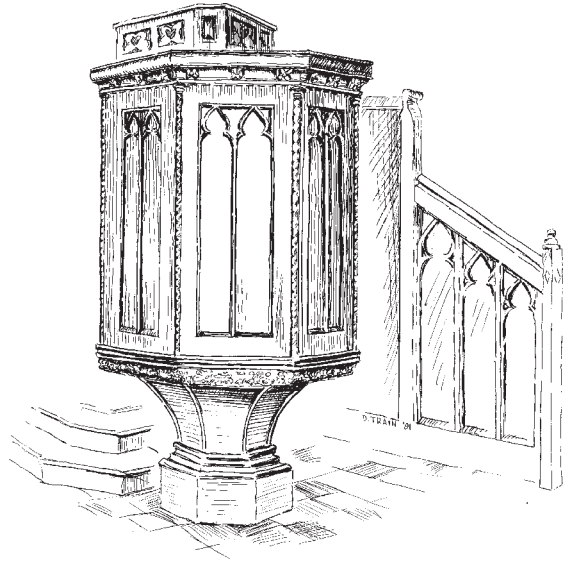


January 18, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### *I Wish Churches Would Mind Their Own Business*

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Amos 5:21-24

A while back when I was serving another church, I recall a story broke out of a small town named Roberta, Georgia. It seems that a black youngster was refused membership in a congregational church's Cub Scout program strictly on the grounds of race. When the fat began to sizzle in the fire, scouting brass at the national level became concerned and got involved. The last word had it that the rejected 10-year-old boy would be invited to an upcoming meeting of the Cub Scout group that meets in the Pleasant Hill Church, just a few miles away.

What caught my eye in the story was a statement offered by one of the Deacons of the congregation in defense of the church's equivocation on race. Bill Lacey said that the church did not have a written policy *excluding* blacks, but had decided not to let Eric join because the issue had never come up before, and leaders of the congregation didn't want to do anything to upset the members of the church—*leaders of the congregation didn't want to do anything to upset the members of the church.*

Presbyterian ministers, elders and deacons pledge to work for "the peace, unity and purity" of the church. It's one of the vows we take. A moment's reflection will illustrate that "peace, unity and purity"—all three together—are not all that easy to pursue. Peace, unity, and purity - they are in an awkward, three-part tension. You can achieve one or two together and miserably fail on the third. The trick is to try to balance all three. Some churches, for instance, are so obsessed with intramural peace as to compromise the purity of the faith.

However, I think we all realize there is a bogus peace, a peace that results from moral lassitude, indifference, apathy. It is the peace of the cemetery rather than the peace of God. A troubled church is not necessarily an endangered church. Disputation can be a sign of life and a church at peace can be a church in the throes of death! For some, such an intramural peace is achieved by keeping the church out of social issues and out of politics.

We've all heard the comments: "Religion and politics don't mix." "The job of a minister is to preach the gospel—not to get concerned about social justice." "Politics is too 'messy' for the Christian." Here's how one of our members explained it to me a week ago. "People feel as strongly about their political beliefs as they do their religious beliefs. They don't necessarily coincide. For this reason, church and state really should remain separated regardless of whether you are the church or the state." Frankly, I think these statements are dangerous nonsense.

The statements are nonsense because they ignore the fact that the minute you take "religion" seriously, you've got to be concerned about fellow human beings and in our kind of world, concern with the political arena in which people live comes along with that. To confess "Jesus is Lord" is a massive political assertion! Just ask Herod!

Statements such as "The church should stay out of politics." are not only nonsense, they are dangerous—dangerous because they imply that religion is irrelevant to one of the most important areas of modern life. The decisions made in Congress, for example, affect the destinies of millions of people across the face of the earth. No Christian has the moral privilege of being unconcerned about that fact. On the contrary, the Christian must demonstrate that politics can be a "realm of grace," a place where, at least in a roughhewn way, people can attempt to do the will of God.

In my ministry, the critique I hear most when the church is involved in social justice is the one I heard from another member a while back. The comment is this, "I wish the churches would mind their own business."

Those who express this opinion are telling us that the real business of the church is to convert folks to Christianity and to nourish them in it. Then, if this is done effectively, the church will have a far greater influence on the nation than it does by joining in demonstrations, issuing pronouncements, and dabbling in politics, local, national, or international or taking a stand on a political issue like Viet Nam, gay marriage or the abortion debate.

Every time the mass media reports the participation of clergy in a demonstration, or the arrest of a minister protesting at the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia, or a political pronouncement by a church council, I can almost overhear the grunts rising from a thousand breakfast tables: "I wish the churches would mind their own business."

This sounds like quite a reasonable proposition, until we begin to reflect a little on recent history. Then we discover that this conception of the church's business is the one held, at least in the 20th century, by totalitarian powers. I read that Pastor Niemoeller of Germany, in WWII, once told of an interview he had with Adolf Hitler, who raved against the church's interference in social and political matters. "You can deal with heaven," said Hitler, "the German people on earth belong to me." This is also the Communist position. Churches in China are free to conduct worship as they please, but there is severe restriction on any social activity. Pronouncements affecting state policy are out of the question unless they happen to coincide with the party line.

If we believe that the church should be entirely unconcerned with affairs of state, can we blame Christians in Germany for acquiescing in the Nazi takeover? Who wants to say now that a church that condemned anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany should have kept quiet—should have minded its own business? Who wants to tell the Presbyterian preacher who was excused from his pulpit in Arkansas in the '60s for speaking out against segregation, that he was wrong? Who wants to disparage the preachers in Great Britain who collectively preached the end of child labor a century ago, that they should have minded their own business?

