

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS PREACHING? GOD'S NEWS WE CAN USE

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"
(Rom. 10:14-15)

This chapter aims to answer the question, "What is preaching?" A complex, demanding activity such as preaching requires a multidimensional description. Examining the authentic and inauthentic Pauline Letters for their homiletical wisdom,¹ I offer three characteristics of effective preaching.

In spite of its multiple parts, my understanding of preaching could still be considered minimal. Effective preaching might entail more than I present. I wonder if effective preaching can contain less than I discuss and still claim to be an earnest witness to the gospel.

Insights from Romans 10

According to Olin Moyd, preachers "are just town heralds bringing the news from another source. They do not make the news but are the news reporters."² The image of the preacher as a

herald or heavenly reporter is rooted in the biblical tradition of prophetic proclamation. Furthermore, this image has considerable popularity in the African American churches that have formed me. Having preached in a variety of African American churches, I have discovered that Paul's declaration about the preacher in Romans 10:14-15 is frequently uttered prior to the sermon. Paul, quoting from his Jewish predecessor Isaiah, exclaims in Romans 10:15, "As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.'" Paul's words function almost like a liturgical affirmation in many African American churches.

Some churches regularly recite liturgical affirmations. For example, after the reading of scripture a worship leader will declare, "This is the word of God for the people of God," and the congregants will respond, "Thanks be to God!" In many African American contexts Paul's words in Romans 10:14-15 are often employed as a liturgical prelude to preaching. In the churches of my youth, right before the sermon I regularly heard this odd biblical affirmation about a preacher's feet being beautiful. Though the imagery seemed strange, those who uttered this scripture made it clear that the arrival of the preacher was a moment of great awe and joy.

Closer investigation of Romans 10:15 has clarified the strange imagery of "beautiful feet." The Greek word in this verse often translated "beautiful" (*hōraios*) can also be rendered "timely," as in the sense of arriving at the appropriate moment. Thus, one could render Paul's statement: "How timely are the feet (that is, the arrival) of those proclaiming good news!" In other words, the arrival of the preacher, God's reporter, is always a welcome event because the preacher has the late-breaking story of God's salvation.

God's News We Can Use

In the twenty-first century, information has become the "god" of many people. Or, information and its retrieval in cyberspace have become "god-like." Tom Beaudoin suggests that the expan-

siveness of the information in cyberspace causes many people to imagine the World Wide Web “as a metaphor—however imperfect—for God.” He further observes, “Cyberspace highlights our own finitude, reminding us that we can never be fully cognizant of all that is happening. . . . In this way, cyberspace illuminates our human limits. Yet it also mirrors our desire for the infinite, the divine.”³

A fascinating development of the Information Age has been the insatiable desire for news. Large corporations have based their economic futures and their claims to fame on providing news around the clock. CNN, C-Span, MSNBC, and the Weather Channel are attempting to satisfy our craving for twenty-four-hour news.

Not enough people are raising this question: Does *more* information necessarily mean *better* information? Just because we have more information and more news does not mean it is useful news. In a world where reports about homicides take precedence over stories about heroes, we are hard-pressed to discover news that is beneficial and spiritually uplifting. Thus the primary responsibility of the preacher is to provide God's news that people can use. As mentioned, the Greek word for “gospel,” *euangelion*, means “good news.” Early Christians used the word *euangelion* to make a counterclaim against Roman imperial culture. Throughout the first-century Mediterranean world, persons referred to the imperial benefaction of the caesars in Rome as “good news.”

But, in defiance of the belief that ancient or contemporary “caesars” have had any good news, Christians have always declared that good news is not found in caesar but instead in Christ. God's action in Christ is the true good news, and it is news that we can use.

Before we can talk profitably about preaching from Paul's Letters we need to determine what constitutes preaching in the first place. What is preaching? *Preaching is the faithful, passionate reporting of God's useful news.* Let us examine more closely three defining characteristics of this gospel reporting.

The Faithfulness of Preaching: Cross-shaped Proclamation

Effective preaching seeks to be faithful to time-tested, theological criteria. One criterion that might especially regulate the preacher's work is the theology of the cross, which is a conception of reality that permeates Paul's Letters.⁴ The voluminous scholarship on the theology of the cross attests to its centrality to Christian identity and practice. Without becoming mired in that scholarship, I will briefly present what I *do not mean* and what I *do mean* by a theology of the cross.

