

The Blessings AND CURSES OF PREACHING

A Sermon for Sermoners

by C. Clifton Black

Editor's Note: The editor offers this essay by Dr. C. Clifton Black as part of a conversation about preaching initiated by the article "The Preacher's Craft" that appeared in the summer/fall 2003 issue of inSpire. An earlier version of Dr. Black's essay appeared in Catalyst: Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives for Presbyterian and United Methodist Seminarians (February 2003).

Bidding farewell to worshippers as they dispersed for another week, the pastor returned to her study, closed the door, opened her mind, and heard that it was said:

Blessed are you who yoke research with prayer, to harness your sermon's preparation and delivery. Be it resolved in this 21st century of Christian scholarship that lip service to study or piety will no longer wash. Without disciplined thinking, honed by research, faith turns inert. Without depth of conviction, cultivated by prayer, theology has nothing to consider and no reason to speak. Neither sterility nor stupidity serves the church. The dual responsibility of scholarship and devotion is not merely a good idea; it bespeaks our creation in the image of an all-encompassing God and fulfills our Lord's command. "Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29–30; Deuteronomy 6:4–5).

Blessed are you who honor Abraham and Sarah and all your forebears in Israel. This, too, is a practical application of Torah, specifically the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16)—

which has too rarely been observed in Christian pulpits.

Even after the terrors visited by Christians upon Jews in the Holocaust, anti-Judaism, whether malicious or thoughtless, still profanes Christian sanctuaries and mocks Israel's God. That is a sin, of which we repent. The confession of Jesus as Messiah of Israel and the nations is not inherently anti-Semitic. Rather, it recognizes the gospel's scandalous particularity: in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4).

Nowhere in any of the Gospels or in Acts is Israel repudiated *as Israel*. Quite the opposite: Jesus Christ is the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1), heir to David's throne, and forever sovereign over all the house of Israel (Luke 1:32–33; Acts 2:36). Even in the Fourth Gospel, whose antagonists are stereotyped as "the Jews" (John 7:1; 18:36), Jesus' Jewish identity persists (4:9), some Jews believe in him (8:31), and Jesus himself attests that "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). To divorce Jesus from Judaism or to deny our own adoption by God as children of Abraham is to commit the arrogance of a wild olive shoot: boasting over broken branches, pretending to support ourselves instead of acknowledging our dependence on Israel's adoption, glory, covenants, and promises (Romans 9:4–5; 11:17–24). Paul's warning stands: "Get off your high horse, and be afraid!"

Ironically, the deeper our appreciation of ancient Judaism, the keener our perception of the contemporary church. Absorb the scholarship of W.D. Davies, Jacob Neusner, and E.P. Sanders: learn that the Pharisees



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were not sanctimonious prigs but progressive reformers who sought to dedicate every aspect of life to God's glory. They were the devout, seriously religious people who now attend Christian Sunday schools and InterVarsity Bible studies. Likewise, "the elders and chief priests and scribes," so threatened by Jesus that they collude in his destruction, live on in today's seminarians, tall-steeple pastors, and biblical scholars. The comic strip's Pogo was correct: "We have met the enemy and he is us." We cannot preach from the Gospels with insight until we extract the sequoia from our own eyes (Matthew 7:5).

Blessed are you who hear and relay the biblical text stereophonically, conveying distinctive voices within scripture's full-throated chorus. Remember the wisdom of Irenaeus, who recognized in the four Gospels points of view as diverse as four points of the compass, a theological variety adequate in balance and bounty to nourish the faith of an ever-maturing church (*Against Heresies*). To present John in a manner that makes the Fourth Evangelist sound just like all the others is to follow the path the Great Church rejected (Tatian's *Diatessaron*, the four blended into one), not that which it chose (four distinctive presentations of one gospel). Still whirring in pulpits everywhere, "the Mixmaster hermeneutic" violates yet another commandment, the ninth: not bearing false witness (Exodus 20:16; Deuter-

onomy 5:20). Since scripture offers no homogenized Jesus, preachers concoct one that looks and sounds suspiciously like themselves. St. Paul's name for this was *kapéleia*, “huckstering” (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:17).

Indispensable as it is, singing each Gospel in its own melody is only part of the preacher's responsibility. Somewhere in the interpretive process, disclosed to a lesser or greater degree in any one sermon, that voice invites location within the larger scriptural chorus. Thus, on a given Sunday, we follow the lead of Luke–Acts without isolating its particular view from the Bible's comprehensive witness. Indeed, let us adopt as our own Luke's protocol, which generates conversations between Jesus' homecoming sermon (Luke 4:16–30) and the prophet's testimony (Isaiah 58:6; 61:1–2), between Peter's Pentecost address (Acts 2:14–42) and Israel's songs of hope (Joel 2:28–32; Psalms 16:8–11; 110:1; 132:11). In exegetical terminology, the redaction critic must eventually yield to the canonical interpreter. A faithful preacher is the church's best biblical theologian.

