

PREACHING  
*in the ERA of*  
TRUMP

*For my daughter Maggie:  
your passion for social justice is contagious  
and has served as an inspiration for this work.*

# PREACHING *in the ERA of*



O. Wesley Allen Jr.



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## INTRODUCTION

On November 10, 2016, the day after Donald Trump was elected, I received and initiated texts, phone calls, and emails with friends and colleagues in ministry. One layperson said, “As a Christian, I don’t understand how anyone voted for him. Church didn’t prepare me for this.” Clergy friends raised the question over and over again: “What in the world am I going to say on Sunday?” After one of the most negative campaigns in recent history resulting in a president-elect many fear will reinstitutionalize bigotry and oppression, how does one offer God’s good news?

This book aims to join the conversation struggling with that question. To be honest, I had not even thought of entering this fray until my friend Ron Allen pushed me in this direction. He certainly would have done a better job than I, but I appreciate his confidence in passing the buck to me. I was reluctant to pick up this mantle, but my wife and daughter...well...*insisted*. These two women had been so excited about the possibility of having one of their own finally preside from the Oval Office, and felt their hearts had been plucked out of their chests—not just when a man beat Hillary Clinton in a surprise victory—but when this *particular* sexist man beat her. My wife, Bonnie (who

has given her life to serve people marginalized by poverty, domestic violence, and mental illness), and Maggie (a high school senior considering studying political science and human rights in college) have been supportive readers, critics, and conversation partners as this project progressed. (Maggie has demanded co-author credit: I hope this mention appeases her.)

Another who has contributed to my thinking and writing about preaching in the era of Trump is the Reverend Ron Luckey. This second Ron in my life read every word, pushed me in directions I had not yet gone, and served as a companion on every step of this journey. He is one of the best preachers I have known, and his insights have added more to this project than I can name.

Finally, I need to thank Brad Lyons and Chalice Press for their willingness to publish this work at record speed. I am sure there will be many books to appear in the coming months and years that will deal with elements of Trump's election and presidency from various theological and critical perspectives and in a more in-depth manner than this work allows. This book is simply meant to be an initial volley into that court to help preachers deal with some of the strident rhetoric and policies that promise to cause chaos during Trump's time in office.

In the first half of the book, I offer some commentary on broad issues raised by Trump's campaign that will presumably continue to manifest themselves during his presidency. Specifically, the role of the pulpit in responding to our current situation must be informed by a range of perspectives. In the second half, I turn our attention to the issue of social justice related to specific groups Trump has targeted. Neither Donald Trump nor his supporters created the oppression these groups experience, but their bigoted and hate-filled rhetoric suggests deep problems and fears are likely to intensify in the coming days.

This book is not meant to be an exhaustive socio-political, theological, ethical, or even homiletical analysis of Trump's candidacy and presidency. It is intended to be a help to preachers who want to speak faithfully in response to the destructiveness of Trump's agenda and early days of the presidency.

*O. Wesley Allen Jr.*

Martin Luther King Jr. Day, January 16, 2017

(In the most prophetic of fashions, MLK day starts the week that will end with Trump's inauguration.)



# PART I

## **BROAD ISSUES**

As pastors consider whether and how to deal with Trump's oppressive rhetoric and proposed policies, there are background issues to consider. In the following essays that open this book, I offer my reflections on a variety of foundational issues for preachers to consider in light of the election of Donald Trump, and the potential for significant harm that his presidency could do to the ethical fabric of our society. While I at times turn to specific homiletical suggestions at points in these chapters, most of that sort of work is reserved for the second half of the book.

These reflections, then, are offered as contributions to the conversations many preachers are having internally as well as with clergy colleagues and lay members of the church. I would not expect readers to agree with every perspective I offer, but I hope that even in disagreeing with me, preachers find their views sharpened in a way that helps them better determine how to preach in this critical time.

