

Ecclesiastes and the 20th Century Preacher

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When I was contacted by the Northern Conference Program Committee and was asked to take this paper, it was suggested that I stress the relevance of the book of Ecclesiastes for our time.

You and I will certainly agree that since Ecclesiastes is part of God's divinely revealed Truth, it will speak to modern man. It profited the hearts of the faithful in Israel who lived under the old dispensation. It was included in the canon by the Church in Apostolic times. Luther and our spiritual forefathers gained and grew in faith through their study of it. So also can we be sure that it is relevant for us of the 20th Century. And it will continue to be relevant until the end of time. There is no question of that.

I wonder, however, how familiar we are with Ecclesiastes and how much practical use we make of it in our ministry. Go back home this evening and check your sermon file. How many times have you preached from this book? My own seven year card file had not a single entry from these twelve chapters. I'm quite sure that the seasoned veterans among us today would not find that to be the case. Yet it does seem that when our people come to church on a Sunday morning, it will be a relatively rare occurrence when they will hear a sermon from Ecclesiastes.

Also, were you to check Nesper's "Biblical Texts," you would find only five texts from Ecclesiastes suggested in all the fourteen regular pericope series. Among the suggested texts for special occasions only the sections entitled "Burial of the Dead" and "Baccalaureate and Graduation" have as many as five texts culled from Ecclesiastes.

What about your sick and shut-in calls? How often do you turn to this book for these private devotions? I don't imagine that you have made a great deal of use of Ecclesiastes, as you sought to minister to your people on a private level. I don't believe that my experience along those lines is that atypical.

It's not my intention today to try to encourage you to make plans for a special sermon series on this book of the Bible, although I believe you might come up with a very effective one. Nor do I myself think that I'm going to forsake the more familiar Scripture passages when marrying and burying, or when comforting and counseling. I would hope, however, that from this paper we might be strengthened in our appreciation of the fact that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." (II Tim 3:15) And that Paul's "All Scripture" includes Ecclesiastes. Since the statement has been made, that "No other book in the Old Testament has been interpreted in so many radically different ways as the book of Ecclesiastes,"¹; since some even suggest that "Among the books of the Bible Qoheleth has the distinction of being the most distrusted by the pious, but best liked by the sceptic,"² it is well that we restudy it today. We will find it most relevant for the 20th century preacher.

We propose the following outline:

- I. The World-view of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes.
- II.. Specific Applications cat ions to Our 20th Century Ministry.

I

Modern Biblical scholarship of the higher-critical stripe has subjected the book of Ecclesiastes to its familiar method of attack. Doubts have been raised concerning the authorship of the book. Some assert that Solomon could not possibly have been the author. Robert Gordis, for example, writes,

Traditionally the authorship of the book is ascribed to Solomon, because the opening sentence reads: "The words of Koheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem," and Solomon enjoyed a reputation for wisdom, perhaps not wholly unmerited. Yet the view that Solomon is the author has been universally

¹ "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity." Svend Holm-Nielsen. p. 168.

² "A Study of Ecclesiastes." A.F. Rainey. p. 148.

abandoned today with the growth of a truer recognition of the style, vocabulary, and world outlook of Koheleth.”³

We prefer the explanation set forth by Kretzmann, when he introduces this section to his “Popular Commentary of the Bible” with the words:

The description of the opening sentence, “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem,” will properly apply to no one but Solomon; to whom the book has been ascribed from the earliest times. All the arguments of the modern higher critics have not been able to shake the authenticity of the book. The only question, one which was considered by Luther also, is this, whether Solomon personally wrote the words contained in this book, or whether the discourses were penned by one of Solomon’s scribes.”⁴

But now, what of the Preacher’s world-view—his “Weltanschauung”? There are some who are ready to call him a cynic and a skeptic. Some suggest that his is a philosophy of despair. Others have gone to great lengths to prove him a nihilist, or have seen him as a precursor to today’s existentialists.

