

THE PREACHER'S WORLD

The Myron J. Taylor Preaching Lectures

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November 11, 1998

What is the Preacher's World? It can be thought of in many different ways. Some have thought of it as a paradigm. A paradigm is a pattern, a model, or a formula. In culture, a paradigm is a set of rules or a way of doing things in a certain way. A paradigm is a world view. A paradigm is the way people normally think, live, and resolve the problems they encounter. It is a way of confronting reality.

Anthony Thiselton speaks of a world of two horizons. The preacher lives in the world of the Gospel – a world of God's action in history – and the world of the contemporary interpreter (what we call our world). There is the world of the original Gospel writer, who formulated what one had to say out of a particular historical and intellectual context (an ancient, Oriental (Middle East) world, and there is the contemporary world of the preacher, who also has a field of vision in which one responds to reality as one perceives it. There is an unresolved tension between these two worlds: the tension between disillusionment and hope; the tension between escapism and reality; the tension between skepticism and faith. That's the way James S. Stewart approached the subject (*Heralds of God*). I want to add that the preacher's world is one that encompasses all time: past, present, and future – the world of faith, hope, and love. Faith is rooted in the past action of God; hope rests in the future action of God; and love gives expression to the reality of it all in the present. The present is really a rather fleeting thing. An hour ago this lecture was in the future. In a few minutes it will be in the past. That makes "now" – the fleeting moment – most significant. The preacher learns to place great value on the "now", for that is where the past and the future meet. The past is brought into the present by "remembrance", in the sense that memory makes present in the contemporary moment that which is past. The future is brought into the

present in the sense of “to take something into our experience beforehand or ahead of the time at which it actually occurs.” (See Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar – Christ's Time for the Church*). The preacher is a person who encompasses in one's self and one's message all dimensions of time.

While all of us are here in this contemporary moment in this room, we do not all live in the same world. Our world is composed of the Gospel, our various experiences, our different traditions, and our personal abilities as reasoners – thinkers. There are none of us who can step out of life and view things with total objectivity. Therefore, I want to speak with you about the preacher's world from my own view of things. Look with me at a few facts about my city of Los Angeles. What has been thought of as the epitome of a secular city and a trend setter of worldly values is becoming more religious overall. Between 1980 and 1990, Los Angeles county's population grew by 18.5%, but the number of adherents to all faiths jumped by 47%. Los Angeles is being called the most religiously diverse metropolitan area in the world, surpassing London and New York. At least 600 distinct religious traditions have been identified in the region. Paul Griffiths, professor of Philosophy of Religions at the University of Chicago, said: “More religions are being practiced in the United States than any place else.” Diana Eck, professor of World Religions at Harvard University has said: “Cultural pluralism is changing America's religious life.”

Los Angeles has 4 million Muslims, five times as many as in 1970. Nearly half of them are African-Americans. There are 2 million Buddhists, a tenfold increase since 1970. Hindus have grown from 100,000 to 950,000, and Sikhs from 1000 to 220,000. At least 85 different languages are spoken in our public schools. Yet, the United States remains predominantly Christian – 85% claim the Christian faith.

The mainline churches continue to decline – from 20%-40% during the past 30 years. Only about half of Americans now die in the denomination in which they were born. Wade Clark Roof, a professor

of Religion at UC Santa Barbara, says, "The old line is becoming the side line." Carnegie Calian says, "The present decline casts a doubtful future for denominations . . .".

The most starting challenge to America's oldest religious bodies is the megachurch. In 1970 there were ten. Now, there are close to 400, with 79 in California. More than any other state. Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside attracts up to 20,000 churchgoers. The pastor rides a Harley-Davidson. During the past 30 years, approximately 600,000 left their Protestant church for a megachurch. The audience in a megachurch might vary but the rules are the same: "Avoid a central governing body, blur the lines between ministers and members, slice away elaborate doctrines, profess unbending 'traditional' values and package it all for a consumer-oriented society" (*Los Angeles Times, Sunday, June 21, 1998*). "Half of all church-going Americans . . . are attending only 12 percent of the nation's 400,000 churches. To look at it in another way, half of American Protestant churches have fewer than seventy-five congregants" (Carnegie Samuel Calian, President of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, in *Perspectives*, March, 1998, 12).