## CHAPTER 6

### Making the Church Great Again

As I asserted in the last chapter, preachers should demonize neither Donald Trump nor those who support him as they deal with social issues that arise as part of Trump's approach to running the country. That said, pastors are called by God to preach in ways that show offering anything less than a full and definitive condemnation of Trump's hateful rhetoric in order to keep it from becoming American policy is being unfaithful to Christ's proclamation of the reign of God.

But this isn't just a call for preachers; it's a gift. Yes, you read correctly: Trump's blatant prejudice and intended forms of discrimination is a gift of sorts to the church. Even while the possible institutionalizing of the bigotry he expresses is horrific to imagine, the threat is a gift that invites the church to be the church again. This is a moment in which God is offering the church a chance to engage in God's eschatological vision for the world. It is a chance for the church to cast aside its complacency and pick up the work of transforming the world instead of being conformed to it. It is a chance for preachers to reclaim the ethical voice that is the inheritance of the pulpit. It is a chance for us to *make the church great again*.

### **Ecclesiological Complicity**

The idea of “making the church great again” implies there was a time when it was, in fact, great. In truth, I would be misrepresenting our history if I asserted that. There was no classical time in which the church wasn’t in some way complicit with corrupt, oppressive political forces. Ever since Constantine legalized Christianity, the church and society have been united in marriage in the West. This marriage has at times been a happy one and at times a dysfunctional one; but, a marriage it has been. Referring to the relationship of the two as “Christendom” hasn’t been an exaggeration.

Many would claim Christendom no longer exists in the United States. In the first place, we have never had a state church. We have from the beginning of our history held as sacred ideals the freedom of religion and the separation of church and State. Second, the moral and theological influence of the church has waned over the course of the twentieth century—as seen in the repealing of blue laws, the resistance to God-language in public discourse, consistently shrinking worship attendance, the loosening of restrictions concerning language and sexuality in the media, the schedule of youth sports claiming Sunday mornings, and the like.

Still, one only needs to count the number of American flags in Christian churches to recognize the marriage is still in place. The American flag and the Christian flag standing on either side of the altar table look like the bride and groom standing ever at the chancel announcing their vows to one another. It is certainly appropriate for Christians to love their country and, in secular settings, to pledge their allegiance to the flag. Christians can (and should?) be patriots. But it is another thing altogether for the flag to stand overshadowing the cross in the place where we worship the one and only God and claim to be citizens of God’s reign. It’s not hyperbole to say that this act is the most explicit example of idolatry in the church today.

One church in Kentucky had a tall flagpole in front of

the church building where you entered the sanctuary. At the top of the pole was a huge American flag, and flying under it was a much smaller Christian flag. Then, on the church sign at the bottom of the flagpole, were the words, "Man [*sic*] cannot serve two masters." Unaware of the irony of the conflict between the implicit message of the flags and the explicit content on the sign, this church serves as a perfect example of the contemporary church's complicity with society. The church and the state are married, but the relationship is no longer one in which the church is a major influence on society or even where the two partners are equals. The church seems to have promised not only to love but also to obey its mate, and the result is an unconscious but very strong civil religion.

We preachers have allowed this situation to persist in our congregations and denominations. We've allowed the church to forget that it is to be, by its very definition, a counter-cultural movement. While this is by no means a new phenomenon, we should note how easy a posture this has been for progressive ministers to assume over the course of the last eight years. We said to ourselves, "Look how far we've progressed as a country since the days of slavery, Jim Crow, and the resistance to the Civil Rights Movement." Even though not successful on all fronts, Obama and his administration went on to champion many social causes we care about: health care for all, women's rights, human rights around the world, repair of the environment as a result of climate change, a nuanced approach to violence in and related to the Middle East, and compassion for immigrants. Since things in our world seemed better at least in terms of talk coming from the President, our sermons could focus on spiritual instead of political matters, individual instead of cultural issues.

