

PREACHING
the
creative
GOSPEL
CREATIVELY

Francis C. Rossow



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Introduction



Putting Creativity into Perspective

This book offers four suggestions for added creativity in preaching: (1) a fuller understanding of what literally happened to Jesus on the cross; (2) a greater awareness and use of Biblical metaphors and images of the Gospel; (3) the occasional use of what I call “Gospel-handles”; (4) the periodic use of new approaches and formats in the writing of sermons.

Getting the Most out of This Book

You will derive the most benefit from these suggestions, particularly the third and fourth ones, if you keep in mind two things. First, these suggestions are intended to be supplementary rather than substitutionary, to build on rather than replace what you have already learned from courses in writing and in homiletics. Second, these suggestions will effect creativity in sermons only if they are employed by sanctified preachers, people in whom the Holy Spirit through the Gospel is busy working “both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). Permit me to discuss each of these factors more fully below.

First, the suggestions for creative preaching offered in this book presuppose mastery of the basics of English composition and homiletics. While it is my hope that even a beginning seminary student can benefit from this book, he will do so only if he simultaneously continues to practice all that he has learned in the past about grammar, punctuation, word choice, and word arrangement; and only if he learns the basics of homiletics. It is a truism of writing that only those who are at home with the rules can occasionally go beyond the rules or even break them legitimately and effectively. There can be no extraordinary creativity in our preaching

unless we are, first of all, capable of ordinary creativity. As a matter of fact, if a preacher studies his Biblical text thoroughly, determines carefully what it says, and then says what it says in a direct, clear, coherent manner, he will often get credit not only for thoroughness, care, directness, clarity, and coherence but for creativity as well. It is obviously not the purpose of this book to review the basics of English composition and homiletics, but neither is it the purpose of this book to minimize them. Creativity attempted by one who has not learned how to write or by one who neglects his homiletical homework nearly always falls flat or strikes the listener as mere sensationalism. Without the basics, creativity too easily becomes tasteless.

Second, and even more emphatically, the suggestions for creative preaching offered in this book presuppose steady, continuous growth in the preacher's sanctification. To begin with, sanctification generates creativity in the preacher. There is a surprising correlation in the art of preaching between sanctification and creativity, the former being, to a larger degree than most of us are aware, a prerequisite for the latter. It does not follow from this, of course, that the absence of creativity in a preacher signals the absence of sanctification. Such a conclusion would be a classic instance of false obversion or the misuse of opposites, a procedure that in this instance could be tragic as well as illogical. But it does follow that if the preacher is a highly sanctified person, he is more likely to be creative as well.

Creativity will come more easily to him for several reasons. First, faith and virtue are themselves creative processes: they are the unique manufacture of God the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. His work in the human body, His temple, removes the scales from the preacher's eyes; he no longer sees through a glass so darkly as he did before. The insights the Holy Spirit provides, the preacher is able to transmit to others. He understands sin better, for one thing. He sees the corruption in the hearts of his audience more clearly because, thanks to the Holy Spirit, he sees his own corruption more clearly. Effective Law preaching is always intensely personal. This is not to say that the preacher's discussion of sin from the pulpit should be overtly subjective, the "I've done it too, folks; I've been there and back" approach that can so easily become patronizing and condescending, or a kind of exhibitionism—bragging rather than confessing. But it does mean that the preacher's pulpit talk about sin is always honest, always from the perspective of keen awareness of his own specific shortcomings. Given that kind of personal approach, it is legitimate to describe effective Law preaching as a form of confession and the listener's receptivity toward it as a variety of absolution for the speaker. That is, recognizing the accuracy and insightfulness of the preacher's diagnosis of sin, the listeners will give him their rapt attention. They will regard his diagnosis of sin as realistic, on target, rather than stereotyped and predictable. They will marvel at how much their pastor knows about them and may even be tempted to quip,

“Has he been eavesdropping?” They may say of him (to a lesser degree, of course, and for a different reason) what the woman at the well said of Christ: “Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did” (John 4:29).

Even more important than the improvement in the speaker’s Law preaching is the improvement in his Gospel preaching that results from the Holy Spirit’s activity through the Word upon the character of the speaker. Growing in sanctification, the preacher will present the Gospel more insightfully and provocatively. His preaching will reflect not merely the mastery of one or two safe, traditional formulas acquired during his seminary training but rather the vast and imaginative variety of Gospel formulas that the Scriptures themselves provide.

More specifically, growth in sanctification will have a bearing on the preacher’s Sunday-to-Sunday sermon preparation and delivery. To be sure, it will result in increased conscientiousness about these activities. But what I primarily have in mind is the fact that creative preaching is often a byproduct of passion for one’s subject and compassion for one’s audience. An effective preacher is one who is excited about his material and who is eager to communicate that material to his listeners. I sometimes quip to my students: “Seek ye first your subject and your audience, and creativity will be added unto you.” We preach to people, not to bewilder or impress them, but to help and serve them. Hence what follows? We do a thorough study of the text so that we—and our listeners—know what we are talking about. We arrange our materials logically so that people can easily follow them. We labor to choose words wisely and to arrange them rhythmically so that people will enjoy listening to them. We are humble, getting our self out of the way as much as possible. We are courteous and fair, thinking like the listener, looking at things from his point of view, seeing them his way—in short, letting that mind be in us which is also in our listener. The pulpit is no place for show-offs, novices, upstarts, sensationalists, status-mongers. It is an arena for the best in good manners, for the ultimate in courtesy, selflessness, and humility. Without such virtues, preacher creativity easily degenerates into mere pomp and bombast.

Not only does Spirit-manufactured sanctification in the preacher generate creativity, but it also makes that creativity more palatable to his audience. Even the pagan Quintilian conceded that a persuasive orator is a *good* man skilled in speaking (emphasis added). The Bible says it so simply: “speaking the truth in *love*” (Eph. 4:15, emphasis added). No technically creative sermon can cover a multitude of the preacher’s sins—and I refer not merely to those sins of the flesh for which a pastor may be defrocked (e.g., fornication, theft, drunkenness) but also to sins of the disposition (arrogance, uncharitableness, poor sportsmanship, snobbishness, dictatorialness). Thank God (and I mean the phrase theologically, not conventionally), He, through Jesus, forgives and covers preacher deficien-

cies and shortcomings (else who of us could stand?), but it doesn't follow from this grace that we are to make a career of our deficiencies and shortcomings. The preacher has to be accepted before his creativity will be accepted. He is his own best creative technique. His sermon style cannot rise above the level of his life-style. Before God can work *through* a man, He must work *in* a man. God is Persons (three of them, in fact); He sent His Son as a Person, the God-Man, to effect our salvation; and He still sends persons (preachers) to get to persons (people). This is why good character is so crucial to the preaching task. While it is true that no one can believe *for* another, it is also true, usually, that no one can believe *without* another; that is, God normally gets to people through people.

