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The Gospel and Life in Preaching

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With a twinkle in his eye and skepticism in his voice a clergyman asked recently, "What, in your opinion, is a good sermon?" One almost despairs of giving an answer. There are so many styles of preaching and so many different kinds of people listening that it appears hopeless to try to give a definition of good preaching which would hold true for everyone in every situation. Even the so-called experts often do not agree. Every seminary has its tales of students who submit the same sermon to two homiletics professors and receive contradictory criticisms from them. The faithful often show little discrimination when they enthusiastically exclaim, "Wasn't that a wonderful sermon!" Is there no crucial criterion by which we can judge all sermons?

Admitting that there are vastly different ways to preach and that there are vastly different ways in which people hear, a single fundamental criterion for good preaching, viewed in terms of what happens to the hearer, would be: "A good sermon is one in which the hearer is persuaded by the gospel to trust God and love his neighbor." In other words, a good sermon is one in which the hearer is moved to do the right thing for the right reason. To put it another way, the hearer is freed in faith for love. However, it is a bit presumptuous to judge a sermon primarily on the basis of its positive effect on the

hearer. Faith and love are gifts of the Spirit, who blows where He wills. Viewed, then, from the point of view of the actual content of the sermon, a good sermon is one in which the will and promise of God in Jesus Christ is proclaimed meaningfully in relation to the life of the hearer.

While most everyone agrees with the central thesis that meaningful and persuasive preaching is preaching in which the gospel happens to the hearer, we are not at all consistent in carrying out the principle in practice. It is comparatively easy to preach the gospel meaningfully on occasion, but it is difficult to do so consistently. It is easy to affirm that sermons should be "Christ-centered," but it is not easy realistically to put Christ into the center of every specific situation.

Preachers often make bold assertions in their sermons. "Put Christ into the center of your marriage." One preacher in a wedding sermon was so bold as to suggest the couple should take Christ into the living room and their bedroom. But what does that mean? What does the gospel of God in Christ really have to do with one's marriage relationship? How do we experience Christ at the center of our life? When the preacher asserts that the gospel is the power of God for salvation, how is this true in terms of my life now? What kind of power is the power of the gospel? What do you mean by "salvation"?

In the first section I shall attempt to state theologically what the meaning and power of the gospel is in our life. The

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material is organized under three interdependent propositions: The gospel is God's answer to man's fundamental problem in life. The gospel is God's power that frees us in faith for love. The gospel is God's shape for the new life.

This section is written deliberately in the form of a sermonic essay. The author's hope is not merely to explain but to proclaim the gospel; not merely to talk about preaching but to preach. Since for the most part only colleagues in the full-time ministry will take the trouble to read this, the life situation is taken from life in the pastoral ministry.

I

THE GOSPEL AS GOD'S ANSWER

If you asked most preachers, "What is man's fundamental problem in life?" you would receive a unified answer: "Sin." If you asked, "What do you mean by sin?" the answer would diverge widely. The tendency is always to define sin moralistically as the transgression of the law. It is this, but man's sin is not only that he breaks a law here and there. Sin is separation from God. Man's problem is not rooted in an act of rebellion but in a fact of alienation. The condition of separation exists prior to the outward manifestation of moral failure.

The central mark of separation in life is man's "unfaith." By unfaith we do not mean that man finds it difficult to believe in certain doctrines about God. Rather we mean that man does not stand in an absolute trust relation with God. The fellowship between himself and God is broken, and he is adrift in unfaith. This is the heart of sin. It is at the base of all

sins. All human conflicts find their ultimate source in man's unfaith.

Why is this so? When a man turns from God in unfaith, he must of necessity simultaneously turn the whole world into himself in pride and concupiscence. Man's pride is already symptomatic of man's unfaith. Man's lust to devour everything for himself or his need to make idols out of the world is rooted in the fundamental malady of unfaith.

This point is so crucial and fundamental that it needs underscoring. Preachers often make the mistake of not going deep enough. When they analyze human problems, they take the surface situation—a man does not love his wife. They analyze it and end by saying in effect, "You love yourself too much. You are a proud and lustful man." Indeed he is. Because he is either playing God or making gods, the hearer must be confronted by God's radical judgment—God's radical "no" to everything man does in unfaith. But the question still remains: Why is he proud and lustful? What is it that drives him to such a turning of all things into himself? The answer is rooted in breach of the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me." This self-seeking is precisely what he must do because he is separated from the one true God in unfaith. His failure to love his wife is rooted in his failure to love God, which is rooted in his separation from God in unfaith. If the human problem in a sermon is not analyzed deeply enough, preachers will make the law and not the gospel the key to the solution of the problem.