In ten years, UCLA has doubled its religious associations on campus, from 20 to 40, with the notable addition of Asian religions.

In the midst of all this, there are the chilling details of intolerance. FBI crime statistics from 1996 cite 1,402 religiously motivated hate crimes, a 53% increase in five years. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples are the usual targets. Sunday morning church services still tend to be the most segregated hour of the week. Wilshire Christian Church has three separate congregations worshipping in three different languages.

There are 1,354 religiously affiliated nonprofit Corporations in the city of Los Angeles running food, job training, low-cost housing and other social services. Of those, 500 have been started by churches and synagogues to assist the poor and homeless.

It is estimated that by the year 2000 the following will be the picture in Los Angeles: Protestants 88.8, Roman Catholics 61.8; Jews 5.5; Muslims 4.0, Buddhists 2.0, Hindus .95, Sikhs, 22. (*See Los Angeles Times, Sunday June 21, 1998*)

There are always the parachurch groups. They feed off the Church, generally criticize the Church, get their support from the Church. Account to no one, have a loyalty which is not to Christ and the Church and all the while claim they have the key to the life and vitality of the Church.

That is a quick and inadequate look at my city of Los Angeles. That may not be spiritual enough for you as a preacher, but my contention is that you cannot be a preacher of the gospel in Los Angeles and ignore those facts. That is a part of the preacher's world.

There is another dimension of the preacher's world worth noting. There was a time, perhaps 250 years ago, when the Christian preacher could count on the shared viewpoint of the listening community, reflective of a large theological consensus. There was a time, a very long time ago, when the assumption of God completely dominated Western imagination. In that ancient world it was almost impossible to be an atheist. Not only was the thought of atheism intellectually not available, but emotionally and culturally there was no receptive context for such a notion. The intellectual developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made atheism a credible intellectual alternative for the first time, and then developed an emotionally and culturally accepted posture that made such a belief acceptable. The nineteenth century made even more adjustments and concessions, always at the expense of belief in God in favor of atheism. In the twentieth century God is still a cherished affirmation in private matters. ("family values") but the public realm is largely atheistic, without God, so that "might makes right". Atheism is now a credible, perhaps a consensus option for what is serious in life, and the articulation of "life-with-God" has become a risky intellectual outpost, perhaps as difficult and as odd and as embarrassing as was atheism in the seventeenth century. In the seventeenth century, it was hard,

courageous work to imagine the world without God. And now, as we move into the twenty-first century, in the face of Enlightenment Autonomy issuing in autonomous power and autonomous knowledge, it is hard, courageous work to imagine the world with God. In a culture that has learned well how to imagine – how to make sense – of the world without reference to the God of the Bible, it is the preacher's prime responsibility to invite and empower and equip the community (the Church) to reimagine the world as though God were a key and decisive player. The task is not easy (See *Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching A Sub-Version", Theology Today, July, 1998*; see also (*Michael J. Buckley, At The Origins of Modern Atheism, Yale University Press, 1990*). There are two versions of reality that are in conflict. There is the dominant version which is expressed in our culture, a kind of private, individualized way of life for those who can make it in the market or in the sports arena, who live well, are self-indulgent, but who never get involved in anything outside their own success. It is the way the world looks at things. Preachers are summoned to get up and utter a sub-version of reality, an alternative version of reality that says another way of life in the world is not only possible, but mandated and valid. There is a counter-culture in the world of the preacher and it begins in our imagination – our ability to re-imagine another world – the world of the sacred – the world of God. After many centuries of flowing underground it breaks forth in the words of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near (or, is at hand); repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The sense of this utterance is that an alternative world is possible. Jesus just said it, and some believed and began to act as though it were a reality. You see the tension of it in a text like Philippians 4:22: "All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's (Caesar's) household." Here is the clash of the dominant version of reality (Caesar's corrupt household), and the sub-version of those saints who within a few years had found their way into Caesar's household. Caesar's household was not unchanged. Caesar's household was abolished. That early Christian movement gradually sub-verted, undermined and destroyed the

dominant order (the old order) by withdrawing the spiritual allegiance of millions of souls from the dominant version and giving that allegiance to another order – the eternal order of God. Christianity essentially means winning a spiritual victory in the face of hostile circumstances. They learned to be Christians in spite of everything. We must learn to do the same thing as we face a world that has shut God out. Don't wait for the world to make it easy for us to be a Christian. Our job is to transform the world. Those early Christians did it and we have the same gospel they had.

