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## PREACHING AS THEOLOGY

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## PREACHING AS THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

1. Our topic is not “a theology of preaching,” but preaching as theological reflection.

- a. A “theology of preaching” is theological reflection about our preaching.
  - b. Preaching *as* theology is “second order” discourse—reflection about our preaching, worship, baptism, and Christian experience.
  - c. Theological preaching initiates the congregation into the vocabulary and major themes of the Christian faith.
1. Theological preaching may seem to be risky for the preacher.
    - a. Preaching, in recent years, has been oriented toward “story telling,” which is more “user friendly” to congregations.
      - i. Sensitivity to outsiders who know nothing of the Christian faith may cause us to be cautious about theological preaching.
      - ii. Sensitivity to a congregations that do not know the major themes of the Bible also makes us wary of preaching theology.
      - iii. The people have their own criteria for judging sermons, and they may go elsewhere if they are not satisfied.
    - b. In an age of diminished loyalty to denominations or theological traditions, members often view doctrines as private preference.
    - c. Many people will be more interested in experience than in reflection.
    - d. We prefer simple answers to complicated arguments (Hughes and Kysar: “We cannot even program our VCRs.”)
  1. Despite the apparent risks of preaching theology, preachers who wish to sustain their congregations in the faith have no alternative but to preach theology.
    - a. Without appropriate theological reflection on experience, people will provide their own interpretation.
      - i. Interpretations are often supplied from the culture.
      - ii. Without theological reflection, our view on any idea is piecemeal, leaving us with no coherent perspective.
      - iii. Without theology, preaching becomes trivial.
    - b. Theological reflection is necessary because we live between the treasures of the past and the new questions that are being raised at the present. Our basic convictions must be continually interpreted and explained.
    - c. Theological reflection is necessary because we have always lived in the midst of half-truths or misunderstandings of the faith.
  2. The wide range of Paul’s correspondence demonstrates that he is a model of theological reflection.
    - a. In 1 Thessalonians one finds a simple form of theological reflection; the letter is largely repetition of what the congregation knows already.
    - b. In subsequent letters Paul elaborates on the instructions that he has already given.

## **EXPLAINING OURSELVES: THEOLOGY AS REFLECTION ON PREACHING**

### 2 Corinthians 10:1-11

1. Preaching takes place in the context of the larger culture because Christian communities have been shaped by the culture’s values.

- a. In this instance Paul is responding to the common cultural evaluation of ministers.
  - b. As 10:1-2, 10-11 indicate the charge against Paul is that he is *tapeinos* (humble). (“humble”), and that his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account.
  - c. Peter Marshall (*Enmity at Corinth*) has shown that these values are well documented in Greco-Roman thought.
    - i. Used negatively in Greek thought for flatterers.
    - ii. Also, Paul is frequently humiliated and cannot have his will carried out, as in 2:1-4; cf. 12:21; cf. 11:7.
  - d. According to 10:2-3, the Corinthian outsiders equate their cultural values with having the Spirit; hence the charge that Paul is *kata sarka* (“worldly”).
  - e. Paul’s words in 10:7 suggest that his opponents claim to be “of Christ” in contrast to Paul.
  - f. The theological dialogue between Paul and his opponents is an example of theological issues forced on the church by the adoption of cultural norms in the church.
2. Paul’s opening words (“I beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ”) indicate that he begins theological reflection by associating his behavior with that of Christ.
  3. Paul’s response involves some points that are specific to his own ministry, but enlarges the discussion to involve reflection on the larger theological task.
    - a. This section is the introduction to Paul’s theological defense; that is, before launching his theological defense, he talks *about* doing theology.
    - b. We note, in the first place, that Paul is not entirely countercultural; he speaks in the images of the philosophers, who sometimes described their task as one of engaging in warfare. Stoics: Seneca: “Life is a battle” (96:5) Epictetus: “The philosopher’s thoughts are his protection (4.16.14). His authority to censure does not derive from weapons and bodyguards, but from his conscience and a purified mind (3.22.13-19).
    - c. Here, as in numerous other occasions, Paul employs military terminology to describe the Christian life (cf. 1 Cor. 9:7; cf. 1 Thess. 5:8; 2 Tim. 2:4; Eph. 6:10).
    - d. The distinctive feature of this passage is Paul’s focus on the battle of the mind: he will “destroy strongholds” and “take every thought captive to Christ.”
  4. Paul portrays himself in the role of Jeremiah: his task is to build, and not to tear down (cf. Jer. 24:6).
  5. In 2 Cor. 11:1-4, Paul indicates why he engages in theological argument.
  6. Sermon Focus: As much as we are uncomfortable with the images of war, Christianity involves a “battle for the mind” that tests our capacity to survive.