But then came "the Donald." Not only was the U.S. not ready to elect a woman, we elected a man who promises to make America great again by taking us back to a day when

greatness was defined in terms of whiteness. We elected one who bragged about being able to grope and force kisses on women because he was a celebrity. We elected one who argued that a successful approach to being greedy made him competent to be president. We elected one who promises to build a wall to keep Mexicans, who are “rapists and drug dealers,” out of the country. We elected one who tweets insults at 3:00 a.m. about anyone who challenges him. We elected one who speaks about radical Islamic terrorism abroad to provoke fear of Muslim Americans in our own borders. We elected one who “drained the swamp” of politically trained civil servants to fill his cabinet with mostly white business men who possess more money than a third of American households combined. We elected Donald Trump because he and his campaign did a masterful job of making our anxieties and prejudices the primary issues of the campaign.

And now women’s rights are threatened. Concern for racial equality is at risk. The well-being of Muslims and Latino/as is diminished. The poor in need of aid, including but not limited to health insurance, are more vulnerable than ever.

All of this is to say that Donald Trump has unintentionally been a vehicle for a divine gift igniting the church to say, “No more silence!” and preachers can say, “Let’s get started being the church...again!”

### **Both/And**

I’m not arguing that pastors need to forsake care of the individual soul in our preaching and focus solely on social justice issues. I have recently argued that preachers must deal cumulatively with three dimensions of the human condition:

- the vertical dimension involving our broken relationship with God,
- the horizontal dimension involving our broken relationship with others, and

- the inner dimension involving our broken relationship with ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

We don't preach only salvation in terms of the first and third dimensions, *or* only preach ethics in terms of the second dimension. We must preach both ethics and salvation, recognizing that salvation is ethical in nature and ethics are salvific in nature. The election of Donald Trump hasn't changed this—preachers must continue to address the whole of the human condition.

The advent of the era of Trump does, however, mean that we need to emphasize the horizontal dimension of the church's ethical outlook and activity in ways we haven't been doing or haven't been doing as strongly in the past as we must now. There is an urgency to the current state of affairs that calls preachers to reclaim the proclamation of God's eschatological reign of peace and justice to activate the church to keep the state of affairs from devolving as far as they might if Trump keeps his campaign promises. The radical and dangerous nature of President-elect Trump's rhetoric is a horrible "gift," allowing—nay, *urging*—preachers to let go of any reluctance they might have had about dealing with social issues in the pulpit in the past. While there never really was one, Trump has in the most striking fashion removed any valid excuse for preaching that fails to look outside the walls of the church.

Moreover, Trump has gifted us with the recognition that the way many of us have looked outside our walls in the past will not do. The church has too often been satisfied with offering the world its charity instead of working *in* the world for social change: sponsoring a food drive instead of addressing the causes of poverty; taking up collections for college scholarships for Native Americans without ever meeting a Native American; giving to a pastor's discretionary fund during communion to help people who have lost jobs due to a changing economy without investing in job

training.

Mind you, almsgiving is an honored part of our religious tradition, and charity is indispensable to the work of the church. But the problem is that usually charity is the *end* of the church's mission instead of the *beginning*. Charity makes the giver feel good about doing good, but acts of charity should always serve to point the church toward deeper levels of engagement to bring about social change.

One of the most blatant examples of charity corrupting the fuller work of the church is the so-called "mission" trips churches sponsor so often. Indeed, a quick Google search will demonstrate that such trips have become quite a money-making industry. These are rarely (any more) grassroots events, and more often commercially sponsored forms of Christian tourism. They rarely lead to more significant forms of Christian mission.

Consider the example of one group of United Methodists that travels annually from the U.S. to El Salvador—not to join the poor in their struggle for justice and well-being, to help establish a clean water system, or even to help erect a permanent school or church building. They travel down to Central America, buy food, and get satisfaction by passing it out to the poor in person. It is a Christian shopping extravaganza. Oh, to see a poor, old woman's brown face light up when a white man hands her two oranges! The *gracias* made it all worthwhile!

