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Mike Casey

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PREACHING IN THE WORLDLY CHURCH

~~Where have we come from?~~
Where are we going?

Mike Casey

The authors of **The Worldly Church** paint a bleak picture about the inroads of secularism in the Churches of Christ. Often they point to the pulpit as a symptom of the problem of secularism, and they point to preaching as a means of recovering the sacred in the churches. Since preaching is one of the most important and influential tasks of the Church, their analysis of the preaching of the Churches of Christ needs to be critiqued.

As others in this issue have rightly pointed out, the “Worldly Church syndrome” is hardly true of all the Churches of Christ. While the problem is more apparent in the authors’ own original geographic location, great diversity actually exists across the country in local congregations. They also paint an overly simplistic picture of how the churches arrived at the present situation. Some of their generalizations do not seem to hold up or at least other explanations are possible when the preaching in our tradition is investigated.

At least two different paradigms of preaching have dominated the restoration tradition and its heirs in the Churches of Christ: the Rational tradition and the Evangelical tradition. Each tradition had degenerate changes occur over time as the restoration movement progressed. Each tradition will be explored and then a proposal will be made for the future of preaching within the Churches of Christ.

The foundations of the Rational tradition is partially covered by Weed, Allen and Hughes in chapters 3 and 4. The Enlightenment influenced Alexander

Campbell and the way he understood the Bible. The Bible was filled with rational propositions or “facts.” Each biblical “fact” could stand on its own, like any other “fact” found in nature. The Bible was to be studied “scientifically” and objectively by observing its “facts” and drawing careful conclusions from them. The Bible no longer needed any interpretation, as the authors state:

The task of the Bible student became simply that of collecting the scattered facts and classifying them according to topics or doctrines. He might use a concordance to pull together many of the verses where a particular word was used.¹

Topical preaching was the result of this approach. Preachers would string together impressive citations of bible verses on the subject of the sermon. Frequently the verses were quoted with little or no attention to their historical or literary context. Originally the preaching was highly positive as the search for biblical truths proceeded with the excitement of discovery. As the restoration movement began to encounter problems and issues that could not be answered by citing a verse of the bible, conclusions were not as carefully drawn, logic began to replace scripture citation and some verses were quoted on issues that had nothing to do with their original context.²

After the time of the pioneer generation these tendencies became excaberated, and many began to turn to defending the results of the past discoveries and to attacking those with whom they disagreed. The Rationalistic tradition degenerated into the debating tradition.

The debating tradition clearly turned the ra-

Mike Casey teaches in the Communication division at Pepperdine University. A graduate of ACU, Casey is a member of the University Church of Christ in Malibu, CA.

tional approach to Christianity from a positive to a largely negative emphasis. No longer was there the discovery of biblical truths but the refutation and destruction of ideas that were considered false. The gospel "facts" became the gospel "bullets." As one preacher put it:

Let the siege guns which God put into our hands for devastating use against his enemies be now unlimbered and volley forth the word . . . Let gospel projectiles be hurled against the ramparts of entrenched wrong . . . Reprove and rebuke our brethren . . . and make them know that you are not joking.³

The debating mode spread religious militancy and a highly negative spirit in the churches. During the 1920's several began to question any preacher who preached positive approaches to Christianity. One preacher who later was prominent in the rise of the "non-institutional" division of the 1950's said:

Twenty years ago the preacher that would go and hold a two-weeks meeting for an old, established congregation, skin the sects "all from stem to stern," . . . , then "write up" the meeting . . . was the most sought after preacher. But that kind of preaching is not wanted now. The preacher that is in demand today is the one who preaches all the time on the mercy of God, telling sinners how God loves them, but never says anything about the "wrath" and "vengeance of God As the modern society woman thinks more of the care and charge of a **poodle dog** than she does of a baby made in the image of God, so the average congregation thinks more of "sissyism" in religion than they do of the old Jerusalem gospel.⁴

The attacks on positive preaching continued in the 1920's and eventually were successful in the 1930's.

