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Buttrick, David

Speaking Conflict: Stories of a Controversial Jesus

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John J. Pilch
Georgetown University
Washington, District of Columbia

This book is the third in a series on the language of Jesus. Its predecessors (published by the same press) were *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (2000) and *Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and the Sermon on the Mount*. (2002). As the subtitles indicate and the author himself admits, Buttrick, an ordained minister, homiletician, and professor of homiletics and liturgics (Vanderbilt Divinity School, emeritus), writes for those who teach or preach the gospel but also for students preparing for this task. He acknowledges that he is not a biblical scholar (xv) but seeks to select and read the best of biblical scholarship in order to present it in manageable and more “user friendly” form to teachers and preachers. Buttrick’s success as a preacher and teacher of aspiring preachers is testimony to the value of his contributions.

Moved by his passion for helping preachers in their very important yet extremely challenging ministry, Buttrick tackles the challenges in the introduction to this book. First he reviews forms of speech (captured in “literary forms”); then he surveys scholarship on the form identified as conflict stories. From this survey, he distills a “classic” model of conflict-pronouncement stories. Next he alerts the readers that translations in this book are his own, because the changing target language (English) constantly needs to be adjusted in order to accurately reflect the original (Greek). Translation problems include

such traditional and familiar terms as “Son of Man” (sexist in some contemporary American minds) and “kingdom of God” (anachronistic in democracies or other forms of government). He opts, respectively, for “son of humanity” (which he admits is literal but quite awkward) and “God’s new order” or “God’s social order” (which he recognizes as inadequate, since he uses “kingdom” where “particular texts are so translated”). As for presenting the sequence of conflict stories, he follows Mark, his principal focus.

Since this book is aimed at preachers and preachers to be, he includes sample sermons (his own), albeit with great reluctance. He hopes readers will imitate rather than repeat his samples. Nothing is so repugnant as hearing a “canned” sermon, borrowed eloquence. To his credit, he follows each sermon with critical notes on it, admittedly hindsight. Finally, he acknowledges a problem that all believers recognize: the results of contemporary biblical scholarship often do not support that which is familiar to and held by the believer. Buttrick reminds the preacher that biblical study needs to be integrated with theological reflection, cultural analysis, rhetorical strategy, pastoral sensitivity, poetics, and many other different forms of wisdom in order to compose a good sermon.

A table of conflict-pronouncement stories in the Synoptic Gospels arranged according to subject (conflict over healing, over conduct, over issues, and possible controversies) precedes chapter 1, “The Shape of the Form.” The “classic model” of the conflict form, which Buttrick designed after comparing a wide variety of models proposed by scholars, contains three elements: (1) a question; (2) Jesus’ reply in the form of a counterquestion; followed by (3) a concluding pronouncement. He believes the questions that initiate the conflicts are with us still. Jesus’ counterquestions reveal the mindset of the questioners. The pronouncements are epigrammatic, although some are labored and may have been created for Jesus by those who handed on the traditions after his death. Finally, the conflict stories come in clusters and likely sprang from real-life situations concerning the behavior of Jesus and his disciples.

Chapter 2 addresses three problems faced by preachers: the “problem of authenticity” asks how can one preach conflict stories that may never have happened; the “problem of anti-Judaism” asks how a preacher can avoid anti-Judaism in sermons; the “problem of ‘son of humanity’ texts” challenges the preacher to be sensitive to the complex of interpretations posed by this title, which occurs in only two conflict stories! Although entire sermons cannot and should not be devoted to any one of these problems, the preacher should develop a multiphased strategy. It is important to take the opportunity to teach things about the Bible that study programs and study groups usually do not address (forms, redactions, etc.). As for preventing anti-Judaism in sermons, congregations should become more familiar and friendly with Judaism. Visits to neighboring synagogues,

among other things, can help. In addition, preachers might focus less exclusively on the Gospels and preach more often from the Hebrew Bible.

Chapters 4–7 analyze the conflict stories as they appear sequentially in the Gospel of Mark. Conflict stories from Matthew and Luke are also treated where appropriate. Each conflict story is analyzed in the same pattern: (1) the Markan text (with references to Synoptic parallels) is presented in the author’s translation; (2) parallel versions are summarized and differences with Mark noted; (3) the conflict story is then set in its Markan context; (4) next, the controversy is explained, and the conflict structure is identified, if that element is present; (5) the following section, “Homiletic Theology,” attempts to summarize the “theologies” of different denominations and to settle on some generally acceptable positions; it invites the preacher to recognize and make her or his theology explicit, for this will determine the interpretation and preaching of the passage; (6) “Speaking the Passage” attempts to help the preacher shape the sermon; (7) the outlined complete text (and circumstances) of one of Buttrick’s sermons is presented; and (8) the “discussion” that follows is Buttrick’s critique of that sermon first in general and then in particular following the outlined sermon.

Chapter 8, “The Controversial Jesus,” is a narrative summary of the book that highlights its main points and repeats its caveats for preachers. Endnotes are followed by a bibliography arranged under these headings: “Conflict-Pronouncement Stories”; “Gospel of Mark—Commentaries”; “Gospel of Mark—General Studies”; “Judaism in the First Century”; “Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of Mark”; “The Son of Man Tradition”; and “Other Books Consulted.” There are indexes of biblical citations, personal names, and subjects. The book concludes with a “Table of Conflict Stories in the Synoptic Gospels.”

