

Our yokes

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June 27, 2011

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Before his questioning of the doctrine of hell sparked such a (ahem) firestorm, Rob Bell wrote in *Velvet Elvis* a chapter about yokes, including this:

A rabbi's set of rules and lists, which was really that rabbi's interpretation of how to live the Torah, was called that rabbi's yoke . . . One rabbi even said his yoke was easy.

The Jewish ears that first heard Jesus' description of his yoke would have had another association in mind as well, from the prophet Isaiah: The yoke of their burden...the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian (Isaiah 9:4).

Whether rabbinical or political (or ecclesiastical, for those of us who wear stoles), a yoke is the set of laws, interpretations and expectations laid upon one by a higher authority. What an image for American preachers on the third of July!

The American story is largely one of throwing off the yoke of the oppressor, whether it is Great Britain, the plantation owner or some dictator or terrorist bent on choking freedom. Meanwhile, many would argue that America imposes its own yokes, having become the very imperial authority it is predisposed to resist.

In any case, our national and individual relationships with authority comprise a fascinating field for homiletical exploration, full of both peril and promise.

Are some yokes good for us? Have we overvalued independence?

What yokes have our people accepted uncritically?

What yokes do our people endure by necessity?

What yokes need to be broken today?

How do these yokes compare and contrast with the yoke Jesus offers? And do we really believe him when he claims that it is easy?