

12-1-1954

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Recommended Citation

Boriack, Vernon (1954) "Techniques in Modern Preaching (Toward Communicating the Gospel)," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 25, Article 70.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol25/iss1/70>

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Techniques in Modern Preaching Toward Communicating the Gospel

By VERNON BORIACK

(ED. NOTE.—This article was presented to the Gulf States Pastoral Conference which met in the spring of this year at Gulf Shores, Ala. The writer is pastor of Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Auburn, Ala. As such he also ministers to the students at Alabama Polytechnic Institute of Auburn.)

ALL of us have been preaching the crucial doctrines of sin and grace Sunday after Sunday, year after year, but have we really been "communicating" these cardinal doctrines which are the Christian faith? "To communicate" means "to impart, convey, share, make it so that we hold in oneness" truths with others. Have we been achieving this end? Or while our preaching has been strictly orthodox in content, have we perhaps been employing words and phrases and thought forms which ricochet off the minds of our people like petty rifle bullets off a Patton tank? Have the minds of our people perhaps become so hardened to our many pet, trite, worn, meaningless verbal pellets that no genuine impression is made? There are many indications that exactly this is the case.

Elmer A. Kettner, in an article in the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* for May, 1953, entitled "Are We Really Preaching the Gospel?" poses essentially this question and supplies answers which are not flattering.¹ In an essay captioned "A Critique of Contemporary Lutheran Preaching," appearing in the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* for October, 1950, Erdmann W. Frenk offers much the same adverse criticism.²

What do our laymen think of our preaching? Are we really communicating vital truth which lives and breathes, acts, and reacts in them? Or are they time after time being submitted to a monotonous barrage of blanks? Janice Pries, of our Department of Public Relations in St. Louis, in a recent article in the *American Lutheran* comments:

Much of it (our oversimplification in preaching) has become a matter of utterance and reutterance of spiritual clichés—

a repetition of truths which no Christian doubts and which, generally and humanly speaking, would bring no unchurched, deeply thinking individual to the recognition that the church really has something to say — the most important thing that needs to be said in our time.³

In the same issue of the *American Lutheran* Leo Snell, invited to address a pastoral conference, asserted:

A pastor's sermons are, as a rule, not criticized by people saying to each other: "The sermon that our pastor preached last Sunday wasn't very good." They will either say to each other: "Last Sunday's sermon by our pastor certainly was good" or words to that effect, or they won't have anything to say about it. And having nothing to say about it is frequently a strong criticism of the sermon, the sermon didn't mean very much of anything to them.⁴

Mr. Snell goes on then to indicate that far too little is said about our sermons by our lay people. There is often mute disregard. Sin and grace simply were not communicated, though they were talked about out loud for 20 to 30 minutes.

Having been pretty well knocked out by these rabbit punches — at least as far as our egos are concerned, for all of us think of ourselves customarily as good preachers — let's call time-out and administer a reviving agent. When one compares the sermons by our Lutheran pastors with the general Protestant sermons that appear, for example, in the preachers' monthly, *The Pulpit*, one is revitalized a bit by the fact that the Gospel is at least presented in our messages, though often it may not be communicated adequately. We can always take some little comfort in the fact that the Holy Spirit operates in spite of us. There is a heavenly Aaron there conveying real meaning out of what we "of a slow tongue" mean to say. Much of Protestant preaching on Main Street, U.S.A. — if *The Pulpit* is a good example, as it professes to be — is still shallow moralizing, cheap sentimentalism, and pointless storytelling for the sake of storytelling. This sort of preaching obtains in spite of the genuine theological revolt that has been set in motion in the upper echelons by Niebuhr, Tillich, Barth, Brunner, and colleagues.

But in those Protestant circles where serious sin-and-grace preaching is again in vogue, there is already a great awareness that simply using the same old words over and over again, even when accom-

panied with violent headshakes and facial contortions, will not convey relevant truth although these words are Biblical words. The communication of saving truth urgently requires words, phrases, and thought forms which are alive, relevant, loaded. Those verbal symbols which may convey burning truth to lay ears one year may fall flat the next. Sad to say, words, like automobile points, television tubes, and refrigerator gaskets, wear out. Once they are worn out, they have little value for the present. A word has almost no intrinsic value. It is purely a vehicle. It has no meaning other than the meaning its sound wave flashes on the screen of the hearer's mind. Using worn-out words and phrases can be speaking in unknown tongues just as surely and fruitlessly as was the speaking of the Corinthian Christians, whom the Apostle berated. It is, then, an agonizing, staggering task the preacher constantly faces in striving to communicate God's truth, but it is a task which can never for a moment be relinquished no matter how difficult. Realizing this fact, many leading Protestants are emphasizing the critical need not just to present sin and grace, but inescapably to "communicate" sin and grace. A living oneness must take place between the man in the pulpit and the man in the pew.

