

1-1-1969

Homiletics

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Recommended Citation

Skamser, Lionel O. (1969) "Homiletics," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 40, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol40/iss1/5>

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APOLOGY TO: "The Prophet of Clay"

The homiletical aids employed in and with "The Prophet of Clay" are hardly unique to education, but they may be considered somewhat unique to the pulpit. I believe, however, that such methods can be employed effectively to aid a congregation in understanding and remembering God's Word, and that these methods can move the Christian to delve into Scripture for himself. The underlying philosophy in this approach is that one of the prime purposes of the sermon is didactic.

The traditional Lutheran approach still explains and applies a definite text consisting of a limited number of verses. This is a valid approach and one which is most useful in presenting a portion of the inexhaustible treasures of the Bible. However, pastors do not have to limit themselves to this approach, no more than the preachers whose sermon fragments we find in pages of the New Testament. (Indeed, sometimes the reader wonders if these preachers were acquainted with the exegetical approach, at least as we understand it today.) There is an inherent danger in using only the exegetical approach, as there would be in using only the topical approach. The danger of using only the exegetical approach is that Christians may begin to regard the Bible in a piecemeal, disconnected fashion, without ever seeing how the separate pieces fit together. The topical method may be very beneficial at times to survey the broad outlines of a Biblical book, to catch a glimpse of an entire Biblical personality, to follow a sketch of a complete biography, or to discover what "the totality of Scripture" says about some particular doctrine or some concrete problem that confronts the Christian.

Many Lutheran pastors find it helpful to use a topical approach during the season of Lent as they preach on the personalities, the places, the symbols, or the hymns of the Lenten season. If this is done during special eve-

ning services, then why not on Sunday mornings? I believe a similar approach may be used especially on the Sundays in the Trinity season, in which the prevailing themes are very general.

The unique aspect of the approach demonstrated here is the Self-Test (printed on a bulletin insert) on the sermon. This procedure allows the conscientious Bible student to review the main points of the sermon, and it helps the preacher erase some of those false impressions the parishoner might otherwise take home with him. (On his pastoral visits the pastor is often absolutely amazed by what he is supposed to have said last Sunday!) If the test and scale do not seem challenging enough, then remember that some experts estimate the average church member remembers as little as 5 percent of the sermon. If this be the case, the test and scale may be too difficult. In the final analysis, the test, like the sermon, must be geared to the average of the congregation. The pastor who decides to follow through on the Self-Test may also be courageous enough to distribute a questionnaire to the members to discover how they have been scoring. At best, this will be an enlightening experience, and at worst, a rather humiliating one for the preacher. But it is only in this way that the pastor will know whether to raise or lower the standard for the congregation he serves.

But will church members use the Self-Test? The pastor may discover that many adults do not consider such self-tests drudgery, but rather enlightening and even, to be mundane, entertaining. Otherwise, why would *Reader's Digest* include such a self-test on vocabulary in its monthly issues? Why would *Look* include such a self-test on identification in every issue? Why has a leading national television network presented periodic self-tests on such diverse subjects as driving, health, exercise, and science? Why

shouldn't the church be "as wise as serpents" and utilize a similar method in the most important of all types of education?

I have occasionally included a list of suggested daily Scripture readings featuring parallel thoughts to the sermon. It takes more time than one suspects to compile and arrange such a list. However, I have found it well worth the added effort in the sermon series on the Major Prophets. In this series the pastor, of course, can only touch on the highlights of the prophets' lives and messages. The "Suggested Daily Readings" give the congregation the opportunity to delve more deeply into the sections of Scripture being considered. The main task of the educator may be, as many contend, to move the individual student to study and do research for himself and to supply the student with the necessary resources. Should this not be the main task of the minister who constantly urges his fellow Christians to read Scripture for themselves, but many times fails to suggest a practical method whereby they can grow in their knowledge of Scripture?

