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Preaching the Gospel Today

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WHEN a man is ordained to the sacred ministry in any of the Reformed Churches—and this includes the Anglican Communion, which even the staunchest defenders of its “catholicity” must acknowledge is a “reformed” catholic communion—a form of words is used in which the centrality of the preaching office in that ministry is affirmed. It was customary among the Reformers themselves to speak of a “valid” ministry as one in which “the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance” (to quote the Anglican XXXIX Articles, which are paralleled in other and similar “confessions”); and the history of the ministry in the Christian Church as a whole makes it abundantly clear that “authority to preach the Word of God,” or the right to “dispense the Word of God,” or the giving to the candidate of the Church’s recognition and authority to be “preacher of the Gospel”—all these are more or less synonymous phrases—has been an integral part of ordination.

There are many differences between the various Christian bodies which emerged from the reformation in the sixteenth century—differences in theology and differences in order—but the importance of the preaching office is one point in which they all agree. All of them insist that among the functions of an ordained man, one of the most important roles, although not the only important one, is that he is to preach the “word of God” which is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The minister certainly is not *only* a preacher; and we may regret that many who ought to know better have been content to use that one word to describe his work. The administration of the Church’s sacraments is equally important; and this is especially true for us if we accept the position of the sixteenth-century reformers that in the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, as well as in the pulpit, the gospel is proclaimed and expressed. In fact, we may rightly claim that the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments must necessarily go together; to put it in language used by Professor Whitehead in *Religion in the Making*, the “cult” (by which Whitehead meant the social action of worship) and the “myth” (by which he meant the story which explains a society’s worship) can never be separated. It is the intimate and indissoluble union of the two which prevents preaching from becoming merely a hortatory exercise or a public address, and which prevents the sacrament from being merely routine with suggestions which might seem to border on “magic.”

In another context we should have much to say about the Holy Communion; but in this paper it is the preaching of the word with which we are concerned. And I must admit frankly that it may seem presumptuous for one whose whole ministry has been spent in theological teaching to speak on the subject at all. Those who minister regularly in the Church's congregations have a much more immediate experience of what it means to be a preacher than do those of us who are engaged in academic work. Yet it may be that, entirely apart from the preaching of the gospel in which any theological teacher does in fact from time to time engage outside the walls of his school, his experience in teaching those who are to be clergy of the Church, and in my own particular case a special concern for the "apologetic" of "gospelling," can be of some help to those who are in the parish ministry, and who are forced to consider with utmost seriousness the obligation in this matter of preaching the gospel which their ordination lays upon them.

So we come to the question which must trouble every man who is ordained: Why is it that so much preaching is without power? I think the answer to this question cannot be found, as is often claimed, in the inadequacies of the minister so far as his rhetorical skill, his use of apt illustrations, his logical development of theme, and so forth, are in view. These are important matters, of course; and no minister should venture into the pulpit without adequate preparation for his task, the use of whatever elocutionary techniques he can learn, and the employment of the pointed illustration which will bring his sermon to life for his hearers. But the real explanation of our ineffectual preaching lies much deeper. I believe it begins from a failure on our part. Far too many of us, far too much of the time, do not recognize the terrible truth that as preachers we are engaged in nothing other than the task of confronting our listeners with the very word of God. I think that we do not recognize sufficiently clearly that in the human words which we use our listeners are to hear not so much what *we* say, as what *God* says to them through us. We do not see with sufficient clarity that, as those who have been set apart by Christ in his Church for the work of the ministry, we are "stewards of the mysteries of God," who are commissioned to bring his word or revelation to his people and in his name to pronounce the message of salvation.

All too much of the time, I am afraid, we consider our preaching to be an exercise in theological teaching, in moral exhortation, or in pious meditation. There is room for each of these in our ministry, as I shall attempt to show. But none of these things is what is meant by *preaching the gospel*. It matters not whether we be conservative or liberal, traditionalist or modernist; in whatever category we may be placed, or place ourselves, the fact remains that in so far as we are Christian ministers, ordained by Christ in his Church to be his ministering agents, our *preaching* can be nothing other than the proclamation of God's word for the wholeness of men. And once this recognition is at the heart of our ministry, our preaching

will become effectual—not that we are ever more than unworthy and “unprofitable” servants, but that God in Christ can and does use our unworthiness for his own great ends and makes even our imperfections to serve him.