The recurring refrain of the book is “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” Standing by itself, it sounds very pessimistic. We must be sure, however that we read all of what the Preacher has to say, that we not tear his words out of their over-all context. What he here says is true. “All under the sun”—and by that he is referring to the whole realm of human experience—by itself is a striving after the wind. When man fails to take into account God and His salvation; when man knows nothing about what God has done for us through Him and His death on the Cross; life is indeed an empty nothingness. Bleaker than a Siberian plain in the dead of winter. Even the best that man might achieve can give only fleeting, temporary satisfaction. And so Qoheleth’s world-view is thoroughly Christian and Scriptural.

The Christian must ever take into account what sin has done to man’s life here on earth. The curse of sin is real. Man will feel its effects until the Lord takes us to the mansions that he has prepared for all who are children of God through faith in Christ. For as Paul says. “The creature was made subject to vanity...but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:20,23)

What, then, does this world have to offer, apart from that hope that is ours through Christ? Nothing of lasting value! There will be those who make wisdom their goal., hoping to find satisfaction in that. Indeed, what great university is there that does not attract an unending parade of these searchers after and thirsters for human learning—these people who live under the delusion that man’s life consisteth in the abundance of the titles and degrees that he possesseth? Solomon says that he could personally attest to the fact that earthly wisdom is not the key that opens the golden door to happiness. “I gave my heart to seek and search out wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven; this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.” (Eccl 1:13) In fact, he says, “In much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” (Eccl. 1:18)

I couldn’t help being reminded by those words of something that I read not too long ago in “Time Magazine” about the pressures upon the Japanese student to excel in scholarly pursuits, and the “curse” and the “shame” that is felt by all who fail:

When Haruo Takano, a Tokyo sixth-grader, comes home in the middle of the afternoon after a full day at school, he has a quick snack and takes a nap for an hour or so. Then promptly at 5, he packs up his books again and heads off to a second school, where he studies until 9. Back home once more he locks himself in his room for two hours of homework, including one with a private tutor. Not until midnight is little Haruo, 11, finally allowed to turn out the light. Says he wearily, “I’m happy only when I hop into

³ “Koheleth, the Man and His World.” Robert Cordis. p. 5.

⁴ “Popular Commentary of the Bible, Old Testament.” Paul E. Kretzmann. Vol II, p. 261.

bed.” Haruo’s grueling day is not uncommon in Japan, where a child’s chances for future success in politics, business, or the professions depend heavily on the prestige of his “gakureki”—literally, his academic background...

In the first three months of this year alone, 13 Japanese elementary and junior high school students committed suicide in apparent despair over their academic prospects. The toll rose further early in July in one especially telling episode. Mari Ito, a Tokyo junior high school student who had been hurt in a traffic accident, became despondent when she was told that she would be hospitalized and unable to keep up with her studies for three months. Her mother, Mrs. Fumiyo Ito, 39, was even more distraught: she strangled Mari in her hospital bed, surrendered to the police, then committed suicide in jail.”⁵

Solomon had also learned that the pursuit of wealth and its attendant earthly pleasures in and of themselves cannot satisfy either. “I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards. I made gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits. I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees. I got me servants and handmaidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts... Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” (Eccl 2:4-8,11)

Solomon had pushed one enterprise after another. Great building projects, commercial ventures, culturally-stimulating programs were among his achievements. Money was no object. The result? “All was vanity and vexation of spirit.”

Will man’s mad dash for these things bring any more satisfaction today? A penthouse on Park Avenue, an office on Wall Street, an estate in the most manicured section of Grosse Pointe—none will guarantee happiness. A fleet of Cadillacs and Lincolns, a salary in six figures, like the ones some of the top echelon executives of industry receive, are not the answer. And who of us would really want to change places with the so called Jet Set, the “Beautiful People” who flit between continents in their unending search for pleasure?

To summarize, “Wisdom is better than folly,” (Eccl, 2:13) but even the wisest of this world, as natural man counts wisdom are soon forgotten. (Confer Eccl. 2:16.) And the human dynamos who are burning themselves out by their 18 hour days as they seek to fashion their various business empires, not only have hard days and sleepless nights (Eccl. 2:23), but also have to live with the realization that what they have acquired one day will pass on to someone else—sometimes even to the foolish, who will squander and mismanage it. (Confer Eccl. 2:19-21.)

