

# LIGHT

Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

December 1981

## Preaching on Ethical Issues

By "the foolishness of preaching (as the King James translators rendered Paul's word to the Corinthians), the church of Jesus Christ has moved forward through the ages.

On preaching's wings the church has mounted up to bear the reconciling word of the Lord around the world.

Through the preaching of the Gospel, the church is committed to spread his good news until Jesus comes again.

With this conviction about the primacy of preaching and knowing that what Paul really said in I Corinthians 1:21 had to do with the substance of the thing preached, the Christian Life Commission last summer sponsored

a special conference on "Preaching on Ethical Issues." Held on the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary campus, the meeting was designed to help preachers deal with the pressing moral issues that affect us all.

In this issue of LIGHT we are presenting the three major addresses from this important conference. They are by three exceptionally able Southern Baptist leaders.

The first message on "Preaching on Ethics: Biblical and Historical Models" is by William M. Pinson, Jr., the former pastor of the First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls who now serves as President of the Golden

Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

The second message on "Preaching on Ethical Issues: Preparation, Delivery, and Reaction" is by Cecil Sherman who for more than seventeen years has been pastor of the First Baptist Church of Asheville, North Carolina.

The third message on "Preaching on Ethical Issues in the Context of the Pastor's Total Ministry" is by Don Harbuck who for nearly twenty years has been pastor of the First Baptist Church of El Dorado, Arkansas.

Hear them.

*Joy Valentine*

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#### **Biblical and Historical Models**

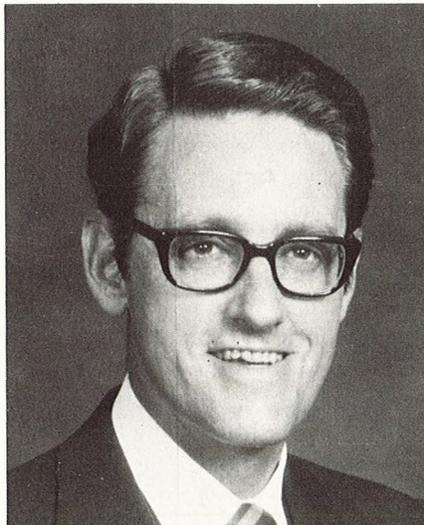
by William M. Pinson, Jr.



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#### **Preparation, Delivery and Reaction**

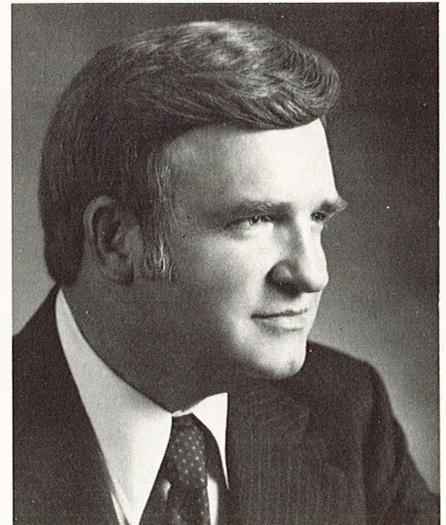
by Cecil Sherman



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#### **In the Context of the Pastor's Total Ministry**

by Don B. Harbuck



# Preaching on Ethics: Biblical and Historical Models

by **William Pinson, Jr.,**  
**President**  
**Golden Gate Baptist Theological**  
**Seminary**

Much of my adult life has been spent either teaching Christian ethics, writing about the history of preaching, or combining these interests by preaching on ethics. Thus with real enthusiasm I accepted the opportunity to speak on "Preaching on Ethics: Biblical and Historical Models."

Preaching both by nature and definition ought to be biblical—the proclamation of biblical truth. Preaching which is truly biblical will deal with social-ethical issues because the Bible does. Preaching patterned after examples of sermons in the Bible will address social-ethical issues because the sermons in the Bible do. Throughout the history of the Christian movement effective proclaimers of biblical truth have dealt with social and ethical issues. A careful look at the models of preaching in the Bible and in Christian history will assist us in doing the best possible contemporary preaching on ethics.

## I. Biblical Models

Models of sermons on ethical themes are scattered throughout the Bible. An examination of these sermons indicates vast variety in style, approach, emphasis, and setting. Such an examination also reveals a number of common characteristics of these sermons, both in content and in approach.

### 1. Variety

Biblical sermons on social and ethical issues indeed vary greatly from one another. The variety results from several factors—the different settings in which the sermons were preached, personalities of the preachers, and purposes of the sermons. The diverse nature of biblical sermons on ethics ought to free

us from the concept that there is only one way to preach effectively on ethics. There are many.

(1) Some biblical sermons deal with specific violations of ethical standards. Elijah preached to Ahab about the sin of the monarch in stealing Naboth's vineyard (I Kings 21:17-26). Nathan preached to David about the king's adultery with Bathsheba (II Samuel 12:1-14). Other sermons are more general, directed to a large audience rather than a specific person and related to many issues instead of a single standard. This is the case, for example, with the sermons of Jeremiah to the people of his nation. Jeremiah's sermons, like those of Elijah and Nathan, deal with the punishment which comes as a result of violating God's ethical standards, but they are directed to the population in general rather than to specific persons.

(2) Many sermons in the Bible, particularly those by the Old Testament prophets, deal with social ethics, that is with sins of a culture or of a nation. Isaiah proclaimed, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:16-17). More often than not, these sermons seem more directed to the leaders of the nation than to the people, although all were involved in the sin. In that same sermon Isaiah declared, "The princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; everyone loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them" (Isaiah 1:23). In other biblical sermons, such as the Sermon on the Mount, the issues addressed are more personal than social. Clearly ethical sermons need to address social issues such as oppression of the poor, corruption in government, injus-

tice, and cruelty in war as well as personal sins, such as adultery, drunkenness, thievery, and greed.

(3) Some sermons in the Bible deal with the theological basis for ethics. For example, the sermons of the eighth-century prophets, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Hosea, stress the ethical nature of God—his holiness, justice, righteousness, and love. They insisted that God's nature calls for a response of righteousness and loving-kindness in human conduct. Ezekiel preached on the doctrine of personal responsibility (Ezekiel 18), indicating that an individual is personally responsible for his or her conduct in the light of God's revelation, that sin has an ethical dimension, and that sin brings destruction. Some sermons emphasize basic guidelines for ethical behavior. Micah declared, "He hath showed thee, O Man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8). Other sermons deal with a wide variety of specific ethical issues ranging from economics to personal morality.

(4) Numbers of sermons are filled with condemnations of violations of ethical standards. For example, John the Baptist preached, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance" (Matthew 3:7-8). The preaching of Amos contains some of the harshest condemnation for immoral behavior found in the Scriptures. Other sermons include the positive as well as the negative, with an encouragement to walk by the standards of God. The Sermon on the Mount is an illustration of such a balanced sermon.

### 2. Similarity

For all their variety, the Bible's sermons on ethical issues have much in

common. In some ways their content is remarkably similar.

(1) For example, in each instance God is the authority for the ethical standards set forth. Oughtness is firmly rooted in the nature and will of God, not primarily in reason, tradition, or nature. The phrase, "Thus saith the Lord" frequently punctuates the sermons.

(2) Another common characteristic in the content of the sermons is an emphasis upon the connection between a right relationship with God and a right relationship with other persons. The two are inseparable. The sermons emphasize that one cannot be right with God unless he is right with his fellowman and that one cannot be adequately related to his fellowman unless he is rightly related to God. The sermons stress that religious ritual apart from social concern is an abomination to God. Isaiah preached:

When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood (Isaiah 1:12-15).

(3) Almost all of the sermons emphasize the ethical dimension of sin and stress that sin brings severe punishment. Sin is not merely violating a religious taboo or failing to carry out a religious ritual. Sin is also the transgression of God's ethical standards and brings destruction to an individual and to a nation.

(4) The preaching also has much in common regarding approach. Practically all of the sermons are examples of courageous preaching. The spokesmen did not proclaim what was popular, but what was right. For the most part their sermons were counter-culture, and they were met with resistance and sometimes persecution. Sermons on ethics at times brought the hearers to repentance but more often they brought the proclaimer rejection, suffering, and even death.

(5) The sermons were usually very concrete, seldom abstract. Because their sermons were filled with vivid descriptions and specific injunctions, no one could accuse the preachers of vagueness. Their problem was not being misunderstood but being all too clearly understood. Startling, shocking, sensational—these words accurately describe much of the ethical preaching recorded in the Scripture.

