

A Pastor Preaching

Toward a Theology of the Proclaimed Word

William Powell Tuck

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With appreciation

To my “mentors” in preaching:

J. P. Allen

Roy McLain

Harry Emerson Fosdick

Leslie Weatherhead

John Killinger

and

To my seminary students over the years from whom

I have continued to learn

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“Clearly, William Tuck’s antenna has been aimed toward God for years. In *A Pastor Preaching* he writes with the wisdom of a sage and the passion of a new believer. With words and stories that rise off the page, Tuck makes a fresh case for preaching that requires all of the biblical, pastoral, theological, and creative commitments in a pastor’s mind and heart. This excellent book will appeal to veteran preachers and newbies alike.”

*Julie Pennington-Russell, Pastor
First Baptist Church
Decatur, Georgia*

“From a preacher’s preacher comes this deeply theological reflection on proclaiming, indeed, embodying the Word. William Tuck exemplifies what it means to be a scholar-practitioner, and this latest book helps those called to the perilous task of preaching to become more grounded in their encounter with the Holy One who beckons such vocation. Congruence between one’s life, one’s words, and the Living Word are essential for homiletical integrity, which Tuck richly illumines by his inclusion of thoughtful sermons. The author’s capacity for critical interrogation of his own practice is a model for all of us who bear witness to God’s self-disclosure in texts and the larger world.”

*Molly Marshall, President
Central Baptist Theological Seminary
Shawnee, Kansas*

“Drawing from his wide reading and deep experience as both a professor and pastor-preacher, Bill Tuck shares with us the essential and enduring tools for the craft of preaching. His passion for theologically reflective and pastorally faithful sermons runs throughout the book.”

*Guy Sayles, Pastor
First Baptist Church
Asheville, North Carolina*

Preface

Preaching has been both a joy and frustration through my years of ministry. It has been a joy to proclaim the good news of the gospel, but it has always been a frustrating experience to know how to do that proclamation effectively. I have always wanted to do it well, but was aware of how far short of my aspirations I usually fell after each sermon.

There are still some voices that speak of the decline of preaching. No doubt, preaching has undergone many facelifts in recent years. Sometimes it seems that preaching has been turned upside down. Some preachers call for the use of all kinds of technology, including screens, images, and sounds. Sermon outlines are projected on the screen or passed out for the parishioners to see. Casual dress such as jeans and polo shirts are replacing robes or suits. And, rather than proclaiming from behind a pulpit, some preachers prance back and forth in front of their congregation like attorneys before a jury. Whether these experimental attempts at preaching will last or are simply a passing fad, only time will tell.

The intent of this book is not to answer or cast a final or even a passing judgment on the “new” approaches to or styles of preaching, but to look seriously at what constitutes the content and background of authentic preaching.

I am convinced there is still a real interest in preaching, evidenced by the many new and varied books about preaching and the large number of preaching conferences and colloquiums on preaching. Pastor search committees still put preaching at the top of their list of the expectations they have of their prospective ministerial candidate. Most pastors with whom I have conversations indicate they have a genuine desire to be the best preachers they can be. I have spent a lifetime striving to improve my preaching skills and am still working on them today. I am still excited about preaching and believe that “good” preaching continues to communicate the good news of our faith.

This book is offered as one pastor and preaching professor's suggestions on how I have tried to share the gospel through my ministry both in the classroom and in the pulpit. I have been pastor of small and large congregations, rural and downtown urban churches, college and seminary congregations, healthy and troubled parishes. During my busy pastoral ministry with my congregations I have tried to share with them not only my verbal sermons from the pulpit, but also a written copy by the next Sunday. This has often been an exacting but rewarding discipline. It has pushed me for originality, careful craftsmanship, sound biblical exegesis, and the desire for clarity and to offer my best gifts. Being pastor in a college and seminary community has certainly heightened my awareness to offer my best all the time.

I know at times I have failed in all of these efforts, but I did reach for the heights. Falling short is no excuse for not trying to do one's best. The resources I mention in the following chapters are those books, magazines, and so on I have found helpful in my sermon study and preaching preparation. There are, of course, many other resources, some more contemporary, from which a preacher can draw.

The sermons in this volume include some I have preached in my local parishes, in pastors' schools, on preaching missions, and as a "traveling" preacher in various types of congregations. I offer them as one preacher's efforts to approximate the type of preaching delineated in the chapters before them. The chapters on preaching are drawn from lectures I have given at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where I served as professor of Christian preaching; at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, where I have been an adjunct professor; and at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where I was a visiting professor. I delivered portions of these chapters as preaching lectures at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and at various pastors' schools and preaching conferences.