Ultimately, the correlation between preacher creativity and preacher character has its roots in the concept of the Word. The Word is both a Person and a message (Jesus and the Biblical Gospel); the Word is the God who speaks and it is what God speaks. This is still God's *modus operandi*, His way of working: message through a man. Preachers are transformers for God's power unto salvation. That is why the transformer needs to be in the peak of condition, in good running order. God's method is not exclusion (God without man); nor is it co-operation (God plus man); rather, it is transformation (God through man). We pastors offer ourselves as ordinary bread and wine "in, with, and under" which God is truly present. Hence, we must never divorce the message from the person or, more specifically, creativity from sanctification. We must not put asunder what God has joined together.

What is Creativity?

Admittedly, the concept of creativity, the whole, is greater than the sum of the words used to define it. To begin with an informal definition, creativity is probably initiated when the writer says, "I have an idea," and rushes for pencil and notebook before that idea escapes him. And creativity has undoubtedly occurred whenever the listener responds with such expressions as "Very interesting!" "Where did you ever get that idea?" "I never heard it put that way before!" "I wish I had thought of that first!" To define it more formally, creativity consists of profound insights stated winsomely. Professor Hayakawa has defined creativity as "the verbalization of a cerebral itch."¹ I like that description because it not only defines creativity—it exemplifies it. Creativity means giving attractive expression to provocative thoughts, making original statements about original ideas—or, more often in the preacher's case, according original expression to familiar ideas, familiar because they are from the Scriptures. Creativity occurs when the preacher puts theological truths into non-theological language, timeless verities into timely words, changeless Biblical substance into changing contemporary forms. To invert the Biblical metaphor, the preacher puts the old wine of the Gospel into new wineskins. He tells the old, old story, but

always in new, new language. Normally we associate creativity with such words as “new,” “fresh,” “original,” “imaginative,” “insightful,” “provocative,” and “breathtaking,” adjectives that appropriately describe creative preaching so long as that preaching is simultaneously responsible, loyal to the Scriptures.

One caution: as preachers we create the medium but not the message. The Gospel is God’s gift to us; in our preaching we neither add to it nor subtract from it. The Gospel is God’s gift, wholly His gift, nothing but His gift. But we do create the package in which God’s gift comes to people. We wrap it attractively and tie a ribbon around it so as to whet the viewer’s curiosity, to entice him to open the package wondering, “What’s in it for me?” What’s in it for him is, of course, entirely the gift of God. The magic is in the Word, the Word of God, which alone is God’s power to salvation. Yet in His wisdom God has chosen to convey that magic through words. Creative preaching simply harnesses the magic of the Word to the magic of words; it couples the unique and exclusive power of the Gospel to the dynamite of carefully selected words and to the harmonious rhythms of skillfully arranged words. Creative pulpit language has been compared to a lens: it brings to focus the light and heat of God’s Word. The power and energy are all God’s, but the lens brings that power and energy to bear on specific people.

How Does One Acquire Creativity?

To whom does creativity come? I have already indicated that it is more likely to come to that preacher experiencing steady growth in sanctification, to one, more specifically, whose primary concern is his subject matter and his audience. There seems to be a paradox here: Seek creativity directly and it is likely to elude you; seek other things first—mastery of material and service to people—and creativity is thrown in for good measure. The speaker is “surprised by creativity.”

Creativity is more likely to come to that preacher who knows his Bible well, because such knowledge enables him to see relationships between widely scattered Biblical truths. This aspect of creativity will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four when I take up the subject of multiple text sermons. For the present let me point out that juxtaposing two or more isolated Bible passages often produces surprisingly creative results. Wedding one Biblical concept to another frequently gives birth to a new and, to sustain the marriage metaphor, legitimate family of Biblical ideas. Once again the preacher, who is always a systematician as well, is joining together in a sermon what God hath put asunder in the Scriptures. Obviously, to perform such creative marriages requires familiarity with God’s Word.

Creativity comes not only to the preacher who recognizes relationships between widely scattered portions of the Bible, but also to the

preacher who perceives connections between the isolated phenomena of his everyday life. He has his eyes open to what God is accomplishing in his day-to-day existence, and he recognizes the emergence of a pattern in God's various dealings with him. In short, he sees life whole. Among all the drab and colorful numerators of daily living, he sees certain common denominators that he attributes to God's grace. He then integrates what he finds, makes sense out of it, and communicates that sense to others in his writing and speaking. Although the listeners may never verbalize their reactions, they will recognize such a speaker as a keen analyst of human nature and will regard his preaching as "creative."

A capacity for analogy, an ability to discern similarities between ostensibly dissimilar things, a gift for seeing likenesses between what is called the secular and the spiritual, this seems to be another prerequisite for creativity. To see sermons in stones as well as in pericopes, to take a tree or rocket or beetle or lamppost and somehow make it suggestive of some Biblical or moral truth is a mark of a creative preacher. "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ."—thus began so many of our Lord's parables. Has anything ever surpassed them in creativity?

Discipline hardly sounds like a word compatible with creativity. Yet it is really another climatic condition favorable to the germination and growth of creativity. Too easily we confuse preaching with mere talking, and too quickly we christen survival in the pulpit as success. It is a common homiletical quip that if we wish to pull the trigger on a text Sunday morning we cannot wait until Saturday night to load the gun. Fosdick's familiar dictum, that a preacher must spend one hour of preparation outside the pulpit for every minute of speaking in the pulpit, is not the hyperbole I used to think it was. It is rather, in my experience, understatement. Even the poet Robert Frost admitted that good writing must be "worried into being." Creative preaching, inevitably, is the outcome of hard work and disciplined study habits. There is no other way, no convenient shortcut. This kind of preaching "cometh only by prayer and fasting." What is easy to read or listen to has probably been hard to write. Even though it is a cliché, the statement that genius is nine-tenths discipline contains a high degree of truth. Preachers are made, not born. Delivering sermons, like delivering children, requires labor, hard labor. The analogy of pregnancy, in fact, is a tempting one to pursue. In the process of frequent intellectual intercourse, ideas are conceived. The brain becomes the womb for the development of the idea conceived. One grows great with the idea, becomes big with it, feels increasingly uncomfortable with it. As the week wears on, the labor intensifies. When Sunday morning comes the sermon is "delivered," and then there is joy that another sermon, or child if you will, has been born into the world, not merely the joy of relief but also the joy of creativity, the humble but honest recognition of a job well done.

