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The Kingdoms of This World: The Rise of the Political Pulpit

BY MICHAEL W. CASEY

Excerpted from *Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ*, © 1995 by Dr. Michael W. Casey. Reprinted by permission of ACU Press.

Don Haymes, in his article on Southern religious debating, makes the perceptive remark that the “energy once devoted to airing of doctrinal differences is now channeled into televised assaults against social and political targets.”¹ The Churches of Christ have clearly followed the social and cultural trends of the rest of the South on the preaching of political topics.

The Churches of Christ were mostly apolitical and pacifist until World War I.² David Lipscomb had argued that Christians were citizens of a different kingdom and should have nothing to do with any worldly institutions, especially political and moral institutions. He thought that it was wrong for Christians to vote, even on moral questions. Lipscomb cared nothing for prohibition or any other moral issue as a part of politics. The business of Christians was to spread the kingdom of God, which would eventually overthrow all political kingdoms. The hope of believers was in the other world, the heavenly kingdom. As a result, Christians also could not participate in war.³

After 1900, however, the entire South began to endorse efforts at moral legislation. Increasingly, Southerners began to see America as a Christian nation and to believe that issues of liquor consumption and the teaching of evolution were important, both spiritually and politically.⁴ The increasing affluence in the Churches of Christ also began to dictate a change in preachers’ interest in political issues. The preachers of the Churches of Christ became more aware and concerned about the surrounding

society, a factor which contributed to the emergence of the political pulpit.

Throughout the history of the Churches of Christ, leaders and preachers have spoken and written about theological topics in order to define acceptable positions. But because of the debating tradition and the practice of congregational autonomy in Churches of Christ, individual preachers have been able to rise in popularity if they could convince most in the churches to agree with them (they have also fallen if they were not able to convince them). Convincing them, however, has often been tricky and treacherous business, for many who have wanted popularity and power have found themselves on the unpopular side of controversies. Most preachers have called these theological topics “issues.” They discuss political questions as theological “issues” that have to be settled among the churches. This style became one more way for some preachers to build popularity among the Churches of Christ.

G. C. Brewer was clearly the key person to introduce the political pulpit. He studied under David Lipscomb at Nashville Bible School (now David Lipscomb University) and took the pacifist position, agreeing with Lipscomb that a Christian should not vote. During World War I, he tried unsuccessfully to prevent his brother, a conscientious objector, from being inducted into the military.⁵ But Brewer underwent a transformation in his beliefs and practices; and while he claimed never to have completely shed his old beliefs, neither did they ever fit very well into the political preaching he helped to pioneer.

The “red scare” of 1919 and 1920 transformed many conservative Protestant Christians into fundamentalists. They became concerned about the threats of Russian Bol-

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shevism and Darwinian evolution to American civilization. The future of Christianity was seen as being involved deeply with the fate of America.⁶ During this same period, G. C. Brewer became concerned about the fate of American society and began to turn his attention to socialism and Darwinianism, which he thought was rampant in American universities. While studying at the University of Texas, he became alarmed at a professor who was "lauding Russia to the sky" after the Bolshevik revolution. Brewer even "went to the governor" of Texas about it.⁷ In a speech at Abilene Christian College in 1920, Brewer stated that "the only way we could save civilization [would be] to destroy our present system of education [and] overthrow our universities."⁸ But the lukewarm reception of his speech by ACC's faculty caused Brewer to keep his focus on local church ministry until 1925, when the evolution issue was heating up across the country, especially in the South.

The famous Scopes trial took place in Tennessee in the summer of 1925, after anti-evolution legislation was passed with help of individual members and congregations of the Churches of Christ.⁹ After William Jennings Bryan died at the end of the Scopes trial, Brewer attempted to replace Bryan among the fundamentalists and advertised himself as the "Bryan of the Southwest."¹⁰

By September 1925, Brewer had begun traveling around the United States, giving, according to T. B. Larimore, "his famous lecture on Evolution versus Christianity."¹¹ Stephen Eckstein reported in early 1926 that Brewer had preached his lecture on evolution at the Sherman, Texas, church building to an overcapacity crowd. Brewer, according to Eckstein, fearlessly defended the Bible from "the claims of Evolution," which were "trying to defeat our spiritual structure."¹² Patterning his efforts after the Hardeman Tabernacle meetings, Brewer continued his efforts against evolution, lecturing in 1927 in Texas, Tennessee, and Michigan, and drawing large crowds.¹³