I want to express my appreciation to Carolyn Stice, my secretary for ten years at St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, who typed earlier parts of this manuscript, and to Barbara Nickel, my administrative assistant at First Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, who helped me get my manuscript in final shape for publication. They have given of their time faithfully and have helped to see this project, for which I have labored for many years, come to a conclusion. I also appreciate Molly Marshall, a noted preacher, seminary president, and theology professor, and James Cox

and John Killinger, distinguished preachers and professors of preaching, for taking time to read the manuscript for me, and fellow ministers, Mike Clingenpeel, Julie Pennington-Russell, and Guy Sayles, for reading the material and sharing their positive support for my efforts. I also want to thank W. Rand Forder, my fellow pastor and friend, for his careful proofreading of the final manuscript and Jackie Riley for her thorough copyediting of the manuscript and for her helpful suggestions.

In an Advent meditation on how John the Baptist pointed beyond himself to Christ, J. Barrie Shepherd challenges every preacher of the gospel to follow the example of the Baptist and not draw attention to one's self when preaching, but to direct attention past one's self to Christ. His personal prayer should become the prayer of everyone who heralds the good news:

Forgive me, Father, when my faith becomes a self-promoting thing, when my testimony speaks more of my own outstanding virtue and ability than it does of your great mercy and forgiveness. Deliver me from all the pompous posturing that lays its claim so swiftly and so sweetly on my soul. Let my life this day become a signpost, an arrow that points clear and true toward your Son, my Lord.¹

In all of our studying about how to preach and in the preaching process itself, the ones proclaiming acknowledge that our best efforts feebly point to the wonder and mystery of the God who has come uniquely into our world through Jesus Christ and that it is about him we preach and to whom we call persons to commit their lives. In humility we affirm that the preaching task is not really about the preacher, but about the grace and love of God we are charged to herald.

Note

¹J. Barrie Shepherd, *A Child Is Born* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 40.

Introduction

Toward a Theology of the Proclaimed Word

What can be more preposterous than a person claiming to speak in the name of God? Yet this is what preachers claim week after week. “The word which I received from the Lord,” they say often without much timidity, “I declare unto you.” In the preacher’s lineage stand such impressive figures as Paul, Chrysostom, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, Fredrick W. Robertson, and John Broadus. But the line continues with Phillips Brooks, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Martin Luther King, Jr., Billy Graham, Carlyle Marney, Ernest Campbell, John Claypool, Gardner Taylor, Peter Gomes, Elizabeth Achtemeier, Fred Craddock, William Willimon, Tom Long, Barbara Brown Taylor, John Killinger, and maybe you and maybe me.

How dare we, you, they, I make such a claim! Is it only our hot breath that keeps the words from freezing on our lips? Is it merely the moisture in our mouths that prevents the words from turning to dust through our teeth? What an absurdity it seems! How shameless is its claim! Even through our ministerial casualness with holy things, our sloppiness with the ordinances, and our careless sermon preparation, we claim his light still “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” “The obligation to speak of God,” James C. Howell reminds us, “whether it feels like zealous passion or the numb inevitability of this week’s calendar, is inextricably paired with an inability we all know too well.”¹

Sometimes it happens and words become Word to us, but more often they do not. Sometimes the words are more like “sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.” The Word is obscured and hidden by tattered rags of outworn phrases and clichés or buried under alliterated glibness and decorative triteness. But sometimes it happens and there is *viva vox*, “a living voice,” words through whom the Word penetrates to become an event once more.

From the beginning when Christianity witnessed to the event of the Incarnate One, its very witness became a part of the event itself. The

Gospels, as we have them, are the early church's preaching about the event. Emil Brunner underscored this emphasis when he declared: "The basic or primal function of the church is that of preaching, for it is this which establishes the church in every sense of the Word."² Jesus himself came preaching (Matt. 1:14-15). Luke 4:14-19 recounts the occasion when Jesus spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah and declared:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Jesus sent his disciples into the world and instructed them to preach (Mark 3:13-14, Matt. 19:7, Luke 9:2). He told his disciples, "He that hears you hears me" (Luke 10:10). Paul lifted his voice to sound this same refrain as he told Timothy, "Preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). Paul felt he had been set apart by God to preach (Gal. 1:15-16) and sighed, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). And Paul listed preaching the Word of God as the supreme commission of the church (1 Cor. 12:31).