Our parish has also attempted to undergird the Sunday message through movies featured in our Wednesday evening informal services. At these services there is no sermon as such but only an introduction showing how the theme of the movie is connected with the previous or coming sermon. The movie that is referred to in the sermon is "The God of the Atom," produced by the Moody Bible Institute, which presents one of the central messages of the Major Prophets, that the rejection of God's will and the espousal of materialism can lead to the destruction of nations and civilizations.

The object lesson employed at the conclusion of "The Prophet of Clay" suggests that such aids need not be separate from but may be interwoven into the fabric of the sermon. If the object lessons in this case seem somewhat histrionic and sensational, the preacher would prefer that you blame his ghost writer. If he were still here to defend this student of his, he might also point out the value of not fearing to be different or to deviate from traditional methods of proclaiming God's Word.

If, following the example of so many educators today, I seem cynical about utilizing only the lecture method to teach Christian truths, it is not because I believe anything must be, or even can be, added to God's Word. But in presenting God's Word to man, whose mind is carnal and infested with the thorns planted by Satan, it is highly doubtful whether the great spiritual leaders of the Scripture, including our Lord Himself, ever relied totally on the lecture method. The methods suggested here are merely variations of methods utilized or implied by Scripture. Most of them date back at least to the time of Jeremiah.

"THE PROPHET OF CLAY"

(An Introduction to Jeremiah)

JEREMIAH 31:33-34

I would like to introduce to you one of the greatest personalities in the Bible. He wrote only two books that we know of today, and yet those two books comprise nearly one twentieth, or five percent, of the entire Bible. This character so completely captivated the imagination of his fellow countrymen that some 600 years after his death there was a rumor in the Holy Land that he had returned from the dead and was reincarnated in the form of Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 16: 14). That rumor, of course, was ridiculous; however, like most rumors, it contained at least an element of truth. This character is one of the most Christlike characters in the Old Testament. Who is this great Biblical personality? Who is this author who wrote nearly five percent of the entire Bible? Who is this Christlike character who was mistaken for Jesus Christ? That prodigious personality to whom I refer is the prophet Jeremiah.

Like so many other great men, Jeremiah was misunderstood, maligned, and maltreated when he was living, and he is still misunderstood, maligned, and maltreated today. Jeremiah has been known as "The Weeping Prophet." We have all known melancholy,

maudlin, sentimental individuals who shed tears at the slightest provocation. We feel self-conscious in their presence. We would rather avoid such persons. That, however, is a mere caricature of Jeremiah, the real man. Search through the 57 chapters of the Bible that he wrote and you will not find one single, solitary reference to Jeremiah shedding tears in public. If he did weep frequently, he hid his tears from others. Jeremiah is also known as "the Prophet of Doom" and "the Prophet of Destruction." In fact, the very name "Jeremiah" has given birth to an interesting word in the English language, and that word is "jeremiad." A "jeremiad," according to Webster, is "a lamenting and denunciatory complaint; a . . . tirade." We have all known negative individuals who do little else but lament, denounce, complain, and spew out tirades against nearly everything in society. We would rather avoid such persons. Again, this is a caricature of Jeremiah, the real man. Yes, Jeremiah did lament; he did denounce; he did complain. But if that is all you get out of the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations, then you have missed the entire point of Jeremiah's two books. Jeremiah's lamenting, denouncing, and complaining were only a prelude to his real message—a message of faith, of hope, and of love.

"Weeping Prophet" . . . "Prophet of Doom" . . . "Prophet of Destruction" . . . "Jeremiads." . . . No wonder Jeremiah is avoided even by Christians, having to live down labels like those! This morning we are going to brush aside these ridiculous caricatures of Jeremiah, and we are going to try to catch a glimpse of the real man. Jeremiah preached with the aid of many dramatic and even sensational object lessons. But Jeremiah's greatest object lesson was his own life. Jeremiah's life is one extended object lesson that teaches us the true meaning of faith.

First, Jeremiah's life teaches us that re-

ligious faith does not mean faith in one's self but rather faith in what God can do.