This does not mean that the child of God cannot properly use such earthly blessings (wisdom, material wealth) that the Lord in His goodness permits us to have, “Every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour; it is the gift of God.” (Eccl: 3:13) For we know that “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.” (James 1:17) God gives these things in the measure He chooses, and we are to employ them to take care of our and our dependents’ needs, to care for the poor, as well as to remember to return a portion to the Lord so that the work of His Kingdom will be promoted. Realize, however, that these things are not an end in themselves. Apart from a faith rooted and grounded in the Savior, they will not satisfy. They can only turn to ashes on the tongue of those who know not God.

After looking at life, Solomon admitted that there are things that puzzle us. “Why does God let this or that happen? Why do the evil so often flourish, while the righteous and God-fearing suffer?” Justice does not always seem to be done. “There is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that longeth his life in his wickedness.” (Eccl 7:15) “Sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily.” (Eccl. 8:11) Still Solomon can conclude, “Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged,

⁵ “Time Magazine” August 18, 1975. p. 75.

yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow: because he feareth not before God.” (Eccl 8:12-13) Are we not reminded of the truism, “The mills of God turn slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.”

Solomon sees what lies beyond man’s life here on earth. He knows there will come a time when God “shall judge the righteous and the wicked.” (Eccl 3:17)

Many modernists claim that Solomon believed that the grave was the end. Not at all. It does not surprise that they make that assertion. For they believe that to be the case regarding others in the Old Testament. They think that the concept of life after death was still in the stage of evolving.

It’s true that the nature of God’s Revelation is such, that as God continued to unfold His truth through the mouth of His holy prophets, details became clearer. That was the case with the prophecies regarding the Savior. Yet even our first parents in the Garden of Eden understood the Protevangelium. They were looking in faith to the woman’s Seed, who would come to deliver man from the curse of sin and death. So also would we insist that at the time of Solomon people were not in the dark about what happens after death. “Sheol” did not mean annihilation and nothingness. Had not Job many years before proclaimed life after death? Confidently he sang, “*I know* that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God; Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.” (Job 19: 25-27)

The Preacher’s message, therefore, is a presentation of sin and grace. Reflecting on his personal experience and what he has seen of life, he paints the stark and gloomy picture of what man’s sin has done. His first goal is that man see the vanity of life apart from God. But he does not stop there. Man is to learn of the Creator and Redeemer that he has—to believe in the Messiah who would come into the world and conquer sin and death—and then in that faith fear God and keep His commandments.

The world-view expressed by the Preacher is identical to that of all of God’s Old Testament prophets. His theology meshes perfectly with that of Peter and Paul and the other “holy men of God (who) spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” (II Pet. 1:21) Will not we also be sure that when we use this portion of God’s Word in our public preaching or in our private “Seelsorge,” we will be bringing our people that message that they need to hear—Law and Gospel, sin and grace, the Word “able to make them wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”? (II Tim. 3:15)

II

If I understand the scope of my assignment correctly, I believe that it is the Program Committee’s intention that in this paper I also point to some specific applications of the book of Ecclesiastes to our 20th century ministry.

As pastors we certainly are familiar with the principle that before we can effectively apply the Word of God to our people, we must first be willing to let it speak to our own hearts. And so, while we will recognize that Ecclesiastes is not strictly speaking a case of the Preacher talking only to preachers—it wasn’t intended as a primer in pastoral theology—let us begin our application with ourselves. Let us consider a few passages in that light.