Luther affirmed the high view that Scripture gave to preaching. He openly preached Christ the Word, which he believed was the utterance of God's own heart. "When thou hearest the Word," Luther said, "then thou hearest God."³ A marginal note in the Second Helvetic Confession states, "*La predication de la parole de Dieu, est parole de Dieu.*" ("The preaching of the word of God is the Word of God.")⁴ It was an audacious claim, but other voices have joined these. Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared:

The proclaimed Word is the Incarnate Christ himself. . . . He is the entrance to the historical Jesus. Therefore the proclaimed Word is not a medium of Expression for something else, something which lies behind it, but it is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.⁵

Listen to Rudolf Bultmann: "The salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding, and promising word of

preaching.”⁶ “The crucified and resurrected Christ encounters us in the word of preaching, and never in any other way.”⁷

Emil Brunner qualified his assurance only slightly: “Where there is true preaching, where, in the obedience of faith, the Word is proclaimed, there, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, the most important thing that ever happens upon this earth takes place.”⁸ P. T. Forsyth made a similar claim: “With preaching, Christianity stands or falls because it is the declaration of a gospel. Nay more—far more—it is the gospel prolonging and declaring itself.”⁹

The audacity of preaching is rooted in the boldness of Jesus himself, carried forward by the Gospels and Pauline traditions, and exposed by many theologians. The origin is found in God’s Word. Even that awareness, however, does not lighten the awesome responsibility of speaking in the name of God; in fact, it may only heighten it. Barth puts his finger on the dilemma: Preaching is “an act of daring, and only the man who would rather not preach and cannot escape from it ought to ever attempt it.”¹⁰ I don’t know about you, but it has never been easy for me to be a “man (person) of the cloth.” It goes against the fabric of my nature a little. There are times I would rather do other things, but a sense of compulsion has been laid upon me. I must proclaim the good news of the Word become flesh. My boldness and your boldness to declare this word does not rest in our strength, power, or fame but in the living Word of God. And preach I/we must!

Personal Encounter

Before we can proclaim the Word of God, we must first be addressed personally by its presence. No one can deliver a message from God that has not been received. How can anyone speak for God who has not heard God “speak”? It is essential to have a word from God before we speak it. Christianity cannot be described from without. Its reality is known from within as we have been grasped by the Word. There is a claim upon us that comes from beyond us. No second-hand knowledge about this Word is sufficient. Out of a first-hand, personal experience the Word becomes real to us. The First Epistle of John expresses it this way:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of

life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest with us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you . . . (1:1-3)

The early disciples bore witness to that which they had experienced personally. God to them was known not by argument but by encounter, not by influence but by a presence.

Throughout the Old Testament it is clear that no prophet or leader of Israel ever spoke for God without a powerful sense of the Word of the Lord coming to him. In many ways and places the Old Testament declares that “the word of the Lord came unto” Abram (Gen. 15:1), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:3), Micah (Micah 1:1), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4, 13; 2:1; 7:1), Hosea (Hosea 1:1), and others. In the Old Testament the phrase “the word of Yahweh” occurs more than 400 times and is the most common way in the Old Testament to describe God’s revelation. The meaning of the phrase is not limited merely to words. Greek thought made a distinction between word and deed, between speech and action, but this is not true of the Hebrew concept. *Dabar* in Hebrew may be translated as an action or event. God’s Word can bring about an action or deed. His Word may be “eventful” because God’s fiat and effective action are one. This is seen in the creation story in Genesis 1 where God speaks and events become a reality. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). God’s Word was proclaimed, and words became events. God spoke and something happened.

The Hebrew concept for the Word prepared the way for the New Testament declaration that “the Word became flesh.” The “Word” of God is not limited to words or utterance, but is declared, by the Gospel of John, to be an event in the flesh and life of Jesus Christ. Words ring with reminders of Genesis 1: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (v. 14), or to use J. B. Phillips’ translation, God “expressed himself.” The incarnation became the fullest articulation, disclosure, or utterance possible to unveil the presence of God in a personal and historical way. The New Testament witness, then, was to bear testimony to what the disciples had seen and experienced in the Logos, God’s communication of God’s self through Jesus Christ. And so the witness is carried forward by us.

Most of us will admit that the Word of God came. We might acknowledge that it came to Moses while he was on a mountain side tending sheep. It came to Jacob with his head on a rock for a pillow. It came to

Isaiah when he was in the temple and saw the Lord high and lifted up. The Word broke in upon Jeremiah in a country village near Jerusalem. It came in a blinding light to Saul on the Damascus Road. It came here and there to others. But does it still come?