Most modern day prophets are not nearly so blunt and bold. Isaiah called his hearers "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah" (Isaiah 1:10). Micah described the leaders of his day as those "who hate the good, and love the evil; who pluck off their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones; who also eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them; and they break their bones and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh within the cauldron" (Micah 3:2-3). Amos describes the wealthy women of his day as cows: "Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Samaria, which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring and let us drink. The Lord God hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the day shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks" (Amos 4:1-3).

The preacher described in the Bible and the sermons recorded there set high standards for proclaiming God's truth about social and ethical issues. Not only do we have a divine mandate for such preaching, we have models of it in God's spokesman. The hearers may have often been angered, but they were seldom bored. Sermons were sometimes laced with sarcasm and ridicule. They pulled practically every motivational string—fear, awe, love, pride, and anger. Yet they were directed toward a common goal—to cause the people to turn from wrong actions to right behavior, from being alienated from God to being right with Him.

## II. Historical Models

And how have preachers for the past nineteen hundred years carried out the mandate and followed the models? How

have they dealt with social and ethical concerns?

### 1. Inadequate Responses

Search through twenty centuries of Christian preaching for examples of ethical sermons and you may be disappointed in what you discover, especially if you believe every preacher ought to proclaim the whole Bible. Some preachers have evidently pruned the Scriptures, removing those portions dealing with explosive ethical issues, rather than proclaiming the entire Word of God. Some seemed to have preferred a Bible that is without any mixture of ethics to one that is without any mixture of error.

(1) Many preachers have carefully avoided preaching on ethical issues, especially controversial ones. When they have preached on a moral issue they have often selected a safe one—saying things they knew their hearers believed, taking the stand expected of them as preachers. They could be termed playful rather than prophetic—playing to the galleries or playing it safe.

(2) Making "expected" trouble has been perhaps the most common way preachers have dealt with ethical issues. In our country, for example, they have preached against alcohol, adultery, socialism, pornography, and similar matters to congregations of persons who either agreed with the preacher or expected preachers to say such things. These preachers may have thought of themselves as prophetic because they spoke against evils accepted or practiced by the general population. But the real test of prophetic courage is taking a stand contrary to that held by those whose tithes and offerings pay one's salary and the church's bills.

(3) A survey of preaching in Christian history also reveals a strange lack of sermons on subjects frequently dealt with by preachers in the Bible. There are relatively few sermons on the plight of the poor, luxurious living by the wealthy, oppression of the weak, or injustice in government—matters of concern for preachers such as Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and others.

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# . . . Biblical

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## 2. Positive Contributions

However, not all have avoided preaching on ethical issues. In fact at one time or another most have collided with a genuinely controversial social-ethical problem. It is difficult to preach from the Bible and not deal at least occasionally with ethics. In writing *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* Clyde Fant and I were impressed with how many of the preachers whom historians regard as “great” did indeed tackle controversial ethical matters in a courageous, prophetic way. Some of the common notions about “successful” preachers we found to be erroneous.

(1) Effective preachers have dealt responsibly with a wide range of ethical issues. A frequently held opinion is that preaching in general has been on subjects such as doctrine, salvation, personal piety, and prophecy. These have often been dealt with, of course, but so have many ethical issues. As Clyde Fant and I indexed the subjects of the hundreds of sermons in *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* we were amazed at the variety of social-ethical subjects. Evidently effective preachers have dealt with ethical issues in their sermons.

(2) Evangelists and evangelistic pastors have preached on controversial ethical subjects. Before our study of past preaching I had the impression that great evangelistic preachers told people how to be saved and preached on safe ethical subjects such as alcohol, gambling, and sex but didn't deal with controversial social problems. We discovered that the opposite is closer to the truth. Consider five of the most effective such Christian leaders, for example—Chrysostom, John Wesley, Charles Finney, William Booth, and Charles Hadden Spurgeon.<sup>1</sup>

*Chrysostom*, who preached in the fourth century, possessed many characteristics often found in the lives of great preachers. He was direct and plain spoken, had a sense of abandonment and freedom in his work, and cared more about pleasing God than about pleasing men. He had a deep concern and compassion for the poor and was alert and sensitive to the problems of people.

A man of great courage, he attacked every significant social and spiritual evil of his day. No sin escaped his blistering condemnation. Sensitive to the plight of the poor at the hands of the rich, he frequently criticized the abuse of wealth. He called upon the corrupt government officials to bring justice to the courts and called for responsibility in high places. He condemned irresponsibility, greed, and pride, continuing this approach even though he knew it would likely cost him banishment at best, and death at worst.

Like so many other great and famous preachers, he was deeply involved with the issues of his community. Much of his best preaching dealt with current social problems. He spoke to lawlessness, injustice, oppression, frivolous living, sexual immorality, prejudice, and especially to personal vice. Because of his relevance, he lost his position and ultimately his life. Yet because he was relevant, he was a great preacher.

When Chrysostom was called to be a presbyter and preacher in the city of Antioch, it was a wild and degenerate metropolitan area. In this beautiful city situated in a strategic location for trade, the citizens were a mixture of persons from all over the empire. The trappings of wealth were everywhere present: covered colonnades of marble protected the inhabitants while walking on the streets; gardens and fountains were scattered throughout the city; chariot races, the theater, baths, the circus, and brothels vied for the attention of the people. Though half of the population was nominally Christian, few gave any evidence of being concerned about the practice of their faith.

Chrysostom had grown up in the city and knew it well. Evidently he was not corrupted by its materialism and sensualism; but he knew the sins of the people and spoke concerning them in a forthright and persuasive manner. By every outward appearance the times were prosperous, but the rot of the empire had already made inevitable its collapse. Political corruption was rampant. Stern discipline among the people had given way to luxury and self-indulgence. The people were more and more prone toward anarchy and less and less inclined to obey the law.

In 397 the archbishop of Constan-

tinople died. There was a scramble for this plum of the eastern ecclesiastical world. Chrysostom made no attempt for the position; nonetheless, his friends in high places wanted him to have the archbishopric. They managed to secure his appointment. At first, things went smoothly in Constantinople. The people were impressed with his preaching. The Empress responded to his spiritual prescriptions. Chrysostom, however, was not one to let diplomacy stand in the way of calling people to repentance. Chrysostom discovered that much money was being wasted by church officials. He put himself on a limited budget and the funds formerly spent on luxuries he diverted to the poor, to hospitals, and to new churches.

Chrysostom ate alone and refused to participate in the revelry of the palace. Soon he had alienated almost everyone in the city except the common people who eagerly gathered to hear him preach. Churchmen whom he had offended collaborated with the Empress in drawing up a series of charges against him. They called on him to come for trial. Recognizing that he had no chance for a fair trial, Chrysostom refused; he was removed from his post and banished.

But the banishment was not to be carried off smoothly. When the people heard about the fate of their popular preacher, they revolted, rioted, stormed the palace, and demanded the return of Chrysostom. An earthquake also shook the imperial palace. The Empress became terrified by the turn of events and recalled Chrysostom.

Nevertheless, he was not to return permanently. Soon the old tensions brought new conflict. The peace of the church and the lives of church members were threatened by disputes between Chrysostom and the Empress. Finally on his own, he agreed to withdraw quietly. He entered into his final period of self-imposed exile as popular with the people as ever. At last, wearied by travel and weakened by his life of asceticism, Chrysostom died in exile in 407, an example of a prophetic preacher whose preaching reached multitudes with the gospel. His death was cheered by much of the nobility and mourned by the masses of people.

*John Wesley*, founder of Methodism, is another example of an effective leader who did not slight ethics. He directed his messages and the activities of his societies against the great social evils of eighteenth century England.

England in the eighteenth century was entering the Industrial Revolution which displaced labor, packed the cities with mobs of people—often without work—and created a wide gap between the wealthy and the poor. Wesley displayed great compassion for the poor. His journal carried notation after notation insisting that his societies be made up of both the rich and the poor. He preached to the poor, counseled them, pleaded their cause, and labored to help them escape the grip of poverty.

Slavery drew from him nothing but condemnation. He abhorred the practice and made public his sentiment. He called for abolition of the slave trade and the eradication of slavery from the British holdings.

Politically Wesley was conservative. As a Tory, he sided with the monarchy. He insisted that commoners could not rule. He argued that representative forms of government were not practical because no real representation could take place. Naturally with such views he opposed the American colonists when they revolted against the British crown. Wesley's outspoken condemnation of the American struggle for independence created great opposition to Methodism in the early days of the United States.

Wesley also preached against personal moral evils. Initially he was not a total abstainer, but he soon changed his mind and demanded that his followers do likewise. He looked upon alcohol as slow poison which sapped the very springs of life. Largely due to the influence of Wesley, between 1744 and 1784 the consumption of alcohol decreased remarkably.

