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## THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A TIME OF RACIAL CRISIS

In looking back on the 1950's and 60's, especially as the issue of race emerged as the center of American conflict and introspection, a great deal of attention has been given to the politics of it all, the massive rallies in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, the social and political levers of power that were pushed and pushed back again, the passage of Civil Rights bills and various Supreme Court judgments, not to mention the continuing struggle our country faces in dealing with this whole matter. Today, we argue about our country's founding - 1619 or 1776 - whether and to what extent progress has been made in the last 150 years, our national burden of guilt and our efforts to reach some sort of redemptive life as a nation beyond race. But perhaps not enough attention has been given to the theological component, perhaps even the theological basis for this whole anguished discussion. Yet for Southern Presbyterians, raised on Calvin and the Westminster Confession, who claimed and proclaimed the sovereignty of God, the matter of race was preeminently a theological matter, and it was precisely its theological nature that made this matter so uncomfortable for the church. Were it merely a political or even social issue, Southern Presbyterians could safely ignore it, as indeed they did for several decades. That exercise in a piety that could safely keep the issue of race at bay was an alternative that our own denomination developed under the theological rubric, "the spirituality of the church." Such a doctrine, first enunciated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, held that the gospel was primarily a spiritual and to that extent a private matter, having little to do with the world of politics or economics, not to mention racial matters. It was, however, our heritage of Reformed theology, that made us uncomfortable with this spiritual compromise first made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and eagerly clung to in the 20<sup>th</sup>, - our memory of our own tradition of Calvin in Geneva, and other more recent Reformed confessions in Europe that forced us to look at the matter of race through a biblical lens that had many uncomfortable things to say about justice for the oppressed and the universality of Christ's claim on sinners of every sort.

Strangely, how the church looked at race depended not on politics or the law or even demonstrations of power, but rather, how the church read and listened to its own Bible. (Parenthetically, I would note that Dr. King often berated white Christians not for their prejudices or indifference but for their failure to attend to their own scriptures. Just as he called Americans to attend to the words of their founding documents, especially the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, so he called Christians to read their Bibles. It was the Bible that he thought was dangerous, that contained words that could and did change the world. His Letter from the Birmingham Jail was not written to

politicians or power-brokers but to fellow clergymen in Birmingham). So how did our church read its Bible? And how did that affect its views on race?

For some time in the South, the Presbyterian emphasis on the “spirituality of the church” meant that scripture was to be read and interpreted primarily for the moral and spiritual benefits religion could provide. One should not belittle this point of view, flawed as it no doubt is. Scripture does teach us a good deal about what it means to live an honorable life, about what benefits the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, regular worship, personal integrity and sharing in a life together bring to the believer. The 10 Commandments, the book of Proverbs, the admonitions of Paul, even the Sermon on the Mount have much to teach us about Christian discipleship and the way one is to live the Christian life. But as long as all of this is kept clear of the social and political realities in which we live, the faith becomes a kind of hot-house flower, domesticated to serve as an ornament of society but not to question or address its very basis, much less transform the culture with which we are called to engage.

Moreover, beginning in the 18th century but lasting well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Presbyterians were more interested in establishing and defending scripture’s veracity in a world where scientific proofs were thought to be the chief criterion for acceptable discourse. Theories of Inspiration that sought to prove scripture’s veracity to a skeptical world flourished, such that the Bible became more of an ikon to be venerated or even worshipped than a witness to be listened to. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Presbyterian Church itself was pretty much a fundamentalist denomination, even declaring itself so in the early decades of the century. Scripture contained rules for living, verses to be memorized as wise sayings, helpful instructions, and spiritual reflection. The Bible was not thought of as being particularly dangerous but more like a pious resource, handy to have around the house.

There were those in Europe and in some places in America that thought of scripture differently, indeed, who read scripture not as a warehouse of spiritual proofs but as an expression of religious affections. Just as the Romantic poets gave vent to their innermost feelings, these theologians thought scripture could best be understood as ancient expressions of religious sentiment, an expression of our feelings about God or the sublime - stimulating for believers today, even in their own way, inspiring.

Beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a growing number of theologians and Bible scholars who were not happy with either of these two alternatives. In the summer of 1916, a young pastor gave a lecture to his colleagues in Switzerland, entitled “The Strange, New World Within the Bible.” As a pastor himself, called to preach the gospel, Karl Barth had stumbled upon a dangerous book, not dangerous in the sense of being mean-spirited or threatening but dangerous in the sense that it is a book that when read, carries us beyond ourselves into a world not of our making, perhaps even not of our own wanting, but a world that demands our attention and summons us to hear its questions to us. He writes, “There is a river in the Bible that carries us away, once we have entrusted our destiny to

it - away from ourselves to the sea." Writing some years later, Eric Auerbach, a German Jew, noted that scripture sought itself to be read, not for pleasure or even instruction, but compelling readers to enter its world, drawing them into a life shaped by its own witness. These are only two examples but combined with many others, theologians and biblical scholars began to read scripture differently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, finding here a witness to a reality that was commanding, a reality that drew the reader into a life not of one's own making but of a life shaped by scripture's own witness and purpose.

As a result of these insights, there developed in Europe and in America something called the "Biblical Theology Movement," an effort to engage with scripture and teach it to seminarians and future pastors, not as moral instruction or expressions of religious affections, but as a witness to the God whom scripture revealed. This movement was particularly prominent among American Presbyterians and constituted the way the Bible was taught in theological seminaries, particularly in the 1940's, 50's and early 60's. As such it rejected both the liberalism of religious affections and the fundamentalism of propositional proofs. Instead, it attempted to recover the Bible for both seminary and church as a witness to God and God's actions in the world. This movement noticed that scripture said very little about itself; that was not its purpose. Rather, it directed the reader to God and to what God was doing in the world, particularly what God was doing in Jesus Christ. The Bible seemed, in their view, to be pointing away from itself. And as it did so, it affirmed that God was active in history, that books of the Bible were, in their different ways, witnesses to God's reality, that there were consistent themes that united scripture's varied witness in both Old and New Testaments - themes such as Exodus and Deliverance, Exile and Loss, Covenant and Renewal, and most of all, Jesus Christ as the center, meaning and goal of all scripture. This movement maintained that understanding the Bible was not a matter of logical proof or religious sentiment but an engagement with God's self-revelation. It also saw the Old Testament as vital to the witness to Jesus Christ.

Centers of Biblical research at Johns Hopkins, Harvard, and elsewhere fueled interest in Biblical archaeology and the extent to which the events rehearsed in scripture corresponded to places and even events in history. The impact of this movement within Protestant churches was, to say the least, significant. Those of you who can remember the Covenant Life Curriculum, will recognize how it grew out of the Biblical Theology movement. Its basic introduction to Bible study, was A.B. Rhodes' book, *The Mighty Acts of God*. God was the subject, not just the object of the Bible's story, the Subject active in history.

Now suppose you were a young seminarian in 1950 drinking all of this in. You might have learned not only how to read scripture in this way, but also how to preach it. Those who did were taught not to begin with their spiritual insights into the faith, much less with the day's headlines, but with the Bible. One began there not for pious reasons but because that is where our story begins, the context in which we and our world are located, the light in light of which we see light. Also, when we begin there, scripture becomes a

witness, perhaps even a dangerous and redemptive witness to a world in need of its grace and gifts. And when we begin there our sermons become the same kind of witness as well.

One of the centers of this way of teaching the Bible was Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, as it was known then. Some names you may or may not know from that era are John Bright, James Luther Mays, and John Leith. John Bright, who taught Old Testament, and whose book *A History of Israel* was a text in many seminaries for years, received his PhD at Johns Hopkins University and taught at Union from 1940 to 1975. Jim Mays was one of the most significant Biblical scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, editing as he did the whole series of *Interpretation* commentaries. John Leith, a professor of Reformed Theology sought to recover for the Presbyterian Church its legacy from Calvin, its engagement with the world in all the world's politics and prejudices, and above all to offer a witness to the redeeming grace of God in Jesus Christ. In many ways, these men - and they were men - were culturally conservative but socially and politically open to change, seeing in the South of their day, a great need to change. If God were in fact active in history, then the post-war South could not be immune to the danger of his scandalous grace.

