

Contemporizing the Gospel

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What would you say is the greatest danger facing the Christian Church today? Is it godless Communism, which threatens not only to overthrow our political structures but to rob us of our religious freedom as well? I'm sure some of you feel that the greatest danger facing our church is that one teaching of the Scripture after another will be lost, so that eventually there will be precious little left to believe.

Now, to be sure, these are dangers, and very real ones, with which you will have to contend in our ministry. But I submit they're not necessarily the greatest danger. As I see it, the greatest danger facing the Christian Church today are not the liberal preachers who rip Christianity to shreds. Just as bad are conservative preachers whose sermons are dull, boring, totally unrelated to the life people live seven days a week. Dorothy Sayers has remarked: "The church today has succeeded in doing what the Apostles and even the enemies of Christ never did: it has made Him appear dull."

The topic assigned for this essay speaks directly to this point, for it describes our ministry as "contemporizing the Gospel."

This is our commission from God, which we must strive to fulfill

- I. by choosing language which clearly conveys God's charter for His people.
- II. by using methods designed to provide a favorable reception for God's message.

Do you remember a remark your Greek instructor made when you began your study of New Testament Greek after years of studying Xenophon, Homer and Thucydides? He pointed out that the New Testament was written not in the majestic and beautiful Greek of the classical period, but in the Greek of the marketplace and the port. Surely the Holy Spirit is teaching us something here. If we are to give our people the Gospel in their language, then we're going to have to learn the Koine of today's world and to preach in language which clearly conveys God's charter for His people, a charter which announces first of all: "I have called you to be Mine!"

One of the dark marks of our day is its doubt, its uncertainty about many important things, especially about the answers to some crucially important questions, questions like: "Who am I, and where did I come from?" "What am I doing on earth?" "What's the purpose of my life?" "Where am I going, and how can I be sure I'll get where I hope I'm going to get?" Nobody can be considered intelligent who doesn't know the answers to those basic questions. But where does one get his answers? Right there is the first fact we'd want to nail down tight when talking to people, especially the non-church member who's used to discussing religion in terms of "The way I look at it..." or "Well, it seems to me..." In order to communicate the Gospel to people, we'll have to make sure they understand clearly that what we're presenting is revealed religion, a message which no man could ever have discovered by himself, but concerning which God told us miraculously. To people who are accustomed to think that this world pretty well runs itself according to well established laws of nature, we daren't ever grow tired of telling people that God has often intervened in our world to cause things to happen which otherwise would never have happened, to tell us things which we would otherwise not have known.

When we describe the action God took in order to make us members of His family there's a temptation for us preachers to be lazy, to fall back into 19th Century language patterns, instead of exerting ourselves to find different and interesting ways of contemporizing Bible truth for God's 20th Century children.

Take the word "salvation." I submit it doesn't communicate too well to our people, chiefly because it's ambiguous. "Salvation" means "deliverance", but from what? Are you satisfied when you ask a Sunday School child: "What did Jesus do for you?" and he responds: "Jesus saved me from sin"? I submit that that answer is imprecise; it doesn't say accurately enough what needs to be said. When your sermon announces: "Jesus saved you from sin," perhaps you mean that Jesus canceled our debt of sin, so that the guilt of our sin no longer rests

on us but on Christ. Or perhaps you mean that Jesus broke the power of sin in us, so that, as Paul reminded the Romans: "Sin shall not have dominion over you" (6,14). Or when you announce: "Jesus saved you from sin," are you referring to the day when we shall be delivered from the very presence of sin? If we want to convey God's truth to our generation, be assured we can do this only in language which speaks clearly, not only clearly enough to be understood, but so clearly that we cannot be misunderstood. For the preacher to disregard this, and instead to follow the principle that if you throw enough mud at a wall some of it has got to stick is unbecoming an ambassador of the Most High.

When you describe Christ's redemptive work, are you satisfied with saying that "He died for our sins"? Is that giving people a sufficiently clear picture of Christ's vicarious work? Where is His active obedience? His death occupied only a few hours on that Friday we call Good, but the life of perfect obedience He lived for us lasted for more than 30 years. At Mt. Sinai God not only forbade disobedience; He also demanded obedience. Surely it's important for us to declare that Jesus, with His innocent death, covered our disobedience; but isn't it equally important to emphasize that Jesus, by His life of perfect obedience provided the obedience which God had demanded of us but we had not provided?