I have been speaking of “the gospel.” What is this gospel which we are to preach? This is the question which will engage our attention for the remainder of this lecture. In attempting to answer it, I should like to make some highly important preliminary distinctions, by saying what the gospel is *not*. Often we can come to the positive truth by considering and rejecting inadequate or false ideas, and perhaps nowhere is this so useful as in the subject we have under consideration.

First of all, the gospel is *not* simply the teaching of Jesus, particularly when this is understood as denoting his religious and moral admonitions and exhortations. There can be no doubt, of course, that the teaching of our Lord is of enormous significance, not only for its own intrinsic value but also because it enables us to understand the kind of person that Jesus himself was, humanly speaking. Many years ago, Dr. Frank Russell Barry, the present Bishop of Southwell, wrote a book entitled *The Relevance of Christianity*. In that book he made the point that the teaching of Jesus—his words as reported to us in the New Testament—has its peculiar importance for us in that it shows “who Jesus was” in terms of “what Jesus said.” As we all know, it is frequently possible for us to determine a man’s character, his quality of life, his way of being a man, by listening to what he has to say. We comment about him that he is the *sort of man* who says things like that. An American illustration would be Abraham Lincoln; it is not only the things that Lincoln did, but also the things that he said and (in this modern instance) the things that he wrote in letters and state papers, that make it possible for us to know the kind of man that he really was. And when the words that a man says are confirmed by the testimony of a life in agreement with them, we may well come to know that man and his personal quality in a very deep and real way. So it is with Jesus.

Yet it remains true that the gospel, the good news which the Church proclaims, is not in itself simply what Jesus said. What he said may be paralleled very largely in the teaching of the rabbis of his time and later. As Wellhausen once remarked, everything that Jesus said (save, I think, his teaching about God’s “seeking the lost”) can be found in the highest and best Jewish teaching; although Wellhausen had to add that much more may be found in this teaching which Jesus eliminated or rejected—our Lord’s human genius here, if the word may be used, was in his selectivity. But it is still the fact that the early Church did not go out into the world proclaiming the teaching of a great Jewish rabbi. It remembered and taught what Jesus had said about God and man, about the Kingdom of God, about human moral responsibility, and the like, because it was *primarily* concerned with something else. That something else gave the teaching its importance; it was not the other way round.

Again, the gospel is not a statement of theological propositions. It is indeed inevitable that the Church should develop a theology, a structure of beliefs which are drawn from, and seek to state in as precise language as possible, the gospel and its significance for men. Those who loudly proclaim that they have no theology and that they desire none are all the more likely to have an *implicit* theology—and doubtless it will be a bad one, since it is not consciously held and therefore is not open to continued critical examination. But no theology, whether that of a Barth or of a Brunner, even that of an Augustine or an Aquinas, a Luther or a Calvin, or even that of a Paul, if he can be said to have had “a” theology, can take the place of the gospel itself. The gospel comes before all these theologies and is the basis for their determination as well as the criterion of their validity. This is why I am always a little fearful of what is often described as “doctrinal preaching.” All too frequently this turns out to be a substitution for the gospel; it consists of some set of propositions which however traditional and however true they may be, can in fact obscure the basic affirmations of Christian faith and make the gospel itself of none effect for those who hear. A theology we must have, and it should be the best theology that is available for us, carefully constructed and critically understood; but we must not make the mistake of thinking that when we have enunciated and then expounded some theological proposition, be it from the golden middle ages or from Karl Barth, we have thereby communicated the gospel of the living God.

