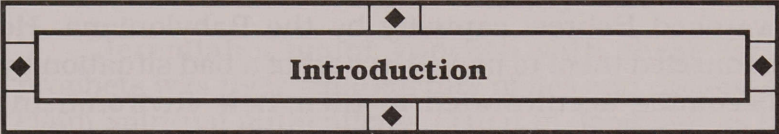


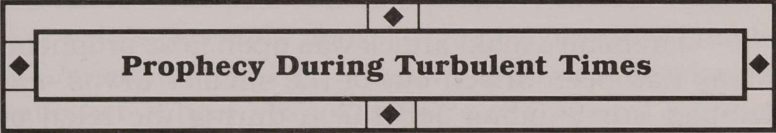
A New Agenda for the Nineties*

Jeremiah 23:25-40



Introduction

We are but four months from entering the decade of the nineties, possibly one of the most turbulent periods in human history. The years immediately ahead promise a decade of paradoxes and contradictions but also of possibilities. Consider the following realities: Rarely in the past has the church of Jesus Christ faced more challenges, but never has the church had greater opportunities. Although the pool of knowledge is today far greater for the church and society, confusion continues over the use of this vast store of information. Observation would indicate that we are hopelessly materialistic, yet surveys reveal that never before has there been a greater hunger for spiritual food.



Prophecy During Turbulent Times

The decade of the nineties and beyond will not be too dissimilar when compared with the period of the prophet Jeremiah. He lived, you will recall, in turbulent times. The exact date of his birth is not known. He lived during the reign of Josiah, although most of his prophetic ministry occurred during the reigns of

*September 1989

Josiah's son and grandson, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiakin. During these years Assyria collapsed and Babylon ascended, subjugating Judah as a vassal province.

Jeremiah, often called the "weeping prophet," watched Hebrew captivity by the Babylonians. He counseled them to make the best of a bad situation by becoming acculturated to their new environment. Jeremiah is known for the following:

- Helped the Hebrews recall their early devotion and loyalty to Yahweh during the Mosaic period;
- Condemned the people of Judah for their syncretistic worship. Judah had acquired the worship practices of those with whom they trafficked;
- Called upon Judah to repent and return to Yahweh. He referred to their apostasy as an adulterous relationship;
- Condemned social injustice, as did Amos;
- Possessed no doubts concerning the certainty of his prophetic calling, albeit at an early age.

Jeremiah's main attack was upon false prophets. Many had been driven out of the smaller towns and temples surrounding Jerusalem during the reign of Josiah and the Deuteronomic Reforms of 621 B.C. In Jerusalem, these false prophets plied their trade, and Jeremiah's criticism of them was manifold:

- Because of the amalgamation of religious beliefs and practices, many of these prophets were actually espousing beliefs more akin to Baal than to Yahweh;

- They were of extremely dubious moral character;
- They espoused a philosophy of unwarranted optimism. Everything will be fine; do not worry, they said, even as the fabric of society was crumbling.

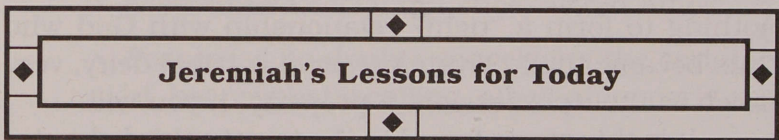
Jeremiah's major concern with these false prophets was their manufacture of lies and dreams to claim spiritual authenticity. Listen to Jeremiah as he has God say: "The prophet that has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that has my word, let him speak my word faithfully."

Jeremiah is not disavowing that dreams can be authentic religious experiences, genuine in their origin and interpretation. However, he did disavow those features of their practices that spoke only to the consumer's interests; anything that made their point and elevated them in the people's esteem was acceptable. One such feature that Jeremiah scorned was the intimacy which these prophets felt they could have with Yahweh. It requires, they thought, little or nothing to form a "tight" relationship with God who thus became their private preserve, a tribal deity, very much in their possession, a property, if you will.

It is this story, found in the twenty-third chapter of Jeremiah, that I wish to develop as we embark upon another school year. For there are several parallels between the story of Jeremiah and his times and the decade of the nineties, which now so glaringly stares into our faces.

As I said earlier, Jeremiah prophesied during a most turbulent period in Judah's history. During his entire life, he experienced and warned against invasions from Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt and from numerous

smaller and less ominous adversaries. It was his opinion that God was punishing Judah for straying from his ways and for their intimate flirtation with other gods. War and internal chaos were the direct results of a faulty and strained relationship with God. One could logically affirm today that the weakened or non-existing moral life of this nation is cause for all of our moral, social, political and economic decay. Then, too, many of us, who profess to know and believe Jesus Christ as Lord, are the main fomenters of war and territorial discord around the world. Today, there are over forty wars, large and small, being waged in various parts of the globe, many in the name of religion and for its glory. We might refer to Lebanon, Israel, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Africa, Ireland and many other volatile locations. Yes, world conditions today do have alarming similarities to those which were prevalent during the days of Jeremiah.