The gospel is God's answer to this fundamental bondage of man. The gospel is the proclamation that God in His love

acted in Jesus Christ and that in His life, death, and resurrection Christ once and for all atoned for our sin and freed us from every power that held us in bondage. The gospel is the joyous word from God about God. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). The gospel is the Word that proclaims the truth that God is faithful even though we are unfaithful. The gospel answers man's question about God, which is always a question because of his alienation from God. The gospel proclaims not merely that there is a God but that God is grace and that in His unconditional agape in Christ He accepts us though we are not acceptable.

The only really meaningful preaching is that which sees the human problem in its depth and links the gospel as God's answer to that problem. The singular task of the preacher is to bring his hearer to the most profound understanding of himself and speak God's answer to his situation of bondage. The answer is the gospel, "God has freed you from the powers of death."

THE GOSPEL AS GOD'S POWER

The gospel is not simply a word about God freeing men through His love in Christ. The gospel is God's freeing power for life. The power of God's love which once overcame the evil one and atoned for sin is present to us today through the outpouring of the Spirit. "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone that has faith" (Rom. 1:16). Because God acts in His Word, because His Spirit works in and through the gospel, the gospel is the Word of life, the Word that is faith-creating in the hearing of it

(Rom. 10:17). The proclamation of the gospel is the means by which God's liberating power is at work in the church and world today. God's Word is God Himself confronting us not as an object to be thought about and manipulated but as a subject who addresses us in His will and grace. Our witnessing the gospel is not fundamentally a lecture about God, but the basis of an encounter with God in which the event of salvation takes place now.

We recall Luther's explanation of the Third Article: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel." The words "I believe that I cannot . . . believe," if taken seriously, forever destroy the temptation to moralistic preaching, which throws the hearer back upon himself without reference to grace. Faith cannot be commanded. Faith cannot be cajoled in fear of punishment. Faith cannot be induced by means of logical proofs given by some authorities higher than the hearer himself. Faith is the miracle of the Spirit.

The Spirit convinces us that God is present in His love in Jesus Christ. When a person is grasped by this grace, his fears are overcome and living trust is born or nurtured.

The Spirit convinces us that the curse of our past sin is covered by the sacrifice of Christ. It is no longer a curse in spite of the fact that the individual bears the marks of that sin in his life. There is no way of redoing our past failure, of regaining our lost vitality. But the curse is removed and the past does not hold us in bondage. My record says, "You are a foul failure." God proclaims, "I have accepted

you." By this word His love frees us from the need to hide our sins and enables us to face the truth about ourselves.

The Spirit convinces us that the bondage of death which pronounces the great "no" upon our life and which closes our future is broken. God has given us victory over death. He has opened our future by standing immovably in our presence in Jesus Christ. "I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39)

This freedom in faith from past sin and future death is the basis of courage in the present. We are able to take risks in spite of the possibility of failure because we stand in the forgiveness of sins. We are able to escape having to die in judgment. We are free to die freely, and because of that decision, to live with courage and hope in every moment of life. God's love in Jesus Christ convinces us of our wholeness, we are reconciled, we are no longer in bondage to ourselves and the world.

As soon as we are made whole, we possess the power to reach outside ourselves to others. As soon as we are freed in faith *from* our bondage, we are freed *for* love to others. "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another" (Gal. 5:13). The gospel is God's power to free us from the powers that distort true life. We are freed by the gospel to be what God intended us to be—people who rule God's world as just stewards and serve one another in love.

Our inability to love is rooted in our failure to experience the love that makes us whole and that gives us power to turn outside of ourselves to others. The gospel is the power that makes men whole in faith and thus frees them for love to others.

THE GOSPEL AS GOD'S SHAPE

Strictly speaking, the gospel is the proclamation concerning God's redeeming deed in Jesus Christ. God is the subject. We proclaim His love in Christ as a gift to the hearer. The gospel in essence is God's power that frees a man in faith for love.