Contrary to classical articulations of atonement doctrines, I do not believe that the violence (that is, the blood) of Jesus' crucifixion satisfies or atones for humanity's sins against God, as if God required "blood satisfaction." Moreover, a theology of the cross is not the uncritical sanctification of suffering and violence as mechanisms for establishing a right relationship with God. Many scholars, especially feminist and womanist thinkers, have sensitized us to the horrific violence, exploitation, and imperialism that Christians have propagated under the "sign of the cross."⁵

JoAnne Terrell urges Christians to reject the "hermeneutics of sacrifice," which is "the understanding that personal sacrifice in the imitation of Christ" is the defining feature of Christian identity.⁶ As it developed, Christianity began to glorify Jesus' violent sacrifice, no longer simply considering it a "once and for all" redemptive act. Instead, sometimes violent sacrifice became a reality to be replicated in the lives of Christians.⁷ This call to (violent) sacrifice has often manifested itself either externally or internally.

Externally, dominant groups exhorted oppressed groups to embrace suffering as an example of "bearing the cross." Ironically this suffering was often inflicted upon the socially oppressed groups by the dominant groups. As an example, Terrell observes that the Christian glorification of sacrifice provided an ideological foundation for slavery in Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Additionally, this obsession with sacrifice has enslaved countless women (especially those of color) in a demor-

alizing cult of surrogacy—a ceaseless cycle of living one's life simply for the benefit of others.⁸ In these instances, the cross (or its abusive interpretation) has not atoned for sin but propelled persons into the “sin of servanthood.”⁹

In its internal manifestation, the call to sacrifice has led many Christians to visit upon themselves all manner of suffering in an effort to replicate the suffering of Christ. Julie Hopkins cites chilling examples of women in Christian history enduring unspeakable, self-inflicted violence as a means to atone for their sins in a manner akin to Christ's death.¹⁰ This self-inflicted suffering has often extended beyond the physical realm to include the psychological realm. Some scholars assert that the Western fixation on guilt also has roots in a malformed theology of the cross. According to Hopkins, such a malformed theology supposes that “only punishment through suffering will redress the balance so that if we are not punished by others we punish ourselves.”¹¹ A ceaselessly tormenting guilt has often been the instrument of that self-punishment.

This discussion demonstrates how easily persons can distort a legitimate theology of the cross.¹² Preaching that supports such distortions should be avoided and denounced. Nevertheless, preaching that evades meaningful engagement with the cross and its implications cannot legitimately claim to be Christian. Briefly, I will discuss my understanding of the cross and its ramifications for preaching. The apostle Paul's influence on my thinking will be evident.

I agree with Paul that fundamentally the cross is an apocalyptic reality. This means that the saving dimensions of the cross are located in its life-altering *revelations* and not in its gory details (for example, “the blood of Jesus”). Assessed without the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, the cross is nothing more than a violent spectacle. According to Paul the Holy Spirit provides believers a framework for properly evaluating the proclamation of “Jesus Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1-10). A theology of the cross offers at least two revelations. First, it reveals the mistake of equating appearances with reality. With God apparent displays of strength can in reality be exhibitions of weakness, and apparent displays of weakness can in reality be exhibitions of strength.

Preaching Paul

Could there be a more impressive demonstration of Rome's bone-crushing strength than the crosses that constantly dotted the landscape of colonized Judea? Jesus' prophetic ministry—especially his temple rabble-raising and enthusiastic proclamation about an inclusive reign of God—must have appeared to the religious and political leaders as messianic mania. On that Friday the crosses upon which Rome impaled Jesus and two bandits were the cure for such mania.

Christians claim that Jesus' prophetic ministry was in reality an authentic manifestation of God's intentions. Therefore, since Jesus' obedience to God had landed him in the execution chamber, God stood in solidarity with Jesus during that execution.

God was present in Jesus' weakness and death as a symbol of divine empathy for the violence visited upon people who justly challenge injustice. The cross is not God's demand for suffering. The cross is God's identification with people who suffer, and especially those who suffer in the service of liberation.