We come to the first scene in Jeremiah's ministry, when the Lord called Jeremiah to be a prophet. About 70 years after the prophet Isaiah died, the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in a small town named Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. God declared to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). In His infinite foreknowledge and wisdom God had set aside and appointed Jeremiah to be His prophet, even before he was born. Jeremiah's mission was to proclaim the Word of God to the nations of the earth.

Jeremiah, who was at this time a young man, seemed to lack confidence and faith in himself. Jeremiah objected: "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (Jer. 1:6). The Lord refused to accept Jeremiah's excuse. The Lord replied: "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (Jer. 1:7-8). The Lord then placed His almighty hand upon Jeremiah's lips to consecrate them to speak God's Holy Word.

Never again would Jeremiah question the fact that God had called him to be a prophet. Jeremiah did not have faith in his own wisdom and ability, but he did have faith that God would work in him and through him. Jeremiah would go where the Lord would lead him. Jeremiah would speak what the Lord commanded him to speak. And Jeremiah knew the Lord would deliver him from all enemies and obstacles.

Immediately Jeremiah sweeps aside one of the major misconceptions of religious faith. In an age that so stresses psychology, self-confidence and faith in one's self are often

confused with religious faith. There are some who believe that religious faith is standing before your mirror each morning and declaring to yourself, "Each day, in every way, I am getting better and better." This does not square with the facts of psychology, and it certainly is not Christianity. Have you ever noticed that there is only a thin line that separates the three C's of Phariseeism: self-confidence, cockiness, and conceit?

Instead, the Bible presents a long list of the real heroes of faith who, like Jeremiah, lacked self-confidence and faith in themselves. When Isaiah was called to be a prophet, he lacked faith in himself. He cried out: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips" (Is. 6:5). In the New Testament, before Peter was called to be an apostle he sank to his knees and cried out to Christ: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). Even after Paul was called to be an apostle, he wrote: "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle." (1 Cor. 15:9)

We must not confuse self-confidence and faith in one's self with religious faith. In fact, it is not until we empty ourselves of our self-confidence and faith in ourselves that God has the room to work in us and through us. One poet traces the growth of faith in four ascending steps. He writes:

The world I thought belonged to me —
Goods, gold, and people, land and sea;
Wher'er I walked beneath God's sky,
In those old days, my word was "I."

Years passed: there flashed my pathway
near

The fragment of a vision dear;
My former word no more sufficed,
And what I said was — "I and Christ."

But O, the more I looked on Him,
His glory grew, while mine grew dim;
I shrank so small, He towered so high,
All I dared say was — "Christ and I."

Years more the vision held its place,
And looked me steadily in the face;

I speak now in humbler tone,
And what I say is — "Christ alone."*

These are the four ascending steps in the growth of faith: "I" . . . "I and Christ" . . . "Christ and I" . . . "Christ alone." It is not until we reach that fourth and final step, "Christ alone," that we can say with the apostle Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ, who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). And: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). And: "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God" (2 Cor. 3:4-5). Christ lives in us, granting us sufficiency for all of our tasks. This is our confidence and faith.

Second, Jeremiah's life teaches us that religious faith does not mean faith in man but rather faith in what God can do for God's people.

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to preach one of the most difficult messages that has ever been proclaimed. Jeremiah pronounced God's judgment against his own nation, Judah. He prophesied that Judah would be conquered and completely destroyed by a foreign power, Babylonia. The purpose of Jeremiah's message was to make his fellow countrymen realize their need for repentance.

If it seems as though Jeremiah lacked faith in his fellowman, this is quite understandable as you look at his life. Seldom has a man been persecuted so much for proclaiming God's Word. His fellow countrymen constantly suspected him of being a traitor in collusion with the enemy, Babylonia. On one occasion he was imprisoned and put into the stocks. On another occasion he was put under the death sentence. On still an-

(* Quoted from *Well Said!* — *Benedicte's Scrapbook* by William Gamble, p. 50; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1954.)

other occasion he was cast into a mucky, muddy cistern and left to die. But the Lord kept His promise to Jeremiah, and each time God delivered him. Finally, according to tradition, Jeremiah was stoned to death — but only after he had completed his mission.