He was a pioneer in the area of popular public education. He even authored books in the field of education: *A Short English Grammar*, *Complete English Dictionary*, and *A Concise History of England*. He threw his support behind religious education.

Wesley was a fiercely independent person. He believed that a man who had accepted the help of God did not need

the help of the state. He led Methodism to be independent from state support and control, and he called for self-dependence and initiative on the part of those who led his societies.

The effectiveness of Wesley is irrefutable. At the end of his career, at least 70,000 Methodists lived in England alone; another 70,000 had probably died during his career. These Methodists were shepherded by 550 itinerant preachers, most of whom Wesley himself had called out and trained.

*Charles Finney*, successful pastor, persuasive professor, able college president, and fiery evangelist, practiced biblical style preaching in nineteenth century America. He was best known as a revivalist but he was also deeply concerned about social problems, especially alcohol and slavery. It is not surprising to hear of Finney's attack on those engaged in the liquor traffic because that has traditionally been a favorite target of evangelists. But the intensity of his attacks on slavery is startling. Few other preachers spoke as forcefully and specifically against slavery as Finney. He declared,

Revivals are hindered when ministers and churches take wrong ground in regard to any question involving human rights. Take the subject of slavery, for instance, the silence of Christians upon the subject is virtually saying that they do not consider slavery as a sin. The truth is, it is a subject upon which they cannot be silent without guilt.

The time has come, in the providence of God, when every southern breeze is loaded down with the cries of lamentation, mourning and woe. Two millions of degraded heathen in our own land stretch their hands, all shackled and bleeding, and send forth to the church of God the agonizing cry for help. And shall the church, in her efforts to reclaim and save the world, deafen her ears to this voice of agony and despair? God forbid. The church cannot turn away from this question. It is a question for the church and for the nation to decide, and God will push it to a decision.

That is not all that Finney says upon the subject, but it will do for an example. Finney said that if the churches would do

what they ought to do the problem could be resolved within three years. They didn't, and a bloodbath ensued. But Finney had tried hard to bring reform both through evangelism and social action, setting an example for preachers to follow who came after him.

*William Booth*, founder of the Salvation Army, is another example of an effective Christian leader who, though noted for evangelism, preached on ethical themes.

Booth was always sympathetic with the poor—he had known poverty as a youth and had never really escaped it. But in his earlier days he believed that conversion in itself was fully adequate to place a man on the road to a better life. With maturity he realized that a person needed more than a religious experience if he were to climb above the horrors of poverty in urban London.

Booth noted that in the winter men and women often slept in the open with nothing but paper to protect them from the icy air. He saw thousands of children sold into prostitution before they were fourteen years of age. He gazed upon multitudes of people gripped by alcoholism. He deplored the widespread unemployment and the inability of many who wanted to work to find a job. He smelled the stench from the tenements where whole families were packed into one room without adequate ventilation or sanitation. He sickened at the sight of armies of rats and bugs feeding on the flesh of the poor. His sensitive spirit suffered as he saw the wealthy grow even wealthier on the suffering and hopelessness of the poor.

In response to such needs, Booth not only preached about the problems but also moved with zeal to establish numerous services and institutions. A list of all his programs would fill several pages. He set up programs for the starving, for the homeless, for the criminals, for the prostitutes, for the sick, for missing persons, for the emotionally disturbed, and for the uneducated. He established factories, farms, training schools and loan services. He did not claim that his efforts would eliminate poverty, but he hoped that they would alleviate the suffering caused by an economic system which plunged millions into poverty.

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Many ridiculed his schemes. Others labeled them as dangerously socialistic. Booth shrugged off the criticism and plunged ahead. About his efforts he said, "We saw the need. We saw the people starving, people going about half-naked, people doing sweated labour, and we set about bringing a remedy for these things. We were obliged—there was a compulsion. How could you do anything else?"

Gradually the poor began to realize that Booth cared for them, not just for their souls. Tens of thousands responded to his message and programs. And in spite of their objections to some of his methods, even the leaders of church and state began to recognize the sincerity of Booth's motives and the effectiveness of some of his methods. Men with such diverse backgrounds as Winston Churchill, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and Cardinal Manning praised Booth. The evidence seems clear—social concern is not only biblical but also an integral part of evangelism.

*Charles Haddon Spurgeon* combined effective pastoral leadership and evangelism with concern for ethics and social problems. No ministerial success story is more fascinating than that of Spurgeon. Before he was twenty, a church in London called him as pastor. Within two years he was preaching to audiences of 10,000 people; at twenty-two he was the most popular preacher of his day. By the time he was twenty-seven, a church seating 6,000 people had been built to accommodate the crowds which flocked to hear him preach. For over thirty years he pastored the same church without a decrease in power or appeal. Sixty-three volumes of published sermons came from his ministry, in addition to pamphlets and other books.

Spurgeon's preaching was evangelistic: hundreds of people each year were baptized by him into Metropolitan Tabernacle; numerous others joined various churches where he spoke as evangelist. He became an inspiration for Christians throughout England and Scotland.

Spurgeon spent most of his time administering church affairs and preparing

sermons. Although he did not become deeply involved in public efforts to alter social injustice, he did speak on injustice in society and immorality in personal life. As with most preachers of his persuasion, his hardest blows were aimed at alcohol. But his social efforts were by no means restricted to alcohol. He called for humane treatment of workers, criticized the rich who preyed upon the poor, stressed the importance of family life, thoroughly condemned slavery, pictured the evil effects of war, and sought higher standards of righteousness for society in general.

Spurgeon's stand on slavery severely affected his popularity in the United States. On one occasion, sounding like a nineteenth century Amos, Spurgeon declared to his congregation:

Slavery is the foulest blot that ever stained a national escutcheon, and may have to be washed out with blood. America is in many respects a glorious country, but it may be necessary to teach her some wholesome lessons at the point of the bayonet—to carve freedom into her with a Bowie knife or send it home to her heart with revolvers. Better far should it come to this issue, that North and South should be rent asunder, and the States of the Union shivered into a thousand fragments, than that slavery should be suffered to continue.

Some American divines seem to regard it, indeed, with wonderful complacency. They have so accustomed themselves to wrap it up in soft phrases that they lose sight of its real character. They call it a "peculiar institution," until they forget in what its peculiarity consists. It is, indeed, a peculiar institution, just as the Devil is a peculiar angel, and as hell is a peculiarly hot place. For my part, I hold such miserable tampering with sin in abhorrence, and can hold no communion of any sort with those who are guilty of it.

Efforts were made to get Spurgeon to tone down his remarks on slavery. He was warned that his printed sermons would no longer be circulated in America if he kept up his attack. American publishers soon eliminated all of his references to slavery. Because of this editing, some in America wondered if Spur-

geon had changed his mind. Henry Ward Beecher declared that Spurgeon had not altered his opinions and had no responsibility for the omissions made in his sermons.

When Spurgeon was asked to clarify his position on slavery he replied, "I believe slavery to be a crime of crimes, a soul-destroying sin, and an iniquity which cries aloud for vengeance." Spurgeon acted further by writing a letter to the "Watchman and Reflector" in which he said:

I do from my inmost soul detest slavery anywhere and everywhere, and although I commune at the Lord's Table with men of all creeds, yet with a slave-holder I have no fellowship of any kind or sort. Whenever one has called upon me I have considered it my duty to express my detestation of its wickedness, and would as soon think of receiving a murderer into the Church or into any sort of fellowship, as a man-stealer.

When this letter was reprinted in American journals, it resulted in an almost complete boycott of Spurgeon's works. One Boston writer said, "Our Baptist papers are overflowing with indignation and call on all publishers and booksellers to banish the books of our worthy young friend from their counters . . ." *The Montgomery Mail* said: "The Vigilance Committee is engaged in burning books, and the two volumes of *Spurgeon's Sermons* have been contributed to their bonfires, and they will be burnt."

This experience over the slavery issue clearly indicates Spurgeon's passion for social justice. Although Spurgeon was not a social reformer in the sense that he spent his time working for schemes of social revolution, he was deeply interested in ministry and social action. For many years he was a keen political liberal with leanings to the radical wing in England.

Spurgeon dealt with social-ethical issues in ways other than his preaching. He was interested in many different forms of social work; from his point of view, social service was the ordinary expression of Christian character. Although he felt that his calling was primarily to preach the gospel, he encouraged others who were involved in the immediate bat-

ties for the oppressed. Under his inspiration and guidance, schools for the poor, orphanages, homes for the aged, and day schools were established. All of the missions of the Tabernacle were centers of social influence. Spurgeon was concerned about the weekday life of the people and encouraged the persons working in the missions to see that the needs of the poor were met.