Reading experience is another prerequisite for creativity—and I

refer not merely to the obvious reading of theological books and professional journals but primarily to the reading of belletristic literature (novels, dramas, poems, and short stories). “The study of great literature is the study of life, and the serious novelist will do more to enrich experience, awaken imagination, sharpen observation, and explore character, than any other teacher.”² No less a person than Dr. Martin Luther has said:

Without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists. . . . Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily. . . . Therefore, I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric.³

I have discovered this in my own preaching experience. Writers like Camus, Cervantes, Donne, Dostoevsky, Fielding, Greene, Herbert, Marvell, Pope, Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Swift, Tolstoy, Waugh, Wharton, plus many others, are seers of the soul, human beings who have wrestled intensely with the issues of life and death and have reported their findings in attractive, non-sermonic form. An occasional writer (e.g., C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien) will even supply the reader with a new perspective on the Gospel.⁴ While the novelist can seldom be relied upon to narrate in any great detail the saving Good News, he can be relied upon to make clearer our need of salvation. If infrequently a preacher of the Gospel, the novelist is often an effective preacher of the Law. One writer has compared the belletristic author to a sycamore tree from which we Zacchaeuses can better see the Lord Jesus—of whose saving acts, of course, we are told accurately and adequately only in the sacred Scriptures. It is not only the content of belletristic literature that is conducive to creativity but also its style. Creative writing is caught, not taught. We assimilate creative techniques through our frequent exposure to them; some sort of literary osmosis occurs. Even the most honest of us is an unconscious plagiarist; we involuntarily acquire—and use—the writing techniques of those whom we read. As a man reads, so he writes. One cannot read, for instance, C. S. Lewis’ delightfully written works for very long without experiencing a decided improvement in his own writing style. In half-jest I have sometimes told my students that I personally derive more homiletical help from belletristic literature than I do from most homiletics textbooks. So what follows? To continue in the semi-jocular vein: “Sell all that ye have and buy Tolstoy”; “Except ye read Dostoevsky, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of creativity.”

Writing experience is another desideratum for creativity. Except for a different source (a text from the Bible) and a different goal (the proclamation of the Gospel for the listener's eternal salvation and his everyday growth in God-pleasing living), sermon writing is no different from any other kind of writing. The more one has tangled with ideas in his past compositions, essays, book reports, term papers, and research papers, the easier it will be for him to write sermons. The most profound thing that happens in even the best-structured, best-taught homiletics course is that a student is compelled to write a lot of sermons that are carefully evaluated. He learns by doing; creativity comes through practice. Mark Twain's three rules for successful writing—write, write, and write—seem to apply to sermon writing as well. Creativity comes to him who writes—and writes, and keeps on writing.

Reluctant as we may be to admit it (unless we happen to possess it to a high degree), intelligence is another prerequisite for creativity. Actually, the trait of intelligence exemplifies grace: it is entirely God's gift to us through our parents and through our environment, and there is little we can do about it except gratefully to acknowledge His kindness and cultivate with His help the gift He has given us. The correlation between intelligence and creativity seems so obvious that there is little point in belaboring it. However, because of the periodic anti-intellectualism that surfaces in contemporary culture, there may be a need to remind ourselves that mental ability is not an impediment to creativity, and that in no case should the virtue of intelligence ever be converted into a fault. In brief, there is nothing to warrant the all too prevalent assumption that a preacher is more likely to be a man of God if he is an ignoramus, that he is more likely to be effective in the pulpit if his character is good while his intelligence is weak.

Almost as obvious a requirement for creativity as intelligence is emotional capacity, here defined as the ability to feel deeply or, in Shakespeare's words, "to see feelingly." Effective verbal communication is always intestinal as well as cranial. What a person feels strongly, he writes and speaks about more interestingly. Because of the advantages of voice inflection and body language, the spoken word is more able than the written word to communicate excitement and sincerity. Nevertheless, these emotions can even surface in the written word insofar as they play a significant role in word choice and word arrangement. Feeling has a way of coursing through the pen onto the page—as the appreciative and discerning reader of good poetry, for example, will readily concede.

Finally, creativity comes to him who thinks creativity important, who has an aversion for mouthing banalities and a compulsion for uttering profundities. Whenever the preacher sits down to write a sermon or enters a pulpit to deliver one, he has an intense desire to be the best possible preacher he can be, not for his own sake but for the sake of the Gospel. This assertion is not meant to contradict the incidental aspect of creativity

described in an earlier paragraph—that creativity is a byproduct of love for subject matter and for audience—but it is a way of affirming the truism that one must consider a goal worth achieving if he hopes to achieve it.

Why Creativity, Anyhow?

Some might think that so far I have begged the question, assuming as true the very thing—the need for and desirability of creativity—that first needs to be proved. Granted that creativity is a word that has a lot going for it; its connotations are uniformly excellent. Yet we must not be mesmerized by the word. Creativity has its dangers. To begin with, it can so easily degenerate into sensationalism; the line of demarcation between the two is admittedly always vague and tenuous. Further, there is the ever attendant danger of pride, of self-advancement, of the preacher getting in the way of God, even upstaging Him, impeding the saving power that lies in His Word—and in His Word alone. After all, doesn't St. Paul warn against this very possibility in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians? He came to the Corinthians, he says, "not with excellency of speech or of wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:1). His preaching "was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). Christ sent him, he observes, "to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect" (1 Cor. 1:17). He goes on to point out that God saves people not through signs or wisdom but through "the foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor. 1:21, emphasis added). Some of us, therefore, can hardly be blamed for regarding creativity as an embroidery upon truth, perhaps even a subversion of it; for suspecting the sincerity of a person who has an excessive fondness for originality; for entertaining the fear that style is somehow incompatible with the foolishness of the cross.