### **HOMILETIC REFLECTION: WAR AND PEACE (2 COR 10:1-11)**

“What do you look for in a sermon?” William Willimon recalls a conference where various church members were asked that question. Some answered, “We want sermons that start us thinking in a new way.” Occasionally I ask the same question, and I get a variety of answers. “I want a word of encouragement—something to help me get through the week,” one tells me. Another says, “I come to find some tranquility to help me cope with the stresses of my life.” What we don’t want words of peace. Some people are so adamant about wanting tranquility

that they have taken out all of the hymns that are filled with military imagery.

I understand the desire for peace. After all, peace is a very biblical word. If you have been bruised by church battles, you want the church to be the place of tranquility. Many of the battles that we fought were over such insignificant matters that they did far more harm than good. Some of the battles were power struggles in disguise.

1. But how do we respond to ideas that are absolutely destructive?
  - a. Paul discovered that there are occasions when bad ideas threaten the existence of the church. In his case, it came in a battle over the qualities of leadership. Some people wanted leaders that fit the Greek ideals—good looks, oratorical ability, etc. People like that wouldn't have much use for Paul. As a matter of fact, they wouldn't have much use for Jesus either. Yet they called themselves Christians.
  - b. Do we not face a culture that shapes our way of thinking so much that it will determine our sense of who we are? Do ideas not matter?
  
1. Paul says that we are fighting a battle for the mind.
  - a. Paul describes his task as to engage in battle in such a way as to “take every thought captive to Christ.”
  - b. Thoughts about doing battle make us understandably nervous because we have seen too many battles fought that were more about power than ideas.
  - c. Although some ideas may not be worth fighting over, we recall that the heart of Christianity is a claim about truth. It matters that Jesus Christ went to the cross; that he was “crucified in weakness” (2 Cor. 13:4); that he was “meek and gentle” (cf. 2 Cor. 10:1-2).
  - d. Examples: It is easy to see this adaptation to culture in other people. Martin Niemoller went to prison rather than adapt his theology to German nationalism. We have fought the battles over racism.
  
1. All of this matters because our final goal, in Paul's words, is to present a community to Christ at the end-time (2 Cor. 11:1-4).

### **EXPLAINING OURSELVES: 2 COR 5:11-6:2**

1. Paul explains himself in one of the most densely theological statements in his correspondence—again in response to questions about his demeanor.
2. Paul is not content unless his listeners understand his theological position (5:11).
  - a. Before he engages in theological explanation, he indicates that his explanation is intended to give his listeners the opportunity to “boast on his behalf” (5:12) to the opposition which questions his legitimacy.
  - b. Paul wants his congregation to be able to articulate a theological position. Paul is not content to function as theologian; he wants his congregation to be able to think theologically. Witherington, 394: “There is an irreducible cognitive content

- to Christian faith, and Paul goes on to spell it out.”
- i. Marva Dawn speaks of the church as a “community of theologians.”
  - ii. Dawn asks: “Do our sermons nourish believers in foundational doctrines of the faith to equip them to resist heresies and idolatries and ‘folk religion,’ with its too simplistic formulations of how faith applies to life.”
3. In 5:14, Paul begins the process of theological articulation by reciting the creed which the entire community knows (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3); that is, theological discussion begins with the fundamentals. In this entire unit, Paul returns to atonement theology.
    - a. First consequence of foundational story (v. 15): that we no longer live to ourselves. Cf. Rom. 14:7! Here is succinct statement of P’s ministry -- and all ministry. One is captured by the story of the cross.
    - b. Second consequence (v. 16). Christians have a new way of knowing that is not determined by culture.
    - c. Explanation (v. 17): For Christians there is a “new world” (cf. Isa. 66:22).
    - d. Consequence (vss. 18-19): This ministry was given by the God who reconciled the world in Jesus Christ. Note how central theological statements are brought up in the middle of a controversy in the church. Some are judging by “old world” point of view. To what extent have our own churches judged by new world pt of view? What criteria do we use for evaluating ministries?
    - e. Concluding appeal (5:20-6:2): Be reconciled to God. Theological explanation leads to an appeal to the congregation.
  4. The movement of the passage would be appropriate for the movement of the sermon. a. Paul begins with the issue that was raised by his opposition (commendation). b. He moves to recall the Christian story. c. He concludes with an appeal to the church.
  5. Sermon Focus. We face any number of decisions that call for our decision about who we are. Such decisions are determined by our value judgments. What kind of leadership do we want? What kind of church do we want to be? For answers we turn, not to the culture’s answers, but to our foundational story: “One died for all.” “God was in Christ reconciling the world. . . .” Don’t limit this foundational story to the worship service. Remember it at the next business meeting. Remember it when you choose leaders. God is making his appeal for us to be reconciled to him and his world.