He started in Lubbock, Texas, where 4,000 people attended his anti-evolution lecture. From Lubbock he went to Fort Worth, Texas, where he held a meeting at J. Frank Norris' First Baptist Church.¹⁴ Norris, a leader among the fundamentalists of the Southern Baptists, supported the meeting over his radio station and allowed Brewer to preach at his church building. He complimented Brewer as "the leading factor in fundamentalist doctrine in America today."¹⁵ After preaching in Fort Worth, Brewer went to Lebanon, Tennessee, where he invited the "leading educators and scientists" in Tennessee to hear him speak about evolution. Over 1,500 people from Kentucky, Alabama, and Tennessee came to hear him.¹⁶

Brewer then went to Michigan, where he delivered his lecture on evolution at Pontiac. Dr. William S. Savage, a leading Baptist fundamentalist, gave publicity to Brewer's speech over his radio program. The congregations in Windsor, Canada, and in Detroit and Pontiac, Michigan, decided to cooperate in sponsoring Brewer at a bigger presentation in Detroit. With the help of "influential brethren and businessmen" of Detroit, they secured one of the largest auditoriums in Detroit. Around 3,000 people, one of the largest audiences ever to hear a preacher from the Churches of Christ in Detroit, attended.¹⁷

Several local congregations of the Churches of Christ in Detroit appealed to the church all across the country for the "Church of Christ" to put Brewer forward as a man to fight for all fundamentalists against evolution. They thought Brewer could "gain the confidence of all the fundamentalists if he were pushed forward as he should be."¹⁸ Brewer did debate several leading modernists and atheists during the 1920s.¹⁹ However, evolution and other fundamentalist issues began to lose steam after the 1920s, and Brewer had to find some other issue on which to build the political pulpit.

In the 1930s, Brewer first attempted to revive an old issue: prohibition. The *Firm Foundation* published some of his prohibition articles after the *Gospel Advocate* refused to do so. He wanted the brethren of Texas to "fight the devil" and to "vote now and vote right" to keep Texas from falling victim to the "ballyhoo" of the alcohol brewers.²⁰ However, this issue also was declining in significance, and Brewer continued his search for an issue.

Finally, while preaching in Southern California from 1934 to 1936, he found it. The United States was in the throes of the Great Depression while at the same time (mostly due to effective propaganda) Stalin's "five-year

plans” appeared to be bringing prosperity to the Soviet Union. American intellectuals and many in the labor unions became attracted to Communism, and membership in the Communist Party reached one million. Brewer, while he preached for the Central congregation in Los Angeles, may have encountered church members who were members of the Communist Party. Some dust bowl migrants from Oklahoma and Texas were members of a California labor union that had ties to the Communist Party.²¹ When Brewer saw the activities of the Communist Party in California, he knew he had found his platform. He began a fight against Communism before anyone else in the Churches of Christ recognized this ideology as a threat.

In 1936 at the Central Church of Christ in Los Angeles, he debated Dr. J. C. Coleman, the executive secretary of the Friends of Soviet Russia. Brewer, in an interview near the end of his life, described the scene at the debate:

The audience filled up [the building] made up of Communists and our brethren . . . and the Communists would raise their red flag and shake it right there out in the audience as I was speaking. If I made mention of “Old Glory”—I had “Old Glory” hung up behind me right there—they’d swear and jeer. When you mentioned the American flag [they] raised the red flag and shook it. Old Jimmy Lovell . . . had gotten himself deputized to be an officer. He had a big 45 strapped under his coat and . . . [Lovell told Brewer], “I was sitting right behind you. I was looking at everybody in the eye out in that audience.”²²

Brewer wrote a series of articles for the *Gospel Advocate*, which it published as a pamphlet entitled *Communism and Its Four Horsemen: Atheism, Immorality, Class Hatred, Pacifism*. Despite claiming that Christians were “peacemakers” and that their weapons were not carnal, he condemned the Communists as political pacifists. He condemned college students who were pacifists and who took “the Kirby Page pledge against war, which binds them not to participate in any war or to support war even in a moral or financial way.”²³ Brewer was alarmed that this pledge included a “war of defense when our country and our homes are invaded.”²⁴ Support of this philosophy meant that the Communists would be able to overthrow the American government.²⁵

Brewer began to be in demand to speak before the American Legion and other patriotic groups. Sometimes his anti-Communist speech was titled “No -ism but Americanism.” In 1936 in a speech in Nashville before the American Legion, Brewer said he was “ready to give the

