

Squib: Preaching Politics

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As an American homiletician living in Leipzig, Germany, I am often asked for my thoughts on American Christianity and the current presidential administration. I never know how to reply. What do you say about something so globally and personally affecting?

Do I tell them that I am still grappling with the role different forms of Christian proclamation played in the election? A reported 81% of evangelicals supported one candidate. A large proportion of white voters did the same. What does this mean for evangelicalism and for my own mainline denomination, which is 94% white? More pressing, what does this mean for black, latino/a, and LGBTQ communities? Or, for Muslims, the poor, immigrants, refugees, and women?

I learned of the presidential election results on November 9th, just as ceremonies were underway in Leipzig to remember the victims of Krystallnacht. It is a frightening connection that many others have made. With the political rhetoric in 1930's Germany and in the U.S. today, many American pastors and professors have called for a new Confessing Church movement, even crafting statements of confession (cf. <https://confessingfaculty.org>). I think about this kind of resistance every time the congregation prays the Lord's Prayer. "*Dein Reich* komme."

But, then, I also wonder about how effective a new Confessing Church movement could be. At its strongest it seems to offer a type of prophetic, poetic preaching that counters the prosaic worldview of domination.¹ At its weakest, it may be overly subtle—too vague to foster resistance in its hearers.²

Some leaders in my denomination are currently calling for preaching that focuses on unity. While well-intentioned, such a call may risk encouraging an unreflective kind of preaching that undermines the invitation to repentance, normalizes oppressive action, and silences the vulnerable. I am reminded of what Albert Rabateau wrote in *Slave Religion* about the ways an overly-spiritualized

¹ Cf. *Walter Brueggeman*, *Finally Comes the Poet. Daring Speech for Proclamation*, Minneapolis 1989, 3.

² Cf. *William Skiles*, *Preaching to Nazi Germany*. UCSD Dissertation, 2016. "The data indicates that if one were to sit in a confessing church during the Nazi dictatorship, one would hear – but only rarely – a critical comment about the Nazi regime, its ideology, and policies. On that rare occasion, the parishioner would hear a sermon like any other – a testimony about God's work in the world in times past and present. But she would also hear a brief comment, perhaps only buried in the commentary about the biblical text, which undermines Nazi leaders, National Socialism, or its persecution of Christians. [...] No doubt it would take concentration, reflection, and will-power for this parishioner to actually be moved to some kind of action based on the pastor's criticism" (281).

faith has been used to assuage the guilt of policies that exploit (especially) black bodies.³ Could focusing on preaching unity be a new form of spiritualizing faith?

A few of my pastoral colleagues in the U.S., who are engaged in bold preaching and protest, have advised me to enjoy my respite from the American church and politics. I have considered it, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁴ and Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵ keep disturbing me.

And, my desk overlooks Nikolaikirche, the cradle of the Peaceful Revolution that energized resistance in 1980's East Germany. Every Monday the church was open for all people. A colleague here calls this Leipzig's original Moral Monday protest, the fruit of which is remembered each November 9th as the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Nikolaikirche reminds me of the foolishness of God. Who would use prayer as a form of resistance, preaching as a counter to police brutality, and candles as an agent of change? Surely only the God who chooses Israel, a people caught in the shadows of superpowers. Surely only God, the one who works deliverance as a disruption of Pharaoh's economy and a mockery of Rome's power. It is this God whose scriptures consistently refer to such politicized themes as refugees, immigrants, women, and care for the poor and sick.

Living in an international context, I still don't know exactly what to say to a new acquaintance who asks me about the presidential administration or even what I will preach next. But, it seems to me that the homiletical question can no longer be whether or not to offer a political word. Rather, the question is whose politic does our preaching explicitly and implicitly support?

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³ Cf. *Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion. The "Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South"*, New York 2004, 109.

⁴ I think specifically of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words to Reinhold Niebuhr about why he had to return to his home country: "I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ..." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 16: Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940–1945, 1).

⁵ "I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season'" (*Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," August 16, 1963*).