### **THEOLOGY AS A CHALLENGE TO CULTURE: 1 COR 1:18-25**

1. In order to appreciate the significance of this passage, we must recall the following:
  - a. that the issue that Paul identifies in 1:10-17 is one of factionalism;
  - b. that factionalism in chs. 1-4 is related in some way to a series of issues that Paul discusses in chs. 5-16.
  - c. that, whatever the problems at Corinth, no one seems to have questioned the basic conviction that brought the church into existence (cf. 15:3); I. e., no one questioned the fact that “Christ died for our sins.”
  - d. This unit is a response to factionalism and the basis for chs. 5-16.
2. We should have some idea of the Corinthians’ perspective.
  - a. The Corinthian factionalism is rooted in the pretensions of socially-prominent people who placed great emphasis on wisdom and oratory.
  - b. Arrogance is the root of the Corinthian view. Paul is on trial; judgments made

- about the emissaries. Paul himself is ridiculous-looking figure, cf. 4:6-13.
- c. Although they did not deny the cross, they probably interpreted it against the background of Hellenistic hero worship, according to which the victorious hero is celebrated after overcoming various trials. Such a story was available in the Heracles saga, in which Heracles took upon himself the burdens and sufferings before the conquered them.
3. For Paul, the extended discussion in chs. 1-4 indicates that he can address Corinthian attitudes only by elaboration on his original preaching; that is, theological preaching is “second order” discourse on our preaching.
    - a. In the context of Corinthians who underestimate the significance of the crucifixion, Paul’s expression “the word of the cross,” is meant to emphasize the shame and foolishness associated with the cross.
    - b. Vss. 19-20. Thesis is demonstrated by quotation from LXX of Isa 29:14. Other passages are quoted freely from Isa 19:11f; 33:18. Belongs to complex of passages saying not to match wits with God. Form of questions recalls Baruch 3:16. Cf. Isa. 19:12; 44:25; 33:18; Job 12:17.
  4. Sermon Focus: As our foundational message, the “word of the cross” is not only the summary of our basic conviction; it is the constant reminder that God’s ways are foolish to our own culture and a challenge all human pretension.
  5. Sermon Movement. I recall a church that was engaged in a dispute over whether to place a large gold cross at a prominent place in its sanctuary. The architect had suggested it. Prominent people had paid for it. Was it a good idea? 1. We cannot dispute that the “word of the cross” is central to our faith. 2. But is it significant that early Christians associated with the cross with foolishness and shame—that the cross, as the ancient equivalent of the electric chair, was not a symbol for centuries in antiquity? It was not a decorative item because it represented the foolishness of God’s ways in the eyes of the culture. 3. The presence or absence of the visible cross may not be the issue. The larger issue is whether we are a people who are prepared to accept God’s foolishness and think in a new way.

### **THEOLOGY AND CHURCH CONTROVERSY (1 Cor. 2:6-16)**

1. After addressing the problem of factionalism in Corinth with a reminder of his original preaching (1:18-25), he reminded his listeners of two other aspects of their original conversion, once more reaffirming that God works in “foolish” ways.
  - a. Against the arrogant and wealthy minority, he recalls that this congregation was composed of “not many wise,” etc. (1:26-31).
  - b. He addresses the worldly understanding of leadership in 2:1-5 by recalling his own demeanor when they were converted (“not in persuasive words of wisdom”); i.e., God works in strange ways.
  - c. 2:6-16 further develops the same point: God turns our expectations upside down.
2. After arguing that God rejects the world’s wisdom, Paul describes his message of the cross as a *wisdom not of this age* (2:6), using the categories of his peers (*wisdom*, *perfect*), but redefining those categories.
  - a. *We* refers to Paul, and the *perfect* refers to those who understand the theology of the cross.

- b. Some, including those who crucified Jesus, cannot understand the cross (2:8), for understanding is based on God's revelation.
- c. This description distinguishes Paul from the opposition which treasures wisdom and oratory; Paul is suggesting that they have missed out on God's revelation.
- 3. The nature of revelation is the subject of 2:10-16, where Paul first refers to the Spirit.
  - a. Paul describes two kinds of people: "we" (the recipients of the Spirit) and the "natural" person (2:14). Paul explains the current debate by pointing out that some "don't get it" because they do not the Spirit. They still have the world's views of foolishness and wisdom (2:14).
  - b. "We," on the other hand, have insights into the ways of God because God has revealed them.
  - c. "We have the mind of Christ" (2:16): That is, those who understand God's inversion of values.
  - d. As 3:1-17 indicates, Paul took his congregation through this theological instruction in epistemology to bring about a new way of thinking about Christian leadership.
- 4. The passage is interesting insofar as it offers a theology of the Holy Spirit, according to which the Spirit is the communal possession of the church. Its major function is to provide insight into God's strange ways.
- 5. This text should be seen alongside 3:1-5, where Paul compares "spiritual" and "carnal" people. That is, the distinction between the spiritual and the carnal is not only one between the world and the church. Our partisan rivalries suggest that the worldly way of looking at things has invaded the church.
- 6. Sermon Focus: We, God's people, hold to absurd values in the world's eyes, but this is because God has poured out his Spirit. The test of our having the Spirit is the extent to which we understand God's way of inverting human values about power and weakness. The Spirit gives us a new way of looking at the world and the church.

