

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

WATERGATE AND THE CAIAPHAS PRINCIPLE

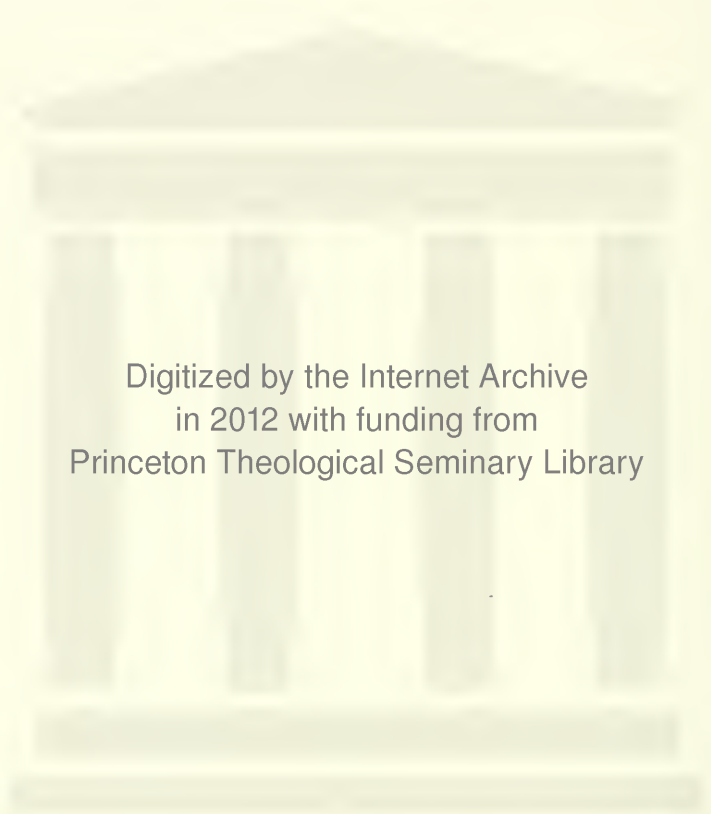
*"It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not." John 11:50*

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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## WATERGATE AND THE CAIAPHAS PRINCIPLE

*"It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."* John 11:50

Sometime ago a memorable cartoon appeared in Punch Magazine. It showed a golfer in a sand trap trying frantically to get out. The harder he swung the more deeply embedded the ball became. Eventually he gave up! Watching all of this from behind a tree were a little girl and her mother. The tag line had the youngster whispering, "He's stopped beating it, Mommy, I think it must be dead."

Some Americans wish, I am sure, that the press, the Congress and the courts would stop beating Watergate. What appeared at first as a fractious caper has evolved into a major scandal. As the drama unfolds, the hearts of many are revealed. Back on October 21, 1973, I declared myself from this pulpit in favor of the impeachment process to begin. Nothing that has since transpired has caused me to change my mind!

However unwelcome the task, I think it very much in order, here on this Memorial Day Sunday, that we look again at Watergate.

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I want to begin with a reference to an ecclesiastical politician by the name of Caiaphas who served as High Priest in Jerusalem at the time of the death of Jesus. Caiaphas held that office for eighteen years. He and his father-in-law, Annas, were High Priests when John the Baptist began his ministry. It was Caiaphas who took part in the trial of Peter and John as recorded in the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts.

But Caiaphas is best remembered for judicially

master-minding the destruction of an innocent prisoner. To fill in the details, Jesus had stirred things up by performing a miracle for Lazarus in Bethany. Some of those present ran off and told the Pharisees what he had done. Presently, the Sanhedrin assembled. The highest court in the land was faced with this dilemma: "If we let him thus alone, all will believe in him. The Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:48) Jesus was making waves. Their religious authority was threatened, so also was the nation and its tenuous peace with Rome.

In utter frustration, members of the Sanhedrin began to ask each other, "What are we doing about it?" Caiaphas seized this moment to provide leadership. He stepped forward and said, "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not." Hereafter we shall refer to this as the Caiaphas principle.

What Caiaphas meant, quite obviously, was that it would be advantageous to sacrifice Jesus rather than further jeopardize either the temple or the nation. Rome had taken about enough from this obscure province. One more provocation might very well be the last!