Jeremiah's Lessons for Today

Since most of you will be starting ministries in the nineties, you could privately and collectively *dream* concerning what you might do positively to influence the world toward peace. This is not wishful thinking. Remember what Ghandi did in India. Remember what Ralph Bunche did in Israel. Remember what Martin Luther King, Jr. did throughout the world. And please do not forget what Jesus did in his time and in our time.

While you are studying at ITC, you can give thought

to helping parishioners be less combative. There are several tasks, the first being:

- You can help people respect the rights and property of others. This was once assumed; however, too many of us now feel that we can take anything we desire, even if it does not belong to us.
- We can help people learn to deal with conflict. Fighting is not the logical first step to conflict resolution.
- We can learn for ourselves and teach others that pleasure and happiness are basic to our personalities and not externally induced. Thus, persons relying on drugs to bring about happiness are only postponing sorrow. Each snort of cocaine, each crystal of crack, each sniff of glue and each shot of heroin leads to larger and more frequent dosages.

We must not avoid the solutions to these problems. We can contribute here and now. We can begin to learn the attitudinal problems that lead to, and continue, conflict. The nineties will present challenges, none, however, more demanding than the resolution of the wars raging around us as well as those raging within.

The second task I suggest as you contemplate the immediate future, concerns your understanding of the Christian faith. You will spend many hours in the next few years with texts in theology, history, education, ethics, pastoral care and other theological disciplines. Dig deeply into these "realms of gold." However, in mining the gold found there, do not forget to read the textbook of your Christian faith, the *Holy Bible*.

I want to make a confession today, one that I have never made. During my seminary career, I was a serious student. I read all of my assignments. I became more than casually conversant with the scholars in religion. My language study was above average, and I had the ability to discuss the Bible. However, I did not *know* the Bible. My reading of the Bible, independently of an assignment, was nil. My advice to you is to realize that the Bible is your Christian textbook. There you learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. There you learn the joys and sorrows of the Christian life. Everything else is but the expansion of these truths. Do not misunderstand me. You need your textbooks, even more than you presently use them; however, you need them to expand upon and make more understandable what you read in God's Word.

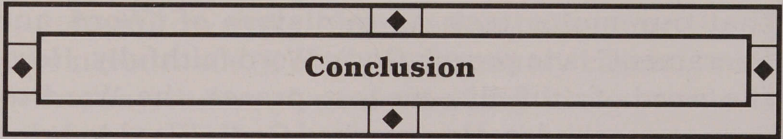
The third task is your need to rely on God's unchangeable Word and less on gimmicks. This the prophet Jeremiah criticized and called false during his day. Too high a premium is placed on consumer satisfaction. When you heighten dreams to a science, as many of us do, you can hide a multitude of sins—personal ambition, fleeting desires and just plain lust—and call it religion. Indeed, we can ascribe it to God. I must admit to you that I am more than a little leery with the glib way many preachers talk about their conversations with God, almost as if God were a boarding-school roommate.

Television evangelists and many popular churches resort to the overuse of what can be a legitimate revelation of God. Jeremiah reminds us

that our major task as ministers of "Word and Sacrament" is to preach God's Word faithfully. Here, the word—faithfully—means: preach the Word as Jesus preached it. He *preached* God's Word to bring comfort to those who were experiencing pain and sorrow. He *preached* it to bring down gluttonous empires and to build the Kingdom of God. He *preached* it to eradicate falsity in every form and to raise up genuineness. He *preached* it to demonstrate a reign where social justice would be the norm and where inhumanity would be an abomination.

As you study and learn, put more emphasis on God's Word. Use imaginative and other illustrative materials to the extent that they are true and are genuinely reflective of your own experiences or the documentable experiences of others.

The decade of the nineties will see people demanding more religious authenticity. They want to be better informed about the Christian faith. They want to be guided in the serious, in-depth study of the Bible, religious concepts and history. The stage is set, according to prognosticators such as Martin Marty, George Gallop and others, for there to be a revival during this decade. However, as we are currently witnessing, the American religious community is rebelling against the antics of Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggert, Rev. Ike and other charlatans who prey on the naiveté of too many Christians. Such persons have now begun to allow their protests to be heard and their purses remain closed.



It is my fervent prayer that students and graduates of this Institution will never, during the nineties, substitute pomposity for preaching, showmanship for salvation, experience for exegesis, greed for grace, cunning for creativity and graft for God! At ITC we have an excellent opportunity to set new standards for the African-American Church and for Christendom. This was Jeremiah's vision; it is my vision, and I trust that it is, and will continue to be, yours.