Thus, in the cross God invests weakness with the divine strength of God's presence. Tyron Inbody remarks, "Jesus' death is more than simply a heroic act; it is, also, the self-identification of God with and for the world in all its frailty, vulnerability, suffering, and death."¹³

The cross does not tarnish God's strength but instead provides a new model of strength. Weakness and vulnerability can be God's instruments for transformation. If this is a legitimate theology of the cross, it offers a sobering message to a world infatuated with "image management." Cross-shaped preaching declares that preoccupation with our apparent images of strength causes us to ignore our real fountains of power.

Economic images and metaphors of strength are predominant in secular and ecclesial American life. Consequently church leaders and congregations have placed an inordinate emphasis upon numerical indicators of preaching's effectiveness. Many church folk would never worship idol gods like those "misguided" persons in the Bible. But have not some of us constructed shrines to church polls, percentages, and PowerPoint® pie charts? Though ever mindful of the concerns of persons in the pew, cross-

shaped preaching ultimately never takes its “cues from the pews.” It refuses to capitulate to what apparently is palatable and popular. Faithful preaching remembers that in Jesus’ parable of the types of soil in Mark 4 only one of the four seeds fell upon good soil and produced a harvest. Statistically, the preacher in that parable yields only a 25 percent “rate of return.” In the reign of God preachers who contribute to the genuine spiritual transformation of one out of four people should be considered “successful.” God’s perspective on the necessary percentage to constitute “success” differs greatly from many of our cultural standards.¹⁴ Faithful preaching welcomes large crowds but does not judge its effectiveness by crowds or their responses.

Preaching that is true to the cross remains keenly aware of the difference between a delirious crowd and a disciplined congregation. The Gospel narratives of the last week of Jesus’ life indicate how quickly the dispositions of crowds can change. Certain ones who hailed Jesus on Sunday would participate indirectly in his execution on Friday.

Second, a theology of the cross reveals God’s involvement in politics. Those who interpret a theology of the cross as a preoccupation with political passivity, victimization, and violence have ignored the actions of Jesus and God. Death did not rush upon Jesus as an unanticipated tragedy. Jesus must have been aware of the lethal potential of his actions and message. Nevertheless, he willingly embraced the consequences. Furthermore, when judged before various political rulers, he forfeited any chance to avoid his fate.¹⁵

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 address God’s involvement in politics. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.” As suggested, in Jesus’ crucifixion—a form of execution reserved for the lowest social classes—God demonstrated solidarity with those who suffer. Through the resurrection of that crucified man, God also has promised the eventual exaltation of those who are oppressed, as well as the judgment of the oppressors.

Jürgen Moltmann amplifies this point:

Now the death of Christ was the death of a political offender. According to the scale of social values of the time, crucifixion was dishonour and shame. If this crucified man has been raised from the dead and exalted to be the Christ of God, then what public opinion holds to be lowliest, what the state has determined to be disgraceful, is changed into what is supreme. In that case, the glory of God does not shine on the crowns of the mighty, but on the face of the crucified Christ. The authority of God is then no longer represented directly by those in high positions, the powerful and the rich.¹⁶

The revolutionary political implications of the cross are resonant in the verb *katargeō* in 1 Corinthians 1:28. The New Revised Standard Version translates this verb “to reduce to nothing.” One can also translate it “to render ineffective.” In other words, God chooses to render ineffective “the things that are” (for example, oppressive regimes) often by “the things that are not” (for example, persons and endeavors despised by the world). God employs seemingly dishonored persons to dismantle the power politics of dominant cultures. I offer one example from American history of God’s tendency to subvert oppressive regimes through persons who lack social power.

In the 1950s, it appeared to some that American racial segregation, which was supported by legal and cultural codes, would last forever. However, Rosa Parks, a blue-collar black woman in Montgomery, Alabama—the very embodiment of dishonor in the eyes of the white southern establishment—boarded a Montgomery bus one afternoon in 1955. In a simple act of courage and protest, she refused to give up her seat on that bus instead of moving to the back of the bus as black persons were expected to do. Her subversive resistance became a watershed moment in one of the greatest spiritual and social revolutions in American history, the Civil Rights movement. As the adage goes, Rosa Parks *sat down* on that bus so that Martin Luther King Jr. might *stand up* and become the great leader that he did.

