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Restoration Church History and a Theology of Suffering

DOUGLAS B. SKINNER

Four days after the terrorist attacks on America last September, a National Prayer Service was held. Among the speakers was Max Lucado, perhaps the highest profile preacher of the Stone-Campbell tradition in the United States today. He composed a prayer for that service entitled “Do it Again, Lord.” This just may be the most famous piece of religious writing to come out of the September 11 tragedy to date. It gives powerful voice to that jumble of emotions that we all felt in the days after those towers fell, climaxing with a clear reference to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In that prayer Max Lucado prayed, “After three days in a dark hole, you rolled the rock and rumbled the earth and turned the darkest Friday into the brightest Sunday.”¹ And then he quickly added, “Do it again, Lord. Grant us a September Easter.” Now, I can’t quarrel with this theology. It’s my theology too. Stanley Hauerwas says that the primary interpretive task for the church since the events of September 11 has been to narrate those events “in the light of cross and resurrection.”² And this is what Max Lucado tried to do in his prayer.

Still, I have to confess that his words made me just a little uneasy, spoken as they were before the dust of the collapse of our landmark buildings and national confidence had even settled. As Hauerwas reminds us, the gospel with which we have been entrusted has two very distinct moments. There is the cross and there is the resurrection. There is a crucifixion and an empty tomb. There is a Good Friday afternoon and an Easter Sunday morning. And there is no doubt about which of these two moments we prefer. Easter trumps Good Friday every time. We do not want to linger over the abandonment that Jesus Christ voiced while he

was hanging on the cross. We do not want to ponder the darkness that swallowed the world on that awful afternoon. We want Easter without having to go through Good Friday.

In the only preaching class I ever took, my professor accused me of invoking what he called the “Christ cliché” in one of my very first sermons. By the “Christ cliché,” my professor meant the glib way in which I had spoken the name of Jesus Christ in relation to the brokenness of the world. He accused me of moving too quickly to Christ as the answer to life’s most perplexing problems. He told me that it wasn’t good preaching, and he was right. In the aftermath of my professor’s challenge that day, I had to rethink my approach to the preaching task. Interestingly, it was in remembering my high school geometry class that I found model that I needed.

I was never a very good math student. I suffered from what some educators now call “math phobia”—at least that’s my story and I’m sticking to it. Algebra still makes my brow sweat and my hands tremble. I got through all those math classes of my childhood and youth by the thinnest of margins. Remedial math classes during summer school



were the norm rather than the exception for me from grade school through the first years of high school. But when I took geometry in my junior year of high school, everything changed. Something about theorems and the degrees of angles just clicked inside my head. I went from being the most marginal of math students to ranking near the very top of that class.

I remember my teacher telling us at the beginning of that year of geometry that it wasn't going to be enough for us just to get the right answers to the problems. He told us that how we got to the right answer was going to matter at least as much as the right answer itself, and that intrigued me. To this day, I credit my high school geometry teacher for teaching me how to think. Remembering his words, I decided to apply this lesson to homiletics after my professor's critique of my sermon—I began to conceive of the preaching task as a matter of spiritual geometry.

I suppose this explains my uneasiness with Lucado's reference to a "September Easter" in a prayer offered just four days after September 11. It was not that he offered the wrong answer in his prayer; it simply seemed premature. He got there much too quickly. It's like giving the right answer to a geometry problem without going through all the steps of actually working the problem. It fails to take full measure of the experience of loss or to give full voice to the anguish that is felt. We need some time to dwell with our pain before the solution to it gets pitched, otherwise God's grace can get cheapened and Christ can become a mere cliché. I suspect this is why theologian Hauerwas warned the church not to say too much too soon after September 11. He understood just how easily the proclamation of the gospel could be "captured by false comforts."³

Sister Terese of the Carmelite Community of Indianapolis avoided such haste. Rather than talking about a "September Easter" just after the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked, Sister Terese wrote of it instead as "a Good Friday out of season."⁴ That was a phrase she had coined several years before when her mother died. In that time of great personal loss, Sister Terese said that it didn't feel much like Easter to her. But in that season of "pain-dwelling," Sister Terese says that she was not shipwrecked in her faith. What sustained her was the abiding assurance of "Emmanuel"—the inner awareness that God was with her in the experience of loss. She had the theological resources to do this. But I am not sure that we in the Stone-Campbell tradition do. Consider a tragic episode from Alexander Campbell's life, what W.K. Pendleton described as "the saddest bereavement it has ever fallen to our lot to witness."⁵

On September 4, 1847, Alexander and Selina Campbell's ten-year-old son, Wickliffe, drowned in a swimming accident in Buffalo Creek within sight of the Bethany Meeting House. At the time of the accident, Alexander Campbell was in Europe. Although he would not learn of his loss until he returned to the United States six weeks later, Alexander Campbell reported a disturbance in his sleep at the time the accident happened and admitted to a deep sense of dread about "something sad" having happened at home.⁶

