

Romans 3: The Preacher's Dilemma

From time to time I receive brochures advertising workshops for preachers. Other homiletics professors in town—at Columbia and Emory—send these brochures to me, as well as our constituent seminaries here in The Interdenominational Theological Center.

The problem is that most of these workshops continue to promote a triumphalistic philosophy of preaching. Whether it is through story-telling, or coping with the text, or doing any of the other things these titles would suggest, the sponsors of these workshops want homileticians who will portray the traditional, triumphalistic sort of preaching which comes into conflict with Paul's epistle to the Romans.

I venture to guess that sponsors of workshops, especially those who are deans here at I.T.C., already know that Clark** and Clingan are probably going to talk about some negative issue in preaching, and people will be dissatisfied!

Indeed, my workshop title at Princeton is: "Preaching as Provocative Conversation!" Today, dealing with chapter three of Romans, I must speak about the dilemma of preaching.

There are six paragraphs in chapter three. Three in the first unit, verses 1 through 4, asks several pertinent questions, ending with the apostle's proclamation: "Let God be true though every human false. . ."

The second paragraph asks whether we ought to refuse to repent of our sins if God uses our sins to display his power!

The third paragraph not only shakes the foundations of any Jewish claims to human righteousness, but shakes every claim to human righteousness, which is re-echoed in the climax of the fourth paragraph: "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

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The fifth paragraph begins with the famous "But now!" Something else has happened! God's will has been demonstrated in history apart from any and all human claims to righteousness. The sixth paragraph contains Paul's application of these findings to his original question.

The dilemma of chapter three for preachers may not be obvious to us until chapter seven of Romans, with Paul's famous confession: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

By nature, all of us are boastful. Every time we go to prepare a sermon, we know the task we must accomplish. We know how excitable the congregation is, how excited it likes to become on Sunday, and precisely what strings to pull, and what words to use to accomplish the level of excitement—whether of loud or of quiet excitement—the congregation expects of us. On the other hand, Romans chapter three confronts us with God's judgement upon all religious claims. Here we face the contingency of our piety. Here, what we do in the brief flight of the Mayfly, which is our lifespan on earth, is set against God's time, in which a thousand of our years are over in the twinkling of an eye.

Our noble attainments, our moral excellence, our conversion stories are uncovered for what they are: boasts; pious lies. Here are our secret motives for preaching—our power lust, our usurpation of the authority which belongs to the priesthood of all believers. They are all exposed by the power of God's Word. No matter how pleasant, sanctimonious, or saintly our facade, our boasting is demonstrated in our accomplishment of praying, preaching and singing.

The essential exposure of the problem of preacher ego does not occur when we are sinning. I am not talking about the poor souls who disgrace the ministry by falling from grace, by committing adultery, becoming drunk or dope fiends, or by embezzling church monies. The function of God's Law accomplishes their justice very efficiently. It is unmitigated self-righteousness for some of us to cast dispersions on those of us who have sinned in secret, while we sin in public through our preaching!

The first dilemma of preaching is that preaching is a sin. Does the unfaithfulness of the Jews nullify God's faithfulness? asks Paul in verse 3. God has entrusted the Jews with God's very own oracles, says verse 2. The circumcision has this advantage for Jews: God has entrusted them with God's Word (that's what oracle means, "Word"). The unfaithfulness or faithlessness, the agnosticism or atheism of the Jews cannot, however, nullify the faithfulness of God. This is why Jesus pronounces a word of judgement upon all preachers when he says, in one place: "Listen, then to the preaching of the Pharisees, but do not follow their example." It is a weak and immature faith which cannot look beyond the agnosticism and atheism of the preacher to appreciate the truth of God's revelation.

The easiest time to be strong and charitable is when the preacher is a scarlet sinner, when the preacher has committed adultery, embezzlement, or is drunk or on dope. Then, the congregation can say that God's light is being revealed through the preacher's weakness. Let us remember, however, what Paul says in verse 6: "How could God judge the world?" (ie, if God did not punish us for being sinners, even though God has used our sin to display his righteousness).

Trying to blame God for our sinful nature is sheer sophistry. The problem here is a popular one, trying to reason from effect to cause. It's like saying: God must be both male and female because we are both male and female and were created in God's image. Is God a hermaphrodite, or a spirit? It would be the height of anthropomorphism to limit the nature of God to the twofold nature of human beings. Whether we are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, black or white, we are all contingent beings, and we are all false (verse 4). Especially in our preaching, God's judgement must negate all of our attempts to become the judge.

