

Doctrinal Preaching*

I.

Discussion of Doctrinal Preaching as one of a variety of types is a hazardous venture. There are many snares in setting forth the distinctive features of preaching that qualifies as "doctrinal."

By simplest definition, doctrine means something that is taught. In a more formal usage, it has more precise and binding implications. It consists of "a principle, or the body of principles in a branch of knowledge or system of belief." There is an element of acceptance, authority, taking a position, recognition of a constraining or compelling point of reference.

Doctrine sets the boundaries of belief and determines the direction and character of response to ideas, propositions, life styles and philosophies encountered in the long stretch of human experience. In the formation of doctrine, there is a codification of interpretations, understandings and convictions which supports and give meaning to selected courses of action. It is a formulation which calls for affirmation, identification, loyalty and propagation.

Some of the attitudes expressive of this sense of attachment and devotion are contained in such pronouncements as "thus saith the Lord", "here I stand", "we hold these truths to be self-evident", "for me to live is Christ." To such expressions, there is a before and an after. The "before" aspect is a compounding of assurances and promises issuing from the ageless struggle with basic values and fundamental truths in the history of humankind. The "after" aspect is indeterminate. The validity of the declaration is attested in the fulfillment of expectations generated by the initial, or altered statement of faith.

It is important to recognize the potential for belief and unbelief, faith and non-faith, inherent in doctrinal statements. This is not a danger, but

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a necessary alerting to the inevitability of taking sides, encouraging partisanship and giving support to those contenders who are most confident that they hold the "keys to the Kingdom", or that it is they "to whom the truth hath been delivered, once for all."

II.

Doctrinal preaching has not fared too well in the community of black Presbyterian preachers during the past quarter-century. Sermonizing during this period has been pitched to the shrill and compelling tones of liberation theology. It has been timed to accelerated requirements of immediate action; informed by the disquieting disclosures of the social sciences; enlivened by an aroused consciousness of the moral-ethical imperatives of the gospel and given focus by the preacher's determination to be "currently relevant."

The community of believers is affected negatively by this radical tendency to reduce the fundamentals of the faith. A doctrine of sin is fashioned in terms of the iniquities of the oppressor. A doctrine of salvation presupposes that God is on the side of the oppressed. The temptation is to make God an advocate and enabler only of those who are victims of economic, political and social exploitations. Ethnic and tribal gods are invoked by each group in its struggle for what it perceives to be right. The historic predicament of the whole family of God is obscured by such ascriptions.

III.

Two potent deterrents to doctrinal preaching are: The prevailing anti-authoritarian mood of our times and the spirit of broad tolerance in matters of religious belief. The latter fosters a high level of individualized religious expression.

This individualistic temper tends to resist the authority of utterances emanating from the understandings of a historic body of believers. It appears to be congenial to the unilateral formulations of unfettered charismatics for whom corporate deliverances are a stumbling block, and inspired consensus in the fundamentals of the faith, an inconvenience. Thus emerges a proliferation of beliefs, a deluge of doctrines and a pandemonium of claimants. Each claims to know what man is to believe about God and what duty God requires. Each succeed in releasing those forces which erode the foundations of the Church as the Body of Christ. This is done in the name of religious freedom.

IV.

Anti-authoritarianism, in reaction to statements of faith, is a defense

against encroachments of "establishment" religion. The latter is symbolized in those confessions of faith transmitted through the centuries from Church Fathers, Councils and the continuous stream of ecclesiastical traditions. The language is awe-inspiring, but the luminous moment of apprehension rarely occurs.

General illiteracy in the discourse of the market-place and in the home disallows for the clear perception, hearing and understanding of the eternal truth. Doctrine is looked upon by many as something to be memorized and recited at pivotal points in liturgy.

The sources of doctrine increase with the broadening and deepening experiences of the faithful in the life of the Church. Consider the words of Paul to Timothy (II Timothy 3:14-17); "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." And then the tutorial assurance that: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

This admonition and assurance of Paul may include sound doctrine derived from even searching of the scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God's revelation of himself is a continuing revelation, made real and present in Jesus Christ. What can we know? How must we respond? When will the whole drama yield its secret? The answer to these questions is both a visible manifestation and a hidden mystery.

V.

In reflecting upon the complementary features of the ministry of preaching and teaching, there can be no disjunction or disharmony. The preacher and the parishioner share a common need. The choir loft and the pulpit must give a certain sound. Harmony must not be threatened nor deluged by cacophony. This is not to impose limits upon unique or extraordinary insights in the understanding of doctrine; nor to restrict the authentic explication of revealed truth to a single order of ministry.

Few people, if any, still remember the old-fashioned childrens Sunday School Class, with Bible reading, teaching cards with the golden text, a brief homily by the teacher, a review of the lesson and a closing, solemnized by reciting the ten commandments or the Apostles Creed. Smile unctuously, if you will, at the unsophisticated mix, criticize the pedagogy, derogate the leadership and then reckon with the alarming vacuum in substance and approach designed to enable persons of every age in the church to testify in word and deed, "this I believe."