Selina Campbell was left "disconsolate" by Wickliffe's death, and the restoration community was asked to unite in common prayer that the Campbell family might find "both strength to bear and resignation to suffer the calamity that has befallen them."⁷ "The stroke which has fallen upon her, and which awaits him," W.K. Pendleton wrote in his obituary for Wickliffe, "is one of more than ordinary bereavement."⁸ In fact,

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some say that Selina never recovered from it. Joseph Jeter and Hiram Lester give accounts of Alexander Campbell sometimes finding Selina at Wickliffe's grave in the cemetery late at night weeping, or wading in Buffalo Creek calling out Wickliffe's name. "He is not here, dear wife," Alexander would gently reassure her, "he is not here." Then he would lead her back home. In her memoirs, Selina admitted to visions of Wickliffe and attempted conversations with him long after his death.⁹

If Selina Campbell's response to the accidental drowning of her son was one of great emotional turmoil, Alexander Campbell's response was one of theologically controlled grief. It was not that Alexander Campbell did not feel his loss deeply. When writing about Wickliffe's death, Campbell described his son as "the choicest lamb from my flock" and the one "around whom clustered so many bright hopes."¹⁰ But Alexander Campbell's grief was effectively managed by his theology. He coped with his loss by clinging to three basic convictions: (1) that God's will is mysteriously inscrutable, (2) that God's intentions for us are always wise and good, and (3) that the hope of heaven provides us with our only real source of consolation in this life. In the immediate aftermath of his loss, Alexander Campbell interpreted it by writing,

[God] is too wise to err, and too kind causelessly to afflict the children of men. May our affections never be unduly placed on any thing on earth; but as those we love both in the flesh and in the Lord are taken to himself; may our affections be more placed on things above and less on things on the earth.¹¹

Much later, when probing "the wounds then opened in the paternal bosom," Alexander Campbell found his final consolation in the promise of resurrection.

How strange, and yet how mournfully pleasing the thought, that, of fourteen children given to me, nine of them are now present with the Lord! Three of them died, never having sinned in their own persons. And as by Adam the first they died, by Adam the second they shall forever live with God. Six of them died in faith, and rejoiced in the hope of a glorious immortality. This, to us their survivors, is a sovereign balm—a blest relief. Though dead to us, they live with God. May the kind Redeemer raise us up with them in his own time, and reunite us in the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.¹²

Reviewing the accounts that we have of this family tragedy, I find myself thinking that if Selina Campbell's response to the death of her son could have used more of the promise of Easter, then Alexander Campbell's could have used more of the reality of Good Friday. He seems to skirt the edges of grief, never quite entering fully into the anguish of the experience. There is a certain reserve in the way he described his loss, a retreat into theological conviction that appeared to buttress his heart. I am left with the impression that Alexander Campbell must have been afraid that to grieve his loss too publicly or intensely would have been to cast doubt on the certainty of his faith. Campbell seems to have had the right theological resources to ground his hope, but not necessarily the ones he needed to voice his grief. And I wonder if the cause of this apparent spiritual deficiency lies in his, and our, hermeneutics.

While editing the *Christian Standard*, Isaac Errett wrote a series of essays entitled "First Principles." His intent was to address the basics of Christianity as they had been traditionally understood by the Stone-Campbell movement. Upon learning that Isaac Errett was going to do this, one anonymous inquirer wrote and urgently asked him to answer the question, "Is it true that the disciples deny the Old Testament?"¹³ The persistent impression that the Stone-Campbell movement denies the Old Testament is a consequence of what Thomas Olbricht described as our "tripartite dispensationalism."¹⁴ In large measure, that is the theological contribution of Alexander Campbell.

One of the core hermeneutical principles of the Stone-Campbell movement from the beginning has been a fundamental recognition of the distinction between the Testaments. This principle finds one of its earli-

est expressions in the fourth proposition of Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* (1809). But it was Alexander Campbell who gave it full expression in his "Sermon in the Law," preached before the Redstone Baptist Association in 1816. In this message, Alexander Campbell made the memorable comparison of the patriarchal dispensation to starlight, the Jewish dispensation to moonlight, and the Christian dispensation to sunlight. The distinctions of these dispensations became a significant issue in Campbell's debate with the Reverend John Walker, a Seceder Presbyterian minister, in Mount Pleasant, Ohio in 1820. It also found expression in the second principle of Alexander Campbell's "Rules of Interpretation" for scripture found in *The Christian System* (1836). In this, Campbell gives counsel always to "observe who it is that speaks, and under what dispensation he officiates" when "examining the contents of any book."¹⁵ "Is he a Patriarch, a Jew, or a Christian?" Campbell asked because the answer determined the applicability of the text to the church's life and the Christian's faith.