After all that Jeremiah's fellowmen and fellow countrymen had put him through for proclaiming God's Word, it is quite understandable that Jeremiah did not believe that man is basically good. In our sophisticated society we would rather not talk about the total depravity and sinfulness of man. But we do not find such a reluctance in Jeremiah. Jeremiah had all the evidence he needed to conclude: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Not only did Jeremiah question the inherent goodness of man, but he also seriously doubted that man could ever really change himself. Jeremiah asked: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?" He concluded: "Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil." (Jer. 13:23)

Jeremiah sweeps aside another of the major misconceptions of religious faith. So often faith in humanity is confused with religious faith. If you declare that man is not born good but rather born in a sinful condition, if you are dubious that humanity is getting better and better all the time, if you doubt that humanity is really on the verge of solving all its problems, there are some people who will wonder if you really have religious faith.

However, like Jeremiah, we have all the evidence we need that man has a sinful nature and that it is really impossible for man to change his nature. We find the evidence for the sinfulness of man in the institutions of society, even in such a one as the United Nations. When the United Nations faces a crisis, such as the war in the Middle East, it becomes apparent that

man is no closer to solving the most overshadowing problem in society — war — than he was the day Cain slew his brother Abel. Man has constantly progressed in discovering more effective weapons to destroy his fellowman, but man himself has not progressed and improved correspondingly. Therefore, we still confront the age-old problem of war. We also find a commentary on the sinfulness of man in the captions of our daily newspapers that speak of murder, adultery, rape, theft, riots, and all forms of human corruption. But we do not have to go outside ourselves to gather evidence for the sinfulness of man. If we search our own hearts and souls, there also we will find a sinful nature that, like gravity, continually pulls us downward to sin, constantly causes us to fall short of the glory and perfection of God. What is more, we seem helpless to change ourselves, even with the best and noblest intentions.

Something is wrong with man. He is sick. Jeremiah cried out that man is sin sick (Jer. 8). And what is God's remedy to the sinfulness of man?

Jeremiah contended that the solution to sin is not found in bigger and stronger social institutions. The solution is not found in more rules and regulations. Certainly there is room and need in our society for these things. But the real solution for sin has to be more radical and revolutionary than that. Since the problem begins with the human heart, which is "deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt," the solution also has to begin with the human heart. Since the heart is "deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt," the heart cannot change itself, no more than a leopard can change its spots. Only someone or something from the outside of man can change the heart. That someone is God, and that something is the transforming Word of God.

Jeremiah foresaw a new covenant, a new contract, a new testament given by God that

would change the heart. He wrote: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke. . . . But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:31-34)

The old testament, or contract, was given by God to the people of Israel when He led them from slavery in Egypt to their Promised Land and gave them the Ten Commandments. But the new testament, or contract, would not be inscribed upon tablets of stone; instead it would be inscribed upon the human heart. The new testament was given by God when He sent His only Son to earth. God's Son, Jesus Christ, took upon Himself our sin. He suffered and died as our substitute on the cross. When we have faith in Christ as our Savior, we receive the benefits of this contract. God forgives our iniquity. God remembers our sin no more. This is the faith, and this faith alone, that saves. Believing in a God like that, we know God, not as a passing acquaintance whom we learn about secondhand through hearsay, but we know God personally as a friend. We know God, not only with the mind but in the Biblical sense of the term "know," we know God with the heart as well. Once believing in a God like that, God's law is not merely inscribed on tablets of stone or printed on lifeless sheets of paper, but His law of love is inscribed on the heart. Christ

declares: "If a man love Me, He will keep My words."

