



## *Texts in Context*

# American Protestant Preaching: A Twentieth-Century Perspective

MARY E. HINKLE

*Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

*All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism*, by Marcia G. Witten. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. Pp. 179.

*Sundays in New York: Pulpit Theology at the Crest of the Protestant Mainstream, 1930-1955*, by William B. Lawrence. Evanston, IL: American Theological Library Association and Scarecrow Press, 1996. Pp. 410.

THESE STUDIES OF PREACHING FOCUS ON TWO DISTINCT PERIODS OF TIME within the twentieth century, and they proceed by methods very different from each other. Yet there are points of contact between them. Each offers an engaging and sobering analysis of the ways that Protestant preaching has sought—and in significant respects failed—to bring to life for modern American audiences the central theological insights of the reformation.

### I. ALL IS FORGIVEN

In 1988, Marcia Witten collected sermons on the prodigal son from a sample of preachers in large congregations of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the

MARY E. HINKLE is assistant professor of New Testament. Her current project is a book on issues and methods in textual preaching.

*Two recent books paint a dark picture of twentieth-century Protestant preaching in America, seeing it as all too subject to the forces of cultural accommodation. Reflecting on this picture is a useful, if distressing, exercise.*

Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>1</sup> *All Is Forgiven* is an analysis of those sermons for the way that their language “replies to the offerings of the secular world” (18). Witten, a sociologist, seeks to discern how certain forces of secularization within American culture have influenced current religious speech. She reads the sermons to analyze how they construe God, sin, the world, and the transformed self. Within each of these categories, she looks for signs of how contemporary Protestant speech (1) accommodates the forces of secularization, (2) resists those forces, or (3) re-frames the discourse, that is, how the sermons help create an alternative to current secular conceptions of the place and function of religious language in contemporary culture.

### 1. *Secularizing Forces*

Witten identifies three forces of secularization: privatization, pluralization, and rationalization. “Privatization refers to the shrinking sphere of plausibility of religion in the modern world,” writes Witten, and to the corresponding limitations on religious language as a medium for public conversation about morality, law, economics, and other topics once discussed in religious terms (19). “Religious topics of relevance are those that treat the inner workings of the self as the focus of in-depth analysis, frequently conducted through the secular language of psychology” (20). As religion is increasingly privatized, even faith communities have difficulty sustaining public conversation and corporate identity. Those who identify themselves with a particular religion may “decide not to accept the creeds or doctrines of their church as a ‘package deal.’ Instead, they may exercise their freedom to pick and choose among church teachings, professing and following some and denying the importance or the relevance of others” (21).

By “pluralization,” Witten means “the proliferation of socially legitimated ideologies in the West,” and a corresponding “open market” understanding of religious affiliation (21-22). Potential members of a church may act as if they are comparison shoppers, and congregations may act as if the best way to reach such consumers of religion is with a marketing strategy that highlights the practical, immediate, and down-to-earth benefits of affiliating with their church. Both groups accept an understanding of religion as a commodity, and both consumers and purveyors of that commodity find it easier to speak of the payoffs of an individual’s association with a congregation (“exciting music,” “uplifting messages,” etc.) than to talk about right and wrong belief, or about “the moral and spiritual demands that religion places on adherents” (22). Tolerance of others’ beliefs is valued, and care is taken not to “offend the customer.”

Rationalization “entails the growth of practices...that calculate the efficiency

<sup>1</sup>Witten says that she chose Luke 15:11-32 because pastors were likely to have a recent sermon on it and because the text is patient of “a variety of treatments and interpretations” (13). Sermons were solicited from 150 preachers of each denomination in congregations over 800 in the PCUSA or over 1000 in the SBC (the size difference is due to the way denominational records are kept). Pastors were asked to send a sermon they had preached between 1986 and 1988. Witten’s analysis in *All Is Forgiven* is based on forty-seven sermons, twenty-one Southern Baptist and twenty-six Presbyterian (149).

or effectiveness of alternative means to a given end” (23). Rationalization is at work when religious observance becomes characterized by forms of speech like that found in self-help books. Complex doctrinal issues are simplified, and religious observance is reduced to a set of straightforward steps to be taken or practices to be followed in order to increase one’s sense of personal satisfaction.