J. Philip Hyatt's essay on "The Place of the Old Testament in the Christian Faith" in the Panel of Scholars Report for the Disciples of Christ identified two errors that Christians have made in the way that they treat the Old Testament. One error is to "overemphasize continuity between the Testaments," and the other error is to "overemphasize discontinuity between the Testaments."¹⁶ Hyatt named the second error as our own. He observed that "the early Disciples leaders were apparently so intent upon restoring the principles of the New Testament that they did not really give profound thought to the Old Testament and its relationship to the New, and to its part in the Bible as a whole."¹⁷

Proof of this hermeneutical accusation can be found in our homiletical legacy and practice. Alger Fitch, in his 1970 study of the preaching of Alexander Campbell, concluded that while "he clearly was a preacher of the Bible," Alexander Campbell nevertheless had a decided preference for New Testament texts. Fitch states,

In sampling the texts referred to either in Campbell's original sermon notes, or in records concerning where and what he preached, we find that of one hundred forty six messages tested only sixteen had Old Testament passages as their basic texts. . . . When he did choose a passage of Old Testament Scripture, it was a New Testament truth that he illumined.¹⁸

Joseph Faulkner, in his analysis of 206 sermons preached in congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1988, observed "an almost Marcionite approach to the bulk of the Bible."¹⁹ Alexander Campbell's descendents in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) follow his example of trying to be biblical preachers while ignoring much of the Bible. Faulkner discovered that "overall in the sample, the New Testament is quoted more than three times as often as the Old Testament."²⁰

Richard T. Hughes has suggested that our hermeneutics, which insist that only parts of the canon of scripture carry "normative weight" for Christian faith and practice, has "crippled the ethical witness" of our churches.²¹ I suspect that this same accusation could be leveled at our pastoral care. In fact, Andre Resner, Jr., in his article "Lament: Faith's Response to Loss," probed the way that our hermeneutical loss of the Old Testament in the Stone-Campbell movement has silenced "the legitimate cry of lament" in the life of Christian faith.²² He suggested that our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ makes us reluctant to pay too much attention to the anguish of Good Friday. We fear that giving full expression to our grief in times of loss might be interpreted as a lack of confidence in the sufficiency of the gospel to meet our needs. Yet "pastoral sensitivity means recognizing that the good news is only good news because the bad news has seeped into every fiber of our being."²³ And so Resner urges us to reclaim the fullness of our biblical faith by recovering the cry of despair. This will require us to "enlarge our canon."²⁴

John Mark Hicks' canon was enlarged out of his suffering. It was the experience of profound personal loss that turned him to the Old Testament books of Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The context of his suffering provided him with the occasion for the "empathetic reading" of these texts.²⁵ An heir of the Stone-

Campbell hermeneutic, Hicks admitted that the possibility of “faithful lament” was not an idea with which he was conversant.²⁶ He writes,

Christianity was a faith of joy, celebration and hopeful anticipation. My worldview was dominated by a triumphalism. It was a progressive view of life. We will set the world aright. We will establish the perfect church, or, at least, restore a true one. It had little room for lament (and little room for failure). But my own suffering forced me to lament because the suffering believer, who continues to believe, can only lament. Lament, with all its confusion, desperation, and doubt, expresses the sufferer’s faith.²⁷

As the laments of the Old Testament gave voice to the anguish that he felt in his heart, John Mark Hicks reclaimed the fullness of the biblical witness as a resource for his faith despite limitations imposed by the traditional hermeneutic of the Stone-Campbell movement. He didn’t have to “rush” the answer. He didn’t have to push prematurely for a “September Easter.” He could patiently dwell with the pain of a “Good Friday out of season” until Easter morning dawned in his heart.

In *The Bible Jesus Read*, bestselling author Philip Yancey wrote about the death of his father-in-law, Hunter Norwood, a man who “believed wholeheartedly in the Victorious Christian Life and named Romans as his favorite book, his guidebook on relating to God.”²⁸ And yet, in his closing pain-filled days, the resource that carried him was the Old Testament. Reviewing the daily journal of his final days, Philip says that “of the hundreds of entries, I can find only nine referring to verses in the New Testament.”²⁹ Yancey concludes,

The wavering yet rock-solid faith Hunter found in the Old Testament sustained him when nothing else could. Even at his most doubt-filled moments, he took comfort in the fact that some of God’s favorites had battled the very same demons. He learned that the arms of the Lord are long and wrap around those he loves, not just in prosperous and happy times but especially in times of travail. I am glad that, in those dark days Hunter Norwood had the Old Testament to fall back on.³⁰

We should too.

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ENDNOTES

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