It is the seal and guarantee of God's new contract that we receive once again this morning, as we receive Communion. Christ assures us: "This is the new testament in My blood." Through the body and blood of Christ God forgives our iniquity: God remembers our sin no more; we know God as a loving friend. Our hearts can only respond with faith and love and thanksgiving. Jeremiah lacked faith in man, but his faith in what God could do to man and for man was boundless.

Third, Jeremiah's life teaches us that religious faith does not mean faith in man's word but faith in God's Word.

Jeremiah seriously doubted and questioned the word of man. Jeremiah refused to go along with the petty politicians and the false prophets who promised that God would never allow the Holy City to be destroyed. Everything was going well. Peace was just around the corner. Jeremiah declared: "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jer. 6:14)

God revealed through Jeremiah that Babylonia would conquer and destroy Judah. The citizens of Judah would be enslaved and deported. That certainly was not too difficult to believe. That happened often in the ancient world. However, God also promised that after a certain period of time the slaves in Babylonia would be freed and allowed to return and rebuild their homeland. That was very difficult to believe. For deported slaves to be freed and allowed to return to their homeland has happened very, very few times in history.

As the armies of Babylonia marched into Judah, as they waited outside the gates of Jerusalem like vultures watching a dying city, all hope was gone, humanly speaking. In one of the most pathetic lines ever penned in poetry or prophecy, Jeremiah had written:

"The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (Jer. 8:20). That prophecy was now translated into reality. The verdant summer of hope had given way to a long, bleak winter of hopelessness. The harvest of man's most frantic efforts had failed. Jerusalem's days were numbered. And what did Jeremiah do? God instructed Jeremiah to take his money and purchase a plot of the doomed land. Jeremiah trusted in the promises of God, as impossible as they seemed, that someday the citizens of Judah would return to live and labor upon their land, and Jeremiah would then hold the deed to the land. (Jer. 32)

Jeremiah sweeps aside a third major misconception of religious faith. Some believe that faith means trusting the word of man; but real faith means trusting in the Word of God alone. Some believe that faith means trusting only when it seems very reasonable to trust, but real faith trusts in God even when there seems to be no reason to trust and all hope has vanished. Some believe that faith means the intellectual acceptance of the fact that there is a God or the intellectual acceptance of the creeds and confessions of the church. But real faith must go beyond intellectual assent. Real faith means a commitment of one's entire being to God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ. Real faith means purchasing a plot of the promised land that will never be yours here on earth. Real faith means "betting your life there is a God."

The faith of Jeremiah may be summarized in what is perhaps the most well-known of the many object lessons he presented, the object lesson of the potter's vessel (Jer. 18). Jeremiah went down to the potter's house and watched the potter forming and shaping a vessel of soft, wet clay. Jeremiah declared that this is what Judah was to be in the hands of God. (At this point I used modeling clay in the shape of a flower pot.) When Judah committed an error, in the hands of

God, Judah could be forgiven, reformed and reshaped according to God's design. This is what Judah should have been in the hands of God. The following day Jeremiah returned to the potter's house and took a vessel that was baked and dried under the hot oriental sun. (At this point I used a real flower pot.) Jeremiah raised the vessel and dashed it to pieces on the ground. (I then cast the flower pot to the floor. The pieces were caught in a receptacle. Taking one of the pieces, I continued.) This is what Judah actually was. Her heart was hardened from rejecting God's Word. It refused to be forgiven, to be reformed and reshaped according to God's design. Judah dashed herself upon the rocks of sin and could not be mended. (Jer. 19)

Extend Jeremiah's illustration to us. Without God we are like this dried and baked clay. We can do nothing of and by ourselves. Without God man cannot be changed. Without God's Word we are hapless in our predicament, helpless and hopeless. But in the hands of the Divine Potter we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us. Moved by the hands of the Divine Potter, man can always turn to Christ to receive the remission of sins; to be reformed, reshaped, remolded.

Have Thine own way, Lord, Have Thine own way.

Thou art the potter, I am the clay.
Take me and mold me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still. Amen.