Caiaphas' principle has its merits. It doesn't make sense to let an apple spoil the barrel, does it? Club-house lawyers have ruined more than one team in collegiate and professional sports. The Caiaphas principle very much resembles the Jonah principle. Recall from the book that bears his name how Jonah resisted the call to go to Nineveh and soon found himself on a ship headed in the opposite direction. A menacing storm roared up that badly frightened the crew. They said one to another, "Come let us cast lots that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." (Jonah 1:7) At this point Jonah stepped forward and declared himself a fugitive from God. The mariners said to Jonah, "What shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us?" Jonah replied, "Take me up and throw me into the sea." (Jonah 1:11)

Jesus was killed, But how was Caiaphas to know that the feared tragedy would not be long averted? Less than two generations later Jerusalem was taken and the temple destroyed. "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."

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The Christian church found Caiaphas' statement irresistible. C.H. Dodd calls this remembered history a "pronouncement story." That is, the narrative was retained by the church in order to preserve Caiaphas' words. Actually, his words are capable of a meaning that he did not intend. In a highly theological sense Christ was to give himself that multitudes might be saved.

John Calvin suggests that here, without knowing it, Caiaphas was bilingual. He was speaking at the paltry level of politics but also announcing the redemption of the world. "Behold the lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) "The son of man is come to give his life a ransom for many."  
(Mat. 20:28)

\* \* \*

The Caiaphas principle has surfaced again with Watergate. Many of our countrymen share the view that once the President has been dealt with by Congress, he will be removed from office and all will be well. In effect they are saying to the President what the mariners said to Jonah, "What shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us?" This is bad reasoning that can lead only to despair.

Of course, the President's role in the Watergate affair must be prosecuted to the full. The country is becoming increasingly impatient with blocked evidence, stalling tactics, precious statements by members of the family, theological rationales offered by well paid masters of casuistry, pompous statements equating the

future of the Presidency with the future of a man and studied attempts to make the press appear to be the culprit.

Let the impeachment proceedings roll on for justice must be done. The higher the office, the greater the need to live above suspicion. "To whom much is given of him shall much be required." (Lk 12:48)

However, we court disillusionment if we nurse the notion that all would be well if the President were gone. Kingman Brewster, Jr., speaking this week at graduation exercises at Yale University warned against thinking that "if the President were impeached and convicted, somehow we could therefore necessarily live happily ever after. My biggest worry at the moment," he said, "is that the 'get Nixon' psychology will mean that once Nixon is 'gotten' people will think they can relax their concern." 1

Scapegoats have always been in high demand in tumultuous times. The "human devil" theory is an old and venerated theory. But to believe that one person can ruin a nation or that one person can save a nation is to be victimized by the cult of personality. The forces that made Watergate possible are still very much alive in America. Our corporate way of life is flawed.

\* \* \*

It is not the sophomoric reasoning of Caiaphas that is needed but sustained attention to what ails us as a people. Among many other possibilities, I should like to suggest three goals that are worthy of our striving at this time. First is the recovery of our ideals. The spiritual nature of the values we hold give us our vitality and power -- not our material achievements. Too many of us in this country have been concerned only with private goals and personal ambitions. Not enough of us care for the body politic as a whole. We just like the nation to be there,

steady and holding, so that we can do our thing to our own profit.

It is time we asked ourselves what we take to be our common ideals. Only thus will we recover our cohesion and power. Back seven or eight years ago the term "civil religion" seemed to me to be almost entirely negative. However, recent thought and reading has led me to see that there is a sense in which "civil religion" can be spoken of in a positive way. Every society needs a set of myths to solidify its present and shape its future for the good. "For what shall it profit a man, (or a nation) if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mk 8:36)

A Pope had this to say one time about an unusually worldly and scurrilous prince of the church: "If there is no God, the Cardinal has led a most successful life. If there is a God -- well, that is something else again."

Second, I propose that we work to recover a regard for truth. It is folk wisdom, but true nonetheless, that human beings are likely to resent in others what most resembles them. As we watch the cast of the Watergate drama parade before us day after day through press and television, our resentment toward those who are most odious to us is a reflection on the inherent dishonesty that we have come to practice ourselves.

It is hard to trace the fall of truth to a single cause. I suspect that the whole concept of "public relations" is largely responsible. A friend of mine just this week described public relations as "the deodorant of the establishment."