Once the preacher has explained the amazing acts of God which brought us rebels back to the heart and the home of the Heavenly Father, the preacher is at another critical point. He dare not stop there. For Christ, saving men meant not only rescuing them but also restoring them. God's charter for us speaks, first of all, of deliverance, but deliverance leads to discipleship. This, then, is the goal of our ministry, the goal of every sermon: to further God's saving purpose in the lives of those who hear, enlisting and equipping them in turn to be agents of God's cosmic rescue operation. In His Word God announces to us not only: "I have called you to be Mine!" but also: "I have called you to be different!"

This is an important fact for the preacher to remember, because many people in the pews are unhappy. Outwardly they may appear well adjusted and on top of the world. But inwardly they know there must be something more to life than they have found. How important for us to say as clearly as we know how that God has called us not only to be nice, quiet, sincere people, but priests of God, His chosen representatives in that particular slice of life where He has placed us. God holds us accountable for helping people to realize that they have been set free from the power of sin and Satan not so that they might be their own boss, but so that they might every day in some way help God in His creative work of governing the universe, as well as in His redemptive work of leading souls to His side. By calling every Christian His priest God is emphasizing that every Christian has been placed in this world to bring the needs and frustrations of the world before God, and in order to transmit God's judgement, promise and blessing to the world.

God has called you and me into this business of being preachers for the sake of His people. We exist for their sake, not they for ours. God's people need help if they are to lead the lives to which God has called them. They need to recognize their dual nature as sinner-saints, to see clearly which those forces within them are which are furthering their growth in grace, and which those forces within them are which are hindering that growth and frustrating the gentle work of the Holy Spirit.

How easy it is to acquire the unholy habit of looking upon the lay members of our congregation as the pastor's little helpers, who are to assist him to carry out his ministry. A more fantastic perversion of the truth could hardly be imagined. It's we pastors who have been called to serve people, to help God's priests carry out their ministry. The pastor who wants to convey to his people God's charter for them dare never forget that the decisive battles of faith are not fought within the four walls of a church building, but in the social, political, economic, and cultural areas where our parishioners spend most of their waking hours.

When we talk to our people about sin, do we muddy the waters by confusing S-I-N with S-I-N-S ? Have we given our parishioners the idea that sin is basically doing naughty things with our hands, our mouth, our eyes? Ought we not rather point out that picking somebody's pocket, or using profane language, or casting hungry glances at sexy pictures are only symptoms of a much more serious underlying malady, and that God is more concerned with the basic cause (a heart in rebellion against Him) than He is with the symptoms? God is always more interested in attitudes than in actions.

Every man of us is convinced that God has chosen us to be His 20th Century John the Baptists, to go before, the Lord to prepare His way into the hearts of men. But when we call people to repentance, do we somehow take the edge off John the Baptist's call by seeking to make it more palatable? In attempting to make the Savior's claim more attractive and less demanding, does our call to repentance get to sound something like: "If you don't all repent after a fashion, and confess your sins, so to speak, you might all be damned, as it were"?

God invaded life on our planet to give us some wonderfully Good News. But good news does not become good news until it's proclaimed. The language which we use to proclaim God's good news must be clear—a kind of 20th Century Koine. More often than tie suspect, people don't know exactly what the preacher is trying to say. Nobody could say that about Christ's preaching. They said many things about His preaching, some of them highly uncomplimentary, but they never accused Him of being obscure and difficult to understand. A pastor intent on communicating the Gospel will never leave people muttering: "What in the world is that man trying to tell me?"

To avoid having people say that about our preaching means we'll either have to explain technical theological jargon or else simply not use it. Words and expressions such as "dayspring," "manifest," "glorious," "manifold," "husbandman," "heir of salvation," "washed in the blood," "the things of this world," used as isolated phrases, contribute little to comprehension. Communicating the Gospel means using concrete examples in preference to abstractions; it means using down-to-earth pictures to explain difficult concepts; it means relating what I am saying to the life and experience of my hearers. We dare not preach as though we're ignoring the 20th Century and instead living in some timeless, spiritual world.