How can we preach if it does not? Dare we scale our own Sinai or Horeb to the point that we come face to face with the Holy One and bow before God to hear the divine Word until our face shines and we know it not? What stone will be your pillow and what awakening so startling that you will declare this is a new Bethel? "Surely the Lord was in this place and I knew it not." Can we ever really preach if we have not come to our own Jabbok and wrestled until the break of day and declared, "I will not let you go until you bless me"? Can we ever preach until we come to our temple worship and see the Lord high and lifted up? Who can preach effectively until she has cried from the bottom of the pits of life, "I sat alone" (Jer. 15:17), or cried from the agony of pain or grief, "Where now is my God" (Ps. 42:10)? Can we ever preach if we have not heard the still, small voice against the Ahabs and Jezebels of the world? Will our voice remain muted until we hear the click-clack of some branches of our sycamore tree assuring us of the presence of God sending us forth to speak in God's name? Will we stride prayerfully through the written Word and our theological tomes to the point that God's holy utterance empowers us with a genuine word from on high?

The Word of the Lord came unto . . . Does it not also come to us? Let us wait before God with expectancy. Let us wait before God with confidence. Let us pray and study the Scriptures with ears attuned to listen. If we have no word, let us be silent or remain till there is a word from God.

For too long many preachers have preached second-hand sermons, borrowed other preacher's experiences, recited someone else's beliefs, and glided along on the surface of religious convictions. Biblical preaching is not "Saturday night specials" made especially easy for lazy ministers. The Word of the Lord does not come as simple sermons from secondary sources for satisfied minds. It is dismal to be beggars for a gospel to proclaim because the gospel has not grasped us. We have surrendered the thunder of God's penetrating Word for the parrot's mechanical imitation. With King David we should vow: "I will not offer unto the Lord that which cost me nothing."

Authentic preaching is costly. Time, prayer, study, and listening will be demanded from us on the side of the mountain with God. Having been addressed by God, we preach because we must. God is known to us not by hearsay, but by personal encounter.

Our Lives

Words have never been enough, not even words about God. Words are difficult to understand apart from some embodiment of them. Even words such as faith, love, hope, and saintliness are difficult to comprehend without some personality to give them flesh and meaning. “How can we know what God is like?” people have asked through the centuries.

In Jesus Christ, God made the divine self known. Of Jesus it was said: “Emmanuel, God with us.” The Word became flesh, not concept or proposition. “He that has seen me has seen the Father,” said Jesus (John 14:9). God became incarnate to communicate love and grace to us. Jesus was the clearest and most visible utterance of God’s nature. The medium became the message. Through his incarnation Jesus has provided us a model for preaching.

The Christian message cannot be proclaimed as though it were an objective bit of information unrelated to the person doing the preaching. The life of the one who dares to declare in God’s name must not contradict her words by her life. It is necessary for the preacher to be in her speaking, but also essential for the authenticity of the preacher’s life that the utterance she speaks is seen in her life. The preacher’s life is intricately related to the Word that is proclaimed. The Word preached is not merely a subjective word of the preacher, nor is it totally an objective word separate from the preacher’s life.

The gospel does not exist in a vacuum. It is made real, incarnate, in the life of a person. Phillips Brooks’ definition of preaching as “truth through personality” moves in this direction. Jesus challenged his followers: “Be not speakers of the Word alone but doers of it.” Preached words, without a life that corresponds to the high demands of the words, are like the empty and flat sounds of a plastic bell—motion without sound or meaning.

There is a maxim in philosophy that states “one’s actions follow from one’s being.” What a person does and says arises out of the quality of one’s character. Quintilian declared centuries ago that an orator is a “good man speaking well.” The essential element he stressed was “the good man.” How much more is this true for the preacher?

The preacher’s personality is so linked to what he says and does that a weakness in character can damage the gospel message. We cannot say one thing and live out another. “Is preaching the art of making a sermon and delivering it?” He responds to his own question. “Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that.”¹¹ What kind of gospel does a

preacher proclaim who never pays his debts, violates personal confidences, whose word cannot be trusted, and defames his marriage vows? What a preacher “is” reveals whether or not his message is credible. The question of credibility is of vital theological importance. If a preacher doesn’t practice his faith, it really does make his words nonsense.

In the last century, Henry Ward Beecher rose to be one of the most famous ministers of his age. While he was pastor of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, Beecher went on trial for adulterous behavior with Elizabeth Tilton. The trial lasted six months and received more space in the newspaper than any event since the Civil War. Although he was found innocent of the charge, many people and publications—including the historian Milton Rugoff and newspapers such *The New York Times* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*—believed he was guilty of the charge and escaped only because of great wealth and powerful lawyers.¹²

Whether Beecher was guilty of the charge of adultery, it is difficult to determine at this date, but he was certainly guilty of serious acts of indiscretion and poor judgment. This scandal hurt the proclamation of Christ by widening the gap between religious words and everyday living.

Martin Luther was right. We are “little Christ” to others. The Apostle Paul declared, “It is on Christ’s behalf we come; it is in Christ’s stead we beseech you.” It is an awesome role! We all have clay feet. Our humanity will always show through. None of us can walk on water. My wife likes to remind me of my humanity. She says: “The thing about being married to a minister is you have to live with him all during the week and then listen to him be the voice of God on Sunday.”