Halford E. Luccock, the prolific and delightfully fresh Simeon Stylites of *Christian Century* renown, for 25 years professor of homiletics at Yale Divinity School, has entitled his immensely meaningful Lyman Beecher Lectures for 1953 *Communicating the Gospel*. Henry Sloan Coffin, for many years president of Union Theological Seminary, calls his recent volume on sermonizing *Communion Through Preaching*. From England, David H. C. Head, chaplain of Edinburgh University, sends us his latest volume captioned *The Communication of the Gospel*. Theological journals like *Religion in Life* (Methodist) and *Theology Today* (Presbyterian) have carried essay after essay accentuating the need of not merely giving verbal utterance to God's truth, but of intimately sharing and conveying God's truth. *The Christian Century* and certainly *The Pulpit* have deliberately focused the spotlight on these volumes and articles dealing with "communicating the Gospel." Sometimes I think that the so-called "sectarians" are more aware of the devil of dead orthodoxy that persistently plagues every branch of Christendom than are we. And dead orthodoxy

is just that: it is dead — stone-cold dead! — no matter how often its verbal symbols are parroted from the pulpit. Its being dogmatically correct does not alter its deadness one mite. Faith and love, which is faith in action, are not worked by magical formulas.

It is the chief characteristic of dead orthodoxy that we are required under penalty of being branded liberal or heretic to use invariably certain words, certain phrases. To illustrate just what is meant, let me cite the recent expression of Charles B. Templeton, evangelist for the National Council of Churches. He lamented that the Fundamentalists have equated certain phrases with the Gospel. As examples, he listed such phrases as "accepting Jesus Christ as my personal Savior," "the Blood of Jesus Christ," and "being born again." "If I repeat these phrases, I am regarded by the fundamentalists as sound, though I may not have preached the Gospel at all," he said. "If I do not use these phrases, I am regarded by the fundamentalists as a modernist." Templeton strongly emphasized that he believes in everything these phrases stand for, but correctly asserted that the Fundamentalists' mistake has been to put a "magical quality" into certain pet phrases and forget what the Gospel really is.⁵

We have our pet *ex opere operato* expressions, too: "justification by faith," "the means of grace," "the office of the keys," "salvation by grace through faith alone," "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," "the blood of Jesus Christ," "the blood atonement," "the Real Presence," "regeneration," "the natural man," or "the natural depravity of man." In relation to our preaching the question is not whether these phrases are theologically correct or convenient vehicles for dogmatic intercourse between professionals — they certainly are! The critical question is whether they still communicate vital, meaningful truth to our people. I fear that with most of our audiences they do not, though, of course, I myself use them all too freely, because, you see, it is easier that way. I many times succumb to the three great temptations that David Christie, in his little classic, *The Service of Christ*, says every minister faces; especially am I bewitched by the first temptation.

The temptation to recline.

The temptation to shine.

The temptation to whine.⁶

Our theme is "Techniques in Modern Preaching." We urgently need certain techniques to make our preaching effective right now in our day. And, as we have already discussed at some length, the employment of meaningful words and phrases and thought forms is one of the most essential techniques that we require. Unless our verbal symbols communicate, they are "as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal," no matter how theologically orthodox they may be. After giving still more attention to our use of words in preaching, we want to consider another very significant technique: the use of illustration. Finally, we must give some attention to a very simple factor which will lead to more effective preaching, one which everyone of us can master, but which few do, and this is that we use more time in the preparation of our sermons.

Let us take further note of our use of words in striving to convey the Gospel. (I am using "Gospel" here in the wider sense of including both "Law" and "Gospel," both "sin" and "grace.") Some years ago, Willard L. Sperry, Dean of Harvard Divinity School, invited the noted philosopher A. N. Whitehead to speak at the divinity school. Whitehead replied:

It is not as though I cannot speak and write simply, without too much effort. That is my native manner. I have to work hard to be obscure. But years ago Bertrand Russell and I were working on a joint book on logic and we came to the conclusion that part of the difficulty in grasping logic derived from the fact that most texts on the subject make use of far too many conventional words which have been worn so threadbare that they have lost all living meaning and have become little more than professional jargon or academic incantations. So we decided to abandon all such words and coin a new vocabulary, explained in a glossary at the end of the book, which would compel the reader to rethink his premises.⁷

Of course, you and I are not delivering lectures or writing books on logic or philosophy when we strive to communicate the Gospel. But must we not pay earnest heed to Whitehead's example nevertheless? Must we not also as much as possible avoid using words and phrases "which have been worn so threadbare that they have lost all living meaning?" Must we not rather employ verbal symbols which will constantly "compel the reader to rethink" his Christian faith? Agreed! This will make preaching very difficult as

writing was difficult for Whitehead, but will not our preaching be more effective then?