The focus on refuting error in any form became so intense that the major doctrines of Christianity were forgotten. The story the writers of **The Worldly Church** so poignantly tell says it all. The young preacher who had preached four "pugnacious" sermons was asked by Fred Rowe, editor of the **Christian Leader**, to preach a sermon on the Prodigal Son. He replied he could not because "he had never studied that subject."⁵

After a hundred years or so of this negative ap-

proach to Christianity, many in the Churches of Christ began to tire of this and search for more positive alternatives. At first it was a few brave preachers whose stories have not yet been told who risked ostracism to point the way. K.C. Moser was one of the first to direct us back to the evangelical center of the gospel. His path breaking book, **The Way of Salvation**, and later writings pointed to the ideas of grace and the person of Christ rather than the "facts" of the Bible or obedience to "laws." He also emphasized the indwelling of the Holy Spirit rather than the idea that the Spirit merely worked through the words and arguments of scripture.⁶ Slowly, but surely, others began to pick up the same ideas and winds of fresh air began to blow through the Churches of Christ. The evangelical style of preaching

began to emerge and grace, love and the person of Christ began to appear as themes in many pulpits. To be sure this style did not appear everywhere the rational and debating style still was strong.

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The late 1960's and the early 1970's were the times of greatest upheaval. The larger evangelical movements of the charismatics and the "Jesus people" caught the imagination of many of the college students and young professionals of the Churches of Christ. These responses, as well as the need of counseling for church members, were legitimate reactions to the problems of a legalistic, overly rational and highly negative preaching tradition. As Shaun Casey points out in his essay in this issue preachers needed to encourage members, counsel them, etc. as a legitimate part of their ministry as servants who were following the message of the cross.

As many congregations began to become more affluent and the young men and women of the 1960's and 1970's grew older, the Evangelical tradition began to be caught up in the trends and the attendant problems of the larger Evangelical movement. The preaching in our pulpits began to reflect the degeneration of the evangelical style of preaching. Helping ministries which focused on "felt needs" began to be done for their own sakes with no reflection on their theological grounding, not because the old Rational tradition gave us the message of self reliance. We discovered self-reliance from our affluence and the culture around us, just as the larger Evangelical movement did and not from the Enlightenment. Zig Ziglar replaced John Locke.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is equated with having enthusiasm in many sermons. One preacher recalled the Pentecost story and pointed out that the disciples were filled with the Spirit and "were fired up with excitement." He believed that enthusi-

Casey: Preaching in the Worldly Church: Where Have We Come From and Where We Are Going. If the songleader has a "sourpuss" attitude, members will "sink down in their pews." However, if the songleader is lively, "with a smile and a lilt in his song, and some enthusiasm about his melody," then "the congregation cannot be contained."

The content of sermons frequently are entertaining anecdotes with moralistic points, if they have any point at all. Often an entire sermon will be filled with a series of these stories leaving the audience feeling good about themselves. Seldom are congrega-

tions challenged and even more rarely are the scriptures expounded or the gospel preached. Clearly I agree with much of the picture **The Worldly Church** authors have painted of many of our large churches, even though they have missed the mark in analyzing how we got there.

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What can be done in the pulpit in response to this situation? First, it needs to be said that there are signs of hope. Many have continued to preach the gospel, even in the face of the changes of orientation that have occurred from the Rational to Evangelical tradition. Many of these preachers do admittedly have difficult times finding pulpits. Several of them are not as "flashy" as their "big name" counterparts. One solution to the problem is for churches to take a chance on the "unknown" preacher who may be too young, or too "single," or who is not entertaining. Too many

churches opt for the "big name" or the "safe" choice while many talented ministers leave the ministry in frustration.

Second, churches should challenge their ministers to improve and should not settle for shallow preaching. Many of our Christian colleges have excellent programs in ministry, preaching, biblical studies and theology. Ministers should be encouraged and allowed the time to take courses, so they can improve. With the growing affluence of churches, some of the financial resources could be invested in providing ministers with more training.

Third, there needs to be some return to the strengths of the Rational tradition. One always knew what the message of the sermon was about. Messages usually had three completely understandable ideas and in the finest sermons of that tradition, they were grounded in excellent expositions of the meaning of the biblical text and message. The "winds of reason" certainly would help arrest the tendency to give insipid entertaining moralistic messages that often lack coherence.

Fourth, narrative preaching needs to be encouraged. Preaching **the** story, and not just any story needs more reflection by our preachers. Retelling the stories of scripture would be a start. Once I sat in our church buildings and heard the story of the prodigal son, the Good Samaritan, the story of Pentecost, etc., for the **first** time. But do our children and new converts hear those stories now? As a preacher becomes more sophisticated he can find modern stories or "parables" that have the same message as the gospel. Again do our preaching stories, preach **the** gospel or a foreign gospel?

On a final note I see signs that these suggestions are being practiced in many places. Change in any religious tradition is inevitable -- hopefully we will thoughtfully reflect on how we can change and remain faithful to the message of the gospel. The writers of **The Worldly Church** are to be commended for stirring up much of the needed reflection on who we are and where we are going as a church.