The following verses from Romans 3:10-14, apply to preachers just as much as they do to pushers:

None is righteous; no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks after God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.

Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive.

Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.

No matter how many colors are in our robes, no matter how many revivals and converts we have, the people of the Church may, by the grace of God, see right through our pious lies and perceive that even in our religiosity "no one does good; no, not even one."

The purpose of the termination of all preaching is set forth in verse 19. The shutting of every preaching mouth must occur in order for the world to be held accountable to God. This is the second dilemma of preaching. Here, we thought WE were holding the world accountable to God! We had actually deluded ourselves into thinking that God was working THROUGH our preaching, when, all along, God was trying to get us to shut up so God could get on with judging the world and holding it accountable!

What was the bloody surgery of circumcision all about, except to connect an entire nation to God? Paul quotes Psalm 51:4: "That God may be justified in God's words, and prevail when God is judged" would be a mistranslation. The RSV is correct: "That YOU JEWS may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged." It is for THEIR OWN GOOD that their own righteous preaching must be silenced. God alone can guarantee our justification and liberation.

No human being (including preachers) can be justified by human laws or human religions. All they do is to expose sin.

Every great and powerful dictator who has ever appeared to fill the air with words, with sermons, and pretended to be God, or God's instrument THROUGH WHICH God will get things done, every one of them has fallen. The dilemma of preaching is also that the bigger they are, the harder they fall. The greater the preacher, the greater the sinfulness of the preacher.

God does not replace human triumphalism with a heavenly triumphalism. God simply negates human triumphalism. God does not choose even to work through Christian preachers. Jesus says, in another place: "Many there will be who will say, 'Did not we preach in your name. . .?' and I will say to them, 'Depart from me, evil and profitless servants; I do not know you.'"

Rather, Paul ends chapter three of Romans precisely as I must end this sermon, that is, with a great "But now!" "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it" (v. 21). What is this manifestation? It is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (v. 22).

God cannot be discovered through the scientific method. God cannot be calculated through mathematics. God cannot be explained through systematic theology. God cannot be revealed through preaching, praying or singing. God manifests himself through faith in Jesus Christ.

First, in our dilemma, as we go to prepare our sermons for the first Sunday in November, let us remember that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (v.23), and for this very reason, not even the preacher is capable of taking a leap of faith! Rather, even the justification of a preacher occurs in the same way as the justification of a dope fiend: we are all justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (v.24).

Here is the possibility for making something useful after all out of something and someone who is utterly false. The liar preparing the sermon, ie, the preacher who is getting ready to keep on talking lest God actually judge the world, may have something useful to do here, after all. "If you cannot pray like Peter; if you cannot teach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus, and say, 'He died for all.'"

Through what human agency does God carry out his judgement? Through the courts? No! Through the legislature? No! Through the Church? No! Our preachers, priests and popes are all excluded here, too. It is done through the blood of Jesus!

Through the blood of Christ all preaching is silenced, and all preaching is given its content. The disappointment here is that God has given us no ground for our old, Justin Martyr type of sacramentalism, based

on wedding Christian faith to Dionysian cultists. This blood cannot be repeatedly poured out; it was poured out once, and for all. We cannot drink it again, because we drank it once, when we crucified the Lord.

At the Cross of Christ, facing the bleeding savior, we behold the judgment of the world. Listen! There is no preaching. The world is silent.

There is a crimson thread running through history: It is the falling of dictators. There is another crimson thread near it, crossing it from time to time: It is the crimson thread of this theological consciousness which we find in Saint Paul. The biographies of the saints are all typified by a saintly despair.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." Martin Luther King, Jr., was filled with a despair over his failures in the Civil Rights Movement, a despair which could only be overruled by God's faith, which alone rests upon perfect love, which alone cast out all fear. That is why neither Bonhoeffer nor King called for another triumphalistic empire to replace the empires they saw crumbling. Neither saint of God proposed any other medium for God's message than Jesus Christ.

The dilemma of preaching is the goal of preaching. Unless our preaching is a dilemma, a dynamic tension between our boasting of being eliminated and God's salvation being preached, it remains and can only be a lie, and it can only result in what Paul quotes from the Psalmist in verses 15 through 17:

Their feet are swift to shed blood,
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way to peace they do not know.

Our faith is nothing. It is not simply another object, or thing, to be found, tested, and evaluated by means of science, mathematics, or theology. Rather, faith is a freely given gift of God, given to all of us through the free act of God in the blood of Jesus Christ. God's gift is the termination of all of our boastful preaching, and the possibility of our preaching becoming a witness to Jesus Christ.