The person of the preacher, however, cannot be separated from the event of proclaiming the message. Preaching is the conveying of the reality of the presence of God through human personality. Preaching is the medium through which the Word of God is transmitted through human words. The preacher is not the message, but is intimately involved with this message, and constantly struggles to understand how she can witness to the Word with her words and life without focusing attention upon the messenger and not the message. “I have been crucified with Christ,” Paul states. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). But Paul also knows that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

Several years ago when a church where I was pastor was looking for an assistant minister, we received the following letter of reference from one of a young man's former college professors:

There is something wonderfully clean about this young man, and the reference there is to his mind as well as his physical being. He is unfailingly a gentleman. . . . He is loyal to the very highest ideals, and he has both the intelligence and the character to render estimable service to those ideals. I believe that if one word summarizes his many splendid qualities, it is integrity, and I like to think of the relationship of that word to integer. He is a "whole number," solid and sound and unblemished.

Obviously we called him. The preacher is first a good person proclaiming the good news. Dare we be less!

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer described a kindly person who traveled with some other companions. He concluded his description of him with these lines:

Indeed I'm sure you could not find a minister more pure.
He was a Christian both in deed and thought.
He lived himself the Golden Rule he taught.¹³

Our Words

The Word, however, is proclaimed not only through our lives, but also through the preacher's words. Hear a word about words. More than 5,000,000 sermons are preached in the United States alone each year. In a typical ministry of 40 years a minister will speak about 3,750 words in a 25-minute Sunday morning sermon, if you calculate about 150 words a minute. Excluding vacation time and at least two other times away, a minister will speak about 172,500 words a year. Over a 40-year ministry that will total 6,900,000 words. Add Sunday night and it swells to 13,800,000. Add Wednesday night and it rises to 27,600,000. That is a lot of talk, and it doesn't include the other occasions we have to speak. Each of us will utter enough words in our lifetime to fill more than 500 books.

Preachers need a healthy respect for words, the tools of our trade. We are ministers of the Word and of words. Labor at the study and forge for the right words to communicate the good news. Our people deserve our best work with words so that they might hear and respond to the redeeming Word of God. Avoid dull, lifeless, and abstract words but struggle for powerful, sharp, incisive, and penetrating ones. Since the gospel has got to be told, learn to tell it well. Give careful attention not only to the content of your message, but also remember that the effective packaging of that message may enable the listener to be grasped more easily by the Eternal Word. But even our best polished words are fragmentary in disclosing the wonder of God's grace. Our words, of course, cannot be identified with the Word. The preacher's words point to the Word of God behind and within our faint pictures of it. Any inadequate word, however, is always ours and not God's.

For our words to reach the inner ears of our listeners in the pews, our hearers need to be convinced that the preacher knows their real needs. Biblical preaching is not merely expounding a passage of Scripture; it also takes seriously the concrete issues the text addressed originally, and then it seeks to show us how the text is released in our own day to address similar particular needs. If the preacher keeps the message only as an ancient event of the past, then the listener will not hear the word of address today. On the other hand, if the contemporary situation alone is addressed and the biblical event is ignored, then the listener will not hear the historic word of good news. Both are essential for proclaiming the Word of God. The preacher labors to master the Scriptures, but ministers among her people to know their needs. Phillips Brooks said in his Yale Lectures that "the work of the preacher and the pastor really belong together and ought not to be separated."¹⁴

When the preacher stands up to preach, the listener wants to feel that what the preacher is saying concerns him. One should be able to say: "I see myself in that image." "How did the preacher know how I felt?" "Why, that's me he's taking about." The *Sitz im Leben* of the Scriptures converges on the listener's contemporary situation. To do this effectively, the preacher engages in a continuous dialogue with his people. As he meets them on the street, converses with them in the hospital or their home, at work or play or the grocery store, he listens to hear their questions and confessions, their joys and griefs, their dreams and failures, their faith and disbelief. As Carlyle Marney once said: "If we have spent twenty hours listening to our people, then we can expect them to listen to us for twenty minutes on Sunday."

When we have walked with our people and have sat where they sat, our words then are authentic. We have struggled with our people, ached with them, wept with them, groaned with them, argued with them, laughed with them, and rejoiced with them. Our words from the pulpit sing with sighs from within; they march with motivation; they are charged with concern; they ring with the rhythm of life; they pulsate with power.

