

The Inescapable Contextual Factor in Preaching

Opening homiletical observations

The gospel of Christ is at the very heart of preaching, but this gospel requires rigorous engagement with our current public reality if it is to engage that reality in continuity with Jesus, preaching of the reign of God. Does a law-gospel homiletic that owes much to Martin Luther's law-gospel dualism encourage this sufficiently? John Calvin employed a different homiletic, one which included what he called "the third use of the law." Did his preaching, as a result, better address the larger reality of his world and might it help us discover a contemporary public homiletic today?¹

James Kay makes the claim that "the contextual factor in preaching is not only unavoidable and inescapable; it is the very means through which the Word of God continues to go forth into ever new situations."² Kay had previously explored how the cross of Christ created a new way of knowing in the world by producing (through preaching) a cruciform community. Such a community, he points, out is called to live in this world by a power that is revealed in weakness. To preach to such a community calls for "a stereoscopic imagination" to distinguish reality seen through the norms of our present culture from what is really going on under the surface.³

Will Willimon notes that the sermons of Fleming Rutledge take seriously the difficulty congregations have in hearing the gospel and, more importantly, allows the biblical text to confront, unmask and defeat what media like the *New York Times* regard as news. She goes so far as to loosen the grip of the media's present in order to clarify what God in Christ wants us to be for tomorrow.⁴

In an incisive reflection on the current state of preaching, Rick Lischer states that the church has adapted to both secular language and the pluralistic disposition of Western societies. As a result the information claims of the preacher are often regarded as but one more voice amid the cacophony of sounds unleashed on us daily. So the church allows gospel requirements to disappear. In a consumer culture one should not be surprised by this result. The homiletic assumptions are that congregants feel that they have the right to be given the choice of accepting or rejecting the message and the preacher seeks to respond to their predilections by presenting the sermon in such a way as to find acceptance rather than rejection. The sermon is no longer a word from the Lord of the church but just another voice offered up as an option. Preachers are drawn to articulate the gospel to resemble the best in our society as though this extends the influence of the gospel on society.⁵

Lischer explores these thoughts further in his Lyman Beecher lectures. He notes that in a technological society, ethics seems to be increasingly difficult. Reflecting on this today, let me note that militarily the development of increasingly sophisticated warheads has not

been accompanied by clarity about their use and abuse. In biology, we are able to modify human cells, to create new possibilities for treatment of disease, to extend life expectancy, etc. but do not know how to explore the rightness of their use. Environmentally, experiments on transplanting life forms into warmer environments may lead to adaptation, but the ecological implications could end up putting other life-forms in jeopardy. These are only a very few of the difficult moral questions that confront us today.

If the radical claims of Jesus and the way of the kingdom he announced have implications for all of the above, how will this be reflected in our preaching? Lischer notes that preachers “try to protect the Bible from politics and science by restricting its application to personal and cultic activities.” Then he adds, “But every formal claim we make for the word, our culture absorbs, affirms and trumps.” As a result, the preacher begins preparing for each new sermon “from the end of words.”⁶ The vocation of the preacher who seeks to be faithful to the distinctive way of Jesus Christ in clarifying its alternative life-style from the surrounding culture involves dying to the hold of that culture in terms of its concrete manifestations economically, politically, socially, professionally and technologically. All of these need to come under the sway of a cross.⁷

I cite these homiletical insights and could reference many more⁸ as a way of introducing the radical challenge for preaching that seems to me to have been underestimated in much preaching today. I admit to a certain boldness in relating this discussion to the law-gospel homiletic because Professor Paul Wilson is the most articulate and convincing advocate of this approach. But then he is the one who sparked my interest on this subject in his recent June workshop presentation on “What is Reformed Preaching?” at the U of T Calvin conference.

The homiletic implicit in John Calvin’s preaching

In the course of his exploration of Calvin’s preaching Wilson contrasted the Reformer’s theory with his practice. He noted that for Calvin presenting Christ was *a purpose* of preaching but in terms of sermon practice and total time, preaching a text or presenting a doctrine from that text was of greatest concern.