Finally, the gospel is not to be confused with credal and confessional formulations. It was right that the Church should have come to state its basic faith in such terms as we find in the historical creeds; but the faith which the gospel evokes, and the gospel which evokes that faith, cannot be contained in the historical formulations, even while it is stated in them. Here it is necessary, of course, to make a distinction between the later developed creeds—and above all, the various “confessions of faith” of the Reformation period—and the Apostles’ Creed. The latter admittedly comes much closer to being a “gospel statement.” And behind that creed, we can see that the *primitive* “confessions of faith,” to which Professor Cullmann has lately drawn our attention, are the almost immediate result of the proclaiming of the gospel itself. “Jesus is the Lord,” “Jesus is the Messiah,” “Jesus the Messiah is the Son of God”: here we come very close to the gospel, or we already have it stated for us. We can see how the Apostles’ Creed is an extension or expansion of such “confessions,” made necessary because of movements of thought or opinion which were beginning to invade the Christian community and to threaten the integrity of the gospel the Church preached. We can see, too, how the Nicene Creed, although more theological in nature, is a further amplification to meet further dangers. But even so it remains true that what we might style “credal preaching” is not the same thing as preaching the gospel itself.

If, then, the gospel is not the moral and religious teaching of Jesus, not a theological system, and not the creeds and confessions of the Church, what is it? The answer is really very simple and yet, I believe, very profound. I should claim that the gospel is nothing other than the proclamation of Jesus Christ himself, in the fullness of his historic human life among us, apprehended and declared as the definitive and focal operation of God in the affairs of men. The gospel is nothing other than Jesus Christ our Lord, proclaimed to be "the way, the truth, and the life." It is the announcement that in him very God is manifest in very man, for us men and for our wholeness. It is the declaration that in him God "has visited and redeemed his people." Nothing other than this, nothing less than this, can claim to be the gospel which makes men wise unto salvation.

In our day we have been much enlightened concerning the primitive forms in which this gospel, "the word of God," was proclaimed. Thanks especially to the critical study of Dr. C. Harold Dodd, as summed up in his notable little book, *The Apostolic Preaching*, we have become familiar with the word *kerygma*, Greek for "the proclamation"; and, taught by Dr. Dodd and those who have followed the line of enquiry which he laid down, we have come to see that this *kerygma* was the very heart of the earliest Christianity. This is New Testament Christianity. We have the written "gospels," or accounts of Jesus' sayings and actions, because it was increasingly felt necessary to give a setting for the proclamation. They contain recollections, in faith, of the life of him about whom the proclamation is made, for men remembered what Jesus had said and what he had done because he was the subject of their proclamation. It was the proclamation of him as "Lord and Christ" which gave its uniqueness and its special quality to the primitive Christian community. All this is, or ought to be, common knowledge for the clergy; and increasingly it will be common knowledge for the instructed laity too.

Not quite so frequently do we recognize the variety of ways in which this primitive Christian *kerygma* was expressed by the early Christian preachers. Dr. Dodd has given us a brief summary which is very useful in stating the essential elements in that declaration: how that the God of Israel, who had spoken by the prophets, had acted decisively in Christ, pouring out the gift of the Spirit, and how that this Christ, now exalted, would return in glory for the establishment of God's kingdom. But there are many different ways in which this main declaration found expression, and we have many of these statements of the basic *kerygma* in the New Testament. Sometimes they are very short indeed: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself"; "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"; "God set forth his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"; "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son"; "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." Sometimes, as in many of St. Paul's epistles, they are more fully stated. But in most various phrasing and with very differing emphasis, in the

light of one pattern of thought or another, the same proclamation is being made; and always it comes down to this: that in the Man Jesus, in the totality of his life and action, God has been active, God has been present, in a definitive fashion, to the end that men may have life in him. Each of the various ways of statement is by its very nature a way of apprehending this gospel and then of proclaiming it.

Now it was natural that the first Christian evangelists should proclaim Jesus against the background of Jewish thought and in the context of what they conceived to be God's historical manner of dealing with his people Israel. They knew of this dealing through what we call the Old Testament scriptures and through the continuing Jewish traditions of their time. Hence they used this material in their proclamation. This was inevitable. For our Lord did not come into the world as a kind of *deus ex machina*; "he came unto his own." He appeared as a Jew among Jews; and the Fourth Gospel rightly asserts that "salvation is of the Jews," in the sense that it is only against that background and in that context that the gospel of Christ can be known and understood. In that sense, too, Pope Pius XI was entirely right when he said that "spiritually all Christians are Semites." This is why the earliest preaching was by way of saying that in Jesus all of God's promises made to Israel were fulfilled: he is the "Yea" and the "Amen." This is why the earliest Christians "searched the Scriptures"—the Jewish sacred writings—to find the material which they could use as testifying and witnessing to their Lord and Master. Marcion, with his attempt to de-judaize Jesus, succeeded only in "de-historicizing" him and thereby making him of no real significance; and Tertullian, the great Christian apologist against Marcion, saw this to be the case and stated it clearly and convincingly. You cannot deracinate Jesus, removing him from his given setting in history and among his own people "after the flesh," without at the same time making him a meaningless monstrosity.