Martin Luther King Jr. remarked, "When Mrs. Rosa Parks, the quiet seamstress whose arrest precipitated the nonviolent protest in Montgomery, was asked why she had refused to move to the rear of a bus, she said: 'It was a matter of dignity; I could not have faced myself and my people if I had moved.'"¹⁷ According to a theology of the cross, God, through Rosa Parks's refusal to move, was on the move, dismantling "the (oppressive) things that are" by "the things that are not."

To ensure that preaching is cross-shaped, one might pose these questions:

- Does my preaching regularly display God's tendency to demonstrate power through weakness?
- When appropriate, do my own struggles and brokenness show forth in my preaching?
- Does my preaching genuinely engage the real (physical, emotional, intellectual, and social) struggles of my listeners?
- Does my preaching present God's subversive opposition to oppressive political structures?
- Does my preaching support causes that promote widespread social and political liberation, especially among those who suffer unjustly?

The Passion of Preaching: No Homiletical Half-stepping

The news that a preacher broadcasts is so destiny-altering that it demands a passionate presentation. To restrict one's emotions in the name of a contrived sense of decorum is to misunderstand the significance of the message one bears. More tragically, such a

restriction misrepresents God, the source and subject of the preacher's news.

According to Enlightenment sensibilities, which celebrate critical objectivity, emotional investment robs the investigator of the necessary objective detachment. Furthermore, in Enlightenment philosophy, truth is an object that one will eventually possess when one divests oneself emotionally.

Passionate Christian proclamation runs counter to certain claims of the Enlightenment. Through their emotional investment in their sermons, preachers challenge the presumptuous Enlightenment fantasy that truth is an object to be dispassionately possessed. On the contrary, preachers declare that "Truth" is the "Divine Subject" who has graciously decided to be revealed in Jesus Christ. Additionally, passionate preaching reminds us that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the result of emotional investment.

The New Testament indicates that God does not "half step." God thoroughly invests God's self in whatever God does. In Romans 5:5, Paul testifies to God's passionate commitment to our salvation: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." The verb "to pour" (*ekcheō*) connotes an enthusiastic, even extravagant bestowal of God's love, which spills over because of its abundance. God is not stingy with God's emotions, especially as it relates to the work of redemption.

In Colossians, a text written probably by a disciple of Paul, there exists an equally compelling example of God's emotional investment. The Christ hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 poetically praises Christ's role in creation and redemption. The hymn's assertion in verse 19 has special implications for a theological rationale for passionate preaching.

In verse 19, the writer exclaims that in Christ "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." The writer did not say, "All of God dwelled in Christ." Neither did the writer say, "The fullness of God dwelled in Christ." Rather, employing hyperbole the writer uses two totalizing words, "all" (*pan*) and "fullness" (*plērōma*). In Christ, *all the fullness* of God was pleased to dwell. This hyperbole

in Colossians 1:19 discloses at least two important things about God's *passion*.

First, the relationship between God and Jesus Christ involves the sharing of God's fullness. Every part of God was touched and implicated in the Christ event. So thoroughgoing is God's investment that hyperbole is the only appropriate linguistic device to capture it. Contemplating the "divine excess" that God poured into Jesus Christ, the writer of the hymn must employ exaggerated speech.

Concerning hyperbole, Fred Craddock declares:

Poets and hymn writers have always used hyperbole as not only appropriate but also necessary for the praise of God. The trim, precise, and controlled language of reason alone lacks the size and freedom needed for liturgy. Vocabularies fitted for the boundaries of time and space wait at the foot of the mountain while winged words move ahead.¹⁸

In verse 19, the writer's words take flight on the wings of hyperbole: God's excessive investment deserves an exaggerated description.

Second, the Greek verb *eudokeō*, which means "to please," is used. "In Christ, all the fullness of God *was pleased* to dwell." This verb connotes God's emotional connection with Jesus Christ. The opportunity to share God's fullness in this way with Jesus Christ brought great delight to God. When God gave everything God had, God did not do it grudgingly but freely.