The solution to the problem of employing words that communicate does not necessarily lie in using short, terse, monosyllabic, Anglo-Saxon, or Old French words. One-syllable Anglo-Saxon words carry no better guarantee against wearing out than sesquipedalian Latin words. One must bear in mind that some of the words which are probably the most shopworn of all are the familiar Old English and French words, like *sin, love, Lord, grace, mercy, faith*. In many of our circles, it is true, the present brief Anglo-Saxon words will convey a lot more meaning than the heavy Latin words, for our people are so accustomed to the theological terms and phrases in the catechism that their sounds compel little thinking.

The hard solution lies only in asking ourselves time after time as we prepare our weekly sermons: "Does this word, does this phrase, does this expression, carry real meaning to my people? Will it strike a responsive chord and cause reverberations of thought inside my hearers? Will it vitally communicate?" If we do not think it will, then let's try to find a different word or phrase. Let's use our imagination in hunting words. Let's not be hidebound by our historical theological verbiage. We should do well to keep a sharp ear cocked toward the picturesque talk and jargon of the teen-agers. They can give us many suggestions. We ought not be above using a Roget's *Thesaurus*. Many of the world's renowned writers and speakers keep a well-paged volume of this work next to their dictionary. We are not hunting words with the idea of showing people how smart and eloquent we can be; we are searching for words which will communicate. Roget will help in that search. Also, let us often ask the members of our confirmation classes, our Bible classes, our adult classes, to give us the meaning which our pet theological terms convey to them. We shall be amazed and dismayed to note how often simple words like *grace, sin, love, Lord* — let alone words like *justification, sanctification, atonement, redemption, real presence* — are met with blank expressions. These words in many cases are not carrying living meaning no matter how often we repeat them or loudly shout them.

Janice Pries challenges us:

Do pastors have the courage to shed their shopworn coat of words, terms, and clichés with which they have told the story of salvation a thousand times before, in exactly the same way, in favor of telling the same story in a "creative" manner? — one in which the pastor's God-given imagination is utilized in making the Word applicable to the sinner in this contemporary world and life? ⁸

Still, we cannot get away completely from some words. What word shall we use as a substitute for "sin"? Shall we use "iniquity," or "transgression," or "wrongdoing"? I fear that these words accomplish just as little in this task of communication. What term shall we substitute for "grace," "mercy," "kindness," "forgiveness"? These words are threadbare, too. How can we get away from Christian "love"? Thanks be to God, though words wear out, they are not like light bulbs, bearings, or spark plugs which can only be thrown away. They are rather like batteries and tires. Many times they can be recharged with meaning. They can be recapped with life.

Vivid meaning can be reinjected into words which no longer stir up thinking, like the ones cited above, if we will but define these words. For example, should we ever use the term "the grace of God" without specifying just what "grace" means? By itself the term simply does not convey much truth; it does not incite cogitation; it does not bite into the very existence of man. I have discovered this again and again in actual experience. "Grace" and many of our other words are abstract terms. Unless we make something concrete and tangible out of them, they immediately vaporize into the atmosphere.

In addition to enlivening certain of our words by specifically defining them, we can resuscitate them by particularizing, illustrating, and peopling these words. Take the word "sin." Does it communicate any meaning when we say to our people — as we often do — "We are all guilty of sin"? Or even when we recite, often glibly, in the General Confession: "We poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean"? Just exactly how are we guilty of sin? Just precisely why are we saying that we are "poor sinners"? We are sinners because we are all such respectable people — we Lutherans, we Christians, we Americans, we Alabamans — and proudly think of ourselves as such. We

are sinners, because we lose our tempers, quarrel with our wives or husbands and children. We are sinners because we cannot live in harmony with our fellow church members, even though we may pray for peace between the United States and Russia. We are sinners because we talk about our friends and neighbors and colleagues and competitors behind their backs and get a big kick out of doing so. We are sinners because we bear grudges. We are sinners because we fudge on our tax payments just a little. We are sinners because we eat too much, drink too much, talk too much, drive too fast. We are sinners because God just does not enter into most of our everyday routine—our selling a customer, our running a lathe, our building a house, our washing the clothes, our cooking the dinner, our going to school, our seeing a movie, our watching television. No, God just doesn't figure in often, only we and our family and our friends figure in. *I am a sinner! I am the wretched, miserable sinner!* When we speak of sin, we must so particularize, so "peoplize," so illustrate that each individual in the pew and each of us in the pulpit is affected to the depths of his existence. "They sting, they bite, they kick me," Emerson said of certain words. The same must be said of the words we use in speaking of sin. Speaking of sin in this specific, inescapable manner week after week will inject genuine meaning into the General Confession. Remember, without an existential (this is the only time I shall use this word) appreciation of sin, there is no appreciation of grace. There is only hardening of the heart.

