

Crisis as a Mode of Public Faith
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We cannot adequately pray that “God’s kingdom should come on earth,” that “God’s will should be done on earth as in heaven,” unless we consider at the same time how we faithfully practice citizenship in that God-intended political economy. It is an urgent as well as complex time to consider public dimensions of evangelical faith. My reflection will be in three parts:

1. Our problematic context for consideration faith and public policy;
2. Biblical resources for public faith; and
3. Some reflections on congregational practice.

I.

It is evident that consideration of public dimensions of faith is now profoundly difficult in many of our congregations. It is equally evident that we have a long history whereby we have arrived at this problem. I could think of six factors in producing our current problem, though you might think of others:

1. We are, for all our Reformation rhetoric, nonetheless inheritors of a medieval sacramental system that define theological matters of terms of sin and salvation, with the church as the healthcare provider to deliver “the medicine of immortality.” While that sacramental system concerns the well-being of the “catholic world,” it became in practice a highly individualized offer. That individualization, moreover, was intensified by Luther’s famous misreading of Paul, together with a doctrine of “two swords” that left the public dimension to the princes. Here I am not raising questions about Luther’s intention, but only the popular force of an offer of grace that had to do with the redress of personal default. The outcome is privatism.

2. That privatism through a sacramental system was taken up in new ways in the treaty of Westphalia that removed contentious religious claims from the public domain and left for religion private affairs of family that invited the public to go secular.¹ Beyond that desperate settlement of the religious wars, the soon-to-follow Enlightenment championed autonomous reason that defeated any thick theological claims of faith that might have impacted public life. Thus medieval sacramentalism, an intense personal-pastoral concern in Reformation, and Enlightenment autonomy all converged to exempt public life from any legitimate summons from faith.

3. The U. S. settlement of the matter was not so easy. While deism of benign kind may have dominated the founding fathers, alongside that deism there was and continues to be a powerful Puritan insistence upon a theological dimension to public life. There was and is no easy settlement between a passion for the secular and a commitment to religious claims. But the practical effect, so it seems to me, is the equation of “the American dream” with the gospel narrative. Thus across the political spectrum, I believe, there is a

readiness to believe that the U. S. political economy with its religious ingredient is the best available representation of God's intention for public life and an accompanying passion for justice and liberty. (So Niebuhr could claim that Christian faith has its best ally in a democratic ordering.) And as "the American dream" has increasingly become marked by global competition and military adventurism in the pursuit of empire, the unquestioned assumption is the convergence of that vision and the gospel narrative. Every pastor knows the risk of suggesting open critical space between the American vision and the gospel narrative.

4. That convergence of American vision and gospel narrative has, from very early days, produced a notion of U. S. "exceptionalism," that the United States is a special chosen people that is not subject to the normal rule of the nations.² The ground for this claim is that the United States political economy is the best carrier of God's intention for creation. The outcome is that the United States does not need to play by the rules of other nations, and is not subject to the restraints or sanctions of any "world order." Thus, for example, by its power the United States can arbitrarily exempt its citizens from the rulings of the World Court, set its own rules of military trials, and even as a primary polluter need not acknowledge the summons of the Kyoto treaty, or a dozen other acts of common restraint.

The ground for such exceptionalism is a coziness with God who is no longer transcendent or over-against this historical dynamism. And as Niebuhr often wrote, the United States assumes a kind of moral innocence that is incapable of self-criticism or irony. As a result the military and economic adventurism of the United States goes uncriticized and unrestrained, using up resources that might otherwise contribute to a humane infrastructure.

5. One outcome of this immunity from restraint and this exceptionalism from the requirements of history is that our practices and policies proceed by default on two large matters.

- (a) There is a default on world political economy, for immunity suggests that we are not bound in a common destiny with all our neighbors in terms of war or healthcare policy.
- (b) There is default about creation as an ecosystem of health, because we do not see our own practices and policies as related to a system larger than ourselves, we having opted out of that system as an exception.