And yet, while all this is true and must be emphasized unflinchingly in the Church, we cannot, on the other hand, make Jesus simply a figure with Jewish significance and interpret him only in terms of biblical patterns of thought. For when we do this we are equally in danger of reducing his place in the world. In my judgement this is the error of a good many of the exponents of what is nowadays known as "biblical theology." With all their laudable effort to understand the integrity of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, and to insist on the basic unity of the Bible, and with all their recognition of the place of Jesus within the setting of Jewish piety and religious thought, these scholars sometimes fail to see that the very truth about God which the Bible as a whole affirms, and above all that which the New Testament says about Jesus himself, can be smothered by sheer biblicism and thereby made meaningless for those to whom the gospel should be a living, vitalizing, and contemporary message.

In his valuable commentary on *The First Epistle of Peter* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, p. 106), Professor F. W. Beare writes: "If the

gospel is to win the hearts of man in any age, it must clothe itself in contemporary forms and bring into its service every thought, imagination, and aspiration of man, that is congenial to its own inner spirit. The glory of Christianity, indeed, lies in this very power to draw enrichment from every source, and to 'become all things to all men.' " That is to say, the Christian gospel, the *kerygma* or proclamation, indeed remains and must remain fixed as the message of the Church, the heart of its life and the meaning of its existence; but at the same time we must find ways in which we can both understand and declare that *kerygma* which will not smother it in an unimaginative biblicism, but which will be appropriate for our own day. We must use all our ingenuity and all our wisdom, all our sympathy and all our wit, to communicate to men and women in our time the central and basic biblical affirmation, without which there would be no Christianity at all and which we believe to be the very word of God for the men and women of our age as of every age.

One of the first steps towards an understanding of the meaning of the gospel is the recognition that the language in which the *kerygma* was initially stated is metaphorical language. I do not mean by this that the gospel is merely a "fairy-tale," although it is of course true that such tales are often told in language of that kind. What I mean is that the words used in the telling, the story itself as told, the ideas that are being conveyed, as well as the setting in which the *kerygma* is to be seen, are not "prose" but are of the nature of poetry and symbol. Here we have imaginative language, evocative in character, not the "literal" language of the chronicle. The gospel which we proclaim is not phrased in the idiom of scientific statement, nor is it told in terms of a philosophical syllogism. It is in fact a *story* and it can be spoken about, and heard, only when this is recognized. Canon T. O. Wedel has said much the same thing in his description of the gospel as a "drama." At the same time as I emphasize this point, however, I wish to insist that this does not imply that the gospel is not grounded in history and established upon events which actually occurred in the world of human experience.

There is an unfortunate impression, found as well among the clergy as among the laity, that to describe the gospel in such metaphorical terms is equivalent to saying that it is not true. One can only remark that it would be a good thing if such persons read a little poetry now and then. Evidently they suffer from the delusion that whatever is not put in prose must necessarily be a lie. But the truth is that in the great matters of life, we men have no choice: we *must* speak as poets. The heart always speaks imaginatively, poetically; and the truth that is to go to the heart must be phrased in this mode. Furthermore, precisely because the gospel has to do with historical event, and because it understands that event in the light of faith in the unseen divine reality whom we call God, there is no other language available for us. To talk of history is to talk imaginatively; otherwise we are not talking about history at all, but about "chronicle" or "annal," which is a