Blessed are you whom the Spirit keeps open for mystery. Like the Gospels themselves, theology and preaching are attempts to articulate God's intervention in the created world. Because such incursions are inherently enigmatic, they may be interpreted but cannot be solved. Few things from the pulpit are drearier than rationalizations of the extraordinary in the Gospels, apologies for biblical embarrassments, dressed in the lingo of scholastic evangelicalism or liberalized Protestantism. A hundred “proofs” of the virginal conception will never replace a single whisper of holy wonder on Christmas Eve. Shrinking the five thousand fed into an advertisement for UNICEF will leave most Christians famished when they approach the Lord's table for nourishment this world cannot provide (John 4:31–34). Learning to preach a comprehensible word without trivializing it spells the difference between a sermon borne on the Spirit's wings and one that flops to the floor like a dead duck.

In this respect the Gospels and Acts are our best guides. Notice how consistently the literalists miss Jesus' point (Mark 7:1–23;

8:11–21; John 6:25–71), how rarely—then delicately, in terms of divine grace and human trust—the Evangelists interpret Jesus' riddles (the parables) or enacted parables (his mighty works). A miracle “explained” is good news gutted: to shift metaphors, a skittish preacher's attempt to squeeze awe into a box that cannot contain it (Matthew 9:16–17). God doesn't need our excuses. Can you trust your listeners as much as Mark trusted his—to conclude a Gospel at 16:7–8, announcing that the risen Christ awaits disciples who, for all their devotion, flee in terrified silence?

“A faithful preacher is the church's best biblical theologian.”

Woe to you who would not bother to read the text because of unwarranted confidence that you already know what scripture is saying. An empty flashlight illuminates nothing. Repent in the chapel; recharge stale batteries in the library.

Woe to you who side with Jesus, assuming the Master's role while refusing the servant's. As you unfold the heart of a text, stand with almost any character you wish: Mary or Martha (Luke 10:38–42), Peter the perplexed (Acts 10:9–23), the man born blind or even his persecutors (John 9:1–41). Never, however, identify yourself with Jesus, as though you and your listeners have truth by the ears and no need of a Messiah. Such was the contemptuous familiarity of Jesus' family and friends (Mark 3:21; 6:1–6a), for whom he couldn't do a thing. How can I wear the mantle of “abused prophet” when I myself have betrayed Christ? How can I hymn, “Lord, I want to be like Jesus,” when what I really

want is for Jesus to be *like me*? Before mounting the pulpit, get straight who is the teacher and who the disciple, who is the Lord and who his slave (Matthew 10:24–25a). Like the Baptist, we are not the light but bear witness to him (John 1:6–8; 3:25–30).

Woe to you who spiritualize the gospel's claims upon the church yet moralize its irreducible assurance of grace.

So easy it is to disregard grace or responsibility, and to confuse the church's grasp of both. Return to Matthew and Luke for clarification. Jesus' great sermons are a summons to faithful discipleship in the real world, prefaced by announcement of our prior blessing by God (Matthew 5:1–7:29; Luke 6:17–49). Consider Matthew's carefully calibrated parables of surprise: anger at God's promiscuous generosity (Matthew 20:1–16), shock that Jesus expects us to love others as we profess to love him (25:31–46). Moralism is a heartless scold, a homiletical whip that stings others for their faithlessness. Gracious preaching regards God's needy children with merciful eyes: with Mary and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, the preacher glorifies the Lord and blesses those yearning for joy (Luke 1:46–55, 68–79; 2:29–38).

Woe to you who despair of your vocation, forgetting that the power of preaching finally resides with God, not with you. No preacher, however skilled or dedicated, should expect a world beguiled by coarse entertainment, political cynicism, and other cheap cheats to unanimously acclaim “the word of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16). Whenever the devil crouches at your door, reread the parables of sowing (Mark 4:1–34). Remember that your job is to plant what you cannot germinate: seeds that grow in secret, invisibly, and find root in a mere fraction—yet bloom there beyond calculation. As with silver-tongued Apollos (Acts 18:24–28) and Paul, who by his own admission couldn't preach his way out of a paper sack (2 Corinthians 11:6), so too with us: one plants, another waters, but God alone gives growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). ■

Dr. C. Clifton Black is the Otto A. Piper Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.