6. And finally, from the perspective of an exegete, the narrative of exceptionalism is a totalizing narrative. It manages to co-opt everything before it. Specifically practitioners of this totalizing narrative delight to take specific biblical verses out of context, fit them to the narrative of exceptionalism-cum-pietism, and give new totalizing meanings that are alien to a text itself. A case in point: I read in *Christianity Today* of a report that CIA operatives were studying the book of Joshua in order to learn more about the legitimacy of spying. Or alternatively, the famous quote from Deuteronomy 15 by way of Jesus, "the poor you will always have with you," is used against the meaning of the text in Deuteronomy as an invitation to indifference about the social crisis of poverty. The outcome of such practice is a total loss of the biblical narrative on its own terms, a narrative that of course dramatically and forcefully breaks the connection of the gospel to U. S. exceptionalism.

On all counts, our subject requires great and informed intentionality to reclaim a more-or-less biblical understanding of reality that stands in deepest tension with the self-justifying narrative of exceptionalism that occupies much of the imagination of both liberals and conservatives in our society.

II.

Given that read of our societal setting, I will devote my energy to the resources in the Old Testament to which we may appeal in our address of public faith.

1. At the outset it is important to recognize that public ethics in ancient Israel was in every generation upstream, always “in the shadow of an empire,” an empire that characteristically appealed to a totalizing narrative that sought to silence any particularized ethical claim.³ (It is not different in the New Testament church...witness the book of Acts.) Thus one can trace the imperial reality amid which ancient Israel practiced its peculiar narrative in times both of resistance and alternative. I mean to suggest that one cannot open the Old Testament anywhere, but to see an intention of resistance and alternative, even though there were always those who sought to collude with totalizing narratives at the expense of peculiar moral summons. Thus:

- At the outset the narrative concerns Egypt and its slave labor policy;
- Solomon and his slave labor policy with a sense of entitlement that permeated the entire history of that monarchy;
- The Assyrian empire with its uncommon brutality;
- Babylon with its act of terminating Jerusalem and deporting its leading citizens;
- Persia, more benign than Assyria or Babylon, but with insistent tax policies that reduced Jews to slavery;
- And finally in a later period, Hellenism which came to forcible dramatic contempt by the remarkable act of a pig sacrificed on the Jerusalem altar, a quintessential mocking of Jewish particularity.

In every season, Israelites and then the Jews had to sort out a peculiar God-given identity, had to find ways to cooperate with empire without being co-opted, had to participate in the general political economy but with one eye on distinctiveness.⁴

Did you notice in my listing of the empires that I included Solomon, a homegrown totalizer that in his policies of indifference and exploitation was quite like all the others?⁵ For good reason Solomon is singled out by Jesus as the quintessential model of self-sufficiency permeated by anxiety: “Not even Solomon in all his glory...” (Matt 6:29).

I begin with imperial environment, because I believe that a public ethic in the U.S. church now must make the case that our evangelical vision and our baptismal version of public reality are from the ground up at deep odds with dominant culture. This stance of “deep odds” that we mostly resist in our sense of exceptionalism might be an invitation to a retreating sectarianism. But it need not. It can also be a sustained insistent alternative proposal to the empire, rooted deep but wide and sophisticated in its word that seeks to impinge upon, modify, and correct the dominant narrative that is now almost everywhere seen to be inadequate. In what follows, I trace out four rootages of resistance and alternative where the church may take its stand. These will be obvious to you but there is, I take it, merit in our reflection upon them.

2. The beginning point in the Bible for resistance and alternative can hardly be anywhere except the Sinai covenant of Exodus 19-24, a text that Jesus understands to be the center of the Torah. Frank Crüsemann has made the point that because the Sinai covenant cannot be located chronologically or geographically, it is given in the tradition as a u-topian claim outside of time, always there, always alternative, always making demand.⁶

As you know, the God who speaks at Sinai is the one “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Israel arrives at Sinai with the scars, scabs, and echoes of Egypt still in its body. The Israelites could still hear the primal command of Pharaoh to “make more bricks,” to give your life over to the imperial enterprise of gratification and self-sufficiency. And when the Israelites arrived at Sinai, they said to Moses...the first thing they said to Moses is, “Whatever the commands of Sinai, we will obey them.” (Exod 19:8) We will take them as alternative to Pharaoh’s brick quota.