Spurgeon always enthusiastically helped to raise money for these endeavors. When his church was moved to the Metropolitan Tabernacle, the old property was sold and the proceeds were used for new schools and for houses for the poor. When extra money was needed, he raised it. For years, he paid for the gas, heat, and other expenses for these houses for the poor out of his own pocket. Spurgeon greatly encouraged William Orsman and others who were working to provide shelters for the homeless.

Spurgeon was also sympathetic to the emerging labor movement. In the midst of strikes and labor unrest he gave his support quietly but definitely to those who were struggling for the very means of existence. Members of his church were so influenced by Spurgeon's attitude that at times they even contributed to the relief of men on strike against their own businesses.

Spurgeon was not the perfect minister by any means; he had his faults. He could be dogmatic, provincial, intolerant, and abrupt. Admittedly he did not provide an ideal model of preaching on ethical issues, but his incredible abilities and his deep devotion to Christ overcame many of these defects. And he did show that a person with social concern could be an effective evangelistic pastor.

(3) Preachers from a wide range of theological views have dealt with ethical issues. It is commonly thought that so-called "liberals" dealt more with social issues than "conservatives" did. Although liberals may have devoted a higher percentage of sermons to ethical concerns, conservatives have dealt extensively with ethical issues. Another common notion is that theological conservatives have always taken the conservative side on social issues and liberals the liberal side. A careful analysis of preaching through the centuries indi-

cates this is not true. In fact, it is practically meaningless because what is considered "liberal" and "conservative" tends to change. For example, the anti-alcohol movement was first led by theological liberals such as Theodore Parker. Conservatives tended to defend drinking—in moderation of course—because they said drinking is condoned in the Bible. Today conservatives are more likely to be total abstainers than liberals are. Even in a given historical period theological conservatives have not always championed conservative social causes nor theological liberals liberal ones.

### 3. Analysis of Preaching

It is clear that preachers in the past, especially effective leaders, have dealt with ethics. How have they gone about the task? An analysis of preaching on ethical issues discloses a wide variety of approaches and emphases depending upon many factors, such as the personality of the preacher, his vocational role, the times in which he lived, and the setting for the sermon. In spite of the variables some general conclusions seem valid.

(1) In the main, ethics has been but one of many interests for the effective preachers. Their ministries have been multi-faceted and their preaching has touched on many subjects—evangelism, doctrine, Christian growth, comfort, and encouragement as well as ethics. A few preachers did become identified primarily with ethics or social concerns, among the most notable being Theodore Parker, Henry Ward Beecher, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

(2) Most preachers have majored on proclamation and not on organization to deal with social issues. Notable exceptions to this general pattern include William Booth, whose Salvation Army organization dealt with social problems; J. M. Dawson, a pastor who helped fashion and lead organizations to champion religious liberty and church-state separation; and Martin Luther King, Jr., a pastor who became an organizer and leader in the Civil Rights movement.

(3) The ethical issues with which the preachers dealt were usually issues of widespread concern in their time. They

often reflected the conscience of their day more than they stirred it. Furthermore, the stand taken on an issue often mirrored the sentiment of the region in which they preached. For example, John Wesley, in England, upheld the monarchy and condemned the American Revolution, while many American preachers condemned the monarchy and upheld the Revolution. During the war with Mexico, people in the Northeast of the United States generally opposed the war, and the preachers in that region spoke against it. During the Civil War, preachers in the South tended to support the Confederacy and slavery while preachers in the North upheld the Union and Abolition.

The preacher today dealing with ethics should be aware that one's culture and group within the culture molds his viewpoints; therefore he should strive to be faithful to Christ instead of culture.

(4) Preachers by their sermons affected society, but the effect is difficult to evaluate. It appears to be negligible. Yet the combined impact of many preachers speaking on an issue was often significant. Multiple sermons were a primary factor in launching the Crusades, in the abolition of slavery, and in the prohibition of alcohol. In a few instances a single preacher has apparently been instrumental in bringing about social change or altering the response of people to an ethical issue. For example John Knox's preaching is credited with bringing revolution to Scotland and a profound change in that country's society and history. John Wesley's preaching is credited with bringing changes to England which helped avert revolution. And Henry Ward Beecher's speaking in England during the Civil War in support of the Union is cited by some historians as a leading factor in swinging English sentiment away from the South.

(5) Although some preachers have been sociological or philosophical in their approach to social or ethical issues, most have been biblical, using biblical authority for their positions and citing biblical references to support them. The biblical approach has taken more than one form. Some sermons treat an ethical issue in the course of an exposition of a passage that deals with that issue, such as

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# . . .Biblical

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Ephesians 5:22-6:4 on the home. Others pull together a number of biblical passages on a topic. A third approach is to apply a biblical theme, such as love or justice, to an ethical issue. How a preacher regarded the Bible determined to a large degree how he used it in preaching on ethics. Some saw it as a collection of rules to be taught, others as a number of guidelines or principles to be applied, and many as a combination of these.

(6) Sermons dealing with ethics have also differed in the place given to an ethical issue. Some have dealt entirely with one issue, others with several. Some have dealt with an ethical issue, others with an issue only as an illustration of a larger subject. For example, sermons on Christian love illustrated love by showing how it applies to race relations, family life, and daily work.

(7) Some preachers maintained the same basic stand on an ethical issue throughout their ministry. Others, for various reasons, changed their position on certain issues. John Wesley changed from toleration of alcohol to opposition. William Booth shifted from indifference to social problems to active involvement in social reform. Reinhold Neibuhr held numerous positions on war and peace. W. A. Criswell first defended segregation and then preached a racial open-door policy.

(8) Many preachers throughout history dealt mainly with so-called personal ethics, such as alcohol, language, sex,

entertainment, honesty, and similar matters. Others—a smaller number—have preached on social issues and problems, such as economics, social justice, politics, and national reform.

(9) Regarding "society"—or "culture" or "the world" or whatever term one prefers—preachers have lined up with each of the basic approaches of Christians relating to culture. Some have identified with it—supporting the monarchy in France, the Divine Right of Kings in England, or Manifest Destiny in the United States (all with appropriate scriptures). Others have called for separation from the world, urging withdrawal into Christian enclaves. Still others have recognized evils but insisted there's nothing really that can be done to change the world, accommodating to it while preaching salvation and a better life beyond. Yet others have preached in favor of efforts to change the world, advocating a wide variety of approaches to social transformation. Evangelism, education, ministry to the victims of social evil, reform, political action, economic change, civil disobedience, public demonstration, violence, revolution—all have been preached, frequently in various combinations.

## Conclusion

The range and variety of sermons on ethics and ethical subjects confounds adequate analysis. Sermons have even been preached which insist that sermons ought not deal with ethical issues!

And what is to be learned from this study of preaching in the Bible and in history? Everyone will come away with individualized conclusions. As for me,

these convictions formed as I studied:

First, no preaching deserving the adjective "biblical" can be without ethical content and application.

Second, effective preaching on ethical issues will be based solidly on the biblical revelation.

Third, there's no one way to preach effective sermons dealing with ethics; a person's approach will be affected by personality, setting, and subject.

Fourth, courage, trust in God, and a commitment to doing what is right rather than what is safe or expedient, are essential character qualities for the preacher who addresses social-ethical issues.

Fifth, the preacher who is true to the biblical models and the best of our sermonic heritage will be especially concerned about the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed—persons often ignored in contemporary preaching.

Sixth, effective pastoral preaching on ethical issues will be part of a wholistic program including sermons on both evangelism and ethics, doctrine and doing, spiritual growth and social action, belief and behavior.

Seventh, the preacher who spends his homiletical life exclusively in the safe areas of devotional, evangelistic, doctrinal, and pastoral proclamation will not know the joy of soaring with the eagles of Christian ministry who have been faithful to the whole Bible in including ethics in their sermonic endeavors.

<sup>1</sup>Material in this section is adapted and taken from *21 Centuries of Great Preaching* by Clyde Fant, Jr. and William Pinson, Jr., published by Word Books, Waco, Texas.

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# Preaching on Ethical Issues: Preparation, Delivery, and Reaction

by Cecil Sherman, Pastor  
First Baptist Church  
Asheville, North Carolina

I am a pastor; therefore, I am a popularizer. My work is immediate and personal. My work is inclusive and broad. So, I am a "general practitioner" in theology and pastoral care.

My people want a word from God. They want this word from God from me. This does not mean that they are unaware of my humanity. This they see clearly; they know firsthand of my foibles. But, they also see in me one who has been called of God, one who has been sent from God.