In *A Concise History of Preaching* Wilson notes that Calvin emphasized the *demands* of grace and his primary homiletical thrusts were: edification, reproof, correction and instruction “for these enable regeneration to take place.” He also adds that we would do well to be instructed by Calvin’s emphasis on social improvement to help shape the kind of human community God intends for the world.⁹ The choice of the phrase “the demands of grace” is evocative and captures something central for Calvin. The inclusion of the larger social dimensions of the gospel’s intended effect also corresponds to the central concern that I want to raise. It seems to me that Calvin was unconcerned about pleasing his hearers and deeply committed to enabling Geneva to conform to God’s way revealed in Scripture.

Let me be very clear that I believe that the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen is central for preaching. Whether or not this has been adequately evident in all my preaching and homiletical work, it is a bedrock conviction that I share with my colleague, Paul. My question has to do more with whether his way of formulating this paradigm by contrasting law and gospel is adequate for the church in our present context. In order to explore this further, I want to go back to Calvin and then reflect on the hermeneutical move from Calvin's time to our own today.

Alister McGrath in the opening address to the Calvin conference interpreted the Reformation as a movement to influence every part of life - personal and social. While Luther focused more on individual salvation, Calvin sought to wrestle with the larger ramifications of the gospel's transforming reach. Calvin had a keen sense that the church needed to interact with its cultural context.¹⁰

Sixteenth century Geneva was at a major crossroads when Calvin was invited back to the city (after having been previously expelled) in order to institute reforms, not just for the church but also for the city - and not just with reference to religion and personal morals, but also with reference to social, political, economic and legal matters. Geneva was no longer under the aegis of some Roman Catholic bishop. It was ripe for reformation because so much of public life was in serious disarray.¹¹ Calvin had an extraordinary gift for conceptualizing the organization of human communities in order to nourish and sustain faith and bring conduct into conformity with Christ's teachings. Many who heard Calvin in Geneva were refugees who looked to him and his "company of pastors" to build communities of faith. What is more, preaching "was to be at the very centre of Christian life and the main vehicle for the reformation of character and conduct."¹²

In his extensive treatment of Calvin's preaching, T.H.L. Parker notes that Calvin's compulsion to preach was theological; he had an earnest desire that the people of Geneva conform their thinking and behaviour, not to the Protestant ethos, but to the Bible - which he regarded as Holy Scripture and the guide and teacher of the church through the testimony of the Holy Spirit.¹³ The congregation, for its part, was to be an active participant in preaching since preaching was a corporate act of the whole church and through the sermon God ruled the church. The congregation listened not just for the word of the preacher, but for the Word of God through the preacher and, if necessary, (guided by the Spirit) in spite of the preacher.¹⁴

Exhortation was critically important for Calvin especially because there was a good deal of conflict over Calvin's reforms. The preacher, he claimed, could not merely declare the truths of the Bible and leave the congregation to accept them or not. People must be urged to accept what was being expounded. In the main Calvin sought, in a low-keyed way of speaking and through exposition and application, to enable people to frame their lives according to the teaching of Scripture. But on occasion his anger was aroused against injustice under the cloak of legality (which he saw as opposition to the gospel by those

sworn to uphold it). He spoke of everything being corrupted in the law courts, of perjury there, in effect, taking God's name in vain, and denial of the truth. He pointed to the need for responsible voting in Geneva elections – “with reverence, with carefulness” in order to elect people who will serve God as public officials. Calvin also touched on the alliances between the Turks and the French and spoke against various Romanist practices (the invocation of the saints, pilgrimages, compulsory fast-days and non-preaching bishops). But these examples tend to come in his crisis years and were, even then, not as important for Calvin as expounding Scripture more broadly.¹⁵

In seeking to understand Calvin's preaching it is essential to recognize that for him God is sovereign over all of life and this, in turn, requires paying attention to the whole of Scripture, including, the Law and the Prophets as well as the Gospels. But here one needs to distinguish between Luther's view of the law and Calvin's. For Calvin there was “a third use of the law,” which, he says, is its principal use, namely, to clarify and confirm for believers the will of God. In his *Institutes*, Calvin states that the law is a means of exhortation to excite believers to obedience and away from the slippery path of sin, converting the soul, making wise the simple and rejoicing the heart (as Psalm 19 indicates). Torah is celebrated because it inspires a love of obedience. Precepts are accompanied by promises to encourage faithfulness in the face of Torah's considerable demands. In Torah the psalmist discerns the presence of the Mediator who is essential in making the law a delight.¹⁶