Frankly, these are hard words from the apostle, admitting of no easy solution and intended to give pause to the enthusiast for creativity. Nonetheless, if Paul's words are meant as a blanket condemnation of winsome writing and attractive speaking, then I fear that Paul, more than any other Biblical writer, fails to practice what he preaches in this respect and stands self-condemned. Even an unbelieving reader vibrates to the magic of Paul's literary style. He quotes poetry. He uses rhetorical devices. He puns. He employs balance and antitheses. He is a master at logic. Paul is unquestionably a creative writer. I point this out, not to charge him with inconsistency, but to suggest the possibility that we have misunderstood him or at least overstated the case he is making.

Can I offer the following modification without emasculating Paul's argument? Creativity is allowable, even commendable, so long as it maintains a slave's role, not a master's role, in respect to the Gospel; so long as it serves the Gospel rather than upstages it. Correctly interpreted, the foolishness of preaching consists in its content, not in its style. The preaching of the cross is foolishness because it is the preaching of the *cross*—that we are

saved by the Son of God's death via the disgraceful mode of crucifixion; and that we are saved entirely by the action of God through Christ, not because of any merit or activity on our part. This is the *skandalon* of the cross, this is the foolishness of preaching, irrespective of the words in which it is proclaimed. What is foolish is our message, not our manner of communicating that message. The foolishness of preaching does not necessitate foolish preaching. Creativity in our sermon construction and delivery is, therefore, in place so long as it stays in place, below the Gospel rather than above it. Creativity is to function as a channel for the Gospel, not as its replacement.

Sometimes the theological objection to creativity comes from a slightly different perspective. The opposition is directed not so much toward “fancy” words, “words of wisdom,” as it is toward the process of preparation itself. The accent is on naturalness, genuineness, spontaneity, “doing your own thing” (what I, in less charitable moments, dub “verbal burping” or “the spontaneous me syndrome”). Preparation is considered contrivance, possibly even symptomatic of a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit. One can forget about—or at least minimize—textual analysis, outlining, writing, and revising, and simply wade into the speaking task when the time for speaking arrives. Forget about yourself and trust in God; just take the plunge, for He and His angels will guide you in all your ways. Says William J. Carl III:

But one has to admit that the 60's were not the best years for the pulpit. In an attempt to avoid the 'golden throat' era of the 40's and 50's, where preachers had taken up permanent residence on a pedestal (some bucking for a place in a stained glass window), we reacted with . . . vacating the pulpit to wander aimlessly in front of the pews. We ventilated our 'real feelings' from the pulpit to show our people that we could hurt too. Some took revenge with what David Buttrick has called the 'Johnny Carson school of casual cats in the pulpit.'⁵

Where this approach is not motivated by mere laziness but seeks a serious theological base, Luke 12:11-12 is sometimes cited: “Take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.” What is overlooked in the use of this passage is the context, which has to do with appearance in the courts in times of persecution, not with preaching or normal witnessing opportunities. Perhaps R. E. O. White has provided the best-balanced, least-caricatured rebuttal to this approach to preaching: “There is no ground whatsoever to suppose that there is more of the Spirit's guidance and power in a ministry that is haphazard and unplanned than in one carefully and prayerfully prepared, balanced, and purposeful.”⁶

Less theologically prompted than the preceding objections to creativity is what might be termed the objection of the intelligentsia. For this

group it is sufficient that the ideas be valid and profound; why stoop to selling them through verbal gimmickry? Their accent is on scholarship, not salesmanship; on content, not form; on what, not how. "How" is a concern appropriate only to fix-it-yourself kinds of people and do-it-yourself types of manuals, but for the intellectual elite, let the word not be found in their vocabulary. A growing number of recent publications (not all of them homiletical) stress the impossibility of sharply severing form from content.⁷ While the two concepts are not synonymous, neither are they as far apart from each other as the proverbial east is from the west. Ideas do not have existence apart from the words in which they are garbed. If the words are fuzzy, vague, imprecise, unclear, and ineffective, then the ideas are fuzzy, vague, imprecise, unclear, and ineffective. To a greater degree than we realize, form is content and content is form; message is style and style is message; theology is language and language is theology (as the word "theology" in its root meaning partly implies).

A peculiar corollary to the objection of the intelligentsia just described is a phenomenon that surfaced a decade or two ago, sometimes referred to as linguistic analysis or the semantic movement.⁸ This movement was frequently characterized by a marked distrust of the very vehicle of communication itself—words. "What do you mean?" and "Can words mean?" were among the questions asked. Historically the chief obstacle to the preaching of the Gospel has been the foolishness of the cross; today it is more likely to be the foolishness of language. Professor Richard Caemmerer points out that the preacher "must face the situation that preaching is foolishness to many potential listeners of our own time not just because it is supernatural or because it offends innate self-righteousness as in 1 Corinthians 1, but because it is said in words, subjects and predicates."⁹ Especially the language of theology has been suspect, sometimes considered ethereal, almost meaningless, prompting many "demythologizers" to strip Christianity of its supernatural language in an effort to make it comprehensible and believable. Where will all such attempts take us? "To hell!" I am tempted to say in all seriousness—except that one would then have to explain what that concept means!

Actually, the distrust of words is not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon; just the degree of it is. No less an artist in words than Shakespeare himself admitted: "A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!"¹⁰ A couple of centuries later another master of words conceded that "human speech is but a cracked cauldron on which we beat tunes for dancing bears, when all the while we long to melt the stars."¹¹ Yet neither of these writers, despite their awareness of the limitations of language, abandoned language as a vehicle for communication; in fact, both of them excelled in the use of words. Readers of *Gulliver's Travels* recall with delight Jonathan Swift's incisive satire on the attempt of the Laputans to abolish words. Since they consid-

ered words to be at best inaccurate symbols of things, why not substitute the things for the words in the conduct of conversation? As a consequence, people carried on their backs sacks containing a variety of objects and when encountering one another would simply, in lieu of normal conversation, extricate objects from their respective sacks and display them to one another. It was all show and no tell. However, the project fell through, according to Swift, for two reasons: (1) a loquacious person was not equal to carrying the weight of a sack containing the numerous objects he wished to “talk about”; (2) the ladies objected—they preferred the old-fashioned mode of conversation.¹² While, admittedly, the increasing disuse of language in television, the perennial misuse of language by politicians, theologians, and many others, and the ever-present phenomenon of jargon in a wide variety of disciplines partly justify diminished enthusiasm for the gift of language, I cannot help sharing Swift’s amusement at efforts to eliminate words as a mode of communication. The ultimate irony always is that it takes words to destroy confidence in words.