As you know, the liberator of the slaves—still in an emancipatory position—gave ten intransigent guidelines for public policy, ten alternatives to Pharaoh’s royal commands of productivity. Of course the ten commandments are not offered as a totem for empire-obeying right-wingers. But we have defaulted in interpretation, have exempted these resources from public policy, and permitted the commands to be co-opted to fit imperial requirement.

I comment on only two of the commandments. The third commandment is “Do not take the name of the Lord in vain.” (Exod 20:7) The commandment is not a prohibition against bad language. It is a warning that the name and presence of YHWH cannot be preempted to serve as a legitimating support for pet projects, not war, not stewardship, not church programs, because the Holy God stands apart from and over-against our best enterprises.

The fourth commandment, placed at the center of the Decalogue, is a curb on defining life in terms of productivity (Exod 20:8-11). The public act of Sabbath is a declaration to our children that the rat race of getting ahead is not the story of our life. Jews must regularly and visibly disengage from the brick quota of the consumer economy to give evidence that our life consists in being and not in getting or having or eating. The command is of course echoed in the tenth commandment on coveting, itself a curb on acquisitiveness (Exod 20:17).

What if we take the Ten Commandments as an antidote to anxiety? There is anxiety in the empire because we will never have enough bricks. And Jesus said, “Do not be anxious about getting ahead in the world, for the Father God knows and provides what you need” (Matt 6:25, 32). Israel resists the anxiety of the empire, and offers an alternative of covenantal freedom that has peaceable rest at its center.

3. Empires proceed by euphemism, characteristically “toxic euphemisms.” Empires proceed by denying what is happening, by pretending it is something else, characteristically by religious or moral legitimization. In that practice the alternative community of covenant—since Sinai—requires the question that was eventually asked of the Roman governor, “What is truth?” (John 18:38)⁷

In ancient Israel, the ones who ask the truth question are the prophets. They are, in a general way, informed by the claims of Sinai. But mainly they are freelance poets who, by their artistry, turn the language, rich with image and metaphor, this way and that so that we may see reality differently. They are engaged in acts of imagination (hence

Prophetic Imagination) that stands outside the normative imagination of the empire.⁸ The practice of image and metaphor leaves them deeply elusive, but they must be elusive in order not to be “apprehended” by the rulers of this age.

We may, in an act of interpretive reductionism, suggest that the prophets have two primary accents. The first, best known to us, is that they pronounce judgment upon dominant culture because dominant culture has violated the gifts of God’s will and therefore will evoke trouble from God. While the prophets use the language of supernaturalism concerning direct divine intervention, they are in fact poets. They do not describe what God will do. They anticipate how the world will feel.

Their utterances of judgment, I suggest, are designed to counter the dominant pathology of the empire, namely denial, the refusal to see honestly and clearly what is going on. So Amos can narrate a characteristic picture of self-indulgence even though that picture pales before our own contemporary self-indulgence:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:4-6)

The first word of the oracle, “Alas,” is a grief word, anticipating a funeral. Those who live as the poet describes will face a deathliness. The portrayal of self-indulgence, of which the self-indulgent themselves are rarely aware, ends in a characteristic and savage “therefore”:

Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Amos 6:7)

Notice that in this poetry God is not mentioned. There is no supernaturalist agent. It will simply happen. It will happen among those who do not notice, who refuse to notice, who are unwilling to notice. The tricky word “therefore” connects in the rhetoric a savage practice of the political economy and an outcome that, except for prophetic imagination, has no connection to the foregoing. The denial is that “this” will not lead to “that.” The prophetic insistence made by daring rhetoric is the connection. The connection breaks the denial, not unlike the connection that Jesus makes concerning the Messiah who must suffer and die, a connection that was unthinkable to the disciples even as exile from Samaria was unthinkable in the ancient Israel of Amos (Mark 8:31).

