

JUST WORDS

JUST WORDS

Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel

JACOB A. O. PREUS

To Sherry



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Preface

In the preparation of this book, I owe a debt of gratitude to many people. To the men and women, both lay and clergy, who helped give shape to this project through their lively and thoughtful responses to my presentations (far and wide), I am thankful. To my many students, who through the years have kept me sharp and have genuinely informed the substance of this book, I owe thanks. To my colleagues at Concordia Seminary, who with ruthless kindness forced me to think clearly and who provided much needed and much appreciated stimulation, I give humble gratitude.

I wish to give specific thanks to several people who have been of special assistance to me. First, I would like to thank my graduate assistants Gerry Bode and Charles Henrickson for their careful research. I am grateful to John Johnson, president of Concordia Seminary, for his support and assistance in providing the opportunity to complete this project. I am grateful to Robert Kolb for his always welcome encouragement. I thank especially Charles Arand, a faithful friend and treasured colleague. I thank John Nunes, friend and editor in Christ.

Finally, I am grateful, more than I can say, to Sherry, my wife, my partner, my friend.

Introduction

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

The Gospel is more than words. It is the dynamic, saving action of God in Christ Jesus through any of its various forms: Word or Sacrament. The Gospel is more than words, but it is still words—words about the Word made flesh for us, words that convey the Word made flesh to us. Is the Gospel just words? Hardly! But it is words nonetheless. It is words that convey and bestow the justification of God on sinners, apart from works of the law, by grace alone, through faith alone, for Christ's sake alone. Just words? No, *Just Words*.

This book will explore the wonderful variety of ways the Gospel comes in *words* and the language used by the biblical writers to describe and convey what God has done for us in Christ. This book is an attempt to investigate the language of the Gospel, to poke around into the Word as language, to feel the rich textures, to peer into the “inner world” of the words called the doctrine of justification. The purpose is to help all Christians not only to grasp and understand the Gospel, but also to proclaim and communicate it in its fullness, to hear it and say it in all its ways of being heard and said, through all God's beautiful words.

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Part 1 focuses on the relationship between the Gospel and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. It highlights the role this central doctrine plays in Christian theology. The chapters also explore the relationship between the Gospel as a divine Word and as human words. This section looks at the nature and function of words in general and the nature of the Word of God in particular. It focuses on rhetoric, particularly metaphor, as a necessary function of language, necessary because it advances our knowledge of reality.

Parts 2 through 7 explore six ways to say the Gospel or six “metaphors for the Gospel”: creation, commerce, law, relationships, sacrifice, and deliverance. In each case, the metaphor is illustrated by means of a scenario in which the metaphor may profitably be used, an exposition of primary scriptural texts, and an exploration of the “problem” that lies behind the metaphor. Additional scriptural texts for further study and reflection on the metaphor are available in the appendix.

Part 8 examines the relationship between the universality of the Gospel and the universality of its words. It attempts to show that not only the substance but also the form of the Gospel is a way to reach beyond self, to transcend the particularities of denominational commonplaces and of culture and language. Thus, chapter 26 discusses the implications the metaphorical nature of the language of the Gospel has for evangelism. Better use of the rich language of the Gospel can be a way to cross the barriers that exist between people so “the Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people” (TLH, 14).

This book also explores the ecumenical and missiological implications of Gospel language, especially the importance that an understanding of the language of the Gospel as metaphor has for inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue. To some extent, such an understanding enables us to talk with one another as Christians of differing confessions and to friends who are not Christians.

Several works have paved the way for this book and have informed my thinking to a greater or lesser degree. Leon Morris’ excellent work, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*,¹ is in many ways a landmark book. It has had a powerful influ-

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ence on my thinking, which I happily acknowledge. Alister E. McGrath has written more on the subject of the Gospel than perhaps anyone else over the past decade. I am indebted especially to his *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*,² which helped me to gain historical perspective on the doctrine of justification. Richard Caemmerer's influential book, *Preaching for the Church*,³ contains a list of the diverse types of language in which the Gospel is presented in Scripture. Finally, Colin Gunton's *The Actuality of Atonement*⁴ is helpful not only because of its excellent exploration into the rhetorical, especially metaphorical, dimensions of language, but also in the way Gunton presents the nature and scope of the various metaphors, though in a very different way than the present volume. All of these books have been helpful, and I heartily recommend them for further study.

The ultimate purpose for writing this book is to hold before God's people the fullness of the biblical witness to the Gospel so the Scriptures may truly be a fount and source not only of faith and life, but also of the language to glorify Christ and to serve His people. Is the Gospel just words? No! Never just words. Rather, words that make us just.

ENDNOTES

1. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984).
2. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Also helpful are McGrath's *Justification by Faith: What It Means for Us Today* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1988), and *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1988).
3. Richard H. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church: Theology and Technique of the Christian Sermon* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959). See especially pages 330–331.
4. Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989).



PART 1

JUST WORDS

1

The Gospel and Justification

I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Romans 1:16–17)

THE SCOPE OF THE GOSPEL

What is the Gospel? What exactly is the language of the Gospel? How do we know when we have the Gospel, when we have said it, when we have heard it? Above all, what is the relationship between the Gospel and what we call the “doctrine of justification”?

The word *Gospel* means “good news.” It derives from the Greek word *euangelion*, which literally means “good message.” Gospel refers to the fact that God has Good News to proclaim to His sinful creatures: Their sins are forgiven; they are declared innocent because of the work of Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, on their behalf. The Gospel is Good News. As a message of

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Good News, the Gospel can be and is used quite properly in a variety of ways.