What has just been said applies not only to the language of the sermon, but, e.g., also to the language of the prayers used in the worship service. Just because a prayer is printed in the *Lutheran Liturgy* or in the *Lutheran Agenda* does not mean it will be helpful in teaching one of God's children how to address his Heavenly Father. Your essayist finds it difficult to understand how any thinking pastor could under any circumstances use a prayer which says to God: "We beseech Thine infinite majesty, vouchsafe unto us the continuance of Thy wonted lovingkindness" Must every collect close with the reminder that Jesus Christ "liveth and reigneth with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end"? If our aim is to communicate the Gospel, then be assured this will be accomplished only with language which speaks to people's hearts and not with strange-sounding ecclesiastical gobbledegook which will predictably turn people off. This very obviously means that you're going to have to rework or rewrite many, perhaps most of the customary service prayers. But you will find that the rewards for you and for your people far outweigh the effort involved.

While we're on the subject of our prayer language, how about the prayers we use elsewhere than in the Sunday service? When we open and close meetings of congregational societies, is the only prayer we use the Lord's Prayer? Do you really think that's a good idea? Isn't that prayer too frequently used and too poorly understood? In case you doubt that, just ask the average confirmand in your instruction class, or the average member of your Church Council, what he understands by "Hallowed by Thy name," and then get ready for a shock.

Don't we owe it to our confirmation instruction class to instruct them also in the art of praying from the heart, instead of exercising them only in reciting memorized prayers? Are we training prayers or reciters? Why not begin each class session with a chain-link prayer, with each student contributing a one-sentence prayer?

The pastor must strive to help people understand clearly also when he reads the Scripture. When you read last Sunday's epistle, (Phil 1, 3-11), did you actually read: "God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ"? If you did, I submit you're not doing all you can to help people understand exactly what God is saying to them. Even if you prefer to continue to use the King James Version in worship services doesn't the need of your people to understand God's Word necessitate explaining terms that are otherwise incomprehensible to them? In the instance just mentioned, why not read that Epistle, or at least the one verse, from a version other than King James? The NIV has it this way: "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."

The preacher who wants to contemporize the Gospel will strive to make his pulpit language and his prayer language sprightly and spirited, instead of ponderous and solemn. Several examples of Martin Luther's down-to-earth preaching come to mind. On one occasion he was explaining how necessary it is to drown the Old Adam. But Luther added: "It's difficult to drown the Old Adam because that rascal can swim." On another occasion Luther illustrated the necessity of good works in the Christian's life by saying: "Faith dare not simply lie on the heart, like foam on beer." Spurgeon once said: "If you preach the truth in a dull, monotonous style, God may bless it, but in all likelihood he won't." Because a sermon is doctrinally correct doesn't mean it has to be as dry as Shredded Wheat. The next time you prepare to enter the pulpit, ask yourself: "Would I be willing to listen to this sermon twice?" Helmut Thielecke makes this sobering appraisal of present-day Christian preaching: "Our preaching is, to be sure, largely correct, workmanlike, and tidy; but it is also remarkably dead and lacking in infectious power. Often it strikes us as isolated from what people feel are the actual realities of their lives and what they talk about in their everyday language. The original intention of the Gospel was to meet man where he is." Contemporizing the Gospel means choosing language which I clearly conveys God's charter for His people.

The preacher dare never forget that he is standing in the place of God. His hands are the Good Shepherd's hands reaching out for the lost sheep; His voice is the Savior's voice; his heart beats with the Savior's love. Whatever particular job the undershepherd happens to be doing, he is acting in God's stead. The pastor's ministry must communicate his love for the flock. If the preacher thinks he's cute, his sermon will show that. If he approaches people with a condescending attitude, people will sense that, and resent it. A too-professional attitude will also betray itself to your hearers. Every sermon you preach, every prayer you pray, every visit you make and class you conduct must announce: "Lord I love You, and I love these people!" But—honestly, now—listen to saw preachers grind out their doctrines and don't you sometimes begin to wonder whether they've ever been in love, or ever had their heart broken, or ever lost a friend? Which brings us to the second point of this essay: Contemporizing the Gospel means using methods designed to provide a favorable reception for God's message.