very different thing. In German we can distinguish between *Historie*, or sheer chronicling, and *Geschichte*, or event apprehended in its deep significance; in English, alas, this verbal distinction cannot be made. But the fact remains a fact nonetheless. Significant history is always told in the imaginative idiom of poetry. And when to that plain fact we add the specifically Christian interpretation of our Lord's life, death, and rising-again, in which God is seen as involved in a supreme manner in occurrences in the public domain of history, it is all the more necessary to use imaginative language, metaphor, poetry, symbol. For we *cannot* speak literally about God and his ways, as if we had a precise chart for the purpose of mapping the divine activity; there is always likeness in difference. When St. Thomas Aquinas says, in the *Summa Theologiae* (Part III, Qu. 8, Art. 1), that the phrase "Christ is the Head of the Church" is metaphorical, he goes on to make this important point: "In metaphorical speech we must not expect a likeness in all respects; for thus there would be not likeness but identity." In that statement he gives us a clue to the nature of theological language, and *a fortiori* to the language appropriate to the gospel: it is not precise identity, but likeness, that is in view; and this, as he notes, means that we speak in metaphor. Religious language is poetical. But the fact that the language is metaphorical, or if you will poetical, does not mean that it is untrue. It does not imply that the events of which the gospel speaks did not happen.

It was of course the historicity of Jesus Christ which provided a major reason for the victory of Christian faith in the Graeco-Roman world. But we must now go on to notice that such historicity need not mean that we have a complete and carefully detailed record of our Lord's days in Palestine. We do not possess any such record. What we do have is a series of reminiscences, collected and handed on "from faith to faith." We have impressions of the impact of Jesus on those who knew him best. Our "early traditions about Jesus" (to use the title of a little book by the late Professor Bethune-Baker) are not interested so much in what has been called the "biographical Jesus" as they are concerned with what Jesus did and said as he was remembered by those who believed him to be their Lord, the Risen Messiah, and who were therefore anxious to hand on to others what was remembered about him.

Some scholars indeed have thought that, because this is the case, we can have no genuine knowledge of the Jesus of history. Such scholars may be on the extreme radical wing or they may be extreme conservatives. The former would tend to minimize the centrality of the historical Jesus in the religion named after him and would turn Christianity into a *mere* symbol. The latter would stress the Christ of faith—perhaps the Christ of the Church's faith—and would feel that the historical life matters little in comparison to the salvation wrought out in the believer's faith. I believe that we know the Jesus of history very well, even if we do not have a precise and photographic account of his day-by-day activities; and I am convinced that the

unique claim of Christianity is that, in and by those events in the actual realm of historical happenedness, God is revealed—revealed, of course, in and under the conditions of history and human life, but revealed nonetheless. There is no Christ of faith who is not continuous with the Jesus who walked this earth in the first century of our era. *Jesus* is seen by faith to be the Christ; but the *Christ* is one and the same person as the Jesus of history.

Having said this, however, we must see what ought in any event to have been obvious: that the several gospels are collections of brief tales, remembered incidents, bits of sayings, and the like, all gathered together in the interest of giving what St. Mark's opening words so well describe: "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God"—the account of the historical happenings, as the Christian community remembered them, which gave rise to the faith that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the divine Lord. The "account of the historical happenings" is not like a newspaper reporter's story of some public meeting or some incident that he has been sent to "cover." The account is inevitably "conditioned" by faith; it is seen in faith; it is communicated along with faith. It has its setting in what the German form-critics have called the *Sitz-im-Leben*, the "life-situation," of the primitive Christian Church. But it has its setting also, as Professor Paul Minear has lately insisted, in the "faith-situation" and in the "worship-situation" of the Christian community, if these barbarous terms may be allowed. Not only did the exigencies of the life of the first Christians, with the problems they had to face, occasion the handing-on of the tales and the teaching, and to a large degree determine how the tales and the teaching were to be communicated. The demands of faith in Jesus, which as it developed came to penetrate ever more deeply into the meaning of his person and work, and the requirements of the worship of God known in faith as working in Jesus the Lord, a worship which likewise was developing in those early days, had their part both in the telling of the stories and in the way the stories were told.