The world we live in is confusing and corrupting. We are called to be holy, set apart. But we live in a society that is amoral when it is not immoral. My people ask me, "What is right? What is wrong?" They assume that the preacher will know; they look to me for some answers. In Matt. 9:36-38, Jesus looked upon the masses. He saw them as "helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." So, Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest is large, but there are few workers to gather it in. Pray to the owner of the harvest that he will send out workers to gather in his harvest" (Matt. 9:38 TEV). The assumption of that remark is that the workers would know how to direct the "helpless" who were like "sheep without a shepherd." My people bring the same expectation to me, "Surely the preacher will know where we should walk on the slippery path we are asked to journey."

So, my people look to me for help in the ethical choices that are built into their lives. I accept this assignment. It has ever been the task of the preacher to speak on ethical issues. Not to speak on ethical issues is to be less than a preacher.

## I. Preparation for Preaching on Ethical Issues.

### 1. The pastor must describe

### God, define God, and declare God in an ethical dimension.

All preaching is rooted in the character of the God declared. The Canaanite god was not ethical; therefore, the devotees of the Canaanite god were unethical. All religions make their converts to be like the god they worship.

We do have an ethicless "Christianity." This expression of our faith is heresy. The heresy is rooted in the blindness of some preachers about the character of the God we declare. If we are wrong about the nature of God, we will surely be wrong about all else, for this is an error of the first premise.

### 2. The pastor must be an ethical person.

Our people will not believe what we do not live. So, in family, in race, and in hunger, we lead with our lives.

It took me a long time to learn this. In 1969 our church was voting on building a Children's Building. It was sorely needed. An old woman voted against the Children's Building. I asked her why. She said, "Young man, in 1926, I voted for a new building. We built it. In 1929, our pastor stood before our new building and pointed to it with pride. His guests were a pulpit committee from a larger church. We were left to pay all through the depression for a building that was just a part of his professional advancement."

Then I understood her reasoning. She did not trust me. She did not really believe that children and their care was the issue. She suspected, and with some reason because of her 1929 experience, that my professional advancement

might be the agenda. My credibility was what was questioned, not whether we needed a building for children. Always, the integrity of the pastor is the ground for hearing anything that is spoken from the pulpit.

### 3. The pastor must come out of the Bible.

Everyone claims the Bible. So, just saying, "I believe the Bible" does not of itself declare anything. How you use the Bible tells me who you are. Some people can preach for forty years and never say one prophetic word. They have not an eye for culture-challenging insights. Their method of interpretation is flawed.

The Moral Majority is using the Old Testament as a model for the creation of a moral society in the twentieth century. The prophet went to the king, and the king used the power of the state to effect moral change. Today the Moral Majority goes to the state house, or to Washington; they would use the power of the state to outlaw sin. There is one great problem in this. The New Testament did not go about effecting change in the individual or change in society in that way. These people have misinterpreted the Bible in a fundamental way. Paul did not go to the Roman Senate to deal with homosexuality or pornography. He was boldly against both, but he went about his fight for right in a certain way. We would do well to imitate Paul both in his position on the issues and his method of getting at the issues.

### 4. The pastor must be all the parts in the pastoral role.

Some pastors just want to

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# . . .Preparation

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preach on ethical issues. They do not want to do the little, daily pastoral care that is a part of the job. This will not do. If we do not attend to the personal needs and hurts of our people, they will not hear us when we make our lofty, ethical pronouncements. We have to pay our pastoral dues.

## 5. Attempt and address only what you know.

Standing before a congregation Sunday after Sunday can be a very revealing thing. If the pastor has a tendency to spout off about things he knows little about, soon the congregation is going to know and recognize. This will diminish your impact.

There are several fields in the ethical arena about which I know little. Medical ethics is complicated and getting more so. Legal ethical decisions are labyrinthine. When you get in these areas, you had best study hard or get some good advice.

Further, I am not required to make a comment about every ethical issue. The newspaper may editorialize about everything, but the pulpit is not the editorial page. Choose your spots. Aim your shots. You will have more impact this way, and you will not appear foolish so often. In time you may even be mistaken for a sage.

## II. Delivery of Preaching on Ethical Issues.

### 1. You must come on strong else the people will pay no attention.

Ethical preaching will change no one unless it is spoken with feeling. No prophet was dispassionate. Paul was probably overbearing. But Paul was not casual. The people will pay attention when they see that the preacher cares. To care, you are going to have to come on strong. So, I

speak of guilt and forgiveness. I tell my people of love and give them a direction. I tell of hope and give my people ways to do good in a bad world.

### 2. Yet these disclaimers abide:

I see through a glass darkly. I do not have all truth, and sometimes I err. The Protestant principle holds here. The lay people have to keep their minds at work while I preach.

Sometimes the laity have more conscience on a given subject than do I. Sometimes they come nearer having a word from God than do I. In a Baptist church there ought to be a way for the laity to speak their conscience; and sometimes that has been the prophetic, ethical word for our people.

Do not make any issue a fellowship issue. On December 2, 1964, our church voted to exclude a Black woman. I was sick. I wanted to quit. I wanted another, honorable church. But, the church knew the pastor disagreed with the decision. In time the church came to be inclusive. We have not excluded the segregationists; we have changed them.

I sandpaper my people; they sandpaper me. Each Sunday I try to bring about a small change in the thinking or the conduct of my people. But over the years these people have turned the tables on me. They are sandpapering me too. We speak for God to each other.

### 3. To change a people, you must stay with a people.

It takes a long time for a marriage to "shake down." Some marriages never make it through the "shake down" period. The same is true of pastors and their congregations. It takes a long time for trust to be given. It takes a long time to learn to listen to a new preacher. Especially does it take a long time if the pastor is saying different words and making different noises from those that have been "traditionally" spoken from

that pulpit. So, to speak the prophetic word is one thing. You can do that and leave. But if you want to make a prophetic change in a people, you are going to have to stay for a while. We have quite a few people who are willing to deliver the word. We are short on people who want to stay and effect the prophetic, ethical change in a congregation and a town. Paul knew about this; so he warned, "Be not weary in well doing" (II Thess. 3:13 TEV).

### 4. Delivery must be consistent with my personality, my gifts, my style.

Here is a special word for delivery. You have to be yourself in an honest way. Do not read too much from other preachers. If you do, you will wind up a mimic. Further, you will quit working and thinking. Trust your instincts. Believe in God's stirring of you. Once deeply moved to speak on a theme, speak.

## III. Reaction and Preaching on Ethical Issues.

### 1. Underlying all this talk is the idea that there is some risk-taking and a little courage involved in preaching on ethical issues.

True. It is not all safe. To be safe is outside the model. Jesus, Paul, Stephen—all were risk-takers. All had a price to pay. We live in a society that has arranged bounds for free speech. We live in a fairly orderly society, and for this reason we can be prophetic and still have our heads. At any time, these happy conditions could change. Conditions changed for Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Then the test would be at the point of whether we are only prophetic when it is culturally safe. Consensus leadership is our national style where all is done by majority vote. Prophetic work does not have the majority. If it did, it would not be prophetic.

### 2. Some observations about reaction to your preaching:

If you become prophetic, you

will find that the opposition will not come at you on the issue you have addressed. They will try to get at you by making you to be the issue. This obfuscates, but that is the goal of the opposition. Just be ready.

Do not expect to be understood. Jesus wasn't. Often you will not be understood in spite of your best efforts.

Keep a strong and positive self-image. This kind of work will cause you to come to doubt yourself. Work through this. I am not right on all things; I am not always pure in all my motives. *But*, I will not let these gnawing little questions silence me on what I believe with all my heart. You have to be able to

come to say, "On this issue I am right!"

Lean on your friends and trust in the Lord. Recently I became involved in a controversial issue inside the politics of the Southern Baptist Convention. The heat from this controversy was intense. Where did I get help?

My friends helped me. My friends who dated back to college and seminary days. We are of common mind. They shared my risk. They shared some of my hurt. My church was a part of this network of support. They came through in magnificent fashion. And my family was all I could have hoped for. I got help from these people.

The Lord helped me. One night I was especially miserable. I had been wounded by the ugly and untrue words of little men. I had a book of sermons by Harry Emerson Fosdick by my bed. Late at night I reached for that book to see what I might find. I could not sleep. In that book was a sermon entitled, "How to Stand Up and Take It." It was God's word for me that night. I was calmed. It was just what I needed. I am convinced that God made the provision for me that dark night.

If the Lord will help me when I have taken my small risks, surely the Lord will be by your side when you take your larger ones.