Doctrinal preaching is not popular preaching. It does not lend itself to

the histrionics and acrobatics which prove to be such useful aids in creating certain effects and stirring certain responses in our hearers. The efficacy of doctrinal preaching is enhanced by the seriousness with which minister and congregation attend to regular and systematic reading of the scripture, studying the pilgrimage of faith and practice in the Christian community. They must become conversant with the genesis and refinements in the creeds, confessions and social pronouncements of the Church.

In our own time, during the past two decades, the arena of debate has been electric with contention over the relationship between doctrine and decision-making in matters of war, peace, racism, sexuality, poverty and hunger. Doctrinal preaching provides opportunity for instruction in the faith that clarifies both individual and collective responsibility to God's call.

In a sense, all preaching begins and ends in doctrine. The order of service and roles of participants reflect the understanding of the church about the sovereignty of God and the working of the Holy Spirit. All of these implications of doctrine are persistent reminders of how the whole structure is joined together and grows into the Lord's holy temple.

VI.

The force of doctrine is conditioned by an awareness that the worshipping community is called by God. The community has a covenant relationship, based upon the gift of deliverance with God. Unbroken fidelity to God is necessary for the believer to be a continuous recipient of it. Doctrine becomes, and is, a delineation of the character of the giver, the substance of the gift and the requirements of the respondent.

Teaching and preaching from the perspective of covenant is a process of "in house" consciousness-raising regarding the divine-human pledge. Erosion, diversion and watering-down the demands of the gospel, as conveyed in doctrine, lead to a comfortable intoning "Lord, Lord", without any conscious intention of becoming a true disciple. The preacher may feel the necessity to be on the frontier of broad human concerns, to delight, entertain, chide or titillate the egos of pillars of the church. He may neglect the "weightier matters of the law" or minimize, by silence or infrequent reference, the stern reminder that "straight is the gate and narrow the path that lead to eternal life." In the wisdom of our predecessors, and by the working of the Holy Spirit, crucial concepts have been set forth regarding God's being, purposes, actions and promises.

Within a cosmic context, we seek to lay hold upon the truth about the existence and destiny of persons created in the image of God. As the scenario unfolds, there are glimpses of an abiding presence in terms of whose activity the whole drama has meaning. The Church, as the unique

manifestation of this presence, attempts to interpret, explain and embody what has happened, what is happening and what is yet to come. The codification of these understandings is refined and amplified as the community of believers seeks more diligently and responds more faithfully to the maker of heaven and earth and all that is in them.

There is a measure of audacity in doctrinal preaching, just as there is the exercise of preference in the formulation of doctrine. No ecclesiastical body can lay claim to the exclusive understanding or articulation of God's word and will.

In moments of greatest uncertainty, the preacher is aligned with Paul's assertion in II Corinthians 4:1-6, with comforting resort to the assurance that "we refuse to practice cunning or tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servants for Jesus' sake."

VII.

The audacity of the preacher is rooted in the essentials of the faith and sustained his knowledge of how ideas of creation, sin, redemption, resurrection, the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ, and eternal life inform and influence the behavior of the believer, and how these concepts affect the whole mission of the witnessing community. In an age when high premium is placed upon diversity, pluralism, ethnicity, freedom of conscience and personal autonomy, it is urgent that the "community of faith" have a clearer conception of what it believes and what it is called to be and to do. An open-ended stance is untenable for those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The doctrines are designed to confirm in the life of the church the certainty of its hope and to provide guidelines for pilgrimage of faith. In this endeavor, the preacher does not lose heart as he recalls the admonition of Paul to Timothy (II Timothy 4:1-4):

I charge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season; convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience, and in teaching, for the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own liking and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.

The scriptural sources of doctrines are overwhelmingly convincing. In essence, the whole pentateuch resounds with: "Hear, O Israel" this is what God has done and this is what he requires of you. Paul's letters to the Corinthians are replete with doctrine. Those who had ears to hear were convicted by the authority of his message.

We may do well to remind ourselves of the charge of God to Israel through Moses: "And these words which I command you this day shall be on your hearts, and you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way; and when you lie down and when you rise, and you shall write them on the doorposts of your houses and your gates." And the opening paragraph to the Directory for the Worship of God provides:

God binds together as a people those whom he has called to be his children through faith in Jesus Christ. This community of faith is the Church, whose life is sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the power of the people.

Those within the Church are called by God to honor him. Acknowledging their own sin, they are the more to acknowledge the power and love of God in overcoming sin by the gift of Jesus Christ the Savior, and to offer their lives in thankful devotion in his service.

God, having established the Church, had also commissioned it to be the means by which his redemptive love may be extended to all humanity. The Church is, therefore, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who calls people out to darkness into his marvelous light, and who in his grace reaches out to pardon, redeem, and empower underserving humanity, through Jesus Christ.

This is the subject matter of doctrine. God alone can give us perceptiveness sufficient to understand and power boldly to declare for the edification of all who have ears to hear.