## 2. Responses to Secularization

Witten investigates how the language of sermons responds to these forces of secularization. Her analysis focuses on four themes:

- How do the sermons depict God?
- In what terms do they speak of sin?
- How do they portray the believer’s relation to the world?
- How do they construe transformation of the self?

With respect to each theological topic, Witten investigates how the sermons employ strategies of accommodation to secular influences, resistance to those influences, or reframing of them.

*a. Accommodation.* Accommodation is the strategy of choice for the preachers whose sermons Witten reviews. Language about God in the sermons illustrates how preachers accommodate their religious speech to secular influences. On the one hand, God is centrally present in two-thirds of the sermons Witten collected, indicating at least that the sermons generally practice a form of speech that is still identifiably religious (140). On the other hand, the God spoken of in many of the sermons meshes easily with secular American culture. In 82% of the sermons in which God is a central character, “God is portrayed exclusively or predominately in terms of the positive functions he serves for men and women” (35) and with hardly any emphasis on sovereignty or transcendence. One of the Presbyterian preachers says, “God continues to wait expectantly for us to come to our senses and grow into new levels of love relationships. He waits patiently for us to recognize our need for his help with all the messes into which we’ve gotten ourselves” (38).

In Witten’s words, the sermons most often characterize God as daddy, sufferer, and lover. God is domestic and domesticated, an openly emotional guy, and someone who loves in extravagant, but finally predictable (and in that sense, rational) ways. “God’s subjectivity is entirely familiar; the nature of his emotions is understandable within the context of human experience, since they are such common emotions as ‘anguish’ or ‘hurt,’ or ‘happiness’ or ‘joy’” (40).<sup>2</sup> God is not identified as the sovereign of the collective, but as each individual’s Significant Other who “validates human beings’ incessant interest in their private inner workings”

<sup>2</sup>Surely the choice of the prodigal son as a sermon text has something to do with the sermons’ characterization of God as such a doting and indulgent parent. Yet even using this text, preachers could have drawn contrasts between the father in the parable and God (that is, the sermons could have pointed to ways that God is like—but not to be identified with—the human parent of one wayward and one responsible son), or they could have focused on God’s generosity as unfair, scandalous, or otherwise inexplicable when viewed on analogy with human feeling.

and who “legitimizes people’s fascination with the depths of their emotional experiences” (130-32).

*b. Resistance.* Strategies of resistance to the influences of secularization are much less frequently in evidence than strategies of accommodation, yet some language of resistance is present in the sermons. Sixteen percent of the sermons—all from Southern Baptist preachers—speak of God as judge, an understanding of God which pushes against the force of pluralization and the correspondingly high value placed on tolerance.

Many of the sermons engage in a strategy of resistance that Witten calls resacralization, that is, “the reinjection of sacred talk into religious pronouncements” (136). Resacralization is clearest in the anthropology of the sermons. Preachers reject modern notions of the fragmented self and instead use biblical language about humanity’s creation in the image of God as the key to explaining each hearer’s true self. The language about self in many of the sermons describes a human nature that is “universal, essentially immutable, ultimately coherent, and the controlling core of the self,” and ultimately good (136). A Presbyterian preacher observes, “When Jesus says that [the prodigal son] came to himself, He pays us the highest of compliments, for He suggests that there is something within the human being which innately wants goodness and love, which wants to be at home and in harmony with the will of God” (110). A Baptist preacher tells hearers, “There is a desire for righteousness in you. There is a hunger for purity. Deep down inside you believe in justice, honesty, and faithfulness. The standards of God are part of our own make-up. We were created in the image of God no matter how marred that image” (111). While modern secularized speech creates an understanding of the self as constructed by various competing forces of nature and nurture, and therefore lacking in any essential unity, preachers resist the modern conclusion by employing different language about the self.