Our words reveal that our finger has felt the pulse beat of people's needs. Our words scratch where they really itch. We seek to address what Henry Mitchell has called the "transconscious level" within our listeners.¹⁵ This is the inmost self, the existential self, the "gut level" self, the intuitive self, the self of our feelings and sensitivities, the self of our unconscious and subtle mentality. Too often our preaching has spoken only to the intellectual self and failed to communicate to the depths within. (And we wonder why people are unmoved by our preaching.) Transconscious preaching attempts to preach to the total person—the unconscious dimension as well as the intellect.

But we also look within our own lives and with our struggles with the faith and with life. All authentic preaching is autobiographical. There is *the gospel* but as Paul said, there is "my gospel." Where we have been most profoundly addressed, we can most clearly guide others. The "wounded healer" demonstrates that the sermon is her own and not another's. Our own experience can provide a deep pool from which to draw. Arthur John Gossip put it this way:

Preach to your own heart, and many startled passers-by will stop to listen, feeling you are addressing them. Draw anonymously on the story of your life, and they will sit astonished in the pews asking, "Who has been telling him about me? . . . Beneath the skin, people are strangely much alike in every age, in every land."¹⁶

If the Word is to be proclaimed through our words, and if we are going to communicate with our congregation, then theological translation is a necessity for the preacher. I will spell this out more in a later chapter, but let me allude to it here.

Too many preachers preach behind biblical or theological words or images that are meaningless to their listeners. Every preacher is charged with the responsibility of conveying biblical, theological truths in ways the

listeners can grasp and apply to their lives. Many listeners are turned off by preaching because he is talking in a language they do not understand or in a way they do not communicate. The gospel, when written originally, was in the language of the common people, and the preacher is charged with that demand every time he steps into the pulpit, or else he needs to forget about the congregation listening or understanding what the preacher is trying to say. This demands that the preacher labor hard to understand the biblical text he is to preach, but the preacher is also charged with conveying—translating—the text so it can be grasped by its hearers. Careless preparation, lazy study habits, impromptu messages, and inadequate translating of the texts will all lead to a closed mind on the part of the listeners and soon will result in empty pews. No one is going to come for long and listen to sermons that show sloppy preparation and fuzzy thinking and are layered with theological jargon or what seems like pious nonsense to the listeners.

As I will expound later, this does not mean we are to discard all the great biblical and theological words of the Christian vocabulary. We need to interpret, paraphrase, and translate them but not reject them completely. Whatever our new theological words are, they must know and build on the old categories. P. T. Forsyth spoke of this danger:

I cannot conceive a Christianity to hold the future without words like grace, sin, judgment, repentance, incarnation, atonement, redemption, justification, sacrifice, faith and eternal life. No words of less volume than these can do justice to the meaning of God, however easy their access to minds of modern men.¹⁷

Since Bonhoeffer declared several decades ago that the preacher had to learn to speak in a “secular way” about God, our society has become even more secular. Scientific and technological advances have been sweeping. The “Greek” mindset of contemporary society finds the gospel story a greater “foolishness” today than centuries ago. Modern society is boisterous in its assertion that everything is natural, biological, social, scientific, technological, clinical, revolutionary, or theoretical. The church often is viewed as a fossil left over from past archaeological digs—interesting but often unrelated to modern culture. How does the preacher understand the modern world, much less preach to it?

Barth's image of the Bible in one hand and today's newspaper in the other hand speaks to this dilemma. The preacher who starts in the Bible and stays in the Bible is not doing biblical preaching. To be biblical, the sermon must also address people today in their culture. The biblical message must come alive today as a contemporary event.

The preacher is often isolated from much of the real world. Indeed, we see the pain, grief, and joy of a selected group of people. But these are mostly those within the church, and they reveal only a dim or partial image of the secular world. Contemporary literature offers one of the clearest windows into the modern world today. I will focus on this more acutely in another chapter, but a brief word here might be appropriate.

Literature will lift the preacher out of his cloistered cell of ministerial isolation and open his eyes to the world outside. "Authentic preaching," Charles Rice observed, "is worldly because it is grounded in biblical faith; it is truly biblical only when it is worldly."¹⁸ The preacher will be reminded constantly of the world where real people live with their precarious and mysterious position in the universe. Modern literature often struggles with many questions and issues years before theologians do. The preacher who reads contemporary literature will be able to use Paul Tillich's method of correlation: "It tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answer implied in the message."¹⁹ The preacher cannot give answers to questions he has not heard. Literature offers him an ear to the sounds of the modern world.

Literature reflects and echoes the discord and alarm in our world today. Through Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, one can experience alienation and isolation. Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* uncovers the struggle with freedom and conformity. The value of human relationships and the problems of pain, injustice, and suffering meet us in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The search for meaning in an alienated society leaps at the reader from Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*. Graham Greene's whisky priest provides an unlikely hero in *The Power and the Glory*. John Updike's "Rabbit" books about Harry Angstrom reveal a side of the middle-class life many preachers ignore. And the list goes on and on.