Our gospel is an unchanging gospel, obviously; but the way in which we present it, and the things in it which need to be proclaimed, with special emphasis and clarity, are determined by the situation, the mental and spiritual situation particularly, of those to whom we speak. The spirit of the times is a very real thing (though it is intangible and difficult to express) and it always has something of the challenge of God in it. Though the gospel is eternal, there must be some translation of it into the present tense. That requires some understanding of the private, personal, universal human needs of men and women in our time. I must admit to you candidly that at this point I had real difficulty being as precise as I wanted to be. However, I can illustrate my concern by referring to one of the most thoughtful analysis of the human situation by H. H. Farmer in his excellent book *The Servant of the Word*. It comes from another time (first published in 1941) but it is so well done that I feel it speaks to our time and it has the added dimension of showing the relevance of the gospel to the human situation.

Farmer analyzes the tragic features of the day under five headings: (1) There is a certain underlying, depressed, hollow sense of futility and meaninglessness of human existence. Many in our time have lost heart. There is a kind of failure of nerve. Human life is flat, unreal, futile. There is the loss of perspective, the loss of the sacred. When people do the things in life they

feel to be really worth doing they always talk the language of eternity. When Leonidas called on the Spartans to die at Thermopylae he cried: "Sparta for ever." Lovers vow themselves to one another for ever. Englishmen cry: "There will always be an England." But when God goes out of our lives meaning and purpose also go. Life goes flat. Many today are totally without any indication of the eternal – the sacred – in their loves.

(2) A very high proportion of individuals today are oppressed by a sense of their own personal insignificance. Many suffer from something like an inferiority complex. Meaninglessness leads to boredom, alcoholism, delinquency, suicide, random murders, graffiti, drugs, child murderers, etc. When there is no God there are no values or ideals either, no moral laws or standards. Meaning can only be found in despising my own meaninglessness. People are touchy, quick to take offense, fighting against a sense of personal insignificance.

(3) There is a yearning in men and women for security. Tillich said we should be desiring courage and be craving for adventure. But ours is a disordered generation. Ours is a shaken time. A good symbol of our era is the old story of Sinbad the Sailor who anchored his boat to what seemed like an island, only to find it to be a great beast of the sea, that went charging off with him, boat and all, across the tossing ocean. The Angel Gabriel says to "De Lawd" in *Green Pastures*: "everything nailed down is comin' loose." Ideas, habits, institutions, ethical standards, once apparently solid and durable, now seem as "frail as frost landscapes on a window pane." There is adventure in being at sea in a seaworthy boat with a storm rising; there is no adventure in being at sea in such circumstances in a sieve. Many people today feel a radical, all-inclusive insecurity. The atomic bomb makes everything on earth seem perishable. Parents express an almost agonized concern for their children, and, in some cases, refuse to have children at all. As one little girl said on the trek of a wagon train on its way to Oregon,

“Mother, will we ever have a home that doesn't shake?” People feel insecure. There is a yearning for security.

There is much in our society which diminishes our sense of personal significance, our belief that life has meaning. There is the effect of technology, which can be liberating as it frees us from domestic or industrial drudgery. But it can also be dreadfully dehumanizing, as we feel ourselves to be no longer persons but things. We no longer have a name but are given a serial number punched on a card that is designed to travel through the entrails of a computer. There is scientific reductionism. Some scientists argue that a human being is nothing but an animal, nothing but a machine, programmed to make automatic responses to external stimuli. There is more to us than a body and a brain. There is atheistic existentialism which says God is dead and there are no values, no ideals, no moral law, no purpose or meaning. All one can do is rebel.