The second theme of prophetic imagination, found everywhere in the great prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, is hope for God’s full restoration of a community that has been radically displaced. The announcement of divine promise did not arise *de novo*. It arises from the seedbed of candor birthed through suffering and loss and displacement. So the prophets speak out of deep need in a context where many are in despair that God has forgotten, that God does not notice, that God’s arm is too short to save. But despair is routed by these originary affirmations:

Comfort comfort my people.
Behold the days are surely coming...

In that day...

And the poets line out comfort, homecoming, new temple, new covenant, new land, new possibility...all things new! As the poets refuse denial and speak judgment, so they refuse despair and speak possibility. They speak such inexplicable possibility as they anticipate restored Jerusalem, even as they anticipate in later reference, "He is risen, he is risen indeed." Risen from the dead, risen from exile, and risen from humiliation and displacement (Ezek 37:1-14). Such utterance is against denial that Messiah must not die. Such utterance is against despair that he has risen. I have no doubt that the beginning of a public ethic is to break the denial in truth-telling that goes behind euphemism, to break the despair in hope-telling because new obedience has to do with what is made newly possible.

4. The third canon of the Old Testament concerns wisdom. That literature, as in the book of Proverbs, articulates steady-state order in the world while the books of Job and Ecclesiastes dispute that order. The entire discussion, however, is about a given order that is inscrutable, but intransigent, in order to be probed but while probed, respected. It may be that wisdom is the best entry into public policy, because this teaching entails no appeal to the particular confessional traditions of Israel. Rather it is an observation-based judgment about the nature of lived reality that is generated and guaranteed by the creator God who makes no concessions or compromises. Wisdom teaching makes connections that are intransigent even if we cannot trace them, connections like:

- ❖ Smoke long enough and you get lung cancer.
- ❖ Destroy the rainforests and have global warming.

That connection requires no explicit divine intervention. It is the way the world works. The connections may later be lined out by scientific specificity, but short of such specificity the connection is observable to the discerning. The world works that way. It is guaranteed and one cannot circumvent it. Wisdom is the capacity to recognize and accept limit that will not be violated.

- ❖ Mock the poor...insult their creator (Prov 17:5).

There is an intrinsic connection between the creator God and poor people, and the connection cannot be broken by the willful action of the powerful.

- ❖ The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory belongs to YHWH (Prov 21:31).

There are not enough bombs in Viet Nam or enough brutal force in Iraq to ensure military victory for the empire, if the gods are allied with homegrown land-loving soldiers.

- ❖ Avoid debt like a hole in the head.

Everywhere in Proverbs the warning is that if you get into debt you will eventually belong to somebody else, and eventually China or the Arabs will wind up having leverage on your economy.

The foolish, the ones Gerhard von Rad calls "practical atheists," are those who refuse to recognize such limits, and image that by power and shrewdness we can outflank those inscrutable, God-given limits.⁹ But wisdom is aimed especially against such technical reason that proceeds as if there were no givens. Nonetheless every empire imagines that it can make new givens, "a new world order," as in, "We don't respond to events...we create new events to which others must respond." The wisdom teachers eventually assert that arrogance is the decisive violation of the creation that is ordered by God. Thus the wisdom teachers, perhaps with due gender distinctions, can conclude:

Three things are stately in their stride;
 four are stately in their gait:
 the lion, which is mightiest among wild animals
 and does not turn back before any;
 the strutting rooster, the he-goat,
 and a king striding before his people. (Prov 30:29-31)

That is stateliness. But this is preceded in the wisdom sayings about trembling:

Under three things the earth trembles;
 under four it cannot bear up:
 a slave when he becomes king,
 and a fool when gluttoned with food;
 an unloved woman when she gets a husband,
 and a maid when she succeeds her mistress. (Prov 30:21-23)

New power seduces and the earth trembles.