Study the lives of great preachers such as George Buttrick, Paul Scherer, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Arthur John Gossip, and Charles Spurgeon and you will find they were wide readers of contemporary literature, both novels and plays. They were constantly picking the pockets of great and less significant writers. The many references, illusions, and quotes from literature

in the sermons of these preachers not only revealed that they probably knew more effectively the contemporary conditions, but also their own sermon style was enriched by their constant exposure to creative writing, poetic images, metaphors, narrative style, vivid picture words, and simple, colloquial language. If we want to improve our preaching, then we must drink deeply from the fountain of contemporary literature. Our language will become more vivid, our style more oral, and our sermons more understandable to the ears of laypersons.

Of course, literature provides only one avenue of acquaintance with modern society. The preacher must confront its problems and needs personally. Literature may provide for some an escape instead of an avenue for meeting issues. The problems in our own homes, down the street, across the railroad track, in the ghetto one block away, or the poverty, hunger, prejudice, disease, suffering, and war near and far challenge us. Whether the sins are personal or collective, sandpaper rough or velvety smooth, the preacher must be a voice letting modern society know there is a word from God. The church, to use Harvey Cox's phrase, is "the cultural exorcist" challenging the powers of evil and darkness in modern society.²⁰

The preacher's words to society should reflect God's Word within us. The Lord we follow was constantly challenging social and religious traditions and orthodoxies. God's Word addresses both the church and the world. We acknowledge that nothing we say or do is immune to corruption. Thus we attend to the voice of God. Voices have always tried to reverse the words of Jesus and have tried to use words—religious words—to imprison others in a newly founded orthodoxy. Jesus said, "If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed." No one else's creedal words have the power to define or confine the fiery nature of the preacher's prophetic voice. The Word of the Lord came; we listened and obeyed. And sometimes, like our Lord, the Word leads us to a place of suffering and rejection.

Loren Eiseley recounted the words a black girl once said to him in Bimini, on the Old Spanish Main: "Those as hunts treasure must go alone, at night, and when they find it they have to leave a little of their blood behind them."²¹ There has never been a finer estimate of "the price of prophetic preaching" to the modern world. The prophetic word is indeed a treasure for which we always leave behind some blood: toil, pain, time, misunderstanding, and much more.

Our Silence

Speak in the name of God, we must. It is a divine compulsion. Sometimes, however, our words get in the way. They are too small, too feeble, too puny to speak of the unimaginable majesty of God and his love. When I attempt to describe the Word of God in Christ, I feel like a small boy trying to look with one eye through a knot hole in a wooden fence to see the world on the other side. Oh, my vision is so narrow, so limited. When I have said all I can discern from the Scriptures about the incarnate Word, I must bow before the mystery that is beyond me. Sometimes I am mute in the wonder of God's love. Oh, tell it I must, and will. But my telling of it is always so inadequate. And so is yours.

To say that one can never put on God's glasses and look at the world from the divine perspective is not necessary, or is it? I remember hearing Bob Soileau at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary relate once an experience that took place in one of his classes in theology. Dr. Soileau had been giving his interpretation of a certain theological area, and when he paused for comment, one of the students declared quite sincerely: "Well, Dr. Soileau, we have listened to your interpretation; let's look at it now from God's viewpoint." But isn't that always our problem? We simply can never know absolutely what is God's perspective.

We have the Scriptures and also hints and whispers within nature. Nevertheless, eternal truth is always read with misty eyes or through a glass darkened by ignorance, superstition, or religious, economic, and cultural mores. Our theological puddings are also flavored with spices of nonsense, prejudice, fear, and mythology. The best of our theological systems still smacks of the comic book level when we think of the mystery of God. We attempt to make sense out of nonsense, draw light from darkness, refine knowledge from ignorance, cultivate faith from agnosticism, and sow seeds of hope in fields of despair.

We always know less than we think—and yet more. We define faith in terms that are less than it is, and yet more than we can understand. We stumble in our articulation of the realities that exist; yet, we are aware that our words conceal as much as they reveal. Then we wonder why we must think of our faith in symbolical and paradoxical terms.

