

Political Preaching Thirty Propositions on Addressing Controversial Social Issues

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I. Allocating Value Authoritatively (Propositions 1-20)

1) The assigned topic reads, "Preaching on Controversial Social Issues." Let us, for reasons of shorthand refer to that as "political preaching" – but not only for reasons of shorthand.

2) All good preaching is tacitly political, just as it is tacitly many things: tacitly prose, tacitly intelligible, tacitly scriptural, and so on. However, while the preacher would add little to a sermon by announcing that today it will be in prose or intelligible or scriptural, he *would* add, to it significantly, as I recommend, were he to explain how it is political, and is intended to be.

3) Consider one eligible definition of politics. Politics, as David Easton suggests in his *Systems Analysis*, is the way society allocates value authoritatively. Doesn't preaching do that also, namely, allocate value authoritatively, when to those who overvalue themselves it announces that "all are liars" or "there is no one who does good, no not one" and, to those who undervalue themselves, it announces "beloved, now are we the sons and daughters of God," or "blessed are the meek," and makes the point specific, local, situational?

4) True, the sort of value which preaching allocates seems rather "soft" by contrast with the more earthy values which an elected official might secure for us: new street lights, crop subsidies, a test-ban treaty. Still, preaching too has been known to allocate its share of tangibles: "Arise and walk"; "buried with Christ by baptism into death"; "a new community"; "my body and blood...shed for you"; "the resurrection of the body"; the collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

5. Of course, the sort of authority by which preaching backs up its allocation of value has none of the muscular clout that ordinary political authority does: a surprise reversal in the New Hampshire primaries, the enforcement power of IRS, nightly access to the media. As a preacher I may try, pathetically, to mimic that sort of secular authority: by pulling rank, by my privileged information about the deity or the cultrus, by the weight of long and revered churchly tradition, by canonical name dropping.

6) Still, any perceptive listener sees through that facade, knowing full well that the whole elaborate edifice of my preacherly authority teeters finally on one itinerate, hillbilly rabbi and our taking his Word for it. But then, that being so and he being who he is, preaching does allocate value with an authority which even politicians emulate: "as one having *exousia*" [Greek for "authority"], so Matthew's gospel describes him, "not as the scribes."

7) In fact, where else in the political sector do you find an authority which, like this authority invoked by Christian preaching, can rouse people to sing as radically as they do or just to keep coming out for their weekly Sunday morning Eucharistic caucuses as they do? Oscar Wilde said his one objection to socialism is that it would take too many evenings. Christians may feel the same way about Sunday mornings,

especially the preaching, yet they come. That is a tribute to some rather extraordinary authority. Few politicians could match it.

8) On the other hand, where else except among fanatics like Jim Jones and the Ayatollah Khomeini can you find an authority like Jesus attracting sane and sober sophisticates to follow him, cross and all? On second thought, most politicians would probably adjure such authority, so closely does it verge on blasphemy and so likely is it to backfire. Yet that does constitute the authority, and the hazard, which Christian preaching may not evade if it faces up to its political calling, that is, to allocate value authoritatively.

9) So preaching is political not merely when it addresses "controversial social issues" (gay rights, nuclear freeze, abortion), but whenever it openly *admits* it is being political and then proceeds to be so, by allocating value authoritatively. Such preaching has a way of creating its own controversial social issues, willy nilly. For example, such preaching may tempt the hearers to draw unfavorable comparisons between the preacher and his authority, on the one hand, and the authority of the "scribes" and the rest of the religious-political establishment, on the other. That is controversial. Or such preaching may attract to the preacher the sort of riff-raff who will scarcely enhance his parish programs: a leper who needs healing, a centurion with a sick slave, Simon Peter's mother-in-law, a paralytic on a stretcher. At least that is the dubious catch which one sermon netted—"the Sermon on the Mount," as Augustine called it. It netted its own first-class "controversial social issues," all because it allocated value authoritatively, with *exousia*.