Self-Test on Sermon

Part I—*Quotations from Jeremiah*. First read the following quotations from the Book of Jeremiah (A—H):

- A. "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth."
- B. "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips."
- C. "Can the leopard change his spots?"
- D. "The heart is deceitful above all things, desperately corrupt."

HOMILETICS

- E. "I will make a new covenant."
- F. "The covenant which I made with their fathers."
- G. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."
- H. "Can I not do with you as this potter has done?"

Next match each of the following statements with an above quotation that it describes by placing the appropriate letter in the blank.

- ___ 1. Man has a very sinful nature.
- ___ 2. Man cannot convert himself, only God can convert man.
- ___ 3. Jeremiah here seemed to lack self-confidence.
- ___ 4. God led Israel to their Promised Land and gave them the Ten Commandments.
- ___ 5. That was not said by Jeremiah! Isaiah said it.
- ___ 6. God forgives all sins; God is our friend; He inscribes love on our hearts.
- ___ 7. God forgives; He remakes us according to His plans.
- ___ 8. Jerusalem was surrounded by the enemy, and the city was doomed.

Part II—*Facts About Jeremiah's Life.* Mark each statement as True (T) or False (O).

- ___ 9. Jeremiah is called "The Weeping Prophet" because he often wept as he preached in public.
- ___ 10. Doom and destruction are the basic, perhaps the only themes in Jeremiah.
- ___ 11. Jeremiah wrote about 5 percent of the entire Bible.
- ___ 12. Jeremiah lived some 40 years before Isaiah.
- ___ 13. Jeremiah was originally from Jerusalem.
- ___ 14. Jeremiah was one of the few

prophets who was popular in his lifetime.

- ___ 15. Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon would conquer, destroy, and enslave the land of Judah and its citizens.
- ___ 16. We associate the Book of Lamentations with Jeremiah.
- ___ 17. Tradition says Jeremiah was stoned to death.

Part III—*Whose Faith?* The following statements describe either the Christian faith or a man-made religion. If the statement is *sound Christianity*, put a C in the blank before the statement. If it describes *man-made religion*, put a M in the blank.

- ___ 18. A Christian should be self-confident at all times.
- ___ 19. Someday mankind will solve all its major problems, and there will be an everlasting political peace on earth.
- ___ 20. Christ lives in the Christian, granting sufficiency for all his tasks.
- ___ 21. Faith occurs the moment one declares that there is a God.
- ___ 22. Trusting in Christ as our Savior—that alone is the faith that saves us.
- ___ 23. Faith should be built on reason and intelligence, otherwise it is not really faith.
- ___ 24. God alone can change man, but man can refuse God's forgiveness.

CORRECT ANSWERS: 1 D 2 C 3 A 4 F 5 B 6 E 7 H 8 G 9 False 10 False 11 True 12 False (After Isaiah) 13 False (Anathoth) 14 False 15 True 16 True 17 True 18 & 19 M 20 C 21 M 22 C 23 M 24 C

0 or 1 **WRONG** = Excellent. 2—4 **WRONG** = Very Good. 5—7 **WRONG** = Good. 8—11 **WRONG** = Fair.

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LIONEL O. SKAMSER

THOUGHTS FOR A SERMON ON HOUSING SUNDAY

(February 16, 1969)

In approaching a Biblical viewpoint on the question of housing, we can learn first of all that everything belongs to God. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" the householder in Jesus' parable of the vineyard asks. What you and I have and hold and call our own really belongs to God. The property we call private is private only in a limited, legal sense. In a broader sense it belongs to God and we are merely stewards who serve Him in the distribution of His property. There is a tremendous difference between being stewards of something that belongs to God and being stewards of something that belongs to us. It is the Christian belief that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" and that stewardship is therefore stewardship on God's behalf. He alone is the ultimate Owner and Landlord. What we call "our" property really belongs to Him, and it is "private" only in the sense that we are stewards of some part of His property to others.