While on the subject of communicating the truth of sin to our people, it must also be asked: "Does it make any sense to our hearers when we speak of original sin, that we are 'by nature sinful and unclean'?" Here, too, we must define, specify, illustrate. As we are born into this world, you and I are creatures who are completely "stuck on ourselves" to the utter exclusion and neglect of God. We are cut off from God, and we don't much mind it. Any observant parent can see in the infant only a few days old that he wants everything for himself. He is the center of all existence. This self-centeredness, this worship of self, this godless attachment to self—this is the fruit of original sin. Children do not have to be taught to be selfish. They are so from their mother's womb. But to be loving, to put the other person first, to think of

their playmates before themselves, this requires endless teaching from the Word of God. All of us who are adult Christians still recognize enough of this original sin in us to know that we are born sinners.

Olin Miller's daily cartoon in the *Birmingham News* carries the observations of a middle-aged, rather cynical, but often shrewd wit. The other day he was depicted grabbing an unruly, howling youngster by the hair of the head, probably in self-defense, and saying to himself: "Children of any generation are about the same. Most of 'em are as bad as they are allowed to be." Even the comics can help us in making the "cussedness" and malignancy of original sin clear to our people—and to ourselves for that matter. Some months ago, in the comic strip "Judge Parker," there appeared a flat denial of original sin, reflecting the way most people think of man. Mrs. Valentine's teen-age daughter, Kathy, has become involved in some rather serious incidents of juvenile delinquency. Judge Parker inevitably comes to the rescue, especially since the judge's son is quite sweet on Kathy. All the problems are finally solved. At the conclusion of the series we hear the judge's son, with Kathy in arm, say to Mrs. Valentine and the judge: "We won't be long! We're going down to the corner for a soda." After they leave, Mrs. Valentine says to the judge: "They're a clean, wholesome couple of youngsters, Judge Parker." And then the typical popular reply: "Yes, Mrs. Valentine! They're just that! . . . All young people are basically good, Mrs. Valentine, but in our anxiety to see them grown into good adults we interpret every little thing they do as bad!" This statement, of course, stands in 180-degree contradiction to what the Bible—and history, for that matter—say about how people are basically.

Just as we make "sin" meaningful, then, by defining, specifying, particularizing, peopling from current happenings, so we can make God's "grace" convey intense meaning. We shall be surprised and disheartened at the blank expressions that will greet us when we ask our people the meaning of the "grace" of God. You and I will have to define this term if we are to convey meaning through it. "Grace" means gift. It means the unearned favor and love of God. It is what God does for us on His own initiative. When we work for 40 hours at the office or the shop, we receive our pay check.

This we earn. We deserve it. It is no gift. But we can never earn anything in relation to God. What God does for us is always a gift. This is the grace of God. The grace of God motivated the revolutionary gift of God's own Son to the world. The "Very God of Very God," who blinked at the first light of day in an animal shelter in Bethlehem, who hung in cringing pain from the crossbar on Calvary's knob, who split wide open the bonds of death on Easter morning, makes possible our being friends with God again. He took our pride, our pettiness, our weakness, our incessant floundering around, our guilt, our punishment, upon Himself and wiped the docket clean for us. But God gives us this Christ. Because of this Christ He cancels our sins as surely as we commit them and confess them. We cannot, we need not, do anything. This is God's grace.

To show what this grace of God means in contemporary terms, I found this illustration several years ago.⁹ It concerns August Strindberg, the eccentric Swedish writer. To August Strindberg no one existed except himself. He took one woman after another only to cast each aside for someone else who happened to suit his fancy at the moment. He practiced black magic in his attic. He would go out into the forest, climb a great rock, and shout defiance at the universe. Committing blasphemy in print was a regular habit for him. He once called Christianity a religion for "women, eunuchs, children, and savages." When his four-year old son asked him whether God could see in the dark, Strindberg replied, "No, but Papa can!" He grew a devilish beard and devoted himself to the study of evil. He flirted with Buddhism and other occult Oriental religions. But in his old age he began to relish the sound of church bells once more to calm his fears and passions. While he was dying of cancer, he wanted his children near him. One evening, while his daughter Karen was at his bedside, he picked up the Bible and murmured, "Everything is atoned for!" Then he died. At his own request he was buried in the Swedish soil which he once proudly damned, under a plain oak cross bearing the inscription *Ave, crux, spes unica* (Hail, Cross, the only hope). The conquering, comforting power of Christ's grace lives in our 20th century.