It should be said here that Witten does not judge whether this particular “different language” is actually faithful to traditional Christian understandings of the self. With its rosy picture of human nature, this example of resistance is itself arguably an accommodation to forces of secularization. Are these sermon excerpts bearing witness to a theology of creation that runs counter to modern notions of the fragmented self, or are they merely espousing a form of the pluralistic ideology that “underneath all our differences, people are people”? Are they proclaiming a sovereign God’s good work in creation, or are they following the rubric of a consumerist society, “Never offend the customer”? Witten does not address the question of whether the rhetoric that the sermons use to “resacralize” human nature represents as much accommodation as it does resistance to secularization.

*c. Reframing.* Witten finds within the sermons only a few examples of language functioning to reframe standard secular understandings of religion. The example she discusses most fully comes from some Baptist sermons and the way they understand the human predicament. When these sermons speak of the central hu-

man dilemma as one of finding meaning in life, they are shifting the role of religion in a secular culture. In these sermons,

the role of religion is not so much to signify objective truths—such as teaching one to enjoy the offerings of life, as in much of Presbyterian speech, or presenting doctrines about salvation, as in some conservative Southern Baptist talk—as it is to provide the symbolic resources through which a human being may weave a coherent narrative about life, supplying overarching significance. (138)

The sermons “reframe” the role of religion in a secular society by construing in a different way the problem that religion is supposed to solve.

Although only a few of the sermons in *All Is Forgiven* use the strategy of reframing as a response to the forces of secularization, Witten theorizes that this strategy will see more use in the future “as churches recognize the costs of unalloyed accommodation” and as “attempts to resolve tensions between moderates and conservatives make salient the idea of striving for some middle ground” (139).

Witten, who is Jewish and who says at the beginning of her work that she is proceeding “from the perspective of ‘methodological atheism’” (16), spells out the costs of unalloyed accommodation with three questions. The questions summarize her findings and point to the most troubling implications of her study for Christians:

What of the immensely potent Protestant doctrine of grace, which appears eviscerated...as speakers fail to acknowledge notions of human depravity and separation from a transcendent God? What of the ability of religious speech to deal with concerns of theodicy, if it declines to contend with issues of human suffering and evil? What of the possibilities for creating and sustaining stable, binding communities of faith, if incentives to congregation are based purely on mutable perceptions of self-interest? (140)

As Christian preaching accommodates itself to cultural forces of privatization, pluralization, and rationalization, it runs the risk of cheapening grace, losing the ability to name evil and speak coherently about suffering, and failing to be the means by which the Holy Spirit gathers individuals into collective membership in the church. These conclusions may be stated in more sweeping terms than Witten’s small study alone can warrant, yet she is certainly on to something.

## II. THE CREST OF THE PROTESTANT MAINSTREAM

Undertaking quite a different project, and proceeding by altogether different methods, William Lawrence concludes that similar accommodations to secular forces were being made in American Protestant preaching in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. Like Witten, Lawrence also ends his study by wondering just how sweeping the legacy of that accommodation may be. *Sundays in New York* is not sociological analysis of discourse but rather historical theology. Lawrence studies not forty-seven sermons on one scriptural text, preached by forty-seven anonymous preachers, but scores of sermons and other writings by and

about four well-known “pulpit princes” (218) who preached in Manhattan from the late 1920s to the middle 1950s. Lawrence reads the sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick, Ralph Sockman, Paul Scherer, and George Buttrick, asking, “How Protestant were they?” (220). That is, how was the theological content of sermons from these preachers shaped by central Protestant doctrines concerning justification by faith, the authority of scripture, and the bondage of the will? Each of Lawrence’s subjects came from a different denominational background: Sockman was Methodist; Scherer was Lutheran; Buttrick was Presbyterian; and Fosdick served Baptist and Presbyterian congregations before he became the first senior minister of the Riverside Church, which opened in 1930 as an intentionally non-denominational congregation whose worship included no recitation of any creed.