We make the claim that it is the wisdom of the cross that contradicts the sureness of the world:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:21-25)

The gospel is the awareness that the best certitudes of the world are always placed in jeopardy by the truth of God. Paul has seen this clearly in Jesus of Nazareth. But even before that the poem of Job ponders the settled conclusions of the book of Proverbs, and comes to see that the best absolutes of human imagination are known to be penultimate. The voice of God speaks from the whirlwind, not even acknowledging the absolutes handed back and forth between Job and his friends. In the end, says the poem, there is inscrutable mystery behind our best claims. We are invited by the poet to pause with our deepest convictions and then to wait. In the end, Job may return to the simplicities of the book of Proverbs, but he relearns them now sobered away from his arrogance. He receives everything back even with new children; but he does not receive back his lost children (Job 42:10-17). Now he must live with that unrecoverable loss and find new ways to obey. The conclusion drawn is one of deep simplicity:

And he said to humankind,
 "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
 and to depart from evil is understanding." (Job 28:28)

"Fear of the Lord" places all else, even our best ideologies, in jeopardy. Both the arrogance of the friends and the deep felt impulse of Job are judged before the God of all wisdom.

5. The empire wants a monologue, the silencing of every voice except its own. The CEO of Home Depot, in the most recent meeting of stockholders, sets a time clock to limit questions of shareholders to one minute. The U. S. builds the world's largest

embassy in Baghdad, constructed under all-night lights, while the city lacks power. All around—in gender, in class, in race—there is silencing power and silent people can only conform in resignation or seethe in resentment, but they cannot act as free agents in their own history.

The book of Psalms is Israel's instrument and practice of speech, designed to counter the imposed silence of all monitoring librarians. Imagine ancient Israel, gathered regularly in the face of the relentless empire, ranging through its repertoire, refusing techno-speech that comes from the Pentagon and the psychobabble that comes from Dr. Phil, and engaging in speech that is truth-telling, the self-in-community a daring, demanding exhibit, refusing safer silence. I have no doubt that bringing the self fully to speech is the first act of public ethics to notice how a voice of advocacy and insistence and alternative sounds in the corridors of power.

Israel sings and speaks and prays, refusing every silence. Israel claims self. The voice of the lament Psalms is the break made by the depleted self willing to declare self a worthwhile agent, even at the throne of God. Such speech is first of all the I, I in my need, I in my insistence and my resistance and my expectation and my sadness and my readiness to wait, but not too long:

I cry aloud to God,
 aloud to God, that he may hear me.
 In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
 in the night my hand is
 stretched out without wearying;
 my soul refuses to be comforted.
 I think of God, and I moan;
 I meditate, and my spirit faints.
 You keep my eyelids from closing;
 I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
 I consider the days of old,
 and remember the years of long ago.
 I commune with my heart in the night;
 I meditate and search my spirit:
 "Will the Lord spurn forever,
 and never again be favorable?
 Has his steadfast love ceased forever?
 Are his promises at an end for all time?
 Has God forgotten to be gracious?
 Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"
 And I say, "It is my grief
 that the right hand of the Most
 High has changed." (Ps 77:1-10)

The laments, without conceding anything, are about the self. Too long the church, in its fascination with guilt, has diminished self, urged self to deference and default, and effaced self until finally there is a disappearance of the self.

But if the laments risk too much self-assertion, they are checked in the rich repertoire by a change of posture. For the lament will most often move to hymn in which

the claimed self is gladly transposed into the abandoned self, abandoned in exuberance to the wondrous reality of God who is worthy of all praise:

The Lord sets the prisoners free;
 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
 The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
 the Lord loves the righteous.
 The Lord watches over the strangers;
 he upholds the orphan and the widow,
 but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
 The Lord will reign forever,
 your God, O Zion, for all generations.
 Praise the Lord! (Ps 146:7b-10)

* * *

Praise the Lord!
 How good it is to sing praises to our God;
 for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.
 The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
 he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
 He heals the brokenhearted,
 and binds up their wounds.
 He determines the number of the stars;
 he gives to all of them their names.
 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
 his understanding is beyond measure.
 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;
 he casts the wicked to the ground. (Ps 147:1-6)

Now the world is peopled by the extravagant power and the overwhelming generosity of God. The self is on the receiving end and glad to be so.

