

The Great Debates: Part 2

Well-----I said well-----well, well, well, the how long should a sermon be debate continues, intensifies, multiplies. In my absence Susan Carter preaches a great sermon, as we say in preacher land “she hit a home run” and-----and she did it in short fashion. She did it in less than 20 minutes.

A big thank you to Susan. A big thank you for making my job, my life, my existence more difficult.

Debates. Debates about this and that. Debates about anything and everything. Debates about how long a sermon should be.

The last time I preached----and I don't want to hear any smart remarks about, When was the last time I preached?----the last time I preached I referred to three famous debates: the Scopes Monkey Trial, or as I describe it, the Evolution verses Fundamentalism debate, the Lincoln Douglas debates, and the Kennedy/Nixon debates. All of those debates were historic, notable, momentous. Interestingly, there was a debate last week of historic proportion. It was last Monday night. Does anyone know what I'm referring to?

Yes, the Democratic presidential debate held at the Citadel. And what was different, what was unique, what was distinctive about this debate was who got to ask the presidential candidates the questions and what was unique was how they questions were asked.

Have you ever watched a debate and gotten bored stiff by tiresome questions asked by stuffy, stodgy television journalists? Have you ever set in front of the tube and shouted out questions you wanted to ask the candidate?

Well,----well, this past Monday your average Joe Schmoo's, the commoners, the woman and man on the street got to ask the questions and----and they sent their questions in by video via the You-Tube web site. It turned out to be quite an evening.

A lesbian couple, and I don't know if they were lesbian golfers so don't ask-----a lesbian couple asked candidates what they thought about their stance on gay marriage. A father of a dead soldier asked if the candidates had family members serving in uniform. Rev. Reggie Longier of Hickory noted that politicians once used religion to justify slavery, segregation and men-only voting. Then he asked, “So why is it still acceptable to use religion to deny gay Americans their full and equal rights?”

Way to go Rev.!

I'm wondering if the Reverend still has a job. Hickory is known for furniture, not for liberalism.

Depending on your party affiliation, depending on whether you think it's way too early to be considering presidential candidates, depending on what you were doing this past Monday night--and as your Pastor I don't want to know what you were doing Monday night----and depending

on whether you read the front page of the Tuesday edition of *The Charlotte Observer* you may or may not have known about the YouTube designed presidential debate.

If you knew about the YouTube debate raise your hand.

There's another debate you may or may not know about. Whether or not you were raised in a church that forced fed you doctrine, or whether you were raised in a church that encouraged you to have a thinking faith, or whether you were told the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God and that meant there was no room for doubt or discussion or argument, or whether you were raised in a steeple that introduced you to the fact that there are two creation stories in Genesis and there are four very different gospels and some gospels were written that didn't get accepted, all of that would influence whether or not you are aware that in the Bible, in the Church's book, what we have going on are some great, intense, passionate, long-running debates.

Have you ever thought of the Bible as having within its pages debates? If not, allow me to introduce you to some of the debates.

In my last sermon I pointed out a debate over whether or not the Passover lamb should be roasted or boiled. I compared that to my debate with certain Wedgewoodians over whether S.C. or Virginia peaches are the best. The truth of the matter is the way to cook the Passover lamb and the debate over peaches are debates about things that are not all that important.

Do you find that you frequently get in debates like that? Do you argue, debate about anything and everything?

If you do, I'm sure there's a good reason you do, maybe nobody valued your opinion or you feel like you weren't heard, but be careful about debating about insignificant stuff. Life's too short for that. On the other hand, be aware that sometimes those debates about the color of the paint at the church or the issues involved in those silly little debates with your beloved that become big debates might actually be about more than meets the eye. Our debates about the insignificant can be----I'm not saying they always are, but they can be debates about power or our dissatisfaction with some aspect of our relationship which for whatever reason we can't vocalize but have to deal with by engaging in passive aggressiveness or aggressiveness or other tricks of the trade. On the other hand, you may just not be as smart as me and you may prefer South Carolina peaches.

We do have in the Bible some debates on matters such as how to cook the Passover lamb which in my opinion are just flat out ridiculous, stupid. But we also have in the Bible debates about some very important matters, debates on significant issues.

For example, there is in the Bible, believe it or not, a debate about the very nature of God. You'd think the Bible would be clear about who God is and how God acts and what God requires, but what we have is a debate.

Have you ever noticed that God as portrayed in the Bible can come off sort of schizophrenic at times, or maybe even bipolar? One minute God is gentle as a lamb, the next minute God is

short-tempered, irritable, and irascible. On one page God is loving while on the next God is uncaring, perhaps even mean. In one verse God is compared to a mother hen looking after her brood while in another verse God is telling somebody to kill the enemy's children. O.K., what mood are you in today God? Which God are you going to be on July 29th, 2007?

Those contrasting, stark portraits of God are easy to identify. Unfortunately, there are some debates about God's nature which are not evident unless you know Hebrew or read books and articles by scholars who work easily with the Hebrew language. Permit me to explain.

There is a general consensus among Biblical scholars that in what we call the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, there is evidence an editor or editors put together the thoughts of several authors, sometimes positioning their contrasting views side by side. Amazing. Different opinions side by side. You might call it a debate.