(4) There is a shocked, and even frightened, awareness of the power of what can only be called the forces of evil and unreason which are at work in history. Human life in the first century AD was deeply shadowed by fear of the sinister unseen. Paul calls these forces by a variety of terms: “principalities and powers”, “the elemental spirits of the universe”, and “the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”, of which Satan is the titular head. Standing behind human authorities and institutions, these “discarnate Intelligences” (to use Thomas Hardy's phrase) exercise a malign influence on human affairs and hold men in thrall. That doesn't mean we are justified in saying, “The Devil made me do it”, but it does mean there are sinister forces at work in human history, standing flaming and fanatically against the rule of Christ. Just stop to consider the Nazi scourge, Lebanon, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, bombings, and we cannot assume that our government's policies are blameless and our own hands clean. The powers of evil find their opportunity in what Paul calls our “flesh” – is not so much to live sensually (though that comes into it) as to live Godlessly, in sinful self-reliance. There are powers of evil in the world

which become incarnated in human systems and institutions as well as human persons. There are powers which are living and demonic at work in our world.

The work of Walter Wink is very significant at this point. His award-winning *Powers* trilogy, and his more recent summary volume *The Powers That Be*. He sheds some new light on God and Satan, Angels and demons, principalities and powers. "When an entire network of Powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values, we get what can be called the Domination System" *The Powers That Be*, 27).

(5) There is in the minds of people a feeling of need for an absolute in conduct. Many feel themselves adrift in uncharted seas without any clear sense of any principle which enables them to choose between competing interests or goals. There does not seem to be any reason for choosing one way of life rather than another. There are no fixed points of reference. And, some may well ask, why should that worry anybody? Why not drift, do what you feel inclined to do? Drifting is not unpleasant. Such an attitude fits well with the contemporary, American-born proverb, what someone has called "America's Quintessential Postmodern Proverb – 'Different strokes for different folks'." That is the wisdom literature of our time. We live in a pluralistic world with any number of different views of reality and apparently no rational means of telling which view is most likely to be true, all views are historically relative and merely reflections of social structures. Christian commitment, according to this view, would not be essentially different from a personal preference for chocolate ice cream over other flavors. All truth claims can be reduced to matters of personal preference. Little wonder that we live in a morally confused time.

Here, then, are these five deep, pervasive needs which manifest themselves in greater or lesser degree in the mood and temper of our times. Though they come from the 40's and 50's I feel they are still relevant. They surely need some upgrading but I present them as an example of what the preacher must develop as a guide for one's day to day work. We must have some understanding of the world – of

the culture – of the time in which we live. The more profound our understanding of the world, the more relevant and effective will be our proclamation of the gospel.

Farmer continues his analysis of what he calls “The Contemporary Mind”, by seeking to show how the Christian message – our blessed gospel – fits these needs – all of them, not one or two at the expense of others, but all of them together. Here is where the Christian gospel becomes thrillingly and excitingly relevant. It does speak to the deep needs of modern men and women.

One thing is abundantly clear – our preaching has got to be strongly doctrinal, not in the manner of the theological lecture room, but in the sense that doctrine and life are seen to be inseparably bound up together. It has got to teach the Christian interpretation of life in all its fullness. Jaroslav Pelikan expresses it clearly: “What the Church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God: this is Christian doctrine. Doctrine is not the only, not even the primary, activity of the church. The church worships God and serves (human) kind, it works for the transformation of this world and awaits the consummation of its hope in the next. The church is always more than a school. . . . But the church cannot be less than a school. . . . The Christian Church would not be the Church as we know it without Christian doctrine” (*The Christian Tradition, Vol. I, p.1*). David H. C. Read says, “Nothing is more needed for current preaching than encouragement to return to basic doctrinal themes. What current preaching needs is some ‘theological guts’.” How foolish, then, the clamor for non-doctrinal preaching! And how desperately you will impoverish your ministry if you yield to that demand! The underlying assumption is, of course, that doctrine is dull: a perfectly absurd misapprehension. Though I must admit that some of us can make the gospel so dull and pedestrian that we could make an angel weep and unweave a rainbow. It is difficult to make our glorious gospel dull, but some of us can do it. But to maintain that doctrine is necessarily dull is simply a confession of ignorance or downright spiritual deficiency. Only a terrible spiritual blindness could fail to see that such

a truth as that presented in the sentence “The word was made flesh” is overpoweringly dramatic and utterly revolutionary in its consequences. “If this is dull”, exclaims Dorothy Sayers, “Then what in Heaven’s name, is worthy to be called exciting?”