Contemporizing the Gospel means not only making the Gospel clear to people; it also means making it attractive to people. Your essayist realizes these last words can be misunderstood. In an attempt to make God's Word more attractive, many have remodeled God's Word—chipping away at the demands and threats of the Law, altering the promises, of the Gospel, perhaps by adding a condition to it. But this does not for a moment change the fact that you and I have been called into the business to win friends for Jesus Christ, to use whatever honorable methods we can think of to provide a favorable reception for God's message. What are some of these?

In whatever he does, but especially in his public preaching the preacher must radiate joy. His voice and his appearance must underscore the fact that Christ has come to bring joy to the world. One wonders how well we have communicated our joy in Christ when an observer as perceptive as Thomas Carlyle defines Christianity as a "creed of sorrow." When one hears that, one ought to ask himself: "Have I given the impression that worshiping God is a solemn and dull business?" Don't forget how your faith looks to that stranger in your service, to that family who's just moved into your neighborhood and on whom you'll be calling tomorrow evening. What appeals to the outsider is not your sensitized conscience or your orthodox sermon, but your joy in Christ, the obvious truth that living out the will of Christ has made you happy.

I have never served a mission congregation as pastor and consequently have never received those loving reminders from Synod headquarters your congregation's financial quotas for the new year, about the annual head count of members and prospects, and estimates of the numbers of new members who will enter your congregation in each of the next ten years. I speak only from personal experience as pastor of self-supporting congregations when I say that it is distinctly possible for a minister to be more interested in his congregation than in the Lord, and to promote the congregation at the expense of the Lord's best interests. When that temptation comes you, then remember that mission work is communicating the Gospel. In all of your dealings with people, be sure that you make it absolutely clear that you're interested in the person for or his sake, and not

for your congregation's sake. When you attempt to lead a person to make a particular decision, show that your interest in him is personally, not institutionally motivated. Your job is to see to it that the Holy Spirit has all the elbow room He needs to move that person in God's direction. Say you're calling on a new family. You hope they'll join your congregation. But why? Do you say: "We're a young congregation, a small group; we certainly could use members like you. The big congregation down the street has plenty of members, but we don't"? Wouldn't God's cause be better served if the conversation instead ran something like this: "We are delighted that you worshiped with us yesterday. We consider it a privilege to share God's Word with people; that's what we're in business for." "Well, thank you, pastor. Actually we haven't as yet decided which church we're going to join." "Right, that's your decision, and I wouldn't want to interfere. I do want to promise you, though, that the Word preached in our church is something you need just as badly as I do. If you should decide to make our congregation your church home, our one big aim would be to help you find God's help to fulfill that purpose which God had in mind when He put you on this earth."

The same thing applies with equal cogency to our attitude toward those people who already are our members. Each of us knows the temptation to regard members as supporters of a congregation, instead of sons and daughters in the King's family. If the fruit you had looked for in some area of congregational life is not there (in the financial area, perhaps) the pastor's concern is not so much that the congregation needs that fruit, but rather that the branch isn't healthy.

Just a sidelight here... This interest of the pastor in the welfare of the souls of his flock will be evident in the pastor's pulpit behavior. When you want to communicate with someone, remember that the name of the game is two eyes to two eyes. All of us know from experience how frustrating it is to carry on a conversation with someone whose attention is elsewhere and whose eyes are constantly flitting away from the person with whom he's speaking. Now apply that to the sermon. How can I have decent eye contact with the people God has called me to help if I'm consulting a sermon manuscript in my pulpit Bible? The pastor who uses a manuscript (frankly, I think "cheat sheet" is a better word) in the pulpit might well give thought ought to what impression he is giving his flock. Is the most important thing that he get through that sermon without becoming unglued, or is the important thing that those people know he's out to serve their deepest needs? And, may I add parenthetically, everything that was just said about the importance of eye contact during the sermon applies equally to conducting the liturgy. There's an antiphonal, a back-and-forth character to our forms of worship; it's a type of elevated conversation; but that character of the worship is obscured when my head is buried in a book. The words of the confession: "Beloved in the Lord! Let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins..." and the comfort of the absolution, "Almighty God our Heavenly Father... hath had mercy upon us" are much more meaningful when spoken to the congregation eyeball to eyeball. Surely it ought to be the long-range goal of every pastor to strive to be independent of the book when conducting the liturgy, especially those parts which call for him to face the congregation.