Another very communicative illustration for the grace of God was suggested by a story recently.¹⁰ I employed this illustration

on Good Shepherd Sunday, and by the facial expressions of my hearers I could tell that it elicited some keen interest. The Good Shepherd sheds His life's blood for His sheep rather than forsake them. Ronnie Kim, Korean infant, was the result of an American colonel's wild night with a Korean prostitute. He was forsaken by his father when the colonel returned to the States, to his lawful wife, his two legitimate children, and his comfortable home. Ronnie's mother tried to eke out an existence for him through the meager profits of harlotry. Soon she died of malnutrition and tuberculosis. Ronnie passed into the hands of indifferent relatives. When the Seventh-Day Adventists finally found him, he was lying in a cold shack, on the bare floor, hardly breathing. They began to nurse him back to health. Then, according to the ways of the Good Shepherd, a kindly Christian Korean nurse, Grace Kim, adopted him. She sacrificed her own health to bring him the food and vitamins his frail body needed. But Ronnie had T. B. of the lungs and the spine. When he dropped a toy to the floor, he could not like other children stoop to pick it up. He needed a delicate bone graft. Though Grace Kim had hardly recovered from a serious kidney operation, she insisted that her leg be used. Five months later the cast was removed from Grace Kim's leg. She will limp for years to come. But Ronnie Kim will be all right. He will run and play just like other children. Out of sticks he assembles an airplane which will one day take his mother and himself to America, he likes to say.—Remember that all of us were much like Ronnie Kim. Our lives were practically worthless. Christ, the Good Shepherd, adopted us into His very own family. He loved us. He insured life for us. But in order to cure us of our fatal disease of sinfulness, He had to sacrifice Himself. This He gladly did. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep! This is how devoted He is to us even though we do not deserve His love any more than Ronnie Kim, the dying bit of Korean war flotsam, deserved Grace's love. But she gave it, and God gives us His love, His *grace!*

Abbott P. Herman, a layman, professor of sociology at the University of Redlands, Calif., has a deep interest in having the Church meet the contemporary social problems. He began a valuable article with these words: " 'My job,' a preacher friend told me, 'is to set forth in my preaching the great principles of our

faith. It is up to the parishioner to apply them.'"¹¹ Professor Herman proceeds to show that such an approach is ineffective and fallacious. People, generally, just do not make the application for themselves. He quotes William James' oft-heard statement, "No one sees farther into a generalization than his own knowledge of its details extends." Hartsbone and May in *Studies in Deceit* are cited. They demonstrate that unless the principle of honesty is made concrete in every variety of social situation, it has no meaning for the child. "Consequently, Sunday school children, as much as the non-Sunday school group, were found to be dishonest in experiences for which they had not been adequately guided." Our adult hearers are not essentially different from our children. For years we can preach God's love to us which must in turn reflect itself in our love to our fellow men, but unless we spell out in sharp illustrations what this means in every area of human living, we may very well discover that our parishioner still discriminates against the Negro, still despises the Jew, still hates the Russian and the Chinese, still bears the grudge against the ex-business associate who took him for a ride, still gossips like a boarding-house cook — and thinks that he is quite justified in doing so!

Although much progress has been made in recent years, the sad fact still remains that in many areas we still stand in rather proud and selfish isolation to the world. In places we are still known and frowned upon as "that separatistic German church." The God-given role which every Christian must assume and actively carry out in the social area, in political situations, in community responsibilities, is something we often do not discuss in clear and concise and concrete terms, lest it be mistaken for "social gospel." But there is a Christian social gospel irrevocably set forth by our Lord when he declared so tersely: "Love thy neighbor as thyself," and again, "Love one another as I have loved you." Many of our people still contribute nothing, aside from keeping their own houses in order, to community betterment and to tangibly relieving social and racial tensions in their home towns. Many are little interested in the desperate plight of millions around the world unless these people happen to be related to them by blood. Ethnic groups in America — the Indians, the Jews, the Negroes, the Porto Ricans, the Mexicans — ought to be sent back where they came from in

the first place — in the minds of many of our people. If our big toe hurts a little, it is of a lot more concern to us than if 1,000 people are dying of starvation each day in Calcutta or Cairo. Very often in many spheres of living our people still live contentedly in their own little church quite unconcerned about the rest of the community and world. We pastors are largely responsible for not translating into sharp, illustrative, inescapable terms that we whom God has loved must show our love to all men everywhere, not just to those who are of the household of faith.