At the same time every proclamation of the gospel leads one to reveal the form and shape the God-man Jesus Christ took in order to be God's servant in the plan of salvation. The form He took was that of a suffering servant who gave His whole life in order to redeem men. The proclamation of the gospel involves not merely a statement of God's action but a revelation of God's shape in the world. Through the Suffering Servant we come to know the nature of the agape of God, and through Him we come to know the nature of the new creation which He brings. "By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. (1 John 4:9)

In proclaiming the gospel we not only offer the gift of God's agape to the hearer but we indicate the shape of agape life that the hearer engages in as a result of the gospel taking hold in his life. The form of Christ bearing the cross in accord with His

Father's will and suffering in love for the whole world is the shape of the new life. "As I have loved you, so love one another."

How has He loved us? What is the shape of agape? Agape is distinguished fundamentally from all forms of human love in that it is "unmotivated." That is to say, it is pure grace. God does not love out of His own need to be loved, but because He is love. God loves us not because we love Him but in spite of our rejection of Him. All human love is rooted in some form of personal need and affection. I love my son because he carries the honor in my name, and I need his love and respect in my life. All human love is "motivated" by the worth of the object and the need of the lover. For this reason it is selective and temporal. It selects the good, the beautiful, the true, and selects them only so long as they are good and beautiful and true. But God's love is unmotivated and therefore it is unconditional and eternal. It forgives seventy times seven and not merely seven times.

When we are grasped by God's love in the gospel, we are moved by it to love with the same love. The gift of the Spirit is not merely that I receive faith but that I receive agape, the power to love like God. The impossible agape love is possible in part. The preaching of the gospel, therefore, includes the gift of agape and indicates the shape of the agape life in Jesus Christ.

It is more apparent now why the basic thesis is stated so dogmatically: "The only meaningful and persuasive preaching is preaching that is gospel to the hearer." The gospel is God's answer to man's ultimate problem of unfaith. The gospel is God's power that frees a man in faith for love. Whatever answer there is to man's ques-

tion concerning that which is ultimate, the gospel is that answer. Whatever reason there is for hope, the gospel offers that reason. Whatever power there is for love, God loved, proclaimed, and conveyed in the gospel is that power. The only way a man can know what the right thing to do is to see the Christ of the gospel. The only right reason for loving God is the love of God which is offered through the gospel. (A hearer cannot do the right thing for the right reason apart from the gospel.)

II

THE PROBLEM

Here is an example of how the gospel is meaningfully and powerfully related to a concrete problem in the life of a minister.

One of the most profound problems we face is that of being a minister and being a human being at the same time. We are admonished, "A bishop should be blameless." Any appraisal of our efforts would indicate we fail in this ideal, as we do in all others. Just how to deal with such failure honestly in relation to our people and to our fellow ministers is a tremendously painful thing for us.

Daniel D. Walker in his book *The Human Problems of the Minister* puts the problem this way:

Nevertheless, most ministers feel a compulsion to exemplify the life they preach. Insofar as this means an earnest striving to be better, it is good. But when it involves assuming a righteousness that is not there, or hiding sins that are, it is evil. Pretense is one of our vocational hazards and suppressed guilt is our occupational disease.¹

¹ Daniel D. Walker, *The Human Problems of the Minister* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 3.

Laymen readily accept the fact that to be a layman is to be human, to desire money, and to have human foibles that reveal themselves now and then. The minister, however, is supposed to be above such things. The writer's father, who had some Amish influence in his life, used to chide him for wearing a gold watch band. The writer would look at his father's wrist and say, "But Pop, you have one yourself." "That's different," he replied. "You are a man of God. You are a minister, I am only a baker." For many people the minister is the vicarious exemplar of virtue in their lives. In every parish there are hundreds of opinions about what a minister should be like and should do. Most of them are quite demanding in terms of the level of the "spirituality" of his life.

The problem is twofold. Not only are preachers guilt-ridden for the poor shape that they cut as ministers of the gospel as they face themselves honestly before the mirror of God's Word, but they feel that they have to turn about and engage in a pretense of innocence and even unnatural virtue in order not to offend the weak brethren. As one man put it, "We preachers are not supposed to be sinful, so how can we confess?"