When you step into the home of a prospective member, in many cases it will be known that you're a pastor of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. You know of course, that in the past the name of our Synod has sometimes had a very negative connotation. For right or for wrong, we got to be known as the Synod opposed to so many things. Hopefully, it has been your experience that that time in our history is largely behind us. But let me urge you to be cautious, when you call on people to whom WELS is an unknown quantity, not to give your Synod a black eye on the other side of her face. Don't describe our Synod as a church body whose big interest is to conserve sound doctrine... Nobody I ever met was interested in supporting a museum for the preservation and display of sound doctrine. Our Synod is interested in bringing a message from heaven to bear on the hearts and lives of people on earth. That and that alone is our Synod's commission and will be until God's magnificent trumpets break into our world, and we are relieved of our commission

It's pretty obvious that if you're going to win a favorable reception for God's message, then you yourself must be impressed with that message. If that message causes you embarrassment, you'll show it, and the results on the person you're addressing will not be impressive. To communicate the Gospel, therefore, be positive, not apologetic. Avoid that bashful brand of Christianity which hesitantly tiptoes up to the newcomer,

hat in hand, and almost reluctantly suggests: "I hope I'm not bothering you, but if you don't mind, I'd like to say a few unobjectionable words about the Lord of heaven and earth." The TV huckster trying to sell you his brand of deodorant or automobile is positive in his presentation of the merits of his product. Dare we be less than positive in presenting the message which has brought meaning into our lives and hope into our future? The Lord of the Church has not called us to be lawyers to argue His case, but witnesses. The people you talk to don't want your argument, but they need your witness. "Does this Christianity thing work?" they're asking. "Then share it with the rest of us!" You don't have to argue the Gospel, because the Gospel proves itself, and is its own best evidence. God's Word, as Luther used to say, has hands and feet. It runs after a man; it grips him. Let it loose, and things will happen. But many are so busy contending for the Gospel that they forget to preach the Gospel.

And, while we're on the topic of things to avoid in your ministry, let me mention another. Don't make membership in your congregation seem too easy. You won't make Christ Jesus one bit more appealing to people by demeaning or under estimating His claim. Let no one ever hear you saying: "It won't cost you much to be a Christian." That is simply not true. It will cost you everything you have and are to be a Christian. It doesn't cost a girl much to become a wife; the right two words will do it. But it will cost that girl a whole lifetime to be a good wife. It's true enough that it cost you nothing to become a Christian; that God did for you, without any cooperation from you. But Jesus' words make it clear that it will cost you your very self to be a Christian: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself ..." Don't underestimate that claim. Let's face it: Christianity is no tame little tea party but an unrelenting struggle against the forces of evil for the souls of men.

The preacher who wants to communicate the Gospel of a risen and living Lord will conduct his ministry expectantly. There dare be no defeatism about our message, because we serve a living Lord, a Lord Who defeated the old evil Foe and Who has promised us: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against My Church." Coming in contact with that powerful Gospel message is in a sense like taking hold of a live wire. In the words of the Scripture there is an abundant supply of power, power to free a man from the guilt of unforgiven sin, power to cut a man loose from slavery to Satan, power to strengthen a man to live the new life which God has called him to live. When you sit down to write your next sermon, and when you step into your pulpit to preach it, believe with all your heart that God's power is waiting to be released. Every time you enter your pulpit ask yourself: "Do I actually believe that God will use me and my sermon in this very hour to convict men and women, and to turn their faces toward Christ and toward heaven?" This is preaching with expectancy.

In analyzing preachers, two opposite types may be found, each as remarkable as the other. There are those who exhibit the sheer genius of being able to take something simple and to twist it into something dark and obscure. I remember reading of a pastor who at a pastoral conference was called upon to thank the ladies for having served lunch, and who responded by expressing appreciation to the ladies for "socializing our intellectual intercourse." There are preachers like that who can take the simple and twist it into the obscure. But there are also those—and may their tribe increase!—who either possess, or more likely have developed, the skill to take something profound and exhibit it with simplicity, a simplicity which glorifies God and edifies people. This is contemporizing the Gospel. Go, and do thou likewise!