You see, it is not possible to draw a firm line in the sand and say, "The church's business ends here." For me there is no question about our primary duty to preach the gospel and offer worship to Almighty God. If that is not central, then the church might as well close its doors, for many of the other things churches do could be better done by secular agencies. But preaching the gospel is not something that concerns only the soul. Jesus Christ came in the flesh, and he was concerned with every aspect of a person's life, physical as well as spiritual—the economic, as well as biblical interpretation—prejudice as well as singing an anthem. And worship is not something that happens in a vacuum. It is an offering of our total life to God in Christ. If it is the church's business to bring to people the Word of God, would it not also be its business to try to feed them if they were starving? And if, as most would admit, we have this duty of care for their bodies, does that not also extend to the body politic where decisions are made affecting human welfare and well-being?

How often did Martin Luther King, Jr. point to the Hebrew prophets? Certainly, *they* were not slow to denounce a purely "spiritual" worship that neglected the physical problems on their doorstep. "Hear this word of the Lord" says Amos. "Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." In modern terms that would mean: "I don't want to hear your lovely hymns or glorious pipe organs unless you are concerned with justice and fair play in the community and in the world."

An older friend once told me of his trips home to Tennessee at Christmas time when he was a young man. He used to enjoy going down home at Christmas and among other things, visiting a fond cousin who owned a restaurant. He would walk in, say "Merry Christmas" and the two would have a piece of pie and a cup of coffee and talk about their year.

One visit several decades ago he came in like usual, "Merry Christmas." And his cousin said, "Let's go somewhere for some pie and coffee." My friend said, "What's the matter? Isn't this a restaurant?" His cousin said, "Sometimes I wonder!"

Well, they went to another restaurant down the street and when they sat down his cousin said, "Did you notice the curtains?" My friend said, "Yeah, I noticed the curtains." Now what he meant by "the curtains" was that down home in western Tennessee they used to have buildings, public buildings that they called shotgun buildings; they were real long and narrow. There was an entrance to his restaurant on the street; there was an entrance on the alley. There was one kitchen right in the middle and then there was a curtain. If you were white, you came in off the street. If you were black, you came in off the alley. He said, "Did you see the curtain?"

My friend said, "I saw the curtain." The cousin said, "The curtain has got to come down."

"Well, take it down" my friend said.

"That is easy enough for you to say – come in here and tell me how to run my business."

“Well, leave it up.”

He said, “I can’t leave it up.” After a while he said, “If I take the curtain down I’ll lose customers. If I leave the curtain up I’ll lose my soul.”

On the advent of a Presidential Inauguration, on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend 2009, in many places around the world, the curtain is up. And all of us are faced with the questions of whether we will help to take it down. I’m not just talking about black/white issues, but social justice in general—about poverty, lack of clean water, lack of medical supplies, starvation and aggression. Will Exxon and Coca Cola and Nestle and the big banks and all the other multi-national corporations lose customers and stockholders or will they lose their souls? Will the United States live out its ideals and its constitution? Or, will we lose our soul? These are difficult questions and by no means are there easy answers. But at the very least, the church needs to be a part of the conversation.

There is an important passage which is found at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew. Its very location persuades me Matthew wants to underscore it, as though he were saying, “If you forget the other things Jesus did and said, please remember his final message.”

What was that final message?

“This is how it shall be when life ceases. This is how it will be when history ends and every person is openly and clearly seen under that light which makes no shadow. When the Son of Man comes in the clouds of glory, attended by bands of angels, every person who every lived will stand before him and he shall be the judge. He shall be the judge in that final court beyond which there is no appeal. Then will be the ultimate, the unambiguous, the complete moment of truth.”

And what is that truth? The truth which will come to light according to this text is that there is an eternity of difference in people. And according to what standard is that difference measured and now more apparent? In response to what question is the distinction made?

That final question, the one essential question by which all are measured, is really a surprising one. You may not think of it as a surprise, but I do. I am surprised by it because listening to people who are fairly deep into religion these days, you get the clear impression that some other question would be the main question. Churches and Christian groups quizzing ministers and each other very often do not ask the question that is considered here the ultimate question. The religious air is filled with questions about the end of the world, visitors from other planets, heaven, hell, and unusual gifts of the Spirit, authority of the Pope—and why are all those mega-churches growing? When I listen to people talk, sincere and dedicated members of various churches, it is very seldom that I hear a discussion that centers upon this question, which is, in the mind of God, the ultimate question. I have known ministers who have been dismissed from their parishes because they failed a question, but it was not this question. I do not wish to make light of the concerns people have. I do wish, however, to underscore this one thing which lies in the arena of common sense. Let me put it this way: If we know we are going to face a final exam of one question, and we are told by the examiner what that question will be, wouldn’t you think that one question would gather to itself the interest and energies and the concerns of all of us?

Now here is the question: “How did you respond to human need?” That’s it. That is the question.

"I was alone. I had no one in the world. My husband had died, my children lived in another state, but I stayed in that big empty house. *Did you or did you not come?"*

"I was in prison, cut off from society for my misdeeds—a criminal, yes; but, still a human being. *Did you or did you not visit?"*

"I was hungry, in Ethiopia, peering into a world of banquets and diets. I heard of places where in a single day there was more food flushed down disposals than my entire family had eaten in a lifetime. *Did you offer me anything to eat?"*

"I was without clothing, looking into the shop windows, gazing at the wardrobes of the world. I waited for styles to change, hoping for an old coat or dress. *Did you offer me anything to wear?"*

"I was a stranger, new at the job, new in the city, new on the street, new in the neighborhood; I was a new country in the world. I did not know a soul. *Did you introduce yourself to me?"*

When everything is over, when the streets have been rolled up, when all the switches have been thrown, when everything we have been doing has been done for the last time, the Creator and Judge will call His world to account with one question: "How did you respond to human need?"