The former President of Princeton Theological Seminary, John A. Mackay, in his superb study of Ephesians, which he entitles “God’s Order”, points us in the right direction. “The letter is pure music . . . what we read here is truth that sings, doctrine set to music.” And may I point out the essentially musical character of the Bible as a whole. All the great movements in the biblical drama of creation and redemption have a musical accompaniment. At creation’s dawn the “morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.” An orchestra of angels hailed the advent of the “Child born, the Son given.” At history’s close there will be a “Grand Finale.” The trumpets shall sound. As Dryden, the seventeenth century poet, expressed it –

The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And music shall untune the sky.

–Song for St. Cecilia’s Day.

What else could the Christian religion be but a singing religion? Drop doctrine from your preaching, and for a brief time you may titillate the fancy of the superficial, and have them talking about your cleverness; but that type of ministry wears thin speedily, and produces no spiritual harvest in the end. We must learn how to preach doctrine, and how to make it sing. Yet, this has to be done without the loss of that I-Thou relationship – that personal relationship that we have in Jesus Christ. The basic story of what God has done in Jesus Christ must always be kept in mind. That is the treasure which we hold in our earthen vessels. That is what the various epistles call “your most holy faith” (Jude 20), a “model of sound words” (2 Timothy 1:13), “the healthy doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:3; Titus 1:9), “the noble deposit”

(2 Timothy 2:14), “the splendid teaching” (1 Timothy 4:6). These phrases could refer to that basic kerygma which lay behind all of the New Testament, and which is pre-supposed in the Epistles. It is that gospel of a personal God who has come to us in the person of Jesus and made personal to us through the gospel by the person of the Holy Spirit. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are in a personal relationship with God, not a legal relationship. That is necessary to keep our preaching of doctrine from becoming sheer dogma without the fire of God in it.

Let us now return to H. H. Farmer's analysis of the contemporary mind to notice how the great Christian doctrines meet the needs which he has so thoughtfully set forth. (1) The affirmation which the Christian faith makes of a divine purpose in history which we are called to serve here and now, and yet which transcends history in its final consummation, stands over against that depressed, hollow sense of futility and meaninglessness of human existence. We see that theme set forth in Ephesians. “With all wisdom and insight he (God) has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time (at just the right moment) to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:8b-10). The theme of Ephesians is the glory of the Church as the society which embodies in history the eternal purpose of God made plain in Christ. There are three things to notice here: (1) A divine intention runs through history. The ultimate reality is a Father, who has a purpose of love for all, and his will is for community. In Walter de la Mare's poem “The Listeners”, there is the ultimate question which all humans ask:

“Is there anybody here”, said the traveler

Knocking on a moonlit door

And his horse in the silence champs the grasses

On the forest's ferny floor.”

We are all traveler's, knocking on the door of the universe and asking, "Is there anybody here?" The Christian faith says, "There is Somebody here, who is personal and a Friend, who has a great eternal purpose of love for your life." We are not left to chance or fate or economic principles or politics – politics has very little ultimate significance. There is "One far off divine event toward which the whole creation moves." History is going somewhere. History is linear not circular. It is God's unveiled secret "that Jesus Christ is not merely the Messiah of the Jews but the Clue to history and the Meaning of the Cosmos." That eternal purpose of God is to be realized through the Church. The Church is the Body of Christ, the social organism which is to execute God's purpose in the world. Here is a correction to all that is called "Evangelical" in our day. Becoming a Christian is not a matter of some personal, private experience of salvation, but the corporate experience of being related to that which is to accomplish God's great eternal in and beyond history. We become Christian's personally, but not privately.

You will be surprised to learn how many people you will meet in your ministry both outside and inside the Church who feel that history has no meaning. There is a kind of practical, atheistic existentialism abroad in the land. You see an illustration of it in Camus' novel *The Plague*. The city of Oran has been overrun by rats which have brought with them the dreaded bubonic plague. Valiantly the doctor and those associated with him battle the plague; finally, after much effort, they succeed in bringing it under control. At the end of the book, however, the doctor says, "It's only a question of time. The rats will be back." There is nothing we can do ultimately to stem the tide of meaninglessness and hopelessness. It is a plague upon our time. History is a working out of God's purposes (yet, everything is not all fixed). Christ is the center of history. The new age of God – the kingdom of God has already been ushered in. All history is moving toward a goal. History is going somewhere. People need to hear and understand that. Somewhere Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote: "Mind behind the Universe, Purpose running through it, Meaning in it, Destiny ahead of it" (William Moat Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick,

419. Over against those who speak of the futility of things, we declare that God's great eternal purpose is in history and we are called to serve it and have a part in it. This is where we get our hope. And people need that desperately today.