The political preachers sought and found respectability for their local congregations and the church as a whole.

last drop of blood in my veins” to defend America against Communism: “I for one, will fight, and I know every red-blooded American citizen will do likewise.”²⁶ Foy Wallace Jr. criticized Brewer: “Did Jesus Christ die for ‘Americanism’ on the cross of Calvary? What about Christians in other nations? What should they shed every drop of their blood for? . . . Such blustering from a gospel preacher . . . ought to make every Christian who reads it blush with shame.”²⁷ F. B. Srygley was astounded at Brewer’s political preaching and added that the hope for the world was “in the gospel of Christ and not how much blood Brother Brewer is willing to spill.”²⁸ Brewer claimed that his speech was inaccurately reported, but many recall the times that Brewer preached on political issues when he spoke at churches.

In 1952 Brewer founded and edited *Voice of Freedom*, a journal devoted to exposing the threats of Communism and Catholicism. B. C. Goodpasture, editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, was the president and Batsell Barrett Baxter served as the secretary of Freedom Press, the nonprofit organization that sponsored the *Voice of Freedom*. As the editor, Brewer said that Christians “as the light of the world should work for political and social reform in the world, not of a few pious individuals in the world!” He also appealed to the example of Jesus in claiming that Christ effected social and political change by sending Rome to destroy Jerusalem—by war.²⁹

Assimilating the traditional conscientious objector’s position of Lipscomb with his own “militant anti-communism greatly troubled Brewer.”³⁰ Most of those who followed Brewer in political preaching, however, readily shed the inconsistency by jettisoning Lipscomb’s pacifist position. George Benson, who succeeded the pacifist J. N. Armstrong as president of Harding College, founded the National Education Program, which promoted free enterprise and “Americanism.”³¹ James Bales, professor

of Bible at Harding, changed from an ardent pacifist in World War II to an outspoken anti-Communist and pro-American speaker and writer. Benson and Bales, friends and admirers of Brewer, preached on these themes in churches and at lectureships.³²

Soon other preachers began to pick up on the same themes. George Bailey, a well-known Texas preacher, delivered the sermon "Will God Always Bless America?" on hundreds of occasions.³³ Wayne Poucher, another Texas preacher, spoke frequently against the Communist threat.³⁴ Eventually, Poucher became a speaker on "Life Line," a nationwide radio program sponsored by the archconservative Dallas businessman H. L. Hunt. The program, according to Poucher, emphasized "the fundamental principles of Christianity and the fundamental principles of Americanism."³⁵ George DeHoff, a Tennessee preacher and publisher of Brewer's autobiography, also developed a reputation for speaking about Americanism and anti-Communism.³⁶

Many other preachers followed Brewer in developing a "God and country" preaching tradition. Only in America, it was supposed, could true Christianity flourish, and only in a free-market economy, not in a Communist system, could Christianity survive. The political preaching tradition equated concern for America with church concerns. The political preachers sought and found respectability for their local congregations and the church as a whole. The debaters had focused their combative energies on defending the kingdom of God, while this new tradition of preaching focused on the kingdoms of this world.

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Notes

¹Don Haymes, "Debates, Interdenominational," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, ed. Samuel S. Hill Jr. (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1984), 196.

²For the change see Michael Casey, "From Pacifism to Patriotism: The Emergence of Civil Religion in the Churches of Christ During World War I," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (July 1992): 376–90.

³David Lipscomb, *Civil Government: Its Origins, Mission, and Destiny* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1889).

⁴R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 155.

⁵Norman Parks, "G. C. Brewer, Controversialist," *Discipliana* 44 (Winter 1984): 56; and G. C. Brewer, *A Story of*

Toil and Tears, of Love and Laughter: Being the Autobiography of G. C. Brewer, 1884–1956 (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: DeHoff Publications, 1957), 60–63.

⁶George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 153–64.

⁷G. C. Brewer, interview by Warren Jones, 22 March 1956, audiotape copy in possession of author.

⁸G. C. Brewer, "What the Colleges Are Doing for Religion," *Gospel Advocate* (14 July 1932): 794.

⁹Michael Casey, "Fundamentalism and the Churches of Christ," in *Encyclopedia of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy*, ed. James Lewis (Simon and Schuster, forthcoming).

¹⁰Warren Jones, "G. C. Brewer: Debater, Lecturer, and Preacher" (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 1958), 153, 155.

¹¹Jones, "Brewer," 148.

¹²Stephen Eckstein, "News and Notes," *Word and Work* (February 1926): 39.