## Preaching on Ethical Issues in the Context of the Pastor's Total Ministry

by **Don B. Harbuck, Pastor**  
**First Baptist Church**  
**El Dorado, Arkansas**

Two things are required of the pastor for effective preaching on ethical issues in the context of his total ministry: *clarity of understanding* and *consistency of action*. Understanding the nature of ethical issues comes first. The traditional definition relates ethics to moral values—the right and the wrong, the good and the evil both in the personal and social realms.

This definition is not so much erroneous as it is inadequate. When defined in this way, ethical concerns can be separated from utilitarian values on the one hand and religious values on the other. The pastor must resist every effort to push ethics into such a corner. What is right, what is good, and what works cannot, by Christian measure, be in essential conflict. Yet they are often divided in people's lives, including the pastor's. How many, for example, justify their behavior by saying, "I know it's not right, but it's good." The ultimate ethical heresy is the belief that the truth, when it is known, will not be good. Sometimes this distortion works in the opposite direc-

tion, as it did in the Vietnam war, when it was said that certain villages had to be destroyed in order to save them. Such fuzzy thinking leads to moral disaster.

The supreme ethical question must always be: "What does it do to people?" We must never be hesitant to ask this question. We do so on the high authority of Jesus who said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Our first conviction boils down to this: *anything that has to do with the welfare of the people is an ethical concern.*

Now take a second step in understanding. Ethical concerns, which have to do with the welfare of people, are not a separate group of issues at all: *they are the human dimension of every issue.* Compartmentalization is the curse of the pastor's life. Caesar reported that Gaul was divided into three parts, but the pastor's life is threatened with fragmentation into dozens of pieces. It is possible for his own faulty vision of reality to intensify this shattering of his life and ministry. Unless he can see life steadily and see it whole, then he will be at the mercy of disintegrating forces which assault him every day. One of these forces is the temptation to make ethical issues into a category distinct from other themes he

must handle in his preaching task. *The ethical must be seen as that dimension of every issue which impinges upon the welfare of people.* Sometimes this impingement is direct; at other times it is remote, but it is never ever nonexistent.

Failure to see ethics as the *human dimension of every issue* has calamitous consequences. First the ethical becomes optional, then it becomes questionable, and finally it becomes trivial. And nothing is more destructive of the preacher than what makes his life and work trivial. I still remember with pain the remark made by an agnostic upon learning that I was a Baptist preacher. "It's bad enough to be a thief," he said, "but to be a petty thief is worst of all." We can avoid pettiness by keeping clearly in view that the ethical has to do with the welfare of the people and is thus the human dimension of every issue that claims our attention. As a pastor, this understanding has helped me to keep my preaching sensitized to the ethical task.

So much for clarity of understanding about the ethical. Turn next to the pastor's consistency of action (attitudes, words, deeds) in relation to the ethical

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# Ministry

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dimension. Three Greek terms symbolize and sum up the process of ethicizing his proclamation and indeed his total ministry.

## I. KERYGMA: WHAT TO PREACH FROM

Every specific effort the pastor makes to implement his ethical preaching task depends on his spiritual vision, his grasp of theological reality, his concept of the Christian *kerygma*. What he thinks about human welfare will depend on his view of God's plan and purpose. His theological framework needs to be consciously reflected upon and refined if he hopes to give any consistent pattern to his entire ministry, including his preaching. For many years now I have been helped in my grasp of the Christian *kerygma* by Donald Baillie's theological parable, which gives an authentic retelling of the Christian story. Here is a brief summary of the parable.

In the beginning God the Creator wanted humanity to be a harmonious fellowship of persons united in his love. God the Light invited all people to gather around him so that each person could see both the Light and everyone else with God's Light on his countenance. But something went wrong. Instead of joining together in this great game of light and love, every person turned away from the Light to dance his own pattern, to make himself the center of the universe, to become his own god. So people were no longer united around the Light. They could see neither the Light nor each other, except in the shadows. But God would not give up on humanity. He resolved to save people from this suicidal selfishness which cut them off from God and from each other. His method of redeeming people was to create in the midst of the rebellious world another community bound together through his love—a fellowship that would become the nucleus of a new humanity. Thousands of years ago God made this fresh start by choosing the people of Israel to be the nucleus. But Israel would not go far

enough with the divine purpose, so God created still another nucleus by becoming incarnate himself in one of Israel's sons, Jesus of Nazareth. This man Jesus, in the midst of sinful humanity and subject to all its temptations, lived the kind of life that God meant everyone to live. To begin this new humanity he gathered around himself a dozen plain men, though they hardly understood him at all. But the people would not tolerate Jesus. They got him condemned to death. Even his chosen disciples deserted him. So Jesus himself became all that was left of the faithful remnant of Israel, and he died on a cross forsaken and alone. But God had not given up on humanity, and his purpose was not defeated. A few weeks later, in the same city of Jerusalem where Jesus was condemned and crucified, there sprang up the most marvelous fellowship the world had ever known. It consisted of those disciples of Jesus now reunited and a host of others with them, living in the warmest and closest relationship and growing in numbers everyday—the church of Jesus Christ. They confessed that Jesus was no longer dead because God had raised him from the dead and defeated death itself. They confessed that Jesus was present with them through the Holy Spirit. They confessed moreover that the very crucifixion which had so scandalized and scattered them was at the heart of God's secret. For this was God's way of dealing with sin and of offering forgiveness and a new beginning to all who would come and accept it. So the church became a new kind of fellowship—a community of forgiven sinners with the cross as its badge. This church is the nucleus of God's new humanity. But it can never be content to remain a nucleus because divine love is its spirit, not only toward its own members but toward all people. So the church reaches out to everyone with the message of eternal life through Christ. This divine-human fellowship transcends all the barriers of class and race and nation.<sup>1</sup>

Now this story tells me where I am coming from in my preaching. It helps me to address concrete situations in the light of my understanding of the whole

plan of God. It keeps preaching on ethical concerns from degenerating into petty moralizing because it is always rooted in the divine intention and initiative. The *kerygma* thus provides a unifying principle for my preaching and for my total ministry. I feel no obligation to shift gears radically when moving from one topic to another because consciously or unconsciously the way I address all subjects is influenced by this *kerygmatic* vision, for therein I find my deepest conviction about reality and what God is doing to redeem his creation. I also agree with what Donald Baillie's famous brother John wrote about the Christian story in its relationship to human welfare:

When all is said, however, the deepest tragedy of life resides, not in those sufferings which seem to fall in such different measures on different men, but in such conditions of earthly existence as are common to us all. The ultimate sadness is that nothing lasts; that the bloom so soon disappears from all things that are young, that the vigour of maturity is so short-lived, while age brings weariness and forgetfulness and decay such as presage the oblivion and corruption of the grave. This is why 'our sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught.' To call to mind the carefree days of youth, to see the friends of youth disappear one by one from our earthly company with hopes only half fulfilled and work only half done, and to know that no task of our own can ever be completed nor any joy held in possession for more than a few fleeting years—this is our great heaviness of heart. . . . About our human suffering, therefore, Christianity has ultimately the same thing to say to us as about our human sin—it repeats to us the story of the life and suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The solution of both problems is somehow in that story.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as much as I am committed to the gospel story, I have problems hearing it clearly, tracing out its implications plainly, and articulating its insights convincingly. I have blind spots, *skotomas*, Henri Nouwen termed them. Largely a product of my culture, they cripple my capacity to relate the gospel to the welfare of people.

The first blinding idea I mention is

*dualism*. Dualism denies the wholeness of life, by dividing it against itself—body from spirit, intellect from emotions, thought from action, the individual from society. Expressions of dualism are legion. All of us are infected by some form of it. Raw secularism and a pious spiritualism are both dualistic. Each denies the fulness and wholeness of life. All forms of dualism confuse the ethical picture by keeping us from knowing what is good for people by keeping us from knowing who people are. To overcome this blind spot we must see that God intends to heal the splits within people and the splits between people, that he came in Christ to bring reconciliation to people and to their world.

*Privatism*, another idea which distorts our understanding of the Christian *kerygma*, produces a paralyzing fallout in the ethical sphere. It takes the fundamental truth of the worth and dignity of the individual and corrupts it by denying the reality and necessity of community. Privatism is full grown self-centeredness. It makes the psychological center of life into the ontological center of life. The prominence of the frontier in our nation's history elevated the pioneer into a hero and made rugged individualism our national creed. The pioneer had those qualities of initiative, resourcefulness, discipline, and sacrifice that human life always desperately needs, but the claim that he was independent and self-made and free-standing, of course, is a fantasy.