Despite all its abuses and limitations, language is still our principal means of communication. I suspect that when we doubt the viability of language as a vehicle for the Good News, our distrust of words is often related to a distrust in God; our attempted abolition of verbal meaning may reflect a prior abolition of God. If language is “double,” it may be because man is “double,” that is, old man as well as new man, flesh as well as spirit. Language is forked largely because the speaker’s tongue is forked. If there is fault, it lies primarily in the speaker, not in speech itself. After all, sin and language have been closely associated ever since the Tower of Babel. The problem is not words *per se*; rather, the problem is big words, dull words, abstract words, vague words, anemic words, slovenly words, pompous words. The only thing that can replace language as a means of communication is better language.

Since at least two of the objections to creativity described above seem to have a doctrinal base, it is appropriate at this point to initiate the defense of creativity on a doctrinal level. The rationale for the responsible use of creative language in preaching lies in the character of the Gospel-event itself. To begin with, one of the names of the Second Person of the Trinity is “the Word.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Although the designation “Word” has many deeper meanings, it describes, at the very least, the function of Christ from eternity toward God the Father. Even as I am presently using words to describe, reveal, explain, and make clear, so Christ from the very beginning served the purpose of describing, revealing, explaining, and making clear the Father. Among other things Christ disclosed the Father’s holiness and love, His wrath toward our sin, but, even more, His determined love to rescue us from our sin. When the fullness of time came for God to carry out that resolution of the “tension” between His

holiness and His love that we call His plan of salvation for us, He turned to His Son, the Word, whose function from eternity was to reveal the Father.

To accomplish this, what did Christ, the Word, do? He became incarnate. He became flesh. He became a man. He was born at Bethlehem and spent approximately 33 years on our earth. One might say that Christ, the Word, became a *concrete* Word. (Prior to Bethlehem Christ had been only a spirit, an *abstract* Word, so to speak.) As any reader or listener knows, concrete words are much more effective than abstract words, more fun to listen to and easier to understand. Likewise Christ, in becoming man also, in becoming a concrete Word, more effectively described, revealed, explained, made clear God's saving plan. One can virtually hear the wonder breaking through the apostle's description of this in John 1:14: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us [can you believe it?] (and we beheld His glory, [imagine that!] the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) [no less!] full of grace and truth [how about that?]." This drastic change of spirit into flesh, of an abstract Word into a concrete Word, that we celebrate every Christmas suggests a precedent for the creative use of language; at the very least it recommends the substitution of concrete words for abstract ones in our written and spoken witness to the Gospel, in our efforts to describe, reveal, explain, and make clear God's saving love.

But the divine precedent does not end there. In His continuous determination to communicate God's saving love for us, the Word "became" words. God placed the historical event (Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection) into an account of that event (the Scriptures), an account intended to be spoken by God's people to God's people till the end of time. In short, God chose language, words, as a vehicle to communicate what His Son, the Word, achieved for us during His earthly ministry. Moreover, the words that tell us about the Word who in turn tells us about God are not just "any old words." They are remarkable words, extraordinary words: inspired (and therefore inerrant) to be sure, but also, on a more secular level, simple words, good words, graphic words, understandable words, language at its best, simple without being simplistic, profound without being incomprehensible (e.g., the first chapter of John's gospel). My point is that the Holy Scriptures are an extension of the incarnation. What God initiated in a stable at Bethlehem, an all-out effort to communicate His love, He continues in the Bible and in Biblical preaching. The divine beat goes on. The revelatory motif continues. Spirit becomes flesh and "flesh" is transmitted through words. Word-words are inseparable even as Christ's deity and humanity are inseparable; hence, the medium cannot really be divorced from the message (and vice versa).

Since God chose language as a vehicle for His saving plan, it follows that we should not hesitate to use language in our preaching—and, in the divine tradition, language at its very best. We should wield it with the conviction that God knew what He was doing when He selected language.

It is incumbent upon us to harness the magic of the Word (that “power of God unto salvation”) to the magic of words. An ancient heresy called Docetism denied Christ’s humanity largely because it was deemed improper for God to become man, because such a transformation was beneath the dignity of God. It wasn’t so much that God *couldn’t* become man but rather that He *wouldn’t*. A modern variant of this is the conviction that the Word (Christ) shouldn’t come to us through words. The contemporary Docetic heresy seems to be a contempt for language, the view that language is somehow beneath God, that He wouldn’t “stoop to conquer” through that particular medium. The practical consequence of this mistaken view is not the avoidance of language (an avenue nearly impossible for even the Docetic purist!), but the transformation of our witnessing language into something lofty, ethereal, and incomprehensible, into some sort of special “Holy Ghost” language, theological jargon, or conventional, stereotyped, “sermonic” language.

Any one of these transformations constitutes a serious impediment to our Christian witnessing. Particularly is this true of “sermonic” language, language teeming with trite, familiar expressions and riddled with clichés (what I sometimes call “The Gospel According to Platitude”). As the familiar homiletical quip has it: “Heresy has slain its thousands but dullness its ten thousands.” Or again: “Boredom is the root of all evil.” This dire outcome occurs because people’s minds are faster than preachers’ tongues. When the preacher initiates a cliché, the listener’s brain, light years ahead of the preacher’s words, completes the predictable thought and wanders off to other things—like shiny cars and shapely blondes. Communicating no doctrine at all—the outcome of trite preaching—is as fatal eventually as preaching false doctrine. In the light of this tragic possibility, it is not an overstatement to describe platitudinous preaching as “a sin against the Holy Ghost” and “taking the name of the Lord, our God, in vain.”

This need not be. Language is a gift of God. There is magic in it—as poets, dramatists, and novelists have demonstrated for centuries. Language is dynamite; it is charged, explosive. We ought to tap its power in our Christian witness. It is true that our language needs to be “correct” and “orthodox,” but it is just as true that our language needs to be alive, vital, packing vim and vigor, fun to listen to and easy to understand. To interest is the first duty of preaching—not the only or main duty of preaching, but “first” in a chronological sense. Before anything can happen—like salvation or sanctification—the preacher must get people’s attention and retain their attention. Good preaching, obviously, is more than creative and interesting, but it is at least that. Creativity is not a goal of preaching, but it is a prerequisite for it.