If you and I are to communicate truth productively through apt illustration, we are going to have to read, read, and read some more. We are going to have to read our own theological journals and periodicals. How many of us read the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*? The "Theological Observer" feature in this journal can furnish us much in the way of penetrating illustrative material for our Sunday sermons. We may profit from magazines and professional journals of other Christian denominations. Again, we do not have an exclusive corner on the best verbal symbols for conveying Christian truth. We shall have to give diligence to contemporary magazines, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Cresset*, the *Scientific American*, *Life*, and perhaps even the *Reader's Digest*, though here Dr. Elton Trueblood's warning to the Interseminary Movement in Richmond in 1952 is in place: "[Too many ministers] seldom read anything more challenging intellectually than the *Reader's Digest*."¹²

We must clip or record and file what we read. In the busy parish ministry of today one simply does not have time again and again to review what he reads so that he can retain it in his memory. His filing cabinets must become his assistant memory vault. For the pastor to neglect his filing cabinet is not unlike a factory neglecting its stock of raw material. One dreadful day the factory just "runs out"!

The Bible, it goes without saying, is still the best book of illustrations. However, a shrill warning must be issued here. The mere employment of Biblical illustrations does not spontaneously guarantee the communication of vital truth. These Biblical illustrations must be retold in the language of today. After all, these Biblical stories, parables, historical occurrences were first told and recorded

in the very modern language of the common people: in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Koine Greek. Do we not have the solemn obligation in using these today to translate them into our contemporary idiom? Otherwise we simply take the people back to Palestine 20 centuries ago and leave them there. You have heard, and I have heard, possibly both of us have preached, sermons that amounted to nothing more than a kind of nostalgic reverie in which our minds were blissfully transported back 2,000 years on a magic carpet of King James English and plainly left there. We read the text, which, let's say, was one of the parables of Jesus. We retold the parable in about three different ways; recounted the atonement in our usual, pet manner; threw in a few words of general application that everybody takes for granted anyway; rounded it off with a rather vague conclusion that could have been uttered 1,000 years ago, or could be a thousand years hence, with hardly a single word altered! This was our sermon. It did not take long to prepare this kind of sermon, and it won't last very long in the mind of the hearer either — if it even entered his mind at all. Victor E. Beck, pastor of Gustavus Adolphus Church, New York, sums it up pretty well when he asserts: "On the other hand, there are sermons that are little more than a review of Bible history. Such sermons are certainly timeless and without specific relevance to any particularly subsequent period in time."¹³ They just don't live.

Dr. James T. Cleland, professor of preaching at Duke University Divinity School and preacher for the university, is widely recognized as one who conveys inescapable meaning in his sermons. In his Kellogg lectures on preaching, delivered before the Cambridge (Mass.) Episcopal Theological School, he says quite to the point: "It is when the minister sees the Christian world view penetrating an immediately relevant human situation that a sermon is born."¹⁴ The mere use of Biblical illustrations and Biblical language does not insure a lively, communicative sermon. "One of the supreme opportunities and functions of preaching is the creation of a bridge on which the truth disclosed in Palestine many centuries ago may be carried into the life and experiences of our time,"¹⁵ correctly adds Halford E. Luccock in his lucid Lyman Beecher lectures.

Though some may disagree, I believe that it is possible to be too simple in our preaching, with the result that a barrier is set up

against effective communication. The person in the pew thinks: "Well, there he goes again. Same old line! I've heard all of that before. I know all that." Simultaneously he throws a switch in his mind which tunes him in to another channel: The baseball game the night before, Senator McCarthy, the big deal on Monday, the Sunday dinner steak that was forgotten in the deepfreeze seem more interesting and challenging. It has always been especially interesting to me that Jesus often bewildered his hearers—not only His antagonists but also His own disciples. He was deliberately difficult and even obscure at times (Luke 5:45; 18:34; John 10:6; 12:16; 16:17). I wonder if He did not employ this technique to stimulate interest, to challenge thought, reflection and imagination, to make the person reach way down and back inside himself. When they heard Him speak, no one could casually say, "I already know that!" Though Jesus was reiterating the eternal truths which God had already revealed to the prophets in essence, still no one could object "I've heard all that before." Jesus gave it a new slant, a novel twist. He put it into different terms. He produced question marks. He let it be known that the treasures of God are inexhaustible also as far as the best human minds are concerned.

Christianity is not a religion for third-rate minds. Every Christian must be a thinker. This does not in any wise mean that he must have an IQ of 135. The Christian must think of his Christian faith in relation to his every action, word, and thought, in relation to his job, his family ties, his politics, his country, his international involvement, his recreation, his entertainment. He must never cease this serious cogitation, though it is always difficult and painful. Through our preaching we must stimulate this thinking. One grows a little tired of hearing the Christian faith spoken of as such a "simple faith." It is so simple that a child can safely wade in it—yes! so simple that the most immense, elephantine mind can drown in it! When Christ urged us to seek after a child-like faith, He was referring to the absolute confidence and trust that a child has in God, in his parents.