Is it possible to discern in this view a sense of the gospel that has the effect of drawing people to relate their individual lives and at least some aspects of their world to God? Is this what Jesus was implying when he expounded the reign of God in the Sermon on the Mount? There is little doubt that Calvin's preaching had a profound effect on Geneva and far beyond Geneva (one thinks particularly of The Netherlands and Scotland) that reflects the public nature of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed.¹⁷

At this point it is helpful to be reminded by Calvin scholar, John Leith, that Calvin's “justification for preaching is not in its effectiveness for education or reform,” but a practice of the church rooted in the will and intention of God. Preaching is a sacrament of the saving presence of God.¹⁸ So Calvin sought not only to explicate Scripture but also to apply it to the life and experience of the congregation, and to move directly from Scripture to the concrete, actual situation in Geneva. He was often polemical advocating what he believed to be God's word in order to build up the body of Christ and fulfill God's purposes in human history. Leith adds that Calvin saw the world as a battlefield.¹⁹

What seems to me particularly important as I reflect on Calvin's preaching is its scope. Theologically it is thoroughly trinitarian with a deep awareness that God is sovereign over all creation. This means that every aspect of life on our planet, in all its beauty and its brokenness needs to be seen in relation to God. Scripture, read carefully, guides both the

church and the world to see this relationship properly and through exposition and exhortation is called to conform to the will of God.

The shape of a Reformed homiletic in today's world

Hermeneutically, how does this Reformed homiletic travel in the twenty-first century? On the one hand, we live in a very different time. Ours is a post-enlightenment, highly secularized, scientifically and technologically oriented global reality. But it is also a world deeply corrupted, terribly wounded, sadly divided, still far from the vision of the reign of God articulated in the preaching of Jesus. What is particularly sad is that so much of the failure of the world is scarcely recognized as such by the church, or if it is, does not seem to call for the kind of radical change that the Gospel implies. Do we need a homiletic that includes Calvin's "third use of the law" to help us see our calling more fully?

In my own experience as a preacher I have often felt that one of my principal challenges was the worldview of my listeners. To be sure, I would also include the importance of reflecting on my own worldview as overagainst the worldview of the gospel articulated by Jesus. Worldview is an integral dimension in my approach to ethics. When I was working on *Preaching and Ethics* some years ago, however, I found it hard to decide whether to locate it as an aspect of my chapter on "Faith" or to include it in the chapter on "Situation and Context." It really belongs to both. We need to reflect on our way of looking at the world both with reference to how we see through eyes of faith and also by pondering how we are shaped by the public world around us. It seems to me that unless we grapple with worldview our understanding of and response to the Gospel will be significantly diminished.

With Walter Brueggemann, therefore, I seek a homiletic though which preaching can become "an event in transformed imagination." Instruction and exhortation may have been Calvin's homiletical tools, but, as Brueggemann says, the deep places in our lives, the place of resistance and embrace are reached imaginatively and concretely when we line out the world differently. I want to press for this concrete sort of naming of reality in its fear and hurt, its shallowness and emptiness in order to invite people to be free to trust a daring journey of discovery even if its edges near to what might be considered scandalous.²⁰

So I am wondering about Calvin's third use of the law, not over against gospel but as a way of making clear how the reality of our world needs to be seen, named and evaluated in light of the reign of God presented by Jesus in his preaching. To grasp this reign of God requires far more extensive grappling with Torah, the Prophets and Writings of the Hebrew Scriptures on the one hand and sustained engagement with the way the New Testament books that follow the four Gospels wrestle with the reality of this reign in their time. Clearly, this process must, in the final analysis be theological. Only as we relate our world to our understanding of God will we see it aright and respond to it through God's enabling.

This suggests that some sermons could explore a variety of texts that may not explicitly deal with gospel but do provide a larger biblical picture to illuminate a theological approach to our culture today. Sometimes when we awaken the realities of human brokenness writ large, listeners may glimpse the reach of the gospel as it is unfolded in subsequent sermons which make that connection more explicitly. This is especially important given the limited time frame now offered for preaching in most liturgies.