This reviewer shares Buttrick’s passion for teaching preachers in hopes of improving preaching. His publications, including this book directed specifically to this problem, are very welcome. At the same time, they raise a question about the content and purpose of exegetical courses intended for preachers. Ought it not to be possible to teach an exegetical course with a view to preaching? In the early 1970s, this reviewer-exegete team-taught a course for preachers with the homiletics professor in the homiletics department. The advantage of such an arrangement was that I could experience firsthand what my exegetical students succeeded or failed to do in preparing their homilies. (The Roman Catholic tradition favors homilies over sermons.) The experience helped me to shape my exegetical courses appropriately, thereby (I hope) facilitating the task of student and the homiletics professor.

A second advantage of such collaboration is that the exegete can better advise the homiletics professor about the relative value of different hypotheses and approaches. The

insider's view is a bit more privileged than the outsider's perspective. Thus, the practitioner of the social-scientific approach to interpreting the Bible would preface an examination of conflict stories by pointing out that Circum-Mediterranean culture in general and Middle Eastern culture in particular is agonistic, that is, conflict-prone. Conflict lies at the heart of talmudic literature (see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003]). It should come as no surprise that it dominates the New Testament as well. Preachers who live in a culture that tries to avoid conflict and aims at superficial harmony can ease the challenge of preaching such stories by recognizing this cultural challenge. David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) is an excellent guide.

From the perspective of these two sources (Rubenstein and Augsburger) as well as social-scientific analyses of conflict (see B. J. Malina, "Mark 7: A Conflict Approach." *Forum* 4/3 [1987]: 3–30), Buttrick has omitted a key item: the insult! Jesus invariably answers each question (a challenge to his honor) with an insult. His favorite insult for the Pharisees is "hypocrites," which is best translated "actor." This aggravates the conflict instead of deflating it. An appreciation of the fullness of the conflict form and its key role in agonistic cultures heightens the challenge to contemporary Western preachers.

Sensitivity to translations as another important tool in crafting good preaching is a point well taken. Every translator is a traitor, as the Italian proverb has it, and preachers need to know how to "correct" the translation as required. Buttrick singles out "Son of Man" and "kingdom of God" as particularly inappropriate. However, contemporary Western sensitivity to language problems needs to respect the context of the ancient world. "Kingdom of God" is nothing less than the establishment of theocracy, which was Jesus' primary interest. It was not something new. It was, rather, a return to God's original plan when kings ruled over a unified Israel as God's vice-gerents. Moreover, as complex as it is, "Son of Man" is often simply an oblique way of speaking about oneself.

Related to the interest in appropriate translation is Buttrick's concern about anti-Judaism. That some preachers sometimes adopt a stance that can be described as anti-Judaistic is irrefutable. It has happened through the course of centuries. However, it is simply wrong to assert that ancient Judaic writers writing about Jesus, a fellow countryman whom they love and cherish, are anti-Judaic because they excoriate other fellow Judaic countrymen who do not share their estimate and appreciation for Jesus. Should these be identified as the forerunners of modern-day self-hating Jews?

Finally, for more than a century now biblical scholars have been distinguishing between Jesus as he lived around the year A.D. 30 and Jesus as he is presented in the New

Testament beginning with Paul (1 Thessalonians, A.D. 49) and continuing through the Gospels (A.D. 69–100) and beyond. What the modern preacher holds in her or his hand (the Bible) reflects at least these two layers: Jesus as he “really was”; and Jesus as he was reinterpreted for the community of the particular sacred writers. Scholars have made this distinction since it was uncovered, and teachers (exegetes) have taught it in the classroom. Perhaps it is time for preachers to share it with their audiences.

Moreover, as Buttrick notes, the results of biblical research often do not support what believers know (or think they know) and cherish as their faith. He rightly exhorts the preacher to incorporate insights from other disciplines. This reviewer argues strongly in favor of cultural insights that help a contemporary Westerner understand the problems posed by ancient Middle Eastern texts. One way to bridge, or attempt to bridge, the gap that emerges between the results of a cultural investigation and the currently “received view” is to take into serious account the more than two thousand years of history between these points. It was not always known or believed the way it is now. That is the “historical” part of historical criticism.

The first homiletics class that I team-taught at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary and University, Mundelein, Illinois, with my colleague, The Rev. Dr. Willard Jabusch, featured two of my star exegetical students. I sat back and looked forward to hearing an outstanding homily. What I heard instead was drivel and pious prattle that sent me into orbit. When I expressed my exasperation and frustration with their work in homiletics, I asked: “You know better than this! Why did you do this?” They replied: “We want to be ordained, and we want to keep our jobs. If we preached what we learned in your class and personally believe, we’d be in jeopardy. Better to say what the people want to hear.” To their credit, they left before ordination. One hopes that contemporary preachers will follow the advice given by the Pastor to Timothy: “Proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it” (2 Tim 4:2, NJB).

Buttrick’s excellent book is very personal and reflects his personal choices. In this he gives an example that is worthy of imitation. He would be the first to deny that it is the best or only way to write a sermon or that his choices among solutions to scripture problems are the most appropriate or the only options. All preachers and those who aspire to be preachers will be in his debt.