Admittedly, there is a danger in the opposite direction, the danger of the preacher preempting the role of God, of witnessing as if the salvation and sanctification of his audience depended upon himself rather than upon

his Lord. If there is the Charybdis of dullness, there is also the Scylla of pride, and the preacher needs to steer carefully between the two. If there is the danger of being boring, there is also the danger of being sensational. In the words of Harold MacMillan: “The difficulty of speeches is that you are perpetually poised between the cliché and the indiscretion.”

Acts 12:21-23 describes the reaction of an audience to a speech made by Herod: “It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.” Herod must have welcomed their verdict, for the passage adds that he did not give God the glory. You remember the outcome. (Indeed, how could you forget it?) God punished Herod: he was eaten of worms and died.

Every time a preacher steps into a pulpit, Herod’s sin is a hideous possibility. The striking illustration, the humorous anecdote, the clever saying, the quotation from the classics, the current “in” phrase—effective as all these devices can be in furthering the program of God, they can also become opportunities for promoting self. Designed to proclaim God as God, these techniques can end up proclaiming self as god. “It is the voice of a god, and not of a man” could well be the audience reaction the preacher is soliciting in his imaginative and interesting pulpit presentation—with the blasphemous result that what gets preached is not a crucified and risen Savior but a well-read and quick-witted pastor.

While it is true that Herod’s sin is always a horrible possibility for the preacher, it would be an over-reaction for him to avoid anything imaginative and interesting. In an effort to avoid the sin of pride, he may commit the sin of dullness. He may shun the striking illustration, the humorous anecdote, the clever saying, the quotation from the classics, the current “in” phrase. Needless to say, Christ does not get preached that way either; in fact, nothing does. We must always remember that normally these creative techniques are not intrinsically bad—or good, for that matter. Whether they are bad or good depends upon whether or not the speaker uses them to the glory of God—and dullness is as little to the glory of God as is showiness.

The curious thing is that a preacher is meant to be “the voice of a god” in a sense. After all, he is God’s representative on earth pleading: “Be ye reconciled to God through His crucified and risen Son.” The preacher has been given this high honor and equipped for this high office by the very God he represents and through the very Christ he proclaims. But the god he is to be the voice of is the triune God, not the god of self. Like John the Baptist, the preacher today is a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord. But also, like John the Baptist, he is not that light; rather, he bears witness to that Light. When people hear him speak, therefore, they are to react, not with “This is the voice of a god,” but rather with “This is the voice of *the* God.” John the Baptist’s motto could well serve as the motto for the preacher of today: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Whatever the preacher does, then, whether he eats or drinks—or preaches—he ought to do it to the glory of God.

No one has resolved the tension more effectively than Richard Caemmerer:

The preacher is indeed unable to add to the power of the Word of God, and it remains the one means of changing the heart in God's directions. But he is in the business of removing obstacles to its hearing. His constant concern must be to find the approach to the hearer and the ways by which he opens his ears and listens. The Word of God does things in the human heart that no other word can do. But it reaches it through the same channels of hearing and attention that any other word must use.¹³

This is why we dare never serve pure doctrine in an impure container. Consistency for "truth and purity" demands that we pay attention to the attractiveness of our language as well as to the orthodoxy of our doctrine. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver" (Prov. 25:11). In short, responsible creativity is in order.

Chapter One



Creativity Through Fuller Understanding of What Happened to Jesus on the Cross

A fuller understanding of what I call “the literal Gospel,” more specifically, a fuller understanding of what happened to Jesus on the cross, is not only itself conducive to creativity in our preaching but is also foundational for the creativity-potential of the suggestions in the next two chapters: a more frequent use of Biblical metaphors and images of the Gospel; and the occasional employment of Gospel-handles. Why and how this is the case will become clear as we proceed.

Definition of “Literal Gospel”

By the phrase “the literal Gospel” I mean those things that Jesus did during His life on earth—or which were done to Him—that contributed directly to accomplishing our eternal salvation. They are actual happenings, historical events, like His incarnation, His birth, His life, His circumcision, His baptism, His temptation in the wilderness, His ministry, His suffering and death, His resurrection, His ascension. All of these were key steps in the working out of our salvation.

The Customary Presentation of the Literal Gospel

Customarily our pulpit presentations of the Gospel include one or more of the literal happenings enumerated above, together with explanation of their significance and application to the specific needs of specific audiences. Obviously which literal event(s) we preach about depends upon the church year: Christ’s birth at Christmas time, His baptism on the

first Sunday after the Epiphany, His suffering and death especially (but not exclusively) during Lent, His resurrection particularly (but not only) during the Easter cycle, His ascension on the day set aside for it on the church calendar, and His life and its significance primarily during the non-festival part of the church year.

Just as obviously we preach about some of these events more often than others. Only a naive homiletical purist would ever make the mistake of trying to touch base with all of these historical events within the confines of one sermon or to give equal time to each of these Gospel-happenings in the course of his ministry. It is not only natural but also defensible to proclaim certain aspects of the literal Gospel more than others. What preacher doesn't say more about Christ's incarnation than about His circumcision; more about His crucifixion than about His baptism; more about His resurrection than about His temptation in the wilderness? While it is desirable for the Christian preacher in the course of His ministry to cover all of the literal Gospel-events, he inevitably says more about the birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus than about the others. He will naturally say the most about the crucifixion and the resurrection since they are the high spots in any Gospel proclamation.

