacher was reminding them of the evils of illiteracy in the inner city; but the gospel declares the liberation from the enslavement of death and sin. That gospel of liberation is good news to those who know they are dying and great comfort to those who suddenly realize it. It is also courage to those who survive.

The preaching of the gospel is in total contrast to political opinions concerning justice. It declares, as Lutherans are supposed to know and as all should hear, the marvelous doctrine of grace. We receive forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God by grace for Christ's sake, through faith. That's the theme in glory. The preaching of the gospel brings an eschatological emphasis which is not the same as what the politicians have in mind. It is like the assurance that my grandfather had—the final victory is Christ's. Angels called this "Good News of Great Joy," and it went far beyond a fair price for mutton. It was joy experienced in the presence of the Redeemer Christ.

The concern of the pulpit is not between a preacher and a government, or a listener and antagonists; first and foremost it is about Christ and the sinner. The pulpit is too important for anything else.

Politics in the Pulpit: A Way to Particularize the Gospel

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The pulpit is a place where one endeavors to be a means through which the Word of God is proclaimed. The Word of God, suggested Joseph Sittler, can be understood as "the Lord's incessant, salvatory activity of love and judgement operative in history." For Christian people the biblical witness is a primary testimony to this activity of God in the life of the world. It speaks of God's mighty acts in the past, rooted in the story of Israel and of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures also point to the continuing actions and promise of God in every age.

Preaching the Word of God—bearing witness to the continuing acts and promises of God—may well require that one specifically address the political dimensions of life. By political I refer to the processes through which people in communities (large and small) establish priorities and implement policies and decisions. Moreover, the term political points to the relationships that exist among people, institutions, communities, and nations. Justification for including reference to things political in preaching is, in my view, at least threefold.

First, most of us would embrace the principle of biblical preaching. This includes a commitment to ascertaining as much as possible about the context in which a specific preaching text was written. What one discovers in this process is that the writers of the Bible were living in

a political world. The words they wrote took this seriously. At one level, for example, the story of the exodus simply tells how God led the Hebrew people out of slavery and into freedom. At another level, however, the exodus was a political event. As the story unfolds, there is a great confrontation between Moses (who speaks for God's concern for justice) and Pharaoh (who embodies a social structure that, while orderly, is exceedingly unjust in terms of the distribution of political and economic power). Eventually Moses leads a daring social-political action against an established order. The oppressed rebel against a system that oppresses them.

One who attempts to preach on the exodus is challenged not simply to rehearse that ancient story, but to retell it in ways that lift up the current quests of people to move from oppression to freedom. The situation of Black people in South Africa is but one of many possible applications that come to mind. To ex-

plore the exodus story in the light of the oppressed in South Africa requires some political analysis and judgement. One needs to say something about apartheid and "homelands" and Nelson Mandela and perhaps United States policy relative to South Africa.

Second, the preached Word of God is addressed to persons and communities that are thoroughly immersed in the social-economic-political networks of life. When, therefore, the Word of God includes the good news that one is freed by God's grace for service to the human family, one needs to ponder how this might occur. Feeding the hungry and providing shelter for the homeless may be given expression in private and personal terms. One might directly provide food or open one's home. There are no politics that need to come into play in following this biblical admonition, some may argue. Things may, however, not be so simple. If a person's intent is to provide the kind of assistance that is optimally liberating, should not one be concerned with the circumstances that caused the homelessness and poverty? Often there are complex social-economic-political forces at work that need to be identified and reshaped. It is not the preacher's primary responsibility to prescribe the precise strategy and legislation for correcting injustices within society. A preacher can, however, pose questions, provide evidence of injustice, and articulate a new vision that is shaped by the biblical story and biblical norms. If the vision is to have credibility, and if there is to be a sense that the vision can in some measure be translated into reality, the preacher's words need to be rooted in an appreciable understanding of the political situation.

Third, most of us preach that God is active in the life of the world. It is my conviction that part of God's action occurs precisely within and through the political, economic, and social movements and debates of history. This is not to say that God can be identified with any single such movement or idea. The incarnation, however, which is fundamental to Christian faith, leads us to recognize that God's manifestation in the life of the world continually emerges in tangible, concrete ways. There is structure to the appearances of God. It is the preacher's obligation to provide witness to the manifestations of God's presence. God's judging and liberating actions are to be proclaimed, as they emerge within the complex structures of the world's life. This task must be approached with boldness, but also with a substantial measure of humility and perhaps even tentativeness. One dare not forget that ambiguity fills the life of the world and that preachers, like all other persons, see only dimly as through a mirror. There are, however, many evidences of God's action in and through the social, economic and political dimensions of life that can be discerned. They should be given expression in the preaching of the church.