Let me fill in some blanks. Many scholars believe that it was a priestly school that performed the editing function of the Pentateuch. Scholars, furthermore, believe the editors used the work of an author we call the Jahwist because that particular author calls God Yahweh. Another author is labeled the Elohist because God is referred to as Elohim. Also, in the first five books of the Bible there is a strand of theological thought known as the Deuteronomist and as you have already surmised the Deuteronomist is responsible for the book of-----Deuteronomy. Scholars, additionally, believe the editor or editors added their own material and since they were priests we call it the P tradition. Add it all together and this line of thinking is called the JEDP theory, referring to the Yahweh, Elohim, Deuteronomy, and Priestly traditions.

Everybody on board? If the person beside you is asleep you have my permission to pinch them in the name of Jesus.

O.K. let's look at some of the debates about the nature of God.

In his book *The Divine Symphony: The Bible's Many Voices*, Israel Knohl observes that Elohim is depicted as a personal God, talking, for example, with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Elohim doesn't like their behavior, their actions. We surmise then that Elohim is a God concerned with the moral behavior of humankind. Elohim punishes those who are bad, even punishing the entire universe for being corrupt except for Noah and his clan. On the other hand, Elohim rewards those who are faithful and that reward includes material blessings. See those TV evangelists know some of the Bible. They just don't realize there's a debate.

When you turn to the places where God is known as Yahweh the picture is completely different. The divine nature associated with Yahweh is impersonal, free of any anthropomorphisms. You don't find any statements like "the eyes of the Lord" or "the hand of the Lord". And it's not only that physical dimensions are absent, it's also that there is no mention of a personal or psychological dimension. Furthermore, Yahweh is never----never depicted as a source of material blessings. And get this, with the Jahwist there are no descriptions of divine wrath or jealousy.

Talk about differences. Talk about disagreements. Talk about---o.k. I'll say it---talk about debates. It's not a debate over spilt milk. This is huge.

That's J and E. I haven't even gotten to P, the Priestly writers and editors. They, for the record, exhibit a general unwillingness to characterize God with any attributes. They, moreover, attribute almost no activity to God. The Lord's only activities concern the giving of the commandments: speaking, addressing, commanding. Nothing more. You might say God is on vacation a good bit.

Are you up for one more debate in the Bible? I think I can summarize it and provide you with a less than twenty minute sermon.

In the Bible we find a debate about God's sanctuary, God's house, or put another way, a debate about worship. People today debate about what is the right way to worship, as if there is a right way. Formal worship, casual worship. Modern music. So-called traditional music. Pentecostal worship. And the list goes on and on. Well, there is a debate in the Bible about worship.

In stark contrast to what was common in the temples of the Near East, and indeed to other temples in Israel, the Temple described in the Priestly Torah is a sanctuary of silence, complete and total silence. Yeah, we Baptists would never survive it. On the other hand, you didn't have to worry about long sermons because guess what---no sermons. Just silence. Also no choir, no singing. In other temples in the ancient world it was customary to sing hymns and pray during the sacrifices. And in Babylonian, Hittite and Egyptian rituals we find that when the priest offer sacrifices, burn incense or light candles there is verbal activity, but not so, not so in the Priestly corpus in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. But---and this is a big but, but turn some pages of the Old Testament and what do you find but the book of Psalms which is----which is Israel's hymn book. And guess what, not one Psalm, not one single, solitary Psalm is attributed to a priest. Do we sing or don't we sing. Do we talk or don't we talk during worship?

The House of God debate. Yes, there are more turns and twists to the debate. In Exodus 33 we read that Moses is supposed to take the Tent of Meeting, as in God's sanctuary, outside the camp at some distance. Interestingly, Moses could go out to this Tent of Meeting but so could anyone else. Joe, Larry, Moe, Martha, Rebecca, Sarah, all of them could go. (Exodus 33:7) But hold your horses. Wait a minute. Don't be so sure of yourself because---because the Priestly Tent of Meeting, the so called Tabernacle, is not situated outside the camp, but rather in its center (Numbers 2:27), and only the priests can enter it, for as Numbers 3:10 communicates, "any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death." Sounds like the priests have grabbed some power, doesn't it! And they are using fear to get their way. Gosh that sounds like the modern Church!

Write this down. The Tent of Meeting described in Exodus 33 is diametrically, completely, utterly opposed to the Priestly Tabernacle; no sacrifices are performed in it, nor do any priests regulate behavior in it. In fact, Joshua, not a priest himself, seems to reside in it permanently. Exodus 33:11 says Joshua was like a child you can't get off the couch to do something. It reads: "Joshua, the son of Nun, would not stir out of the Tent." Ever tried to stir a child?

There is a vast divide separating these two paradigms of the Tent of Meeting.

Debates, I'm telling you, there are debates in the Bible right and left.

So-----so maybe I should not be so dead sure that God requires a 20 minute sermon. And maybe you---maybe you should not be so sure God favors a 15 minute sermon.

Here's a John Wesley quote, Wesley being the founder of the Methodist Church. Wesley says, "When I was young, I was sure of everything; in a few years, having been mistaken a thousand times, I was not half so sure of most things as I was before; at present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me."

Scottish novelist and poet Muriel Spark, was honored at a Royal Society of Literature function celebrating her autobiography. John Mortimer asked her, "I wonder what you think about God?" To which Spark replied in the most humble of terms: "I think God exists infinitely mysteriously. I don't know a thing." (As quoted in *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 July 1992, 15.)

What I saying is this: The Bible may not teach us everything we think it teaches us.

And I'm saying: surprisingly, maybe one of the few clear teachings of the Bible is that religious intolerance needs to be avoided at all costs. For the Bible if we read it carefully is a Bible that has many different voices and those voices are in engaged in debates.

Now tell me how much time I have left?