This is only proper. Apart from the resurrection of Christ, everything else in our Christian religion is meaningless. "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). As for the prominence of the crucifixion in our preaching, there is ample Biblical precedent. Without intending to equate quality with quantity, I think it appropriate to point out that since the Bible devotes more space to the account of Christ's suffering and death than it does to any other aspect of the literal Gospel, this should be an important consideration for us in our Gospel preaching. Besides, Gospel preaching that accents Christ's crucifixion is psychologically valuable. To begin with, people understand what we preachers are talking about when we say that Christ died. Death is something within the listener's experience—not his firsthand experience (although it will be someday), but his secondhand experience. That is, he has seen death among acquaintances, friends, and relatives, and therefore he knows what death is—whereas a virgin birth or the resurrection of a person dead and buried are not within his experience (and hence less comprehensible). Further, Gospel preaching that accents Christ's death for us, in our place, capitalizes on a given in most human value systems (even non-Christian ones), namely, that people regard dying for another so that he might live as the most a person can do. We even speak of it as "the supreme sacrifice." When the listener hears that Christ's execution was a substitute for his own, he again is in a position to understand—even admire—what it is that Christ did in his behalf.¹

It is precisely here, however, in our customary preaching of the cross that we often fail to proclaim the *full* literal Gospel. Basically, this chapter is

an attempt to answer a deceptively simple question: “What happened to Jesus on the cross?” The question may trigger the impatient answer: “He was executed. What else?” The response “He was executed” is correct, and good as far as it goes—very good, in fact—but it does not go far enough. It does not tell the whole story. Something else happened to Jesus on the cross. It is this “something else” that is the subject of this chapter.

A Word of Caution

Before I deal with this subject, however, a caution is in order. What is about to follow is intended as supplementary to our preaching of the cross, not substitutionary; as complementary, not corrective. What is about to follow I consider essential, highly essential, to our proclamation of the Gospel. But enthusiastic as I am for this specific facet of the literal Gospel, I am not a crusader; there is no intention of “straightening out the church,” of condemning the preaching of the past and correcting the preaching of the present. This book is simply an attempt to enhance the creativity of our preaching, and the matter at hand is a key step in that effort. Earlier I spoke of our “usual,” “most frequent” mode of preaching Christ’s crucifixion. These words were meant not in a derogatory sense, but simply as descriptive of what in fact is the case, be it good or bad; and I, for one, think it good—at least as far as it goes—for the reasons already specified. In respect to our customary presentation of the event on the cross and in respect to the additive to that presentation about to follow, perhaps the Scriptural advice is in order: “These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Matt. 23:23).

Perhaps further caution is in order. In the words of C. S. Lewis:

The central Christian belief is that Christ’s death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter. A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work. I will tell you what I think it is like. All sensible people know that if you are tired and hungry a meal will do you good. But the modern theory of nourishment—all about the vitamins and proteins—is a different thing. People ate their dinners and felt better long before the theory of vitamins was ever heard of: and if the theory of vitamins is some day abandoned they will go on eating their dinners just the same. Theories about Christ’s death are not Christianity: they are explanations about how it works.... We are in the same boat here. We believe that the death of Christ is just that point in history at which something absolutely unimaginable from outside shows through into our own world.... Indeed, if we found that we could fully understand it, that very fact would show it was not what it professes to be—the inconceivable, the uncreated, the thing from beyond nature, striking down into nature like lightning. You may ask what good will it be to us if we do not under-

stand it. But that is easily answered. A man can eat his dinner without understanding exactly how food nourishes him. A man can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works: indeed, he certainly would not know how it works until he has accepted it.²

Let me deduce two caveats from the lengthy passage just cited. First, while it is true that knowledge of the Gospel-event is crucial to faith in that event, still knowledge and faith are not synonymous, nor is there necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between the two such that the degree of faith is always in proportion to the amount of knowledge. Most pastors, I am sure, have had the experience of finding among their congregational members persons whom they would call with little fear of hyperbole “heroes of faith,” persons whose faith the pastor envies, and persons “the latchet of whose shoes” he considers himself “not worthy to unloose”—and yet people whose knowledge of the Gospel and whose ability to verbalize that Gospel are nowhere near equal to his own. Chances are it is some surprisingly cheerful old lady eking out the remainder of her days in a nursing home and patiently looking forward to her transfer to heaven, or some minor officer in the congregation unobtrusively and good-naturedly doing what needs to be done, however menial the task. But in either case the pastor recognizes that if not a greater than John the Baptist is here, at least a greater than he himself is here. Such persons fall into the category Lewis has described: people who have experienced the nutrition of food without knowing all the theories of nutrition, about the vitamins and proteins and how food works. Quite simply, as vital to faith as is the description of the full literal Gospel here following, still there are people who have gone to heaven—and will continue to go there—without understanding this particular aspect of the Christian Gospel. Knowledge of this aspect, crucial as it is, should not cause us to feel superior or preach that aspect in a superior manner.

My second caveat is that even though the following description of the full literal Gospel explains more, it does not explain all. In my opinion, it gets to the very core of the meaning of the Gospel-event; at the same time, that event is greater than this—or any other—explanation of it. To repeat the words of Lewis, “If we found that we could fully understand it, that very fact would show it was not what it professes to be—the inconceivable, the uncreated, the thing from beyond nature, striking down into nature like lightning.” The Gospel-event is “a many splendored thing,” a multifaceted diamond. All we are about to do is appreciate just one more of its many facets.

The Full Literal Gospel

Now back to our question: What happened to Jesus on the cross? He was crucified, of course. He was executed. He suffered, He shed blood, and

He died. And He did all this in our behalf, as our substitute. He suffered the suffering we were supposed to suffer and died the death we were destined to die on account of our sins. As we have already seen, and for the proper reasons already delineated, the Bible and Bible-preachers frequently describe Christ's experience on the cross in these or similar terms, as if death were the only or ultimate or climactic event that occurred on the cross.

But every so often the Scriptures go a bit farther in their explanation of what happened to Jesus on the cross. They demonstrate that God the Father and God the Son, in their intense love for us, even went beyond what we call "the supreme sacrifice." They show that Jesus went to an even greater extreme than that which He once described as the extreme: laying down His life for us (John 15:13). I refer the reader now to a careful study of particularly the following Bible passages: Ps. 22:1-8; Is. 53; Matt. 27:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13.

Among the strangest of Jesus' words from the cross is His cry recorded in Matthew 27:46: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Jesus accuses His Father of deserting Him in the hour of crisis, of turning His back on Him right when He was most needed; and Jesus reacts with a heart-rending "Why?" In Psalm 22 the language is even more shocking. There Jesus, speaking as God's Righteous One, charges His Father with not listening to His cries for help (v. 2) and of always coming to the rescue of the "fathers" (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, Moses) but, inconsistently, not to His own rescue (vv. 4-5). Jesus delineates His own utter degradation ("I am a worm, and no man," v. 6), and He pictures the bystanders at the cross chortling over the Father's abandonment of His Son (vv. 7-8). Isaiah 53 reminds us that Jesus not only was punished by men but also was "smitten of God" (v. 4), that "it pleased the Lord to bruise Him" (v. 10), and that Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors" (v. 12).