10) Recall just that one excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount which provides this week's gospel reading, and note how the

preacher allocates value to his hearers—or, as we shall see, allocates the most drastic dis-value to them.

11) Dis-value, yes, in spite of the fact that the hearers were as Matthew identifies them, Jesus' own "disciples." They were not pagans or outsiders to the Jesus movement but loyalists, partisans, collaborators. On top of that, I gather they were poor. The potential for political exploitation by the preacher could have been immense, given their obvious need of such desperate necessities as food and clothing. How tempting it could have been to play upon self-pity, all the more because of their known sympathies.

12) Instead, what this preacher identifies is their worry, their worry over food and clothing and survival, and scores them for that. He scores them because their worry is de-humanizing (reducing them to less than grass of the field and birds of the air), futile, life-shortening, ethnically inferior (like the Goyim), and asking for more trouble than they've already got. But worse than that, their worry is unbelief and, worst of all, hatred against God and servitude to another master.

13) Their materialism, which a political demagogue might have exploited, this preacher excoriates. Still, not for a moment does he deny the reality of their material needs. "Your heavenly Father knows you have need of them." What he does do is re-prioritize those needs, dethrones them, thus relieving the hearers' servile dependency upon them: "Seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and then (in due order) all these things shall be yours as well."

14) We sometimes say, a bit too spiritually, that the theme of the Gospel of Matthew is the kingdom of heaven. What it really is is the kingdom of heaven coming upon the earth. Because the Son of Man had the authority first of all to forgive sin and to

forgive it “upon the earth,” he also had authority to cure a sinner’s very earthly polio. “All these things shall be yours as well.” The value being allocated is quite as material as it is spiritual.

15) Some of the hearers of that Sermon on the Mount (not a bad percentage for a first sermon) caught the political promise in its down-to-earth message. If “life,” even their life, the life of chronic worriers, is, as the preacher said, more important than food and drink; if even their bodies, the bodies of disbelievers, *oligopistoi*, are more than raiment; if even they, Mammon-loving God-haters, are of more value than Solomon’s glory, then what?

16) Well, then anyone who can re-allocate value the way this preacher does must surely find also their bodies valuable enough to cleanse their leprosy, to heal their slaves and their mothers-in-law. In fact, they wouldn’t be surprised if he were to show concern even for “what they shall eat and what they shall drink.” Before it’s all over, he’ll probably be saying, “Take and eat,” “Take and drink.” We’ve heard political promises before, but never like this.

17) That could get him into trouble, him and them: such earthing of heaven, such reallocating of value, such political preaching. But then, politics, mixing in the *politia*, never is risk-free.

18) Wherever that Sermon on the Mount was re-preached this week, there was political preaching. Wherever the preacher effectively re-prioritized his hearer’s needs, upstaging capitalist Mammon with the Friend of sinners, there a message was sent to the capitalist advertising industry, there shock-waves rippled out into a consumerist economy, there the worshipers of longevity had second thoughts, there people in debt were less prone to intimidation by their lenders, there politicians gained

independence from their handlers and owners, there even teenagers were less bribable by the threat of allowances withheld, or less cowed by the new styles in raiment, there the contributions dropped off to those scare-pitches which traffic about "worrying about the morrow."

19) Wherever that Sermon on the Mount was re-preached this week, basic human value was re-allocated authoritatively, losers beset by their own nobodiness became somebodies, the lowly estate of God's handmaidens was "regarded" (*angesehen*, as Luther put it) and (as he punned) those lowly ones gained faces (*Gesichter*) and personhood. Once that happened, there was no telling what lengths the re-valued person would go to for the sick and the slaves and the in-laws, for improving the health delivery system and the savings and loan business and the advertising industry.

20) Any preaching with that sort of political potential ought publicly to be identified as the political thing it is, if only to render it more so.