A few sentences ago I advised you to be theological translators. We need to make our words about the Word plain and simple. But I quickly flash a caution light here to warn you not to be too simple. R. E. C. Browne states it forcibly:

Never get things too clear. Religion can't be clear. In this mixed-up life there is always an element of unclearness . . . If I could understand religion as I understand that two and two make four, it would not be worth understanding. Religion can't be clear if it is worth having. To me, if I can see things through, I get uneasy—I feel it's a fake. I know I have left something out. I've made some mistake.²²

None of us ever see the whole of truth, especially religious truth. Who dares to state that she can explain the problem of evil and suffering or the mystery of goodness? Whose mind or limited words can explain all about God's creation of the universe, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, or eschatology? We cannot capture God or these great theological themes in a tiny web of words. They will always break under the movement of such thoughts. Even the best of our words fail to describe fully the mystery of God's love. For the sake of simplicity we cannot surrender all of our metaphors, paradoxes, and symbols. So, I return again and again to the biblical words and shout and whisper them about the God I have known through his word, Christ.

But words are not the only way we can express ourselves. Conversation is an intimate means of communion, but it is not the only means, nor was it the first. Men and women had communion with one another before speech was developed. Even today with speech, communion can be established by a nod, a gesture, a glance, a smile, a touch, a facial motion, or a body motion. Communion can be established in a vital way without a verbal word passing. In my former church in Bristol, Virginia, our deaf choir would sometimes "sing" by sign language. Their gestures were breathtaking at times, and were expressed without a verbal sound. We can speak with our eyes, our hands, our face, our gestures, and our touch. In so many ways we can speak without talking.

In some of our deepest experiences, words are inadequate. When we have lost a loved one or have had a bitter disappointment or have felt rejected, words cannot address our deep need. Nevertheless, a touch or an embrace by someone who understands us and loves us can strengthen us without a verbal word passing between us. And that is a powerful language.

Centuries ago King Zedekiah asked the prophet Jeremiah: "Is there any word from the Lord?" And the question is addressed to us again today. Yes, the Word has come, but will we be able to hear it coming now? We

cannot hear God's Word if we do not listen. The Word of God came, but it was not verbal. It does not continue to come just as words. Only when we pause and listen will we hear.

Jesus said the first and greatest commandment began with the call to listen. "Hear, O Israel." On many occasions Jesus warned his followers: "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." The Apostle Paul directed the church to remember that "faith cometh by hearing." When we listen, we will hear the Word of God. As the Psalmist has reminded us, "Be still and know that I am God." When the prophet Elijah sought to find the Lord, he did not find him in the noise of the wind, earthquake, or fire. He heard "a still small voice." This verse might be translated more closely to the original text as "a sound of gentle stillness." Apart from and within the rush, noise, and hectic pace of our lives comes "a sound of gentle stillness." The sound of God's eternal Word comes to interpret the silence.

In that silence I simply bow before God and remain silent before God's silence. Sometimes God speaks in the silence before my words, at other times between the pauses in my words, and again after my words have been said. In the silence, God has taught me that the divine Word goes forth even when I am mute or my words fail or are inadequate. God's Word is still proclaimed.

The sound that comes to interpret the silence is not found in the noise of words, written or verbal, but is heard in the Living Word. We read in the Vulgate: *In principio erat verbum et verbum erat epud Deum, et Deus erat verbum . . . Et verbum caro factum est.* "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh" (John 1:1, 14). Is there any word from the Lord? Yes. The Incarnate Word has come from the depths of the very being of God to interpret the sounds of silence. So, go preach. Proclaim his word, knowing that in our words and in our silence, God continues to speak the divine Word.

Notes

¹James C. Howell, *The Beauty of the Word: The Challenge and Wonder of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 3.

²Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), 142.

³Martin Luther, *Werke*, quoted in Philip S. Watson. *Let God Be God: An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 152.

⁴See *La Confession Helvétique Posté'tieure* (Texte Francais de 1566) (Neuchatel: Delachaux Niestle A. A., 1944), 42.

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961), 4:240. Quoted in Clyde Fant, *Preaching for Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 22.

⁶Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 302.

⁷Rudolf Bultmann, *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschelben*, vol. 7, of *Beitrage zur evangelischen Theologie*, ed. E. Wolfe (Munic: Evangelischer Verlag, Albert Lempp, 1941), 66. Quoted in Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 21.

⁸Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 142.

⁹P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent Press, 1907), 3

¹⁰Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Come Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1978), ii.

¹¹William A. Quayle, *The Pastor-Preacher*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 27.

¹²Milton Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 449-503.

¹³See the General Prologue, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Poetical Works of Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933), 24.

¹⁴Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Seabury Press, 1964), 75.

¹⁵Henry Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 12ff.

¹⁶Arthur J. Gossip, *In Christ's Stead* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 83.

¹⁷Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 197.

¹⁸Charles L. Rice, *Interpretation and Imagination: The Preacher and Contemporary Literature* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 41.

¹⁹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:8.

²⁰Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, Co., 1965), 149.

²¹Loren Eiseley, *The Night Country* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 224.

²²R. E. C. Browne, *The Ministry of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 58.