¹³Warren Jones transcribed notices and ads about Brewer's trip from Brewer's personal scrapbook. I have pieced together the trip from these sources. See Jones, "Brewer," 149–60.

¹⁴Jones, "Brewer," 109, 150, 152.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 150, 157.

¹⁷*Ibid.* See also W. S. Long, "G. C. Brewer's Lecture in Detroit," *Gospel Advocate* (5 January 1928): 22.

¹⁸Claud F. Witty, John T. Smith, W. S. Long, Claude B. Thomas, C. B. Clifton, E. G. Rockliff, "Here and There," *The Way of Truth* 4 (January 1928): 35.

¹⁹Jones, "Brewer," 160.

²⁰Ron Halbrook, "G. C. Brewer: Perennial Protagonist," in *They Being Dead Yet Speak: Florida College Annual Lectures, 1981* (Temple Terrace, Fla.: Florida College Bookstore, 1981), 205.

²¹James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 150–64.

²²Brewer, interview. See also James L. Lovell, "Brewer-Coleman Debate," *Gospel Advocate* (12 March 1936): 262.

²³G. C. Brewer, *Communism and Its Four Horsemen: Atheism, Immorality, Class Hatred, Pacifism* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., [1936]), 37–38.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 38.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 39.

²⁶F. B. Srygley, "G. C. Brewer's Lecture," *Gospel Advocate* (26 November 1936): 1133, 1141.

²⁷Foy E. Wallace Jr., "Doctor G. C. Brewer, LL.D., and Harding College," *Bible Banner* 2 (April 1940): 3.

²⁸Srygley, "Brewer," 1141.

²⁹Halbrook, "Brewer," 206.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹The U.S. military used N.E.P. anti-Communist films in the 1950s and early 1960s. See L. Edward Hicks, "Sometimes in the Wrong but Never in Doubt": *George Benson and the Education of the New Religious Right* (Knoxville: University of

Tennessee Press, 1994).

³²George Benson, "Christ and the Problem of Human Progress and Welfare in the Present Day World," *Harding College Lectures 1951* (Searcy, Ark.: Harding College Press, 1952), 136–49; and James D. Bales, "Communism Confronts Christianity," *Lubbock Christian College Lectures 1962* (Lubbock, Tex.: Lubbock Christian College, 1962), 77–91.

³³George W. Bailey, "Will God Always Bless America?" *Abilene Christian College Lectures 1963* (Abilene, Tex.: Abilene Christian College Student Exchange, 1963), 156–73.

³⁴For example, see Wayne Poucher, *The Wondrous Story* (Carthage, Tex.: Ark-La-Tex Publishers, 1964), 20–21.

³⁵M. Norvel Young and Batsell Barrett Baxter, *Preachers of Today*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1959), 351.

³⁶See his sermons "What Made America Great" and "The Christian and the Government" in George W. DeHoff, *"I See My Time Is Up": DeHoff Autobiography* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: DeHoff Publications, 1989), 446–55, 490–92. See also Barry Cole Poyner, "The Secular Speaking of Evangelist George W. DeHoff" (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1986).

SILENCE

GOD WAS WITH HIS NOTHINGNESS
AND BROKE HIS SILENCE TO CREATE BY WORD,
HE WRAPPED THINGS IN SOUNDS OF IDENTITY
AND LET CREATION DECIDE WHEN TO BE HEARD.

MAN IN HIS QUEST FOR DIVINITY
IMAGINES HIS VOICE HAS QUICKENING POWER
AND SILENCE SPEAKS OF NOTHINGNESS
A NOWHERE IN THE SCHEMES THAT TOWER.

IF WE CANNOT HEAR THE THUNDER PEALS
WE CRAVE EVEN A WHISPERED TONE,
IT IS THE STILLNESS THAT CRIES NIHILITY
THAT TAUNTS IDENTITY, FOREVER ALONE.

OUR PRAYERS DEMAND THE PRESENCE OF GOD
PROVEN BY HIS WORDS OF VINDICATION,
FRIGHTENED BY DIVINE SILENCE
WE TREMBLE OF ABANDONMENT TO SATAN.

DARKNESS IS A PLAYTHING TO HIS LIGHT
SIN, THOUGH FORGIVEN, MAY BLISTER FEET UNSHOD,
BUT EVERYTHING IS CONQUERABLE WHEN WE LEARN
SILENCE IS PRELUDE TO CREATION BY GOD.

— H. Eugene Johnson