Very true, we can be too difficult, too obscure, too scholarly, in our sermons, and frequently we are. We can be eloquent for the sake of eloquence, not for the sake of communicating truth. But

often, in thinking that we are avoiding the Charybdis of whirling profundity, we are bumping smack into the Scylla of shallowness and no longer stimulate mental activity on the part of our hearers, and they soon drift off to sleep on us. People, at their best, like to be challenged, not spoon fed. Christianity demands the best of every person, including his mind. St. Paul was not complimenting the Corinthian Christians when he told them that he has had to feed them "with milk and not with meat" (1 Cor. 3:2). He was rather rebuking them. The writer to the Hebrews was doing the same in his letter when he concludes, "And have become such as have need of milk and not of strong meat" (Heb. 5:12). Let me summarize this subject with this pertinent statement made by James Stalker, noted Scottish preacher and educator, in the Lyman Beecher lectures of 1891:

Not infrequently ministers are exhorted to cultivate extreme simplicity in their preaching. Everything ought, we are told, to be brought down to the comprehension of the most ignorant hearer, and even of children. Far be it from me to depreciate the place of the simplest in the congregation; it is one of the best features of the church in the present day that it cares for the lambs. I dealt with this subject, not unsympathetically I hope, in a former lecture. But do not ask us to be always speaking to children or to beginners. Is the Bible always simple? Is Job simple, or Isaiah? Is the Epistle to the Romans simple, or Galatians? This cry for simplicity is three fourths intellectual laziness; and that church is doomed which does not supply meat for men as well as milk for babes. We owe the Gospel not only to the barbarian, but also to the Greek, not only to the unwise, but also to the wise.¹⁶

It is a terrifying dilemma that the preacher is caught in today. He must visit in the homes of his members; make hospital calls, shut-in calls; attend the endless organizational meetings of the congregation; be a virile leader of the youth; see that the detailed records of the congregation are kept; answer his voluminous mail and that distracting, maddening telephone; fill out reports in quadruplicate; do his studying and reading; be known as a community leader; try to keep his neglected family reasonably content; engage in some social functions; mow his lawn; wash his car; attend pastoral conferences and conventions—and at the same time he is supposed to have time and freedom of mind in which

to prepare sermons which effectively communicate sin and grace! How can this frightening, nerve-racking dilemma be solved? We are going to have to put first things first! And is not preaching of prime importance in our royal vocation? According to Erdmann W. Frenk there is not one inkling of doubt about it. He begins his before-mentioned article thus:

Preaching, i. e., the public proclamation of the Word of God, is the chief function of the Christian ministry. It is duty number one on the pastor's functional docket. It is his first and foremost responsibility. It was this in the early church. It became this again through the Reformation. It must be this in the Church of today. At the top of any list cataloguing the duties of a pastor in the order of their importance, preaching must stand first. If there is one field in which the pastor will seek to excel, it is in preaching.¹⁷

Our people likewise look upon our sermon as of top importance, though sometimes I fear they think a sermon can be pulled out of a top hat with a deft flick of the legerdemainist's wrist. They forget that the rabbit has to be carefully placed there in the first place. Nevertheless a Gallup Poll of several years ago showed that 97 per cent of our population in the United States considers the sermon to be the paramount feature in a service of public worship.¹⁸ Our people expect us to be motivating preachers. We, then, are going to have to give a good part of the very best of our time to our sermons. The evidences are that with many of us this is not the case. The principal, concerted work on our sermons is relegated to very late in the week, perhaps, even to Saturday afternoon or evening. By this time in the week we are pretty well worn out. Our minds are preoccupied with a host of matters. We are at the same time trying to get our service lined up for Sunday, prepare our Bible class lesson, put out the bulletin, and that infernal telephone just keeps clanging away! Then suppose that at this late time an emergency arises. Our sermon just fades away! We cannot do our best in communicating the Word unless we begin serious work on our sermon early in the week.

Possibly, in addition to giving a good part of the best of our time to our sermon preparation, we must spend more time on them. Charles B. Templeton writes: "It has been stated that Dr. Fosdick spent thirty hours of preparation on his regular thirty-

minute Sunday morning sermon; an hour of preparation for each minute of delivery. Little wonder his sermons were homiletical gems, and space was at a premium whenever he spoke."¹⁹ I don't know how you and I could ever manage that especially since we have to write one or two new sermons every week, but all of us can squeeze out some more time to put in on our sermons.