The wonder of the Psalter is that these genre of claimed self and abandoned self are in close and easy proximity to each other. Israel finds no awkwardness or contradiction in its capacity to claim self in demanding entitlement and to yield self in buoyant theological affirmation. It is the capacity to praise and to lament, to yield and to claim, to be exuberant and then indignant, that is the supple emancipated practice whereby the self can be fully free and fully grateful, fully demanding in the world. The wonder of the book of Psalms is that the God of Israel is willing to be the responding partner for Israel in all these dialogical transactions, ready to be addressed in lament in order to respond, ready to be praised by Israel and therefore magnified above all the other gods, ready to ascend in large rule and to descend into unbearable mystery, ready to be a party to the fluid, open dialogue that constitutes the covenantal existence promised at Sinai and practiced by Moses.¹⁰ One cannot go easily to public policy unless there is a people prepared, schooled and equipped for the open extremities of human existence. Capacity to live to the edges of wonder and dismay creates a large arena in which we are able to move beyond ourselves, bold before intransigent reality and buoyant alongside people in need. It is this large arena of human possibility that makes a faithful life sustainable:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor 4:8-10)

The life of Jesus is a life of suffering that requires lament. The life of Jesus is a life of resurrection that requires doxology. We carry that whole life in our bodies, lament and doxology, suffering and resurrection, and we are unafraid!

6. Thus I suggest ample resources in the text for faith enacted in public domain:
- a) The Torah that offers an alternative to the endless productivity of Pharaoh...and Jesus who offers discipleship as an antidote to anxiety;
 - b) Prophetic truth-telling that exposes the euphemisms of exploitation among the rulers of this age,
 - that speaks judgment to open denial, even as we confess that Messiah must suffer and die;
 - that speaks hope to penetrate despair, even as we confess, “he is risen,” against all conventional expectations.
 - c) Wisdom reflection is acknowledgment of a given order of *shalom* that contradicts our technological arrogance,
 - an order that gives life but not on our own terms,
 - a protest that makes all our absolutes penultimate even as we ponder the one,
 - whose foolishness is wisdom,
 - whose weakness is strength,
 - whose poverty is wealth.
 - d) The Psalms are an invitation to extremity,
 - The extremity of the claimed self,
 - The extremity of the abandoned self,
 - The nurture of a free self who proceeds in dialogue that leads to a self open and free and with energy, against all our silencing in conformity and collusion.

Each of these literatures invites to an either/or:

- 1) Either sabbath rest or the anxiety of productivity;
- 2) Either truth-telling or life hidden in denial and despair;
- 3) Either all before a life-given order or arrogance too much in love with our own absolutes;
- 4) Either the rhetoric of extremity or a safe life of silence.

That either/or can perhaps be thematized into large narrative claim:

Either: a life from creation through obedience to peace at the last,

Or: a life of self-invention through anxiety to death.

Thus we are confronted with a narrative of hope vs. a narrative of fear. And we may choose. The two narratives have been lined out by Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and

righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer 9:23-24)

Jeremiah uttered these words just as his world was collapsing. He understood the trajectory of disaster marked by wisdom, might, and wealth, and the trajectory of possibility marked by steadfast love, justice, and righteousness...and he never confused the two. It is worth noticing that Paul, in his great rendition of the wisdom of the cross quotes this text from Jeremiah:

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor 1:30-31)

Paul asserts about people who choose the gospel may as a part of God's intention:

God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor 1:28-29)

"Bringing to naught" creates space for that new kingdom ruled by the one "who calls into existence things that do not exist."

III.