When this illusion becomes an energizing idea, it blinds people to the Christian vision of community, a community bound together by love for God and love for neighbor, the prototype for which is the church. Privatism is incapable of understanding the dynamics of society and naively assumes that whatever is good for an individual will automatically be good for a group and can be accommodated without conflict into a social situation. Privatism falls short of grasping the meaning of forgiveness and forbearance and sacrifice which are elements essential to human welfare in community.

Another idea which blinds us to the ethical implications of the *kerygma* is *cultism*. Cultism declares that God is only available to those who adopt the doctrines and patterns of a particular group. This dehumanizes those outside the

group by cutting them off from God, for, as Nicholas Berdyaev said, "Where there is no God, there is no man."

Cultism attaches itself to Christianity at the point of the gospel's particularism, which holds that Jesus of Nazareth was one man at one place at one time—God incarnate—for the salvation of all people in all places for all times. The historical particularism of Christianity, far from being cultic, aims to draw people together into community at the same time they are drawn to God's revelation in faith. In Jesus of Nazareth God has acted to prevent us from making our religion a private luxury that we could enjoy without being troubled with people.

He has taken every possible step to have us unite with others when we unite ourselves to him so that our religious devotion can never be made to seem an escape from our social responsibilities. This then accounts for the historical particularism of Christianity. But this particularism must not be made to exclude people outside the Christian fold from contact with God. It cannot be allowed to put arbitrary restrictions on how God will deal with people who have never heard the gospel or who have never been confronted with it in such a way as to find it persuasive. In other words *the historical particularism of Christianity is designed to overcome privatism and not to create cultism*.

We must insist as did the Apostle Paul that even when people are not specifically or convincingly confronted with the preached gospel of Jesus Christ, God has other ways of confronting them (see Romans 1 and 2 and 10). Indeed Jesus pointed out that he meets us all through the claims made upon us by our fellow human beings. Our response to him in our neighbor, according to Matthew 25, will be the final basis of eternal judgment for us.

So let us keep clearly in mind that as Christians we can maintain our unwavering commitment to Christ as the only Savior, the way and the truth and the life who is absolutely essential to everyone's salvation, and at the same time we can relate to non-Christians as fellow human beings who have been confronted by God and who will be judged by God and not by us.

Resolve, therefore, to purge these

*skotomas* from your field of vision, lest there await you the fate of the blind who try to lead the blind. Unchecked dualism, privatism, and cultism can turn the gospel into bad news—bad news for the very people Jesus died to save and the pastor is striving to help.

## II. KOINONIA: WHOM TO PREACH THROUGH

The pastor's church, the Christian *koinonia*, plays a large role in what he is able to proclaim about ethical concerns because it is the congregation he will be preaching to and through. Every preacher needs to grasp the intention of Jesus on this score. His purpose, as the *kerygma* makes clear, was to create a people, to constitute and bring to consummation the new Israel. His twelve closest disciples symbolized the twelve tribes of the new Israel.

With world redemption in view, Jesus worked patiently with a small group, instructing, guiding, chastening, molding them to his purpose. He was creating a new kind of community, a community bound together not by the ties of blood or race or law but by divine love. He knew it was not enough merely to proclaim this message. The word, which had become flesh (person) in his own life, had to be fleshed out from then on in a living community.

He promised that the gates of death would not prevail against it. He gave to this community a new commandment that they were to love one another even as he had loved them. The book of Acts tells us that the vitality of this Christian fellowship accounted for the vigor of its cohesiveness and growth.

The Ephesian letter tells us that all Christian obligation aims at building up the church (Eph. 4:11-13). And why so? Because the strength and believability of the gospel proclamation depend upon the church and the way it conducts its life. Unless a new kind of existence actuated by love and justice transpires in the fellowship of the church, then the gospel is not good news about what is, it is only a new set of high ideals, a new law. This is why Paul declared the church to be the body of Christ, the continuing incarnation, a perpetual demonstration of two great commandments to love God

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and to love neighbor. Indeed, the church must be part of the good news it tells if the news is to be telling. The church, of course, is far from perfect but it is being perfected, it has been formed in Christ and is being reformed by the Spirit.

Think about God's incredible wisdom in giving to pastors a fellowship to work with and to preach through. God has cut our work small so that we can do it well. Seeing the vast horizons of a world full of complex problems will bring us despair unless we recognize that Christ has ordained the conquest of the world through the transformation of the church.

Ethical preaching understands that the preacher's first priority is getting his church on the road to conversion by getting his members to practice the ways of love and justice. When the church is thus converted, it will amplify rather than nullify the preacher's proclamation to the world. If, on the other hand, the pastor is incapable of leading his church to put into practice the rudiments of the gospel—love, forbearance, patience, long-suffering, mutual burden bearing, repentance—how presumptuous it is for him to lift up his voice to preach to those beyond his church. Why should the world want to hear a gospel that has been rejected in practice by those who know it best.

A pastor without a loving church is without credentials in trying to address ethical concerns beyond his congregation. If he is unable to induce his own people to submit to the gospel, by what strange reasoning can he expect those on the outside to hear and obey? So let the preacher take hold of his church with both hands, knowing that his most effective ethical preaching will be that which is seconded by a congregation that has submitted itself to the law of love and justice.

In the heat of the Civil Rights struggle in the early sixties our congregation adopted an open door racial policy by a vote of 199 to 186. This action enabled me to speak with greater conviction on racial concerns and what I said was

amplified a thousand-fold against the sounding board of our people's decision. The most prominent black educator in our city told me years later when I helped with his wife's funeral that because of what our church did and what I was able to say because of it that race riots were prevented, that blood did not run in the streets of our city, that our public school system integrated without violence and became healthy and strong, and that a large measure of racial justice prevailed in our community.

Let every pastor then school himself in the strategy of the *koinonia* if he would do effective preaching on ethical concerns. He must reach the world through a church that he has first reached by his proclamation of the whole counsel of God.

### III. KAIROS: WHEN TO PREACH OUT

Addressing ethical concerns in a redemptive way requires a fine sense of timing. This principle of the fitting season, the *kairos*, comes, of course, from Scripture. The Bible is a time-conscious book from one end to the other. Ecclesiastes teaches the beauty of taking appropriate action in the proper season. In the fulness of time Jesus came into the world, born of the woman, born under the law that he might redeem people from bondage.

He began his ministry when the time was ripe. He stressed the seasons and the signs of the times. "I must work while it is day," he once said, "the night comes when no one can work." In Nazareth he gave the slip to a lynch mob because his time had not yet come. Often he spoke with authority but at times he kept silent, not wanting to cast pearls before swine. He frequently answered a question by raising a question and at times refused to answer questions at all. He withheld information because his disciples could not bear it at that stage of development. Different from the fool who blurts out everything he knows in the first five minutes after he meets you, the man from Nazareth shrewdly kept his counsel. Finally when the end approached, Jesus recognized it and said it. Knowing what time it was in his own life, the Master's timing endowed his words with spirit and life.

All we can learn from Jesus proves that preaching on the ethical dimension demands a keen sense of timing. Once Charles Spurgeon told his students that all Scripture is profitable but not equally profitable for all occasions. Then he denied vehemently that he had ever preached a deacon's funeral from the text, "And it came to pass that the beggar died."

A wise preacher must have the skill of a good chef who knows how and when to use the ingredients available to him. Most of the time the pastor-chef must cook without a recipe over a hot stove. If he can't stand the pressure and heat, he will have to get out of the kitchen.

When two of those legendary "cajuns" from south Louisiana were musing together one day about the mysteries in the world, Couvillion cited the television to Broussard as the biggest mystery of all because, as he put it: "Dey trow a pitcher all the way from New Yawk and in Lafayette dey catch it in a little box and it don't even bust." "Still," rejoined Broussard, "dat mystery ain't so big as the thermos jug. You put something cold in it and it stay cold. You put something hot in it and it stay hot. How do it know when to which?"

Here are some clues I have followed in trying to know "when to which," when to preach out on ethical concerns.

#### CLUE 1: When it's in the canon.

Staying with the Scripture is the surest way to touch ethical concerns with authority. When I am faithful to the Scriptures in my preaching program, I find more legitimate occasions to deal with the ethical dimension than I have time to fulfill. No part of my preaching experience has confirmed the inspiration of the Scripture more than the continuing relevance and appropriateness of this book to the kaleidoscope of ethical concerns. Handling these subjects in the midst of exposition finds people generally more responsive to my insights than at other times. Being people of the Book, Baptists are vulnerable to the Bible and its authority.