### **COUNTERING FAULTY THEOLOGY: 1 COR 8:1-13**

- 1. Theological formulations can be used by all sides. In this instance, those who eat meat offered to idols are capable of theological reflection on their own. The words of 1 Cor. 8:1-6 suggest that Paul is quoting a creedal statement that the opponents have introduced.
  - a. Those who justify eating meat offered to idols under all circumstances engage in theological reflection: Because there is only one God and one Lord, idols do not exist. As a result it is permissible to eat food offered to idols.
  - b. Paul's recitation of the creed in 8:6 indicates that he agrees with it.
    - i. The passage is an interesting reformulation of the shema ("Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one.")
    - ii. The reformulation introduces a parallelism between "one God" and "one Lord."
    - iii. The passage suggests the importance of returning to our fundamental confession of faith, beginning here in our response to church controversy.
- 1. Paul's response in 8:7-13 indicates that he takes issue with the inferences which his opponents draw from the creed..

- a. Paul suggests that theological truths must be placed within a larger perspective. If one does not see theological truth within the larger perspective, one can damage others.
  - b. “Food will not present you to God” (v. 8; cf. Rom. 14:17); one can be right and yet not right. Some claims may be true but theologically insignificant.
  - c. The opponents engaged the topic with a Greek understanding of freedom; Paul responds with Christian theological convictions that provide perspective.
    - i. In the first place, the first theological statement (v. 6) must be interpreted within the larger context of the church, which is God’s family. That is, ecclesiology must also be taken into consideration.
    - ii. In the second place, the doctrine of the cross is a factor here. To live out the consequences of the creed in v. 6 without a theology of the cross would be destructive.
  - d. The climax of Paul’s argument is to introduce a missing ingredient to the theology of the others.
  - e. According to 8:13, Paul lives out the consequences of the appropriate theology.
1. Sermon Focus: Ideas matter. Good ideas in the church can become destructive to the community of faith when we divorce them from the transforming effects of the cross of Christ.

### **PREACHING ON THE RESURRECTION: 1 COR 15**

- 1. Paul begins the new section on the resurrection (ch. 15) abruptly by reciting the gospel which he had originally preached (15:1-11).
  - a. He does not indicate at first why he has introduced the topic; he only recalls his original preaching among the Corinthians.
  - b. He summarizes his original preaching in three distinct parallel phrases: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.
    - i. It is commonly indicates that the words “deliver” and “receive” are taken from rabbinic tradition, in which fixed material is committed to memory.
    - ii. Apparently Paul expects his listeners to agree that this “creed” is the basis for discussion.
  - c. One cannot be certain where the fixed tradition concludes. Did it include all of the accounts of eyewitnesses? Some of the lists of eyewitnesses, supplemented by Paul’s inclusion of himself?
  - d. Paul’s point in 15:1-11 is to indicate in v. 11 that all had shared a common faith.
- 2. Only in 15:12 do we learn why Paul has introduced the topic of resurrection: Some say that there is no resurrection of the dead. Verses 12-19 address that issue.
  - a. Once more, theology involves the encounter with cultural understandings. Probably the Corinthians are Greeks who find the Jewish idea of personal

- resurrection incredible.
- b. The Corinthians do not deny the resurrection of Christ; they deny the bodily resurrection of Christians (preferring instead the Greek idea of immortality).
  - c. The major point in vss. 12-19 is to argue that, if there is no resurrection (which the Corinthians insist), Christ has not been raised (They believe in the resurrection of Christ.)
3. Verses 20-28 explain the sequence of the resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection.
  4. Verses 29-34 raise a series of questions indicating the foolishness of continuing our labors if there is no resurrection.
  5. Verses 35-49 turn to the “how” of resurrection; Paul is probably answering questions that suggest that resurrection is an incredible idea.
  6. Verses 50-58 conclude with climactic presentation.
    - a. Verses 50-57 return to themes already stated 23-28 he had shown that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Now he returns to that theme in order to exult in triumph (Fee).
    - b. The entire presentation ends with exhortation (v. 58), which resumes a point that has been a theme throughout ch. 15: is our labor in vain (15:2, 10, 14).
  7. Where do we encounter text? Whereas the Corinthians were saying, “There is no resurrection?” our culture asks: “Do we have a future?”
  8. Sermon Focus: The doctrine of the resurrection is important to us because it ensures us that our labor is not in vain.