II. Some Practical Suggestions (Propositions 21-30)

21) Political preaching is too world-involving to leave it to preachers alone. It ought to include response from the congregation as well, that is, from the church's professional worldlings, the people. That might be done in the form of dialogue sermons or in some other multi-lateral form. (See Martin Marty's recent book on "people participating in preaching.") Naturally, the lay participants in the preaching are to be as prepared and as accountable in their subject areas as the ordained preacher is expected to be in his or hers.

22) Shouldn't the church engage in political preaching only when

it has something unique to contribute which is not available anywhere else? I suppose so, but only so long as a distinction is observed between the gathered church and the deployed church. *Within* the Christians' gathering it is their unique Gospel and Sacraments which distinguishes what *they* say about society from what everyone else in the world says about it. But *outside* their gathering, out in the world, the same Christians' political talk is *not* at all that distinguishable from the political talk of anyone else of good will and good judgment. Out there what is distinctive about Christian politicizing is that, unlike other movements, it need not call attention to its own Christian uniqueness—unless, of course, it is invited to give a reason for its hope. Ordinarily, though, out in the secular *politia* the Christian movement is unique by being incognito. Few other movements can stand to be that self-effacing.

23) Political preaching, while it may well encourage parishioners to join this or that political cause, ought first of all explore what avenues those parishioners already have for improving society right within their existing callings, and ought to hold them publicly accountable for those callings, possibly with the congregation's weekly liturgy.

24) Political preaching dare not give the impression that Christians who do not visibly take a stand *contra mundum* must by that token be cowards or a-political. Isn't it also a fact of Christian political life, as Petru Dumitriu has observed, that "whoever loves the world as it is is already changing the world?" Organized public activism is not every Christian's charism or cup of tea. But being political, somehow, is.

25) Political preaching is best when those who disagree (say, on the policy of nuclear deterrence [editor: or on addressing terrorism or approaching gay and lesbian concerns]), and disagree vocally, still feel at home with one another in the

same congregation. Once they are gone, whether hawks or doves, criticizing their position becomes inappropriate. For that would mean talking behind their backs. One thing the church is not is a cozy fellowship of the like-minded, just the fellowship of the Christ-minded.

26) Political preaching will encounter political differences, perhaps encourage them. As John Courtney Murray remarked, "An honest difference of opinion is a rare achievement." Also, it is an achievement which preaching might well promote, rather than take every apparent political difference in the congregation at face value and evade it. In the end, Christians who differ honestly often feel closer than those who don't and, in the process, they acquire together that rare charism, a mutual sense of humor.

27) Political preaching must recognize what Liberation Theology is trying to teach us: the Christian gospel simply does show a "preferential option for the poor." True, there may be more than one kind of poverty. There is the poverty of not having. There is also the poverty of having but not owning, owing for what you have, being in debt. In either case poverty, however spiritual it may also be, is always also economic. Political preaching has a nose for poverty in whatever form.

28) Political preaching takes sides with the poor of whatever variety, even though the poor may have no realistic chance of ever gaining their rightful power, now or in the future. To shield itself against that bitter truth, political preaching may be tempted to ennoble suffering for its own sake and then, ironically, scorn the sufferers themselves. The preachers of Christ need no such cruel illusion. What Christ identified with was the poor, not their poverty. Their poverty he detested.

29) Political preaching calls special attention in so many words

to the revolutionary new order which is being enacted in the liturgy itself, for example, in the mutual absolution which we all pronounce in the exchange of Peace and, climactically, in the Holy Communion. These transactions are in fact the revolutionizing of the economic order here and now. Nowhere else in the economy is there such an exchange of goods and services with utterly no thought of price or deservedness.

30) Political preaching, mindful of how our Lord bids us lose ourselves for his sake and the Gospel's, and bids the church lose itself in the world for the Kingdom, might occasionally conclude the Sunday service by saying, not "Go in peace, serve the Lord" but simply, "Get lost."

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