In His gracious wisdom God has permitted us to serve Him in the ministry. A great privilege it is. Amidst the vanities of this world, we have that which alone can give meaning to life and make it worthwhile. We bring to others the Bread of Life. And yet, are there not times when we seem to forget what a high calling is ours? The world will ever look down its collective nose at us. “The preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness.” (I Cor. 1:18) When that happens, we might think of the Preacher’s little “parable” in Eccl. 9:14-15: “There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it. Now there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered the same poor man.” It is human nature to forget a man’s contribution, important though it might be. It is even more a fact of life that the world is not going to recognize the worth of

our life's work. But God sees and knows. He says, "And they that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever and ever." (Dan. 12:3)

The message comes through loud and clear in Ecclesiastes that we are to recognize the vanity of earthly things. Yet Satan's greatest temptations to those in the ministry might well include an unhealthy preoccupation with and overmuch concern for those very things. We might become discontented when we compare our standard of living with the average family in our congregation. We might begin to imagine that our people's attitude is "Lord, you keep 'em humble; we'll keep 'em poor." Usually those fears are groundless to begin with. But let us also remember. "Better is a handful with quietness, than both hands full with travail and vexation of spirit," (Eccl. 4:6) and "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire." (Eccl. 6:9)

Dissatisfactions may also arise in the ministry when we think that our talents and abilities are not being recognized. The pastor of a small, country parish may get to feeling that he is being, overlooked—that he is ready for greater responsibilities. Will not the Lord, however, use us where He sees fit? "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous." (Ps. 34:15) Then, too, greater responsibilities are not always so much a blessing. They may simply mean more problems, bigger headaches, and fewer restful nights. (Cf. Eccl. 2: 23).

It would seem that we might also find a special application for our ministry in Eccl. 4:9-11: "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they both have heat; but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

The picture set before us in those verses is that of a traveler in ancient times. It was not good sense to take a journey alone. Should he accidentally fall, there will be no one to come to his assistance, nobody to render first-aid and bring him in. If he is beset upon by robbers and brigands, he will have to fight them off by himself. And in the chill of the Palestinian night, it would be a comfort to have the additional warmth of a friend lying under the same coverlet.

That is something that we might well remember for our ministry. Don't be a lone-wolf. Seek the aid and comfort, the advice and the encouragement of your brethren in the ministry. Pastoral conferences, such as ours today, afford such opportunities. In this connection we refer to "The Shepherd Under Christ." Professors Habeck and Schuetze write,

The pastor should expect to serve and help his brothers in a synod even as he expects their helpful service. Only when pastors are willing to encourage, strengthen, admonish, correct, and reprove one another with the Word of God will a synod remain truly united and spiritually strong. Without becoming officious, each pastor is to be his synodical brother's keeper, but in a spirit of humble helpfulness void of pride and self-righteousness. At the same time, he should be willing to accept brotherly admonition either when it is given informally or by someone who has an official responsibility.

The pastor should feel obliged to attend conferences regularly and participate actively. He should welcome the opportunity for receiving Holy Communion with his brother pastors, for studying God's Word, and for discussing the work of the church. Active participation includes accepting the assignment of a conference paper.⁶

Perhaps the reason why some neglect to consult with their brethren is that they are not open to constructive suggestions. Solomon says, however, "Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king who will be no more admonished." (Eccl 4:13) The Scriptures record for us the sad case of one of Solomon's own sons Rehoboam. He was not old at the time, but when he succeeded his father, he refused to listen to the sage advice of the elders of his people. They counseled him to lighten the people's burdens. His hard-headed answer was, "My father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions." (I Kings 12: 11)

⁶ "The Shepherd Under Christ." Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck. p. 358.

And that unwise policy helped to split the kingdom in two, with Jeroboam taking with him the northern tribes and setting up a rival throne.

Another passage from the pen of Solomon that interests us in regard to our pastoral ministry is that of Eccl. 5:1, where we read, “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil.”

All of us have explained this passage to our children in catechism classes as we taught them the Third Commandment. We made the application that not only are they to hear the Word of God regularly, but also that they listen to it attentively—that they participate in the worship with sincerity. Not just going through the motions outwardly, for that is the “sacrifice of fools.” Just as important is it that when we conduct the service, sing the hymns, and read the prayers, that it not be a mechanical sort of thing, but that we concentrate on the thoughts that are being expressed. And it would seem that when we as pastors have the opportunity to hear one of our brethren, that we are not going to be sitting in the pew as professional critics—there to observe another’s pulpit style—but to hear the Word and have it applied to our hearts.