More and more as one reads the documents pertaining to Watergate, one senses that those who were trapped with the jelly on their hands were more concerned with appearances than substance. Not "What have we done?" but "How does it look?" There is something unsettling about knowing that a company can produce

the sleaziest bar of soap in America and with proper advertising and public relations make that soap the number one soap in the country.

I had an extended trip with a taxi driver awhile ago. He talked and the meter ticked, and I listened -- to both. He acknowledged that it was true that when cabs go down to meet a cruise ship they try to do a little "stealing." No, they do not try to lift any of the cargo. Rather they attempt to bilk the newcomer. Luggage is piled up in the front seat to block a view of the meter. A few well draped coats can insure the invisibility of the meter. Result -- a ride of twenty or thirty blocks might "cost" twelve dollars.

"But," my driver said, "I don't do things like that. Oh, once in awhile when the meter shows \$1.75 and my fare is new in the city, I might charge \$3.50, but that's my limit." "I'd call that a little Water-gate," I said, "wouldn't you?" His answer was, "No."

We are talking about something more than semantics here. I don't know anyone who sought to penetrate the correlation between person and word better than Emerson. I would suggest if you have a copy of Emerson's Essays hiding away somewhere that you pull down the one on "Nature" in which these words are to be found: "A man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon his love of truth and his desire to communicate it without loss. The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires -- the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise -- and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time the fraud is manifest and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections." 2



A regard for truth.

Third, I would urge us to move toward a more politically relevant church. I know what is being said about churches that have paid a price for their relevancy. I have talked to enough lay people around the country in the past year who have not hesitated to suggest that the quieter the church is on public issues, the more crowded its coffers will be. But the church must not return to a form of piety that has no relationship with the world. We are still hamstrung by an ethical sense in the Christian church that does not go beyond the inter-personal. We have not done our homework or our praying on how best to relate what we believe about the love of God to the systems, structures and corporate entities of our society.

Some years ago when the Christian faith was just beginning, it found itself in a position historically that prohibited the development of a corporate ethic. As one authority has noted, "Christianity has not generally included the political dimension in its theological scheme. This is not so much because of the so-called other worldliness of Christian theology, but because during its crucially formative years in the Hellenistic world Christianity emerged as a religion of the household. The majority of the earliest converts to Christianity were slaves, or else drawn from the urban proletariat. They came, that is, from those whom the ancient world believed to be a part of the realm of necessity, the dimension of labor which was concerned not with freedom but with matters of basic human need. In this realm both household duties and familial virtues represented the highest ideals. As a result public virtues were practically ignored, and early Christian ethics remained the ethics of the household and not the ethics of the city or the empire." 3

It may be that this is where we are again, but without historic justification. Indeed, Jeb Magruder made this very point in a recent public statement when he said, "We had private morality but not a sense of

public morality. Instead of applying our private morality to public affairs, we accepted the President's standards of political behavior, and the results were tragic for him and for us." 4

Ralph Nader recently made the astounding statement that you and I affect other lives, for good or for ill, more through our agencies, organizations and associations than we do personally one-to-one. It is conceivable that on a one-to-one basis people can be the saintliest of the saints yet still be part of institutions that have a harmful effect on others. How can love for God express itself in our kind of society for the benefit of all?

\* \* \*

"It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not." To follow the principle of Caiaphas is to be in for disillusionment at the end of the day. For whatever happens to the President, personally or politically, we still have our systems, arrangements and values to deal with -- do we not?

Here on this Memorial Sunday I am moved to say that the enemies of America are too optimistic and the friends of America too sad. This experiment in democracy, for all of its flaws, has a future as bright as we will make it. One man did not build America, and one man cannot destroy it. I find strangely relevant today the words with which Abraham Lincoln ended his Second Inaugural Address on the 4th of March, 1865: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." 5

CLOSING PRAYER

*Teach us, Lord, a proper love of country  
that will render alike to God and  
Caesar what is their due.*

*Help us to cherish what is good  
and change what is not,  
Until this republic becomes for all  
what it has been for some --  
the land of the free.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. "The New York Times," May 20, 1974
2. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, The Best of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," pp. 87-8, published for the Classics Club by Walter J. Black, New York 1941
3. Coats, William R., God In Public, p. 16, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974
4. "The New York Times," May 23, 1974
5. Lincoln, Abraham, Second Inaugural Address, 1865 from We Hold These Truths, p. 265, compiled by Stuart Brown, Harper & Bros., New York 1948

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