We can also draw on insights from contemporary culture, insights that the Spirit may have inspired in a surprising way. Recently, I viewed www.storyofstuff.com, a Utube presentation. It was an amazing exercise in imagination as it traced the path of “stuff” in our lives from extraction, production, distribution and consumption to disposal. It not only clarified each phase but added the steps in between that are usually left out. It did so simply and creatively. Finally, it offered an alternative way of viewing the whole process that would be life giving in stead of life destroying. Is this a contemporary secular version of preaching that challenges the reigning worldview of stuff and offers a creative alternative? If its insights could help the church become a better community of stewardship, can it be preached? Does this suggest how an imaginative approach to exposing reality could signal a contemporary version of Calvin’s “exhortation”? I would certainly want to provide an explicitly theological orientation for its central message but its concreteness in our current social context already glimpses what gospel should result in. How can I learn from such an experience to probe further the inescapable contextual factor in preaching?

This homiletical probe is still a work in progress, a gut intuition, that there was something about Calvin’s homiletical vision that could awaken in us a larger paradigm that explores more directly, with preachers like William Stringfellow,²¹ the cogency of the biblical vision of the reign of God for our world today. I don’t want to set aside the law/gospel paradigm, but to loosen it to allow for exploring the larger biblical ways of seeing reality through this theological lens with its eschatological vision beckoning us toward the way of the reign of God. I don’t want preachers to use law simple as a prelude to articulating gospel. The gospel already begins to take shape as this larger understanding of Torah is allowed to confront us and our world. Our culture has so invaded our individual and collective consciousness, we need a concerted commitment to exposing its distortions and deceptiveness in order that reach of the cross and resurrection truly disrupt our public reality.

¹ This is a kind of follow-up to my paper last in October, 2008, “A Public homiletic – its biblical roots and contemporary shape.”

² James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalis Press, 2007), 132.

³ Kay, *Interpretation*. 53/1 (January. 1999), 48-49. Kay offers Fleming Rutledge as an example of such a preacher.

⁴ William H Willimon, “Forward,” in Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), xiv-xv.

⁵ Richard Lischer, "The interrupted sermon," *Interpretation* 50/2 (April, 1996), 172-74. Lischer goes on to note that the evangelical alternative seeks to reverse the process. Instead of the word being accommodated to the world, the world is called to account by the word. However, this latter approach falls into a kind of moralism by laying out what the world's behaviour ought to be without undergoing the internal conversion that is prerequisite to changed behaviour. In the process it also assumes too simplistically that it knows what Gospel faithfulness looks like on all kinds of moral questions and ends up supporting the world's agenda on such things as immigration, law and order and militarism that are far from the way of Jesus presented in the Gospels. The megachurches for their part have bought into modern technological culture and present their message in ways that resonate with that culture. The medium powerfully affirms a cultural message that may no longer call that culture to live under the cross even if the language of the cross is used. (174-75)

⁶ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 17-19

⁷ Lischer, *The End of Words*, 28-36. I should add that this does not necessarily make the gospel counter-cultural though I think that, for the most part, it is. I have given an example of a cultural communication toward the end of this paper that appears to anticipate the gospel rather than obscure it.

⁸ For another pungent example see Edward Farley, "Toward a new paradigm for preaching," *Preaching as Theological Task, World, Gospel, Scripture*, Thomas Long and Edward Farley, eds. (St. Louis: Westminster John Knox Press, (1996), 165-75 who observes that through preaching the world of the Gospel is related to the world of Scripture to disrupt the world of the congregation under the hopeful expectation of redemption. (174)

⁹ Paul Scott Wilson, *A Concise History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, (1992), 100-01.

¹⁰ Cf. John T McNeill who notes in his Introduction to John Calvin, *On God and Political Duty*, J.T. McNeill, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, Co., rev. ed., 1956), that for Calvin, piety embraces all of every day life – family, community, education, culture, business, politics. (vii)

¹¹ Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954/1974), 445-46.

¹² Lea Palmer Ulandel, "Switzerland," *Preachers and People in the Reformation and Early Modern Period*, Larissa Taylor, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 242.

¹³ T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 1-7.

¹⁴ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 48-51.

¹⁵ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 119-27.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge, trans., (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1957), vol.1, 2.7.12. It is clear that for Calvin the law thus understood points to Christ through whom believers are enabled to keep the law.

¹⁷ Let me note in passing the reference that formed the basic direction of my colloquy presentation a year ago, N.T. Wright, "Kingdom come: The public meaning of the Gospels," *The Christian Century* (June 17, 2008), 29-34.

¹⁸ John H. Leith, "Calvin, John," *Concise Encyclopedia for Preaching*, William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds. (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1995), 61

¹⁹ Leith, "John Calvin," 63

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 109-10.

²¹ Cf. William Stringfellow, *An Ethic For Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1973).