What accounted for this "breakdown in relationships" between God the Father and God the Son? Certainly such a rupture was an exception to the rule. Repeatedly the Father had called Jesus His "beloved Son" in whom He was "well-pleased." Many times during His earthly life Jesus had prayed to His Father, and God had always proved to be "a very present help in trouble." Just the night before, in fact, in Gethsemane Jesus had asked His Father for help, and God had sent an angel to strengthen Him. When the arresting party arrived a few moments later, Jesus was confident that, were He to ask His Father for assistance, 12 legions of angels were available. But now on the cross, at the climax of Jesus' suffering, the angels' orders are "to stand back and fold their wings."³ God is not listening! He is not helping! What had happened?

Together 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13 give us the answer.⁴ In that interval on the cross the pure and holy Jesus, "who knew no sin," was made sin for us. Innocent as He was and loved of the Father as He was, Jesus, nevertheless, was in that moment teeming with sin—our sins, every

last one of them. While from our point of view Jesus was absolutely innocent, from God's point of view He was guilty, guilty because the Father looked at Him and saw our sins, the sins Jesus had voluntarily taken upon Himself. The officiating centurion concluded of Jesus, "Certainly this was a righteous man" (Luke 23:47), and a group of people who had witnessed the execution that day went home beating their breasts (Luke 23:48) as an expression of their conviction that justice had miscarried and that an innocent man had been put to death. Prior to them, others not at all prejudiced in Jesus' favor had acknowledged His innocence. The Judas who had turned Jesus over to the enemy finally admitted that he had betrayed "innocent blood" (Matt. 27:4). Pilate, in his damnable attempt to escape responsibility for the condemnation he had authorized, spoke of Jesus as a "just person" (Matt. 27:24), an assessment with which Pilate's wife agreed (Matt. 27:19). Herod had found Jesus amusing—but innocent. Numerous participants in Jesus' passion-suffering declared Him innocent, but at the cross such was not God's judgment. There, indeed, Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors." Not only was He geographically placed between two criminals and not only was He socially reduced to their level, but also, above all, He was considered by God a transgressor, as the sinner of every sin ever committed or yet to be committed.

So what happened? Our sins on Jesus got in the way between Father and Son. God is not only love—He is also holy. Thus, the Father accorded sin the treatment it deserves: damnation. God loathed what He saw. He shrank back from it. He turned away with repugnance. He abandoned Jesus. He forsook Him. In the words of Galatians 3:13, Jesus "was made a curse for us." "To be accursed of God means to be abandoned by God in terms of His grace, mercy, and love. Physical death is the cessation of biological life: to be abandoned of God is spiritual death, the ultimate experience of the wrath of God. . . ."⁵ To put it plainly, Jesus suffered hell. "God loved us so much that He was willing to pay the cost of thrusting His own dear Son into our misery, hell and death and having Him drink that up. That is the way we are saved."⁶ Jesus on the cross tasted that "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power" described in 2 Thessalonians 1:9. While Jesus was dying on the cross, a phenomenal darkness (Luke 23:44-45) covered the earth, a literal darkness symbolic of the darkness that obtained between Father and Son when the latter was made sin for us and made the curse for sin in our place, and a literal darkness suggestive of the darkness of the kingdom of darkness that Jesus was tasting in that dread hour. It would not be inappropriate to speak of *two* descents by Christ into hell: the literal trip to the camp of the enemy that occurred sometime between Jesus' return to life and His emergence from His tomb, a descent described in 1 Peter 3:19 and summarized by the Apostles' Creed with the simple assertion "He descended into hell"; and a prior descent into hell on the cross that can hardly be called metaphorical by way of

distinction since there Jesus was immersed into the very alienation of the damned. The descent into hell that the Creed refers to—and the only one it refers to—is, of course, a step in our Savior’s state of exaltation. But the descent into hell that this chapter is describing is a step in our Savior’s state of humiliation. In “gangster” terminology He “took the rap for us.”

“For us”—that’s the point. The damnation that Jesus experienced was *our* damnation, the damnation we deserved for our sins. The hell that Jesus tasted was *our* hell, the hell we had coming for our rejection of God. In this ordeal—as well as in the ordeal of crucifixion—Jesus was our substitute.

Before He died, of course, Jesus and His Father were reconciled. Since Jesus had paid the full penalty for sin, death and hell, since His task was “finished” (John 19:30), He was reinstated into the family of God. “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit” were Jesus’ last words (Luke 23:46), a description of the state of affairs between Him and the Father powerfully confirmed by Jesus’ subsequent resurrection from the grave.

A Plea for Preaching the Full Literal Gospel

It is my plea in this chapter that we also talk about Jesus’ suffering of hell for us in our presentation of the literal Gospel. So often in our preaching on the crucifixion, we appropriately point out that Christ was executed for our sins but then inappropriately fail to point out that He was also damned for those sins. We see men mistreating Jesus on Calvary, but we fail to see God forsaking His Son there. We see the blood, but we fail to see the hell. Frankly, I do not often find the fact of Christ’s damnation in our behalf surfacing in sermons, theological articles, commentaries, or even dogmatics textbooks. Even when the subject does arise, the writer more often than not merely flirts with the fact or engages in euphemism.

Of the reasons for this omission I am not sure. In some cases, perhaps, it is the outcome of a gap in our theological training; seminary silence on the issue begets corresponding pulpit silence. In more cases it is the result of reticence or even a fear to call a spade a spade, a hell a hell, and a damnation a damnation. Says Dr. Francis Pieper:

...the question has been discussed whether or not, in the case of Christ’s suffering, we may speak of His having endured the punishment or torments of hell. Bellarmine and other Roman Catholic dogmaticians have expressed dismay at this statement and have gone so far as to declare it an “intolerable wickedness” to ascribe to Christ the suffering of the torments of hell. Also timid Lutherans... have disapproved this statement. But their pretended piety has rightly been pronounced folly; for as surely as the wages of sin is not merely temporal death, but eternal punishment in hell, and as surely as Christ has borne all punishment of all sinners in the world, it is Scriptural to call Christ’s suffering an enduring of the torments of hell.⁷