Lawrence divides his work into three sections that correspond to periods of time in the early- to mid-twentieth century (the depression, the years of World War II, and the decade after the war). Each section includes a chapter on each preacher. Each chapter includes a subsection on how each of the three central doctrines of Protestant Christianity found (or failed to find) expression in the sermons of a particular preacher during a specific time in his ministry.

Studying the sermons of these four men proves to be an effective way to trace theological trends during nearly half a century of American history. For example, Fosdick “left no doubt that liberal theology had saved him from abandoning all faith” (20). Sockman’s Jesus was, in Sockman’s words, “a man of healthy, rugged common sense” (47), important for Christians because of the example of service he offered. Scherer, when told by a Union Theological Seminary student that he was neo-orthodox, replied, “Before neo-orthodoxy was, I am” (56). In 1944, Buttrick reminded his hearers that it was not the charter of the United Nations, but the work of Christ, that would unify humanity: “The world is one, not in our choosing, but in something that chooses us....It is already made one in Him” (173). Lawrence’s study is worthwhile simply for the lively lesson in historical theology it offers.

Yet Lawrence’s work is also important as a study of the ways that even early twentieth-century preaching was at points characterized by increasing accommodation to forces of secularization. Lawrence’s conclusions about the legacy of the two best known of these four preachers is—if this is possible—even darker than Witten’s conclusions about the state of Protestant theology in the hands of preachers who use religious language in ways similar to those whose sermons she studied. Lawrence concludes that Buttrick and Scherer “stood authentically in the heritage of the Reformers” (225). However, “the pulpit theology articulated so effectively by Sockman and Fosdick...was a set of doctrinal propositions that contradicted the fundamental tenets of Protestantism. In effect, they carried forward a popular and prosperous counter-Reformation, filled with misplaced confidences in works, in flawed wills, and in transient authorities” (225). As Witten had concluded her study with questions about how the genius of Protestantism is to survive when preachers have only the strategy of accommodation with which to respond to the

forces of secularization, so Lawrence offers similarly grim comments about the legacy of the two of his four subjects who “published more, had longer preaching careers, gave more radio sermons, and (in Sockman’s case) travelled more widely” than Buttrick and Scherer (225). Commenting on the effects of Fosdick’s and Sockman’s work, Lawrence writes,

The loss of scriptural authority was a crushing burden for non-fundamentalist Protestants to carry, for no substitute could sustain them. The reduction of faith to human trust and human effort robbed Protestants of their appreciation of grace....The view of freedom which failed to recognize a prevailing, perverse fault in human existence encouraged naïve dreams about the possible achievements to be won through prosperity at home and “police actions” abroad.... The pulpit theology of Sockman and Fosdick on Sundays in New York, and that of their imitators across the land, became shallow offerings of false doctrine; thereby, theological consent was granted to The American Way of Life. (225-226)

### III. “DON’T BLOW IT”

Years ago, I was one of several pastors on the staff of a large congregation. On Sundays when I was to preach, one of the other associate pastors would regularly stop by my office just before we got ready to enter the sanctuary and say to me (as a joke, I think), “Don’t blow it, Mary.” Where do these two portraits of twentieth-century preaching leave those of us who expect to be preaching in the twenty-first century? Is there more for us here than cautionary tales involving both anonymous and famous colleagues who blew it? I offer four observations.

1. *Preaching is an exercise in constructive theology.* Whether preachers regard our work as primarily offering biblical exposition or giving encouragement to hearers for the week ahead or something else, we are also, with every sermon, constructing a theological position that has broader social implications than we might have thought. Of course the form of a sermon matters. Yes, expert use of vivid imagery helps keep hearers interested. But theology matters, too. As we preach, we are saying more about God, sin, the world, our hope, and so on, than we may realize. Preaching will provide much of the theological education that many of our hearers receive.
2. *Words do things.* This is not news, of course, to religious people, especially those of us who read Genesis 1, but generally comments about the power of words are spoken by preachers when we want to comfort ourselves about how God can work through our feeble efforts. “The word will not return void,” we say, alluding to Isaiah 55 (and sometimes, perhaps, excusing our own lack of preparation). The studies from Lawrence and Witten offer another perspective on the power of words. Words that are not God’s word can do things too. Whether agency is with the words or speaker or hearers, whether agency is with the Holy Spirit or some other spirit(s), words do things, and words that are not faithful to the gospel can do things that are not faithful to the gospel. Reflecting