**CLUE 2: When it is on the calendar.** Ethical concerns can be confronted naturally at such times. Numerous calendars exist, of course—those for the Christian year, the local church, the denomination, and the community

being most important. When the calendar features an important theme, questions about the welfare of people already are set throbbing in their minds. One August in remembrance of the first atomic blast at Hiroshima, I preached on "The Anniversary of an Umbrella" and talked about that umbrella-shaped atomic cloud which still hovers over our world and compels us to give attention to world peace.

On "Race Relations Sunday" I spoke about "Going through Samaria," using the moral necessity which constrained Jesus to share himself with an alienated people as an imperative for racial reconciliation to be obeyed by Christians. I received at best a cool hearing on that Sunday eighteen years ago. No one really heard and appropriated a message I had agonized to prepare and deliver. No one, I thought, until a dozen years later a young black citizen told me how that sermon had kept him in church and stayed him from becoming a radical. He then proceeded to quote some salient passages from that sermon which he had heard but once over the radio.

During the Bicentennial celebration, I addressed the entire community on our heritage and hopes and heartaches as a nation. In that malleable moment I said:

Whatever dream it was that our founders were committed to in the beginnings of this land did not include enough people. It did not include the slaves. It did not include the Indians. In many ways it did not include women. We know Thomas Jefferson saw this discrepancy. One paragraph in the Declaration of Independence as originally written was a flaming philippic against slavery, indicting it as a crime against humanity. But to guarantee the declaration's endorsement by all the states that section was removed. Slavery was too deeply entrenched in Georgia and South Carolina and brought too much money to Northern traders to be dropped. Thus from the beginning major human segments of the American population were excluded from the dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The nation has paid frightfully to rectify these wrongs. Injustice spawned our bloodiest war and killed over a half million of our youth. And for all of our

history we have been troubled by racial unrest and the struggle for equality. Let's face the truth. Unless all the people in this land get in on the dream, the dream will be spoiled for everyone. . . . But today people are being shoved from the center of our concerns by avarice. Greed is gnawing away at the nation's heart. The only ideal that many people cherish is economic growth. A yawning gap between the rich and the poor in this country threatens the whole stability of the land. In the air-conditioned comfort of our homes and offices many of us have almost forgotten the sweat and tears of those who have so little.<sup>3</sup>

Keep the calendar in mind as you search for the right moment to speak an appropriate word for the welfare of people.

**CLUE 3: When it is before the congregation.** Sometimes issues are strictly congregational in nature, but they raise concerns of wider application. Times of decision-making in the church—changes of direction, installation of new leadership, building programs—all present an opportunity to wrestle with the ethical dimension. One particularly anguishing moment for me came in our church's decision to invest in a Christian Life Center.

Struggling with priorities and eventually preaching a sermon on it brought me and the congregation face to face with the abiding Scriptural principle of building up the church. Whatever is required to keep the church strong and healthy has to be done because this is the source of health and strength for the individual members and the base of outreach to the world. How to build up the church may be different materially in every situation, but the same question must always be asked. Remembering that God's strategy for redeeming the world rests on what happened in one place gives new significance to localism.

To make anything real it must be made local. Life is always specific, never general. This experience helped many people in our fellowship to see the ethical implications for all forms of localism—domestic, educational, and political as well as religious.

**CLUE 4: When a crisis erupts.** The assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. provided a

tragically urgent setting for preaching. The rightness of the moment did not reduce the tension of the task, however. Sometimes the subject must be taken up even though reactions will be predictably harsh. On several preaching occasions I've found myself saying with Esther: "If I perish, I perish."

One of the most awkward moments I have faced recently was in response to Bailey Smith's remark on Jewish prayers. I did not want to be publically critical of our convention president, but the alienation and hurt in the Jewish community were so profound that I had no choice.

I experienced the same kind of tension when an irresponsible evangelist dropped like a bombshell on our community and raised all kinds of questions about the validity of religion and the soundness of conversion experiences occurring under a man who proved to be a con artist and a charlatan. Speaking on "Carnival Religion" created some strained relationships, but I felt compelled to do so out of concern for the greater welfare of people.

A few years ago our city faced a crisis in education after five successive bond issues had been defeated. I preached about the importance of education and the necessity of supporting the bond issue, knowing full well the opposition to the bill by many of our members. I pointed up the moral dimensions of the bond issue by using an analogy.

Beginning where our people were, I stressed the moral basis for opposing beverage alcohol—namely, the harm it does to people. I moved next to relate the personal experience of having lived in two different communities—one with good schools and liquor available on every corner and the other with bad schools and no liquor available except the bootleg variety. I speculated about which community would be best for children and concluded that the community with the good schools, since children are forced to drink the education but not the alcohol (a community with good schools and no liquor would be better yet). So support for education, I argued, was not just a financial but also a moral concern, in the same way the liquor issue was. The bond issue passed by 300 votes.

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# . . .Ministry

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**CLUE 5: When you are under conviction.** Occasionally a moral concern, like a fire in the bones, will not stay quiet until it is proclaimed. I had such an experience with the subject of "faith healing." Religious hucksters milk so much money and hope out of folks with their assurances of God's immediate healing, I finally, after years of brooding on it, preached a sermon on this abuse and distributed several thousand copies of it. My text was Paul's statement: "Trophimus have I left ill in Miletus," which by itself refutes the whole "healing" heresy. There was Paul, standing trial in Rome for his life and needing Trophimus by his side as a friend and witness to his innocence, yet his companion lay sick and had to be left behind. Neither physicians nor prayers availed for his healing, and Paul lays out the predicament in plain words.

In his language one can find no trace of guilt, no confession that prayer was lacking or faith was wanting—only the forthright acknowledgement of our human vulnerability to disease. By whose authority then do the "faith healers" make their claims when the greatest of the apostles repudiates their doctrine so directly?

Whatever factors bear on the decision of "when to preach out," it must always end up as a result of conviction, which is but another way of saying that we preach, as we walk, by faith and not by sight.

Somewhere in the writings of Oscar Wilde appears a parable about the master who came from the purple mountains to the white city. Upon entering the city he saw a young man chasing a harlot and asked: "Why do you waste the morning of life in pursuit of lust?" The youth answered: "I was blind and you restored my sight: what else is there for me to do?" Moving farther into the city the master found a man lying drunken in the gutter and asked: "Why do you squander the strength of manhood in debauchery?" The man answered: "I was sick and you healed me: what else is there for me to do?" When the master came to the heart of the city, there he saw

a wrinkled man with gray hair sitting and weeping at the side of the street and asked: "Why do you spoil with tears the golden afternoon of life?" The old man answered: "I was dead and you raised me back to life: what else is there for me to do?"

I first heard that story from a cynical fellow student. He repeated it to our Russian history professor, an exile from Nazi Germany, a Jew who narrowly escaped the holocaust. When asked his reaction, the professor replied simply: "It does not help." The young cynic shot back: "What do you mean it does not help? Do you think we need help?" Then Dr. Strauss, turning upon him those eyes of wisdom and pain, answered, "Yes, we need help. Someday you will understand." Preaching on ethical concerns in the total task of the pastor moves forward in the conviction that people need help, that God has provided this help in the gospel, and that he communicates his help in great measure through the foolishness of preaching.

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from the epilogue of Donald Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp 203ff.

<sup>2</sup>John Baillie, *Invitation to Pilgrimage* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), pp 115-116.

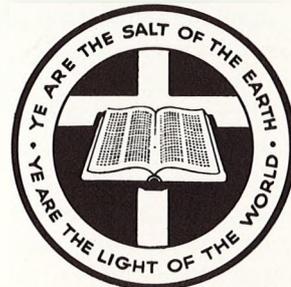
<sup>3</sup>Don Harbuck, "Independence Day Meditation."

## Salute to Tillman

William M. Tillman, Jr. has edited LIGHT since its rejuvenation in 1978. Last summer he resigned his position as the Christian Life Commission's Director of Research and Editorial Services to accept a Christian ethics teaching post at Southwestern Seminary. He consented, for the time being, to continue these editorial responsibilities. Now he has concluded that he cannot continue this arrangement. Some 8,000 readers of LIGHT will miss Bill Tillman's effective editorship and will now join in saluting him and thanking him for a job exceptionally well done.

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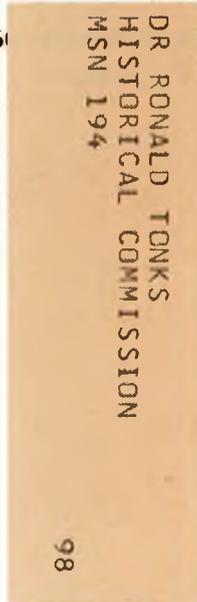
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