One person who studied with these teachers was a young man from Great Falls, South Carolina, named John Lyles. A graduate of Davidson College in 1950 and later Union Seminary in 1954, John was ordained in Bethel Presbytery and called to serve the Marion Presbyterian Church in Marion, South Carolina. Earlier in 1954, the Supreme Court had ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. Also, in the summer of that year, the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church proclaimed that "Enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics." So, this newly minted young seminarian, having been taught something of the Bible's witness to that strange Kingdom of God that beckons us to a world of forgiveness and grace, sets out to speak about God's activity at work in a racially segregated South Carolina. In a little book edited by Donald Shriver, entitled *The Unsilent South*, one of John Lyles early sermons can be found. It is entitled, "Amos Diagnoses Our Southern Sickness." It was preached in October of 1957. I want to focus on this sermon for just a bit.

Note a couple of things at first. 1) The sermon is not a rant on the injustice to be found in the segregated South. That is not where Lyles begins. He begins with the text from Amos. He wants to listen to what Amos is saying to Israel, and yes, he wants his people to hear that message as well. But the story is about God and what Amos sees God is about in dealing with an Israel that has lost its way. Secondly, Lyles is not preaching this sermon his first year as pastor, not even in his second year. He did not come to Marion to straighten out the folks in Marion. Only in his third year did he take up this heavy burden and speak to his people as their pastor, who loved them and was charged to speak the Word of God to them. Far from being some routine recitation of scriptural proofs or the

easy work of talking about his own feelings, Lyles found that bearing witness to the Gospel was a heavy thing, a burden even to speak of the God of Jesus Christ, but a burden he was charged to bear and carry.

In opening up the book of Amos, the first thing that Lyles notes is that God judges Israel, that judgment is one of the forms of God's love for his people. If God did not love them, if they were simple an ornament, a matter of indifference, his judgment would never have waxed so hot. He goes on to note that God's judgment of Israel's faithlessness is not confined to Israel. Israel's story of injustice is somehow our story as well. Jesus Christ has made it so. These words to Israel have something to say to us. Indeed, they judge our well-accepted and comfortable myth that white people are inherently superior to black people, and so we can simply dismiss them, and perhaps not even see them as people. He notes also, how much God loves Israel, which, of course, is Israel's very problem. Because God loves Israel, God expects a great deal from his own people. Israel had been elected by God, chosen by God, but elected and chosen to serve, to be a light to the nations. Instead, Israel thought she had been elected to receive blessing upon blessing all of which would mark her as superior to others. We too, as Presbyterians, believe that God has chosen us, Lyles insists, but for what? Privilege? Self-satisfaction? Superiority? Or as a witness to God's grace and love in the world? Lyles concludes by asking his congregation if Amos, in his day, separated religion from public life? He does not appear to do that. Should we? And he finishes by citing not Amos but Jesus' haunting words of judgment in the parable of the sheep and goats: "Depart from me - for I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me no drink, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." This word of judgment is from our own Redeemer and Savior.

One final note before concluding. Lyles' sermon is premised on the fact that God loves his people, that God loves Israel, that God loves the people of Marion, South Carolina, black and white. Lyles is not laying down some new law, nor is this some sort of moral exhortation to work harder or be better. He is talking to sinners, but he does not begin with their sin. He begins with God's love. If God did not love his people, if God did not love the sinners of South Carolina, there would be no reason to risk preaching this sermon. But the scandalous burden is that we are chosen, chosen for love and service. Like Tevye, we might well ask if God could not choose somebody else for a while, but the fact is God had chosen John Lyles to preach and to preach the demanding word of love to his own people.