on liberal Protestant preaching, William Lawrence writes, “Ignoring the brokenness of the human will put a doctrinal seal of approval on false expectations about the human capacity to liberate individuals and society” (226). Words do things; sometimes they offer false security and illusory hope.

3. *Do more than connect.* Surely there is no proclamation when a preacher fails to connect with hearers. Yet it is not enough for us to “only connect.” It seems to have been the noble goal of making faith accessible to his hearers that motivated Harry Emerson Fosdick to preach a faith that observers would come to regard as “not specifically Christian.”<sup>3</sup> What we are offering when we connect is as important as *that* we are connecting.
4. *The word of God is near you.* It is not a new thing that God’s word should be preached by and to sinners living in a context shaped by forces that are hostile to that word. Ours is not a peculiarly twentieth- (or twenty-first-) century difficulty. Which of the prophets or apostles did not have to proclaim a word that could only be heard as strange in the context for which it was spoken? The word of God is, by definition, *God’s* word and so is *extra nos*, that is, strange, foreign in our context, a word quite beyond preacher and hearer alike. Yet,  
“Do not say in your heart, ‘who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim). Rom 10:6-8

The connection between word and world is God’s to make, and in fact, God makes that connection repeatedly throughout the scriptures and most decisively in the word made flesh. Living between Ezekiel’s prophecy and the fulfillment of John’s vision, we hear from both directions, “the dwelling of God is with mortals.”<sup>4</sup> The word is *extra nos*. The word is near you. May God grant those of us who preach to be both hearers and doers of God’s word. ⊕

<sup>3</sup>A. B. McDiarmid, “A Critique of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Conception of Preaching as Personal Counseling on a Group Scale” (Th. D. diss., Pacific School of Religion, 1961), cited in Lawrence, *Sundays in New York*, 78.

<sup>4</sup>Ezek 37:26; Rev 21:3.



America began as a significant Protestant majority nation. Significant minorities of Roman Catholics and Jews did not arise until the period between 1880 and 1910. Altogether, Protestants comprised the majority of the population until 2012 when the Protestant share of U.S. population dropped to 48%, thus ending its status as religion of the majority.[1][2] The decline is attributed mainly to the dropping membership of the Mainline Protestant churches,[1][3] while Evangelical Protestant and Black churches are stable or. Against a prevailing view that 18th-century Americans had not perpetuated the first settlers' passionate commitment to their faith, scholars now identify a high level of religious energy in colonies after 1700. That course viewed Protestant history in the United States through the prism of the experiences of the Protestant denominations. This course will take the view of examining major trends and movements in Protestantism, many of which affected multiple denominations (or passed them by). 1. T/F The Evangelical movement of the late 20th century became a potent force for electing Democrat politicians. 2. T/F During the Civil War, both sides thought they were fighting "with God on our side" 3. T/F The great revivals of the early 19th century were fueled primarily by the Methodists 4. T/F Billy Graham rose to prominence by advocating strict adherence to denominational ties 5. T/F People from Europe flocked to William Penn's "Pennsylvania" because of its low taxes and. The twentieth-century historiography of the Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands (1520-1620) reflects four major shifts in approach: from a partisan or compartmentalized to a neutral and from a chiefly theological to an integrated approach, from a national to an international perspective, and from a focus on the national to one on the local and regional level. These shifts mirror contemporary socio-cultural changes, such as depillarization, ecumenism, and internationalization. The concept developed by Juliaan Woltjer (1962) of a large and heterogeneous middle group of "Protestantizing" Catholics between small groups of fervent Protestants and conservative Catholics caused a watershed in the research.