(2) According to the Christian faith, this eternal purpose, while it is of cosmic and supracosmic scope, is a purpose of love, which means that it bestows the richest possible personal significance upon the individual person. Christians believe in the intrinsic worth of human beings, because of our doctrines of creation and redemption. God created us in his own image and endowed us with rational, moral, social, creative and spiritual faculties which make us like him. The Psalmist spelled it out: "You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:5). John said: "God so loved the world" that he gave his only Son for our redemption. The cross is the chief public evidence of the value which God places on us. People have value. "You are of more value than many sparrows" (Luke 12:7). People need to know they are valued and loved, not only for the sake of their own image and self-respect, but even more for the welfare of society.

When human beings are devalued, everything in society turns sour. Women are humiliated and children despised. The sick are regarded as a nuisance, and the elderly as a burden. Ethnic minorities are discriminated against. The poor are oppressed and denied social justice. Capitalism displays its ugliest face. Labour is exploited in the mines and factories. Criminals are brutalized in prison. Opposition opinions are stifled. Belsen is invented by the extreme Right, and Gulag by the extreme Left. Unbelievers are left to live and die in their lostness. There is no freedom, no dignity, no carefree joy. Human life seems not worth liking, because it is scarcely human any longer.

But when human beings are valued as persons, because of their intrinsic worth, everything changes. Men, women and children are all honoured. The sick are cared for, and the elderly enabled to live and die with dignity. Dissidents are listened to, prisoners rehabilitated, minorities protected, and

the oppressed set free. Workers are given a fair wage, decent working conditions and a measure of participation in both the management and the profit of the enterprise. And the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth. Why? Because people matter. Because every man, woman and child has worth and significance as a human being made in God's image and likeness.

(John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 232)

(3) The Christian doctrine of providence, of the overshadowing and indwelling purpose and wisdom of God in history relates itself to that distressing sense of radical insecurity, which haunts the modern mind. As Farmer writes: "When the feeling of insecurity is so radical, it cannot be met by a glib, blandly optimistic affirmation about the future, nor by any construction, however clever, of blueprints of a better world. It can only be met by something as radical, namely an ultimate declaration and decision of the soul about God" (*The Servant of The Word*, 145-146). Here we need to re-think our understanding of the sovereignty of God.

None of us know too much about God. There is still a lot of mystery surrounding God's person, in spite of the fact that he has sought to reveal himself. All of us must be humble before his presence. God's sovereignty must mean God's right to be God – to be what God is. Through the ages theologians have sought to express that. The Heidelberg catechism of 1563 defined providence as:

"The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand."

That affirmation of God's providential activity is most severely tested by the reality and power of evil. Shirley Guthrie, a reformed theologian, has responded to the old foundations of the council of Dart, with these four statements: (1) God's sovereign power is not God's freedom to do anything God pleases. It

is God's freedom always, with everyone, in all things, to be the loving and just Lord that God is. (2) God's sovereignty does not mean that everything that happens is willed and caused by God. Many things happen that God does not will. Evil is by definition what God does not will. (3) The sovereign power of God is not power that dominates and controls, and supports domination and control in human, personal and social relationships, it is power that liberates those who are oppressed by their own or others sinfulness; breaks down old distinctions between the superior and the inferior, insiders and outsiders; sets people on their feet and enables them to live as free, responsible, mutually caring and loving brothers and sisters of one another. (4) The sovereign power of God is not freedom from involvement with human weakness, suffering and dying. It is God's freedom to be the friend, companion, and fellow sufferer. God is the God who suffers with us. God rules over all things by guiding creation to its goal, but accomplishes this by God's Word (Jesus Christ) and Spirit and not by unilateral and coercive power. "God Rules" Bath insists, "in and over a world of freedom" (*Church Dogmatics, III/3:93*). We and all people everywhere come from and go to meet a life giving liberating, reconciling, life-renewing triune God of sovereign power who is not only present but present and at work (and who invites God's people to be not only present but present and at work) moving toward the new humanity in a new heaven and a new earth that are on the way and will surely come. Here is where we find our security.