Well, Lyles' sermon was to be a two-parter: one part this Sunday, the second part next Sunday. But after worship on the first Sunday, the session met and asked him not to preach part II and soon after, asked Lyles to leave. There was a cost to bearing witness to the gospel, something that both the Liberals and Fundamentalists never suspected, but which those who had been trained to listen to scripture's witness and offer a witness of their own soon discovered. Of the 20 Presbyterian preachers cited in Shriver's book, four

lost their pulpits almost immediately, though none of them left the ministry and all of them served the church later in very important and substantial ways.

There were other pastors I could mention. Robert Walkup, for example, who left Starkville, Mississippi after the painful events there when Civil Rights workers were murdered and later when James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi. The pain in some of these sermons is palpable, but in surprising ways there is very little self-pity, but instead a kind of confidence, not smugness or arrogance, but confidence and even gratitude to be given such an opportunity to preach the gospel in a moment of crisis. And, as you might imagine, there are stories about these days and these pastors that are full of laughter - some of it at the craziness of it all, some of it in just very good humor and grace. You might be interested to know that John Lyles pastored several other churches and eventually became presbytery exec in Florida before retiring. His son, Patterson, is a pastor in Tennessee and his grand-daughter, Betsy, pastors a church in Dallas.

So, what can we conclude from all of this? Let me mention a few points:

1) The 5th chapter of Ecclesiastes begins with this verse: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." The recognition that scripture tells the story of the God who makes a way when there is no way, the God who is the subject of scripture's witness, had the effect of un-domesticating the word and revealing the true questions that are ever before those who would listen. In some ways that makes the Bible a dangerous book - not a book of good rules and solid behavior, but a book that may well take us where we had no intention of going. Reading scripture, like following Jesus, is a risky business, not because we will fail or make mistakes, but because it may land us into seeing people we had not seen before, following Jesus into places we would never think of going, risking the attempt to love folk whom we would never think of doing so on our own.

2) Scripture read in this way is full of surprises. The danger it gets us into also reveals the joy of being with each other as we share this adventure. That is where advent leads: to adventure, to life together, to the joy of common struggles, common hopes, struggling on matters that matter. Are we waiting for something better than that?

3) Reading scripture in this way takes courage. If you are like me, I am and have been in so many ways, a coward, but scripture is full of cowards who are called upon daily to hear the words: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Failure here is definitely an option. Scripture is brutally honest about that, brutally honest about the failures of the disciples to understand or follow or keep faith with Jesus. But the God who is our refuge and strength, a present help in time of trouble, does not let our failures matter. He even uses them to surprise us with his gifts of meaning, hope, and yes, even victory. The cross should be a sign of ultimate failure but it is scripture that teaches us that it is the cross that triumphs, which is why we are right to lift it up and why we can draw strength from it and why we cannot take our failures more seriously than God's redeeming grace.

A personal reminiscence: in 2001, I moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, to become dean of the Charlotte campus of Union Presbyterian Seminary. One of the people who looked me up shortly after I assumed these new duties was John Lyles. We became friends and he would often come to the seminary for lunch or just for conversation. When he died in May of 2015, I was asked to speak at his memorial service. With your permission, I would like to share with you a bit of what I said on that occasion.

A final and personal word. I did not know John Lyles until I moved to Charlotte in 2001. He looked me up. He encouraged me in my work. He came to our functions and seemed happy to be supportive of this new seminary venture, as if he would rather be here than anywhere else. I suspect he made a lot of people feel like that. I remember seeing him walk across campus one cold, overcast winter's day, with his overcoat trailing in the breeze and a floppy hat covering his head. I called to him and he turned to me and smiled and one could feel the warmth and encouragement and hope all the way over the quad. The witness is not far from the source of such warmth, and in ways that we should not denigrate for theological reasons of modesty, this witness resembles the Lord to whom it points.

John's witness is finished now, his baptism, as we say, is complete. But the work, he would be the first to tell us, is not finished. His family and his church family carry further that witness today, which is another gift. This Lord who comes first has left room for us, as he always does, to bear our witness too, and invites us even now to sing with the psalmist with our voices and our lives: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name." Amen.