In order for the world to have a saving encounter with Jesus Christ, God knew that God could hold nothing back. Since Christian preaching is a God-sponsored attempt to create additional redemptive encounters with Jesus Christ, preachers must realize that God's demonstration of passion has already set the terms of engagement. In the initial revelation of Jesus Christ, God held nothing back. Thus preachers, who serve as conduits in the creation of fresh revelation, should model their pulpit behavior on God's lack of restraint. We should be willing to give our all for the sake of the gospel.

Authentic righteous passion belongs in the pulpit. By authentic passion I mean affections that emerge from a preacher's own encounter with the gospel. Some preachers prepare and deliver sermons as if their clerical garments are lined with asbestos. They insulate themselves lest the fire of the gospel approach their souls too closely. On the contrary, preachers should want the fire of the gospel to thaw their chilly indifference, to refine their impure motives, and to illumine their faltering footsteps.

One sure way to engender authentic passion is to remember regularly that preachers stand as much, if not more, in need of their sermons as their listeners. Jeffrey Arthurs contends, "Effective heralds demonstrate that the truth [of the sermon] has gripped them and that it should grip the listeners."¹⁹ For many preachers the quest for holiness becomes a professional obligation rather than a personal discipline. When the profession of ministry deadens our emotions to the promptings of the gospel, our ministries are in jeopardy. By genuinely opening themselves to the awesome demands and promises of the very gospel that they bear, preachers keep their emotional and spiritual nervous systems acutely alive.

Righteous passions are affections that attempt to avoid even the appearance of evil. We are very familiar with preachers who use emotions manipulatively in their preaching. Some preachers transform their church lecterns into "bully pulpits." With mean spirits and arrogant demeanors they browbeat their parishioners and poison the soul of the congregation with a debilitating fear.

Other preachers play to their parishioners' sense of sympathy. They regularly begin their sermons with excuses for why the sermons are not as well prepared as they could have been. In this case, the call for sympathy becomes a smoke screen for a lack of disciplined preparation. Both fear and sympathy are emotions with enormous homiletical possibility, but apart from intense self-scrutiny these emotions can easily become hindrances to the gospel.

Unlike computers the human psyche does not possess a constantly running virus protection program. Thus we are not able to screen completely our emotions, whether honorable or dishonor-

able. Our inability to screen fully our emotions might be an occasion of grace. It creates the possibility that in the preaching of a sermon we might encounter unforeseen emotions that add texture. I would be suspect of preachers who have never shed unexpected tears or laughed at an unanticipated moment during their sermons.

Nevertheless, preachers should be vigilant concerning their emotions in preaching. Sharing one's emotions about an upcoming sermon or even about one's ministry in general with a trusted confidante is a practical way to check one's emotional motives. Twenty minutes of critical feedback from a friend about one's emotional "blind spots" prior to a sermon can prevent twenty minutes of disastrous preaching during a sermon. Responsible proclamation neither half-steps with respect to emotions nor oversteps into the realm of emotional manipulation.

In my exhortation for passionate preaching I am not advocating reckless, unenlightened zeal. I am, however, calling for *purposeful abandonment*. We should be willing to abandon all unnecessary emotional restraints for the purpose of reconciling persons with the gospel. At its best, effective preaching creates a theological Camp David where two estranged parties, God and humanity, can come to a peaceful accord. As ambassadors of this peace process, preachers should be willing to explore the full range of their emotions and intellect to achieve this desired end.

Passion in preaching certainly involves our emotions, but it is more than emotions. Passion is also fundamentally a mental disposition. The English word *passion* is related to the Greek verb *paschō*, which means "to suffer" or "to endure." Thus, with respect to preaching, passion is a mental willingness to endure vulnerability for the sake of the gospel's reception. Passion might beckon preachers to reveal the tender spots in their lives.

According to Ephesians 6:15, preachers should wear as shoes the gospel of peace. When passion attends our preaching, people will realize that preachers place "clay feet" in those shoes. How vulnerable we become when people discover our clay feet. According to Isaiah and Paul, even clay feet become "beautiful" if the preacher is *passionately* proclaiming God's good news.