There is little self-reflection among the First World sponsors or participants of the group to admit that if, instead of traveling to Central America, they just sent the money for the food *and* the money they spent on their own travel, lodging, and food, the people would have much more food. It would be a more significant level of charity. Beyond that, there is no apparent awareness in the group of the ways charity without social action perpetuates the social ills that keep poor people impoverished, as opposed to being their allies as they seek to claim a more secure status and stable

level of well-being in society. To do this, however, would require that the mission team give up much (all?) of their own status, recognizing the hubris of their actions and the self-serving nature of their endeavors.

The Gospel of Luke is clear that the oppressed can only be lifted up when the oppressor is brought down. In the Magnificat, for instance, Mary prophesies that God

has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of  
their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their  
thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty. (1:51–53)

Similarly, in the Beatitudes, Luke doesn't present Jesus blessing the "poor in spirit" the way Matthew does (Mt. 5:3), but, instead: "Blessed are you who are poor," and, "Woe to you who are rich" (Lk. 6:20, 24).

President-elect Trump has proclaimed a gospel of blessed are the rich, the white, the able-bodied, the male, the celebrity, the straight, and the evangelical. He has promised future blessings that are a reclamation of past privilege (accompanied by past levels of oppression). And in doing so, he has gifted the church with the chance to say we will no longer be satisfied with being God's Band-aid on the social ills of the world. We will increase our charity, but we will also take up the challenge of engaging in mission that aims at changing the structures that make charity necessary.

### **Preaching Mission**

In order to preach mission that will counter Trumpian values, three homiletical strategies will be especially helpful to pastors.

First, we must make room in our sermons and our liturgies for *confession and lament*. We must be honest with



ourselves and with God. We must confess the role that the church played in the bigotry and anxiety that got the likes of a Donald Trump elected. We can't pretend to be the holy community of faith taking on the sinful world. We are both in and of the sins of the world in this case. Confession is best served with lament. We must find faith to challenge God in these times, asking why God allows hatred, ignorance, and oppression to set the agenda for this era. The psalms are a rich homiletical and liturgical resource for this strategy.

The second strategy has to do with preaching ecclesiology *in declarative terms instead of imperatives*. When preachers tell the church what they need to be doing, the congregation hears the negative flip side: "You're not doing what you are supposed to." More than inspiring or challenging, imperatives usually evoke guilt or shame. Congregations experience sermons of this sort the same way children experience a parent chastising them for not doing as they were supposed to do, and saying, "I'm not angry at you; I'm disappointed in you." Heads lower so as not to make eye contact.

Instead of preachers calling the church to become *who we ought to be* (ethically speaking), we should name *who the church is* (theologically speaking). We should speak of mission, reminding hearers that mission is who we are (instead of who we ought to be). People will want to live up to that which defines them. Their heads will be raised (meeting the preacher's eyes) with a sense of pride and purpose, saying, "You know, that *is* who we are! Let's get moving."

In other words, when we tell a congregation who they are in declarative sentences, they will turn them into self-claimed imperatives. Of course, this doesn't happen in one sermon. We must preach this ecclesiological definition repeatedly in nuanced ways for it to take hold. To be effective in doing this, we must *show* them the church defined as mission and not simply tell them. We must provide imagery of individuals and congregations that are involved in mission. The images

may be taken from other communities of faith, but we still claim them as defining who we are.

A third homiletical strategy needed to help the progressive church become a mission-active church is to preach *eschatology*. We moderns and postmoderns have, to a great extent, left eschatology in the wake of our progress. We often think of eschatology as being prominent in the prophets and the Book of Revelation, but the early Christian movement was thoroughly eschatological. I would dare say that *every* page of the New Testament includes eschatological themes and language that we miss from our scientific-worldview perch positioned two thousand years away. We don't sit at our windows waiting for Christ to come surfing in on the clouds, so we miss the more subtle elements of the eschatological outlook that is part of who we are.

For the early church, the Christ event (in the past) was an eschatological event. The cross and resurrection marked a turning of the ages. That means the church lives in the last days. That statement need not be taken literally to still be claimed faithfully. The last days are characterized by an "already/not yet" perspective. *We* have *already* experienced the salvation revealed in Jesus Christ and live in the light of that good news. However, *the world* has *not yet* experienced that good news manifested throughout the whole of creation.