A most striking passage, and one that finds particular application for the 20th century preacher’s ministry, is that of Eccl. 10:1: “Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savor: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honor.” How easily a single indiscretion can tarnish one’s reputation. Again we quote from “The Shepherd Under Christ”:

A pastor will have to be circumspect at all times when making calls in the homes of his people. It is not enough for him to know that his motives are honorable, he will also need to be careful not to give the wrong impressions. Let him be guided by the principle that the apostle expressed in a slightly different context: “We have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Cor. 8: 21-NASB). Especially in his contacts with the women of his congregation must he be guided by the apostle’s caution: “With all purity” (I Tim. 5:2). A pastor’s position and a woman’s profession of Christian sincerity do not guarantee that some woman member may not be tempted to try to exercise her coquettish wiles upon him. History and experience show that feminine enthusiasm for certain members of the clergy at times has had elements of an erotic nature in it. When a pastor suspects that such might be the case, no better advice can be given him than to imitate the turtle and withdraw into his shell. If additional calls upon such a misguided soul become necessary, it may be wise for the pastor to augment his own wariness by asking his wife or a reliable member to accompany him.⁷

It only takes one drop of poison in the cup; it only takes one small match dropped carelessly in the forest. And so, how we will want to guard our conduct, “Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed.” (II Cor. 6:3)

Special care is to be exercised in the use of the tongue. Solomon says, “The words of a wise man are gracious, but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell?” (Eccl. 10:12-14) This section would appear to contrast wise and foolish behavior, again in rather general terms. But might we not specifically apply it to the preacher, as he ministers to the people of God under his care? Let our words be gracious—sensibly tactful, helpfully wholesome, lovingly winsome. Not the kind of words, which for one reason or another turn people off. How can we hope to minister to them if they have already tuned us out? And let’s not give the impression that we know it all.

In closing this section we want to end on a positive note. While we live in a less than perfect world, with all of its attendant vanity, yet God has entrusted us with the Gospel of Christ, the one thing that can give real meaning to man’s earthly existence. We will want to be about our work with all the energy that the Lord will supply to us. “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest.” (Eccl. 11:10) our time is limited. “Work while it is

⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

day, ere the night cometh when no man can work.” (John 9:4) “In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand, for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.” (Eccl. 11:6) If that admonition of Solomon is true regarding all honest labor, it is all the more to be remembered by us who have been called as laborers in the Lord’s vineyard.

“There is no new thing under the sun,” says Solomon (Eccl. 1:9) our people are going to have to deal with the spirit of materialism. Even more so than in Solomon’s day does it pervade the society and philosophy of life of the 20th century world. More and more are people reaching for and clinging to the soap bubbles of life, and in the meantime neglecting those things which have significance for eternity. “Vanity of vanities” must be our warning when we see the modern-day Rich Fools repeating the words, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease; eat, drink, and ‘-:e merry.” (Luke 12:19) Still must we sound the warning not to get caught up in this spider’s web that Satan so skillfully weaves, telling our people that they not delude themselves into thinking that working seven days a week, ten and twelve hours a day will bring them joy if it’s done at the expense of their soul’s eternal welfare.

If someone comes to us, complaining about the seeming inequities of life and the social injustices that he sees in the world around him, we can point out that Solomon saw them in his day too. We are not going to see here on earth that perfect society of the utopian dreamers. God will eventually judge the wicked on the Last Day—when “The Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then shall He reward every man according to his works.” (Matt. 16:27)

Until that time comes, the Christian preacher has one essential task—to preach the Word (in all that that entails) to people—to strengthen them in their faith for this life and to prepare them for eternity. Will we not begin already with our children, reminding them “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth”? (Eccl. 12:1) Will we not teach them to know the Savior and His salvation? So that when the difficulties of old age come upon them, they will still cling in faith to Him and receive the “inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.” (I Pet. 1:4)

As Christian preachers of the 20th century let us set forth as best we can the bankruptcy of all that this world has to offer—at the same time proclaiming the riches of grace available to all through Him who said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”