The problem is evidenced in many ways. Sometimes the preacher's whole life takes on a "ministerial tone" something like the often decried pulpit tone. He tries to sound just a little more holy, a little better than he really is. Laymen often react to their own creation. They say in effect, "I can't really relate to you as human being, pastor. You don't understand, because you are a man of the Spirit."

The predominant view of ministers as described in literature in that they are

irrelevant teetotalers whose most exacting task is chairing a ladies' society meeting. The view is an overstated one, but it does reflect a truth. We often assume a ministerial tone in our ministry that renders us unreal to people.

The problem is felt in our own inner frustrations as we strive to be all things to all men. We know at times that what we are doing is not the work of a person but a "personage," to use Tournier's distinction. We are merely functioning as functionaries. We are not involved as a human being to other human beings in open dialog.

In our effort to break through the subtle and sometimes overt schizophrenia, we often seek solutions that only increase the loss of personal integrity and our alienation from the people. We react with high sensitivity to the criticism of the parish, sometimes in the form of a kind of messianic self-justification. "They have always persecuted the prophets." Sometimes it takes the form of repression of our genuine anger. Again we quote Walker:

Clearly the minister is in a different position. Like everyone else, he has his enemies; but unlike most, he feels compelled to pretend they are his friends. In part it is due to popular opinion that shapes his profession into a stereotype. In part this is due to his own sincere desire to be a true follower of the One who counseled men to love their enemies.²

Sometimes we take the offensive and castigate the parish for its fundamental failure to respond to the prophetic Word we preach to them. Sometimes we simply engage in a double standard of morality. We save our real living for those rare

² Ibid., p. 17.

occasions when we get together with other preachers or a few people who understand our common humanity.

In so many instances, however, what we do does not enable us to relate openly and honestly with the people. We live in constant suppression, repression, submission, in simple avoidance of the truth about each other.

THE GOSPEL ANSWER, POWER, AND SHAPE

The crucial question is: What does the gospel have to do with all of this? The first answer ought to be a limiting one. The gospel does not solve all problems or every dimension of every problem, although the healing power of the gospel may affect every dimension of every problem. The gospel per se is not the answer to all the biological, psychological, and environmental factors that go into making this situation problematic. The hearer may need medical advice; he may simply need rest; he may need to eat less. There are many avenues of solution to a problem and many things the hearer can do on his own in dealing with aspects of a problem.

The question then is: What does the gospel have to do with this problem? We should apply the threefold distinction employed earlier. The gospel is God's answer to our past failure in our ministry to others because it convinces us of the forgiveness of sins. The gospel is God's power that frees us for a prophetic ministry because it convinces us that God judges us in mercy and gives us His grace in Christ. The gospel is God's shape for our ministry because it reminds us that we are to assume the form of servant to others.

The gospel convinces us that through the forgiveness that God offers in Christ He frees us from the curse of our failure. The gospel frees us from the need to defend ourselves against just criticism. The gospel frees us for a ministry that is open through the sense of a new beginning each day in the forgiveness of sins.

It is hard to forgive. It is even harder to believe you are really forgiven. Paul Tournier is right when he said to a group of psychiatrists:

Open your eyes and you will see among your patients that huge crowd of wounded, distressed, crushed men and women, laden with secret guilt, real or false, definite or vague; even a sort of guilt at being alive, which is more common than you think.³

We are burdened by both real and false guilt, consciously and subconsciously. We are compelled to defend ourselves against criticism precisely when the criticism may be correct. A wise teacher has observed: "Never tell a woman she is wrong, especially when she is wrong. In self-defense she will gather together all your errors of the past and throw them into your face." How much of our own self-defense can be truly understood in this light—the defense that beclouds the real issue and seeks to displace guilt but ends in loss of integrity and community with others.

The gospel says: "God accepts you. Prodigal, never mind the excuses. Never mind finding some gimmick to get back into the vineyard. Your Father rejoices when you return to His grace. He kills the fatted calf and orders a feast, because this day you who were dead are made

³ Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 60.

alive again by His grace." There is no need to deny your humanity. God is faithful and just and will forgive you your sin. There is no need to give people the impression that you are a saint of saints. If they see your humanity and wonder how you can serve in spite of it, say to them, "God uses earthen vessels to do the work even angels cannot do." God's grace is so great that it can take me in my weakness and work a miracle. Though I am not at peace, He makes me a peacemaker. This is the miracle of my empty hands.