It is the Christian belief that God's creation, His material blessings, are provided for His children here on earth on a family basis. That is, they are intended for all and not just for some.

The principle of divine ownership and impartial distribution is fundamental to the Christian world view. Although we may hold legal title to our property, the ultimate title is held by God. In one sense, therefore, when we share our earthly wealth with our neighbor in need, we are simply giving him what is God's. We are giving him what God intended for him to have. And so when we contribute to the community chest or pay taxes for Social Security or support open housing legislation, we need not be overly self-congratulatory. We are simply doing what we should be doing as Christians. We

are simply being good stewards in the distribution of God's bountiful gifts.

It is less than Christian for us to think of our giving and sharing with others as *our* mercy to the less fortunate. Instead, we must see it as a stewardly handling of God's wealth to fulfill God's purposes. We are God's stewards, acting for God in the distribution of *His* wealth to *His* family here on earth. There is no ground here for the hypocrisy or pretension of self-congratulation. As our Lord reminds us: "When you have done all that is commanded of you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

These Biblical truths are extremely important and relevant in a day when private property and "property rights" are sometimes used as reasons for not sharing God's wealth with others. A God of love, whom we address as our heavenly Father, provides for *all* without discrimination or favoritism — just as a human father provides for the weak as well as for the strong among his children. Since God is the Lord of creation, the Landlord of Ultimate Title, whatever any of us may hold by legal acquisition and ownership must be used under the Lord's judgment. What we hold, we hold for Him and administer in the care of others. Always, however, His sovereign will must take precedence over our wills. It is both our glory and our humility that we are God's agents through whom He works out His plans and purposes in the world.

In the summer of 1967 at New York our church adopted resolutions that urged all our members to support and participate in housing programs that seek to achieve equality of opportunity for every human being, that would emphasize every Christian's ministry to the whole man, that would be directed to the membership of every congregation in the Synod. Since that time there are those who have argued that to do all these things — to provide shelter for the underprivileged

and the exploited—would invade the rights of private property. They argue that this is a new social gospel, that we have forsaken our Scriptural moorings, that one cannot find in Scriptures a specific directive requiring us to do these things. What they fail to understand is that because Christians believe the Word they stand ready to dedicate their resources, to use their efforts and their talents in His name through service to others.

In a recent television program, "Cities Have No Limits," an NBC White Paper narrated by Frank McGee, the point was made that 34 million Americans live in deteriorating, delapidated, substandard housing. Either the assertion is an absolute falsehood, or it is something about which we as Christians must be concerned. The Old Testament prophets had a great deal to say about justice and the distribution of God's gifts to people. Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were all passionate advocates of justice and righteousness. They called for fair and impartial dealings among men. They made charges—detailed charges—of glaring injustice: of corruption and bribery in the courts, of the rich "skinning" the poor. They had a burning concern for the oppressed, the dispossessed, and the exploited; for men, women, and children defrauded of their God-given rights. For the Christian, the work of justice is identical with the work of love. To address ourselves to the housing needs of our fellow citizens is what justice demands and love compels us to do.

The will of God *will* be done among us as we realize more and more fully who we really are. When a group of Dutch laymen came to the great Dutch scholar Nebdrik Kraemer during the Nazi occupation of Holland and asked him what they should do—collaborate with the Nazis or resist by subversive activity—Kraemer's answer was a classic. "I will not tell you what you should do," he said, "but I will tell you who you are." And once those Dutch Christians knew who they were, their resistance movement began to take shape.

There are many pressing problems in addition to the beginning we are making in housing that we as Christians and as Christian citizens in this community and nation have been called upon to face and will be called upon to face in the future. On many of the problems I would not presume to tell you what you should do. I would only remind you who you are! You belong to the new order of God's creation that allows you to act freely in the service of others, unburdened by the chains of hate and prejudice that hold so many in bondage. To know yourselves as men and women who depend wholly on the forgiveness of God means that you will share the love you have received from Him through deeds of love and service to others.

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