

Righteous Judgment

By James C. Goodloe IV

Surely by now it is clear that we are standing under the judgment of God. Nothing else could account for the precipitous and calamitous decline of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) over the last 40 years. And while we stand under the judgment of God, this indeed is our only hope: the judgment of God is righteous.

There are a number of renewal groups at work in the church. However, I suspect that the hard reality is that none of our programs or strategies will succeed. It is not likely that those ideas will be sufficient for us to escape the judgment of God. Nor, indeed, should we try to escape.

Instead, the one thing we need to do is to hear clearly the word of God. Through the word, God may damn us in order to save us. Through the word, God may slay us in order to make us alive. Therein lies our only hope for the righteousness of God's judgment. Therein lies our only hope for God's grace and mercy.

Moreover, surely we must hear the whole word of God. It is not our prerogative to pick the bits and pieces we want to hear. It is, instead, our duty and our joy to hear the whole word of God. Indeed, it is our very life.

Through the centuries before us, this work has been done by preachers reading and preaching through the Bible book by book, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse. This method is known as *lectio continua*, preaching through the Scripture in order, without omitting sections. Consider our goodly heritage of this kind of preaching.

Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254) preached through the books of the Old Testament one by one. Today we have some 20 of his sermons on Genesis, about 15 on Exodus, and a similar number on the other historical books.

John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) preached through most of the books of the New Testament. We have 89 of his sermons on the Gospel of Matthew. When we look at these sermons, we discover that he proceeds through the whole of the Gospel explaining the text verse by verse.

Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339-97) preached in Milan, the capital of the Western empire, at the same time John Chrysostom filled the pulpit in Antioch. Ambrose fascinated his congregation with his expositions of the Old Testament.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) also preached a *lectio continua*.

Ulrich Zwingli (1481-1531) started out by taking the Gospel of Matthew and preaching through it verse by verse, day after day for a whole year. Zwingli began his reform with a return to the classical practice of systematic expository preaching.

John Oecolampadius (1482-1531) became preacher at St. Mark's Church, where he set to work preaching, just as John Chrysostom had done, through one book of the Bible after another.

Matthew Zell (1477-1548) began his ministry by preaching through the four Gospels.

Wolfgang Capito (1478-1541) preached through Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Martin Bucer (1491-1551) did a long series of sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, the first epistle of Peter and the book of Psalms. If the Gospels were preached though in course on Sunday morning, then the New Testament Epistles were preached through either later on Sunday, at vespers perhaps or else at the daily preaching services. It was the same with the Old Testament books.

John Calvin (1509-64) introduced this approach to Geneva. Those who were exiled during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-58) took it with them when they returned to England and Scotland. The exposition of Scripture in course became one of the biggest planks in their platform of Christian revival. To them it was an essential component of Christian worship that was according to Scripture and after the example of the early church. Sunday morning Calvin normally preached through the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles. At Sunday vespers he would preach through the Psalms or perhaps a New Testament epistle. On weekday mornings he preached through Old Testament books. Calvin preached through most of the books of the Bible, and he preached his way slowly through each book. Normally, he took three to six verses at a time. This system produced, for example, 123 sermons on Genesis, 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 159 sermons on Job, 176 sermons on 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 43 sermons on Galatians.

John Knox (1513-72), preacher at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, exercised as dramatic and powerful a preaching ministry as any preacher in the history of Christendom. He did this in the course of expository preaching, never departing from the text of Scripture.

Book by book, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse: this is the way to proclaim the word of God! This is the way to place ourselves under its authority. This is what we need to hear. This is the way toward life. Can we not do this again? Can we not dare to preach through the Bible using *lectio continua*? Can we not submit ourselves to the word of God and thus receive the righteous judgment of God? Is this not our only hope?

At this time, I know of five ministers preaching this way in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Are there others? Are there other preachers willing to do this? Are there other congregations waiting to hear the word of God?

I beg, plead and entreat all of our preaching ministers to take up *lectio continua* as the way to fulfil our holy responsibility for proclaiming the word of God.

References — Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed according to Scripture*, revised and expanded edition, WJKP, 2002. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, seven volumes, Eerdmans, 1998.