(4) The Christian doctrine of the love of God is not a glib and easy doctrine. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Love is always relevant but never a simple possibility" (*Christian Faith and Social Action, 12*). It is not as simple as saying, "God loves you, and so do I." Christian love is not a mushy sentiment, but an act of the will. It is not a natural reaction, it is an achievement. Perhaps the best definition in English of the Greek Agapé is caring. Dr. Kershner used to say, "Love is intelligent good-will." Drummond called it, "The greatest thing in the world." Paul said, "Love never fails." Enormous problems stand in the

way of talking like that in a world like ours. We have to face the reality of the origin and power of evil; the prevalence of injustice, the suffering of the innocent and the occurrence of catastrophes. When we earnestly seek solutions to such problems we find no solution, no explanation. What we do find is a presence – a cross on the hill outside the city wall where the Son of God is dying. Suddenly we realize that we are not alone. God does not take away our problems. He comes to us and suffers with us.

When you set the cross in the context of the world's sin and suffering, three main notes will be in your preaching. You will preach the cross as Revelation. Where else does the terrible truth about sin stand so nakedly revealed? But the greatest of all the paradoxes you will have to preach is this – that the same event which reveals evil in its terrifying demonic malignity reveals also invincible love. You will preach the cross as victory. On the cross Jesus cried, "It is finished." Something had happened which settled the issue forever. Hapax – once and for all – is the trumpet – note of the apostolic preaching. "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." That is decisive. We wrestle against principalities and powers, but we know now that we are fighting a defeated foe. P.T. Forsyth said: "The evil world cannot win at last, because it failed to win the only time it ever could. It is a vanquished world in which men play their deviltries. Christ has overcome it." After Calvary, it can never be midnight again. You will preach the cross as challenge. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). There is nothing like the cross of Jesus to shame our selfishness, to put down our pride of intellect, to rebuke our false ambitions, and to create within us a longing for that spirit which shone so gloriously in him. Here we see God coming to us, suffering for us, suffering with us, as he defeats every evil power in the universe. In spite of everything – every evil thing – God loves us.

In one of his books H. H. Farmer tells how, as a young man, he once preached on the love of God. After the service an old Polish Jew who had become a Christian came up to him and said, "You should

never preach on the love of God until you have seen, as I have seen, the blood of your dearest loved-ones flowing in the gutters on a grey winter's morning". Farmer later asked him how he could believe in the love of God after that. The old man replied that at first he could not. But then he came to see that he was faced with a choice. Either the cross was true and God's love was real – or he was left alone with total despair.

(The Expository Times, March, `1980)

The thrust of the demonic has to be met with the fire of the divine. That is what happened at Calvary.

(5) In the call to loyal discipleship to Christ there is satisfaction for the deep, ineradicable need for a fixed point, an absolute, in the realm of conduct. The shallow, confused attitude of many in the church today is expressed in this little verse: "Won't somebody give me some good advice on how to be naughty, and still be nice." Augustine stated it perfectly nearly 1600 years ago when he prayed: "Lord, make me pure, but not yet." Our standards are all mixed up. We have gotten so wrapped up in the achievement of success, that we have forgotten that Character is the keystone of the good life. Often we put cleverness above goodness, success before sincerity, and achievement in front of integrity. The confusion of our time appears in the story of a young woman at a banquet who turned to her friend to say, "Dr. So and So is a great man. He speaks eight languages." Her friend wisely answered, "Yes, he is a great man, but not because he speaks eight languages. He could be a liar in all eight." This situation is often met by preachers who offer only a moral harangue or a legalistic catalogue of rules. All of our must, should, and ought sermons accomplish little or nothing. Paul Ramsey began his great book on *Basic Christian Ethics* with this sentence: "The first thing to be said concerning Christian Ethics is that it cannot be separated from its religious foundations." P. T. Forsyth got it right: "If conduct is wrong, it is the religion that needs reforming; the life will follow the faith" (*The Cruciality of the Cross*, 27). The Christian life is a life based on faith, lived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and lived within the

fellowship of the Church. We cannot be a Christian by ourselves. During the war years, the New York Times carried the rather startling statement: "Last night Miss Bessie Smith whistled the Fifth Symphony". Now Bessie was undoubtedly quite a whistler, but she didn't whistle the *Fifth Symphony* – that requires a full orchestra. The Christian life is not a solo performance.