God's forgiveness enables me to live honestly with my past failure that still plagues my ministry in the present. Suppose that I did make a mistake in counseling the couple and contributed to an eventual divorce! Suppose that I did fail to minister adequately to a mother in her illness and the children still cannot forgive me! The error of the past haunts my present. But the gospel says to me: "It is not a curse upon you. God does not count it against you for Christ's sake. You will have to live with some of the jagged edges, but not in hiding, blushing at the sight of the offended, unable to say to them, 'Forgive me, I was wrong.'"

The gospel convinces us that God alone is our Judge and that He judges us in the mercy of Jesus Christ. The gospel frees us from the illegitimate judgment of others. The gospel frees us for a prophetic ministry. St. Paul was badgered by the Corinthian church. Why don't you do this? Why don't you be like that? He asserts his freedom in the words: "Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even

judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me." (1 Cor. 4:2-4)

There are criticisms we must accept openly. There are false criticisms we must reject just as openly or run the risk of losing ourselves in false guilt and loss of self. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two. The gospel enables me to say: "Don't you play God in my life. I put myself into the hands of God, who is Judge. I do what I finally feel He directs me to do. I do not even judge the act myself."

Without this freedom from human judgment there can be no freedom for prophetic ministry — ministry that is willing to be set against the opinion of the majority, ministry that can if need be bite the hand that feeds it. The gospel enables us to be afraid of no man, because we stand in awe of the gracious God.

In the moment this happens I become a new man. I become a man of whom no one else need be afraid, no one else need close himself off from. Why? Because I proclaim to him: "I am not your judge, just as you are not mine. God is. God judges you justly, but above all in mercy. Come let us make a new beginning together this day."

The gospel convinces us that God created and nurtured the church through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ (John 20:21-23). The church is not a human ideal made of ideal humans, but a divine reality born and nurtured in the forgiveness of sins. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a re-

ality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely we shall think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.⁴

The dreams of virtuous men seeking to form an ideal community was not what brought the church into being. What brought the church into being was the mercy and grace of God. The power of the church does not lie in the virtue of its members but in the grace of our Father. The purpose of the church is not to bring about some utopian community but to continue the power of God's resurrection in the present through the forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ. The uniqueness of the church is that it is a community of the forgiven, and the power of the church is that it conveys God's forgiveness to people.

What freeing power does this proclamation have as we relate to our people and to the church? This gospel frees us from disillusionment with regard to the failure of our people. This gospel frees us for a ministry centering in the new beginning in forgiveness. So much of our own accusation of our people and the church is based on basic illusion about the church. A very fine member of the writer's congregation said with bitterness, "I can't understand why there should be so much politics in the church. It makes me mad." He perhaps had a right to be angry, but his righteous indignation was in part based on the false assumption that the church is

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 30.

some ideal human community made of ideal humans. In our situation we often end up accusing our people for their failure to achieve a kind of preconceived ideal we have set in our minds for what the church should be. We see our ministry as an effort to bring into being a Camelot, an ideal city in the midst of a fallen world. We are bitterly disappointed when the people accuse us, turn on us, and fail to respond to the appeals. The disappointment is invalid to the extent that it grows out of our illusions about what the church is and what our ministry in it ought to be.

If a preacher honestly accepts the humanity of his people, they will not disillusion him. If it is his joy to share the power of God's forgiveness with them, then he will never be disappointed by their reaction to his ministry in their midst. Again Bonhoeffer reminds us:

Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus, the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that one Word and Deed which really binds us together — forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.⁵

The gospel frees me from the need to defend myself against my parishioners and colleagues, and it prevents me from accusing them. The gospel frees us for continual acceptance of one another without repression of anger. Anger is not repressed; it is melted away when I remember the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

unbelievable grace in Jesus Christ that binds us together.

My purpose is not to be exhaustive but to give one concrete illustration of the gospel of God proclaimed in such a way that it takes hold of life — real life — shakes it at its foundations, and offers the possibility

of new life in Christ. Word and life belong together. The Word divorced from life is a meaningless, magical incantation. Life divorced from the Word of Christ is in the throes of death. It is the preacher's task to bear the Word of God in the life of the hearer.