To help contemporary ears understand the ancient eschatological outlook, I often use the illustration of being in a car on a two-lane country road at night. There are few street lights in such a setting, so we turn on our high beams and perhaps edge closer to the center of the road to be safe. Then, driving up a hill, we notice headlights shining over the top of the hill from the other direction. What do we do? We move back to the right, away from the center line, and turn our lights down. That moment is the eschatological experience. *We* have *already* experienced enough of the other car to have changed our behavior, but have *not yet* seen the car fully revealed.

We in the church have *already* experienced God's love, grace, justice, peace, and calling on our lives, and *yet* the world still struggles with violence, suffering, lack of resources, hatred, inequality, and so on and so forth. We are perpetually driving up that hill celebrating what we have experienced of God while being utterly dissatisfied with the state of the world. Having experienced a sliver of God's character, we know something of God's vision for the whole of God's creation. Sharing God's dissatisfaction with the pain experienced in and by the world leads us to act in cooperation with God. What Paul advises of individuals fits also for the church engaged in missions:

...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1b–2).

The eschatological church properly defined can't and won't be satisfied to conform to the world, but will be transformed by the renewing of our minds to discern and do God's will in striving to transform the world.

## PULPIT STRATEGIES

In the previous pages, I have examined the beginning of the Trump era and what I see as the church's and preachers' appropriate responses to it from a range of different theological angles.

In the material that follows, I turn my attention to specific social justice issues raised by views Trump expressed during the campaign and the early post-election days. The issues covered are not all of the social issues raised by Trump that should trouble the church. Instead, they are those in which he attacks specific groups of people.

Trump did not invent the kinds of bigotry and hatred he expressed during the election. The United States and the American church have been struggling with them since long before the last election cycle. Nevertheless, "The Donald" played the issues as one trump card after another to take as many tricks as possible without regard for standards of justice, civility, or compassion. Each chapter that follows, then, begins with a list of examples of ways Trump, Trump's staff, Trump's supporters, and/or Trump's appointees give the vulnerable in our society cause to fear that the social issues will become more intense during Trump's time in office. Readers may be tempted to scan through or even skip over these

lists, but I'd urge you to take some time with them. Even though you are likely familiar with most of the incidents included, it is important that we not let them fade into the past. The cumulative effect of reading them together reminds preachers of long-running patterns of oppressive speech and action by Trump, and of the high stakes we face in the coming days.

Following the opening list, we turn away from Trump and focus on the issue itself for the bulk of the chapter. The main focus is not to analyze in any exhaustive manner the social issues being discussed. I strongly recommend that preachers read sociologists, political scientists, theologians, and social ethicists who are better scholars on these issues than I. My contribution, I hope, is simply to offer a few framing thoughts about the various matters as they relate to preaching, and then to offer a few suggestions (and at times caveats) in relation to dealing with the topics in the pulpit. I don't intend the list of strategies I present to be exhaustive. Instead, they are meant to be suggestive, so that preachers choose some, reject some, adapt some, and add others to them.

# CHAPTER 7

## Race and Justice

Examples of Trump's racism in general:

- The Justice Department sued The Trump Management Corporation for alleged racial discrimination against African Americans looking to rent apartments in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island (1973).<sup>1</sup>
- As U.S. attorney, Jeff Sessions (Trump's nominee for Attorney General) prosecuted three African American civil rights activists for voter fraud due to their role in helping poor, uneducated, and often illiterate black voters mark their ballots with their permission. The jury acquitted the defendants after only three hours of deliberation (1985).<sup>2</sup>
- According to John O'Donnell, Trump said, "I've got black accountants at Trump Castle and Trump Plaza. Black guys counting my money! I hate it... The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day." O'Donnell also recounts Trump referring to an African American employee, saying, "I think the guy is lazy. And it's probably not his fault because laziness is a trait in