Some of you remember the "Twelve Great Churches in America" series which *The Christian Century* ran in 1949. Perhaps the most significant observation on this series for the preacher was this comment in the last editorial roundup:

... a majority of ministers yield too often to the temptation to subordinate the prophetic to the pastoral claims of the ministry. The demands of "service" seem generally to receive attention before the ever greater need of people to hear the Word of God proclaimed with timely relevance and power. Man's deepest needs in our day as in every other are spiritual, and they can be met only by searching and contemporary proclamation of Biblical and theological truth.²⁰

A declaration that really struck me between the eyes was made by Praelat Issler, one of the German essayists at the Bad Boll Conference in 1951. He asserted that "through the sermon the ground is made either harder or more receptive to God. Neither the preacher nor the hearer leaves the church in the same spiritual state as when he entered."²¹ What an awesome, staggering responsibility we bear! In order to successfully bear this responsibility, at least to some small extent, in order to be effective communicators of the grace of God, we must want to be effective communicators more than anything else. Any psychologist will tell us that unless we want to be something more than anything else in the world, we shall never be that thing. Having the will to be provocative preachers under God's grace, we shall mightily strive to be such, and we shall make progress.

Three things in closing:

The first is suggested to me by Halford E. Luccock.²² During World War II in London, over the desks of the broadcasters sending messages to enemy countries, were printed these words in conspicuous letters: "Is what you are saying worth a man's risking his life to hear?" Is what you and I are saying Sunday after Sunday worth a man's changing his life for?

The second is given by the Bad Boll essayist spoken of a few lines above. He strongly urges us to let our people know of the difficult task we have in communicating the Word of God Sunday upon Sunday. Then we ought to plead with them for their constant prayers in our behalf, as Luther so often closed his letters with the three poignant words, "Pray for us."²³ We cannot imagine what transcending power would come to us if we had our whole congregation praying continually that we might be great preachers for the sake of Christ, our risen Lord.

The third is a quote from the 1933 Lyman Beecher lectures by Dr. L. P. Jacks, English minister and professor:

Was there ever a time when the burden of the Lord was not too heavy for the man who had to bear it? It is of the very nature of the Lord's burden that it should be so. The shoulders of Atlas are unable to carry it. The hands of Moses that dropped in weariness, the cry of Elijah, "I, even I only am left," the Figure that collapsed in the Garden of Gethsemane, these are the hands, that is the cry, that is the figure of every man who has ever dared to take upon himself the burden of the Lord. Be assured that if your burden affects you otherwise, if there never seems a time when it seems utterly beyond you and absolutely crushing, then it is not the Lord's burden that you carry. But just because the burden is the Lord's it is not you alone that carry it. The Lord carries it with you. Take the Lord's burden upon you and you will find that the strength of the whole universe is in you to help you bear it. Yes, we do get help. If it were not for that we should all break down.²⁴

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NOTES

1. Elmer A. Kettner, "Are We Really Preaching the Gospel?" *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXIV (May 1953), 321 ff. Note especially the opening paragraphs.
2. Erdmann W. Frenk, "A Critique of Contemporary Lutheran Preaching," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXI (October 1950), 46 ff.
3. Janice Pries, "The Intellectual and the Artist in the Church," *American Lutheran*, XXXVII (February 1954), 11 f.
4. Leo Snell, "What a Layman Expects of His Pastor," *ibid.*, p. 4.
5. Reported in *The Christian Century*, August 5, 1953, p. 900.
6. Quoted by Edgar Dewitt Jones, *The Royalty of the Pulpit* (Harper, 1951), p. 286.
7. Willard L. Sperry, "Sin and Salvation," *Religion in Life*, XXI (Spring 1952), 163.
8. *Loc. cit.*
9. *Time*, August 15, 1949, p. 83.
10. *Time*, April 5, 1954, p. 38.

11. Abbott P. Herman, "Preachers Must Be Social Scientists," *The Pulpit*, XXIV (July 1953), 2 ff.
12. *The Christian Century*, October 15, 1952, p. 1,196.
13. Victor E. Beck, "Relating the Timeless and the Timely in Our Preaching," *American Lutheran*, XXXII (July 1949), 9.
14. *Time*, March 29, 1954, p. 71.
15. Halford E. Luccock, *Communicating the Gospel* (Harper, 1954), p. 112f.
16. Edgar Dewitt Jones, op. cit., p. 187.
17. Erdmann W. Frenk, op. cit., p. 321.
18. Cited by Leslie Conrad, Jr., "Poets Speak to the Preachers," *The Pulpit*, May 1951, p. 22.
19. Charles B. Templeton, "The Church and Its Evangelistic Task," *Religion in Life*, XXI (Summer 1952), 333.
20. *The Christian Century*, January 3, 1950, p. 8.
21. Praelat Issler, "Christ Speaks Through the Ministry," **CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY**, XXIII (July 1952), 497.
22. Halford E. Luccock, op. cit., p. 42.
23. Praelat Issler, loc. cit.
24. Edgar Dewitt Jones, op. cit., p. 209.