Preaching Paul

To ensure that one's preaching is appropriately passionate, one might pose these questions:

- Do my sermons regularly depict God's capacity for "emotional investment"?
- When preparing a sermon do I consider its implications for my own life and spiritual development?
- Do I strive to place in every sermon at least one point about which I care deeply?
- What is the most significant obstacle preventing me from being more passionate in the pulpit?
- Am I cultivating a circle of confidantes with whom I can honestly check my emotional motives?

The Usefulness of Preaching: Portable Proclamation

Finally, effective preaching proclaims useful news. Useful news speaks to people's deepest needs with clarity and compassion. People gladly receive such news and eagerly take it with them once the benediction is pronounced. God never intended the church to be a spiritual Fort Knox, safeguarding the riches of the gospel within its walls. Sermons should place nuggets of truth in portable pouches so that people will be immeasurably richer where they live and work.

Paul's considerable attention to the moral behavior of his congregations indicates his abiding interest in useful preaching. He expected the gospel to exert a pragmatic, perceptible influence on his converts' conduct. For instance, he declares in 1 Thessalonians 4:1: "Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to

live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more."

In the phrase "how you ought to live," Paul employs the verb *peripateō*, which means "to walk." This verb connotes "a way of life" and can be understood as biblical shorthand for ethical conduct. In his initial preaching to the Thessalonians, as well as in this Letter, Paul emphasized the practical ways that the gospel should alter believers' lives.²⁰ As an illustration of his concern for the pragmatic, Paul discusses the sexual conduct of the Thessalonians in the ensuing verses. The pragmatic focus in Paul's preaching provided gravitational pull to his theological conceptions, preventing those conceptions from hovering above the daily struggles of his converts. Surely Paul realized that preaching that neglected to provide useful guidance for daily living was woefully inadequate.

Admittedly, we need to be cautious when speaking about the preaching of useful news. Without appropriate theological rigor, preaching could easily diminish the gospel to a list of simple solutions for common problems. Some preachers have become quite popular in the media for preaching sermons that perpetually "fix" people's dilemmas, whether they are poverty, fractured relationships, or physical and mental distress. With routine precision, their sermons—in conjunction with their special anointing oils, prayer cloths, and toll-free telephone numbers—supply the needed remedies. People pay handsomely to be in the presence of preachers who provide such guaranteed results.

In such cases the gospel ceases to be a two-edged reality that makes demands upon us even as it blesses us. Instead the gospel becomes a commodity, just another product for our personal fulfillment. Thomas Long underscores the danger of this kind of preaching:

The fullness of the gospel may be reduced to those aspects that are seen to be useful in the present. While it is true that preaching should always connect to the situation at hand, it is also true that the gospel is larger than the questions, issues, and needs contained in any particular moment.²¹

A crass utilitarianism has invaded many aspects of American culture. The church has not been spared. A fitting response to the gospel used to involve the words, "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace." Now some Christians seemingly interrogate God with the culture's anthem, "What have you done for me lately?" My earlier discussion of cross-shaped preaching should serve as a defense against this kind of reduction.

The gospel is God for and with us. Nonetheless, God must always receive the primary emphasis lest our sermons resemble the self-help manuals in popular bookstores. Many self-help books promise healing and fulfillment in the present. Whereas the gospel offers present abundance, it also insists that our ultimate healing and fulfillment must await God's future.

With the appropriate emphasis on God, responsible preaching seeks to address the needs and questions of listeners. But a degree of theological sophistication is required. Some pastors occasionally poll their congregants, inquiring about sermon topics that might interest and assist the congregants. This approach is entirely appropriate and demonstrates respect for the congregation. Nevertheless, the gospel reminds us that we often miscalculate our needs. Recognizing our tendency for miscalculation, Thomas Frank insists, "I don't really understand what most of my 'needs' are anyway—that's part of why I continue to listen to Jesus."²²

Thus the assessment of individual and congregational needs must be in conversation with the gospel. Paul Scott Wilson thinks that such a conversation will distinguish the "expressed need" from the "actual need." The expressed need is "the need the congregation identifies for itself, in its own words." The actual need is "the need of the congregation as discerned scripturally and theologically."²³ When making such distinctions preachers should avoid a patronizing attitude. Often parishioners are excellent spiritual diagnosticians, and their expressed need reflects their actual need.