First, the Gospel refers to those portions of the Scriptures that tell the story of Jesus. The biblical books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are known as “gospels” because they were written for the express purpose of telling the Good News of God’s provision for the salvation of human beings in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Second, we use the word *Gospel* to refer broadly to any revelation of God, regardless of the content. For example, some use the word *Gospel* not only to refer to what God has done for us in Christ, but also to refer to what God commands of us as a righteous and demanding God.¹

Third, we use the word *Gospel* to refer specifically to the work of Jesus on our behalf. It is the Good News that God is reconciled to a world of sinners. This is the way it is used most commonly among the Reformers of the 16th century. They carefully separated what God has done for us in Jesus Christ from what God demands from us. The former they called the Gospel, the latter the Law. The Gospel is not what we do as a loving response to God’s graciousness in Christ. This they usually referred to as sanctification. In a narrow, restricted sense, Gospel is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ to rescue us from our sin and to make us holy in His sight.

THE GOSPEL AS WORD AND SACRAMENTS

Although a primary form of the Gospel is the words about Christ’s saving work on our behalf, words are not the only form the Gospel takes. The Gospel, the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16), comes in *verbal* and in *visible* forms. A person receives God’s favor in the Gospel either by *hearing* the message proclaimed (in sermons, in Bible classes, or in other simple verbal expressions of God’s love in Christ) or by receiving it through *visible* means—the water of Baptism or the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper.

THE GOSPEL AND JUSTIFICATION

The Gospel is verbal—conveyed through words—and it is visible in water and in bread and wine.

It must be clear from the outset that the Gospel is more than words. In whatever form, whether Word or sacraments, we hear and see and receive the same Gospel, the same saving power of God in Christ. Both Word and sacraments provide the same access to the favor and love of the heavenly Father. These wonderfully diverse forms of the Gospel should never be considered to be in competition with, or even contradictory to, each other. They are different ways our gracious God has provided to bestow on us the saving blessings earned by Christ on the cross.²

Further, these forms of the Gospel are not as separate as one might think. The sacraments are not merely materialistic rituals, external signs. They need the Word to give them power, to explain them, and to interpret them for our learning and benefit. Likewise, the Word is not a unidimensional, flat, interior, intellectual word. It is a dynamic, eventful Word that goes forth from God into the real world with powerful effects.

THE GOSPEL AS EVENTFUL WORD

The Gospel is more than words. In today's world, words tend to be flat, merely descriptive, without any real force. Although we love and defend our First Amendment rights to free speech, as a culture we generally have a low opinion of words and their power. Too often we actually believe the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." We think of words as less harmful, less powerful, than actions. We are dead wrong. In our hearts we know that words *do* hurt. Anyone who has been crushed by careless criticism or who has felt remorse over a "cutting word" knows that words have power. Words bite and break. Words kill.

When spoken or read, words make something happen. Communication through words is an event. This is true of any communication, but it is especially true of communication

with the Gospel because the Gospel is the Word of God. The Word of God is a creative, powerful word, energized by the Holy Spirit. Both the Law (what God demands of us because of His perfection) and the Gospel (what God has done perfectly for us in His Son) are creative, powerful words. The Law creates sorrow in sinful hearts. The Gospel also creates. It creates true faith in the hearts of sinful people, something no ordinary word could do. Although all words are eventful, only the Word of God is fully creative and powerful. The Word of God is *theologically* eventful because in it God is at work doing what only He can do.

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORDS OF HUMANS

The Holy Spirit works powerfully and creatively in our hearts through the *Word* of Law and of Gospel. That is, the Holy Spirit speaks to us “in, with, and under” human expressions and human language. These two forms of creativity, God’s and ours, do not work at cross purposes with each other and should not be seen as contradicting each other. To be sure, our creativity is only descriptive and evocative while God’s is performative. In our use of words, we are like an artist who is restricted to the use of preexisting materials. The artist doesn’t create anything new. He or she “creates” a new perspective of what already is there through the imaginative use of media, whether the reflective qualities of paint or film or metal. God’s Word, on the other hand, is creative in a far more profound sense. It performs. It does what it says. As God says in Isaiah’s prophecy:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is My word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10–11)

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When God speaks, He brings into being things *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), as He did in the beginning (Genesis 1:1). God speaks into being things that are not. Just as in the beginning He said, “Let there be light,” and light was, so today He says through the Gospel, “Let there be faith in the heart of a sinner,” and faith is. This divine Word comes in human words, and it comes *only* through human words. These words of the Gospel are inspired by God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works creatively in the hearts of people even as we seek to speak the Gospel creatively to others.

A DIVINE AND HUMAN WORD

What is the nature of this relationship between God’s Word and human words? An analogy can help illustrate the relationship. There is a connection between the Word Incarnate—the God-man, Jesus Christ—and the Word about the Word Incarnate, the Gospel.

Our Lord Jesus is both divine and human. He is God, and He is man. He has a divine nature and a human nature. There is something about Jesus that is divine and something that is human. Yet He is not *partly* divine and *partly* human, as if His divinity and His humanity could be separated from each other. Since His conception, the eternal Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, has been united inseparably with His human nature in a mysterious but wonderful Personal Union.

It is a mystery: Jesus is *fully* and *genuinely* divine and at the same time *fully* and *genuinely* human. As God, Jesus is fully divine, and He possesses all the attributes of God. He is eternal, unchangeable, almighty, all-knowing, and is present everywhere. Jesus also has divine names and does the work of God. As human, He lacks nothing of genuine humanness, and He experiences all that our humanity includes (except sin). This great mystery has been believed and confessed by Christians through all the ages of the church: Jesus is “very God of very God ... born of the virgin Mary.” This constitutes the ortho-