I am obligated, even if ill-equipped, to conclude with some comments on congregational practice. I am not a pastor, though I am the son of a pastor; but I think I do not underestimate the difficulty of these issues in the life of a congregation.

First, I offer five observations about the congregation, all of which are obvious to you:

1. It is important to re-construe the congregation, in all its aspects, as an arena in which we practice evangelical imagination, that is, in which we conjure the world through the claims of the gospel. This means that we do something very different "in here" from what happens "out there," it means that we engage in deep contestation of a healing kind. I believe that most congregations are not construed as a place where we do something different from our culture, which means to work at distinguishing the gospel from the American dream.

2. It is important to recognize that we have so much to unlearn, both fearful conservatives and shrill liberals. Partly we have to unlearn because we have learned poorly. But more important, we have to unlearn because what we have learned is not now adequate. As per the model of Thomas Kuhn, it is as though we are working with Ptolemaic assumptions in a Copernican universe.¹¹

3. The beginning point for reconstrual is baptism, and we must now learn from the Anabaptist traditions. Baptism is the marking of an alternative identity wherein "we renounce Satan and all his works," wherein we declare that God's promises are definitional for us and for God's whole creation.

4. The Eucharist as an act of alternative imagination needs to be reconstrued away from the older "sin-salvation" model into the obedience of creation with twelve baskets of bread left over...loaves abound!

5. The sacraments are reconstrued because of the word. My exposition has been an argument that everything needful for our work is in the text of scripture and the great ecumenical tradition of interpretation of that scripture. But we have been lazy and compliant about the text; we ourselves have been content to take bits of the text and fit it into another narrative. I have no doubt that the beginning point of public policy is text, text, text. That is not because the Bible tells us what to do about abortion or immigration, but because the Bible places us in an alternative world where the God of the gospel is clearly enacted.

6. So much depends upon pastors and teachers of the church being faithful witnesses, not to pet projects that are liberal or conservative, but to the deep claims that invite to Easter. I call your attention, if you get frightened like I do, to the words of Jesus to his disciples about the dangers of testimony:

But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. (Luke 21:12-15)

Jesus promises to give his witnesses “mouth.”

Finally, I conclude with four comments about the congregation:

1. The work of congregational ministry is to help people find themselves in crisis so that the ambivalence between old and new can be felt and named. I believe the crisis is already felt but it mostly remains unnamed. I believe people, if alive at all, are wistfully in crisis that cannot be dealt with unless it is named.

2. The crisis is to be conducted visibly and overtly in a mood of pluralism, so that the pastor cannot very far urge specific outcomes, but people are led by the Spirit in ways beyond even us.

3. The context of congregation as arena for evangelical imagination is so that people can re-decide against a false story; such re-deciding gives energy and freedom for obedience to new possibility.

4. The truth makes free. Nothing else does. We have some truthfulness entrusted to us. The rest is given by the Spirit through our practice. The promise is that we may be as free, in truth, as was Miriam with her tambourines and her sisters:

Free at last,
Free at last,
Thank God almighty, free at last! (Exod 15:21)

¹ See Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

² On the current crisis of U.S. exceptionalism, see Gary Dorrien, “Consolidating the Empire: Neoconservatism and the Politics of American Dominion,” *Political Theology* 6/4 (October 2005), 409-428.

³ See Walter Brueggemann, “Always in the Shadow of the Empire,” *The Church as Counterculture*, ed. by Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 39-58.

⁴ On the dynamics of this social location, see Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

⁵ On the dynamics of this social location, see Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

⁶ Frank Crüsemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 57.

⁷ On this text and the narrative of the trial of Jesus, see Paul Lehmann, *The Transfiguration of Politics: The Presence and Power of Jesus of Nazareth in and Over Human Affairs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 48-70.

⁸ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), and with specificity, William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 65.

¹⁰ On the theological urgency of dialogue, George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 225 comments, “It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech-acts except that of monologue....” On current interest in dialogue as it is presented in the literary theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000).

¹¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).