There are three characteristics of useful news: charitable, accessible, and memorable. First, useful news is charitable. Simply put, preachers should love the people to whom they

preach, even if at times those people are not likable.²⁴ In that masterful rhapsody about love in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul warns his hearers about the dangers of loveless ministry.

My appeal to love is not easy morality. It is a strenuous effort to hold our parishioners in the highest esteem, irrespective of current congregational climate. People do not have to come to hear us. Even if they populate the pews, they are under no compulsion to pay attention to us.

On a weekly basis churchgoers grant to preachers the priceless gift of their presence. Many parishioners endure hardship and inconvenience to attend church. I tell my preaching students, "Love your people just for being there in church on Sunday!" We should honor parishioners' faithfulness with sermons that acknowledge the real circumstances of their challenging lives. I have little sympathy for preachers who criticize so-called "CME Christians"—those persons who attend church only on Christmas (C), Mother's Day (M), and Easter (E). If many of these persons were to hear relevant preaching on any of these three days, they might return.

Another manifestation of charity is pastoral attentiveness. Compassionate listening—at jubilant wedding receptions and hopeful child baptisms, in anxious hospital waiting rooms, during demanding family counseling sessions, and in chilly graveyards—will provide important insights into the contents of useful news.

Second, useful news is accessible. A church matriarch once told William A. Jones Jr., the celebrated pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn, "Put it where everybody can get it." Effective preaching is at home in the conversational tones of everyday language. According to Warren Stewart, preachers should want people to "experience the Word in understandable terms, symbols, and images." He further observes, "Common, everyday language in preaching makes for *portable* preaching, preaching that can be carried home."²⁵

As a professor, I spend much time in the lecture hall. As a preacher, I strive to use language that could be understood in the pool hall. This is not a call for "dumbing down" the gospel. "Pool hall" chat is often as heady as "lecture hall" conversation. Persons

in pool halls just have a greater appreciation for straightforward talk.

Third, useful news is memorable. Vivid imagery enhances the likelihood of a sermon being remembered. Effective preaching couches its news in skillfully painted images and refuses to believe the lie that images are intellectually inferior to concepts. Images and concepts actually complement each other. We express our most abstract concepts in images. In human development, our ability to apprehend images precedes our rational thinking.²⁶ Since images are the foundation for human cognition (note here my *imagery* of a foundation), the creation of stirring sermonic imagery is, indeed, an intense intellectual activity.

Paul's Letters are filled with provocative images. From this we might infer that his sermons were as well. A brief roll call of some powerful Pauline images should convince us of his nimble use of imaginative language: In Romans 11, he depicts the Jew-Gentile relationship in terms of an olive tree. In 1 Corinthians 9, he likens Christian existence to a grueling athletic competition. In 2 Corinthians 4, he reminds preachers that they are expendable clay jars containing the priceless contents of the gospel. In Galatians 5, he urges his hearers to cultivate the sweet fruit of the Holy Spirit. In Philippians 3, he recalculates his religious identity using the financial balance sheet. In 1 Thessalonians 2, he gently cares for his congregants like a mother nursing her children. In Philemon, he considers himself a "prisoner of Christ Jesus" even as he advocates for the freedom of the runaway slave Onesimus. Paul obviously knew that stirring images place handles on truth so that the gospel becomes portable and useful.

To ensure that one's preaching provides "useful news," one might pose these questions:

- Do my preparation for and presence in the pulpit reflect my love for my listeners?
- Do I strive to use accessible, everyday language in my sermons?

- Does the imagery in my sermons make them “portable”?

Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and martyr, once remarked, “The primary confession of the Christian before the world is the deed that interprets itself.”²⁷ “The deed that interprets itself” is also a marvelous definition of preaching. Ultimately, the meaning of preaching lies in whether or not it makes a difference in the lives of those who hear it. Whether we preach in a cathedral or in a storefront; whether we use the Queen’s English or the idioms of the people, the meaning of preaching should be self-interpreting. When the deed is done right, nobody will ask, “What is preaching?” They will know, and we will, too.