To lead people to a valid moral life requires more than merely quoting the Sermon on the Mount or The Golden Rule. The ethical teaching of the Bible requires being considered in context and careful, thoughtful interpretation. Blake said: "If Christianity was morals, then Socrates was the Savior." The Sermon on the Mount is a religious ethic. It is a divine imperative based on a divine indicative. The indicative may be expressed like this: "God has manifested his Kingdom – his saving Rule – in Christ." The imperative may then be expressed like this: "Therefore let all who accept the Rule of God live in a new way – the Kingdom way." The Sermon on the Mount is a design for life in the Kingdom of God. "Good advice" must be based on the "Good News of the Gospel".

The Sermon on the Mount is a disciples ethic. It is a way of life for people of the Kingdom, not humankind at large. Gore said: "Spoken not to the world but to the Church" (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 15). T. W. Manson comments: "Given to the new Israel" (*The Teaching of Jesus*, 294).

The Sermon on the Mount is a prophetic ethic. It does not lay down rules, but opens up principles. James Denny said it well: "It would be a great point gained if people would only consider that it was a Sermon, and was preached, not an act which was passed" (*Letters to William Robertson Nicoll*, 71). One of the toughest series of sermons I ever preached was on "The Beatitudes". There is a conflict between the prophetic and the legal spirit.

The Sermon on the Mount is an unattainable ethic which we, as Jesus' followers, are nevertheless challenged to attain. There is an eschatological dimension to the ethic set forth here. The future consummation of God's reign is still to come but it also has made its impact in the present. We are

seeking to live in the here and now that which can only be perfected in the future. By the power of the Holy Spirit we grow and develop, but we don't lose heart because we are not now perfect.

Paul's ethical teaching is informative. Truth for Paul is always "truth in order to goodness". Salvation as a present experience, is nothing if it is not moral, and it stands in relation to the Gospel as the fruit to the root. The biblical ethic is rooted in the Gospel and appears as the fruit of that relationship. John Ballie once said, two things are really real – grace and gratitude. Erskine of Linlathen once wrote: "In the New Testament religion is grace, and ethics is gratitude" (*Letters of Thomas Erskine, 16*). For Paul Christian goodness is "grace" goodness. It is not conformity to a code, but the harvest of a Spirit-filled life. An outline of the Pauline ethic might be:

1. Act as Christ did.
2. Acts as Christ directed.
3. Acts as members of Christ's body.
4. Acts in agapé.

Paul made love the master-key of morals. "Be rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3:17). "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (I Corinthians 8:1). "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14). Love is the great ethical principle of the New Testament.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was preaching a sermon from Philippians 4:22: "All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's (Caesar's) household." He closed his sermon with these words: "This is the conclusion of the matter, that if this desperately needy world is ever to be saved, with not souls only but the societies of men redeemed to a kingdom of peace and righteousness, there is one indispensable prerequisite for which no substitute will ever be discovered: men and women, namely, who do not wait for Caesar's household to be redeemed before they begin living redeemed lives within it

– Christians in spite of everything!” (*Fant and Pinson, 20 Centuries of Great Preaching, Vol. IX, 69*).

The hunger for an ethic that can meet the demands of a time like this will be based on the interpreted, theological ethic set forth in the Bible. The need is to challenge Christians today to believe like Christians and to behave like Christians. Don't accept the status quo. That is a big order.

CONCLUSION:

That is the preacher's world. I have been able to give only the barest sketch of a part of that world, but I have tried to give you the heart of it as I can conceive it. This is the world that must occupy our mind and heart and soul – all of us. In this world we must live and eat and sleep and dream. Here we will labor and study and sweat. Every facet of this world requires to be examined and mastered. We will come to know it like we know our A,B,C's, only some parts of it will hound us for years as we wrestle with it. It will dominate us, control us, fascinate us, consume us. When we go to the theater we will see through the eyes of our world. When we play we will bring our world along. It is the last thing we think about at night and the first thing we think about in the morning. It can never be a leisurely exercise for now and then, always before our eyes will be that lonely person standing between the world and the Gospel – the preacher! Standing between the forgiveness of God and the sin of human beings – the preacher! Standing between the truth of God and the deep need of people – the preacher!