But what importance has all this for the preaching of the gospel? I should answer that such an understanding of the way in which the compilation of the gospel narratives took place, and also of the nature of the material which they contain, delivers us in our preaching of the *kerygma* from much that was troublesome and confusing to an earlier generation. For it enables us to stress the historicity of the evangelical message; and equally to stress the fact that our recognition of the metaphorical language in which it is couched, as well as our knowledge of how the setting of that message in the life of Christ took shape, does not in any way reduce this historicity. What it does do is help us to have a better appreciation of the *kind* of historical material which gives us the gospel, and thus it assists us towards an approach to the preaching of the gospel which is of extraordinary value in our own day.

I have been speaking of the need for finding a way of stating the *kerygma* which will be relevant to our own time, while it will also be true to the

abiding affirmation of faith which gives the Church its essential being. This leads me to emphasize the necessity laid upon us for translation. In our preaching of the gospel we must get at it, present its "offense," in such a fashion that it is a challenge to decision for men and women who live in the middle half of the twentieth century. But the idiom of the Bible, in which the gospel is phrased for us, seems unintelligible to many such persons. It is not merely that they cannot understand what we say; it is that they cannot understand what we are talking about. Hence we *must* translate; we must be ready to say, "in other words . . ."

Now some seem to think that all translation is traduction; they would appear to assume that to translate is inevitably to betray the original. Of course this may be so. If we are not sufficiently instructed in the original, if we do not have an ear open to nuances, if we are literal-minded and prosaic, we shall doubtless be guilty of traduction. But on the other hand, the refusal to translate at all is likely to make us sound as if we were parrots repeating a merely verbal form to those who somehow or other can be brought to listen to such boring stuff. Of course the fact is that translation need not necessarily be betrayal at all; it can be faithful translation. Translation, if it is to be good, involves two factors: first, that we shall know the language *from* which we translate; and second, that we shall know the language *into* which we translate. In the period now so easily dismissed as "the age of liberalism," it was doubtless true that some who engaged in translation did not know, deeply and thoroughly, the language *from* which they were to translate; hence they sometimes preached a gospel which was another gospel from that which "makes" the Church. But in the present time, it seems to me, altogether too many of us may know or think we know the original quite well, but we do not know the language *into* which we are to translate; hence the gospel as preached is preached to ears that do not and cannot hear, because they are ears that are attuned to a quite different set of conditions, patterns of thought, and ways of conceiving the universe.

This business of translation is unquestionably an exacting task. Probably one reason for the emergence of the strictly "biblical" type of preaching in our own day is that many have felt that the efforts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to translate had only succeeded in betraying. In some instances, as I have admitted, this may have been the case. But the modern cure seems often to be worse than the old disease. For what is nowadays preached by those who follow the new and fashionable school is frequently simply unintelligible, meaningless, without significance, to a very considerable proportion of their hearers, both those who are within the Church itself and even more those who are outside the "blessed company of faithful people."

For myself, I freely admit that I belong to that small group of Christian theologians who would maintain the necessity for a "new Christian modernism." By this I am not suggesting anything very startling, for all

Christian thinkers have been engaged in one way or another in the "re-conception" of the faith of the Church. I am thinking particularly of men in recent years like William Sanday and James Franklin Bethune-Baker and William Porcher DuBose, to name only Anglicans—and there were many others in other Christian bodies. These men were not "reductionists," in the sense that they were seeking to lower the claims of the gospel. Neither were they "minimizers," in the sense that they were willing to make the Christian faith an easy and simple thing which would appeal to any "man of good will." Rather they were intent on taking the essential core of Christianity, which is the gospel of the living God, the proclamation of God's presence and work in Christ for men's wholeness, and on so thinking it through again, so "re-conceiving" its implications, so teaching it and so preaching it, that people living in their own time could *hear* it and, if they were willing to make the commitment and surrender, accept it for themselves.

In the past few decades we have had a great theological revival. Some of its contributions have been of enormous value to us all but many of them seem to me to be both dangerous and unfortunate. For the overall result of the great reaction has been, in my judgement, a sophistication of the true simplicity of the gospel, the use of a jargon which the common man (and the intelligent one, too, often enough) cannot understand, and a tendency to assume that the biblical and credal language *as it stands* need only be spoken, and enough has then been done to state and communicate the point of the Christian proclamation. Yet the early Church itself, when it departed from biblical idiom at the Council of Nicaea and used for theological purposes a non-biblical word, *homoousios*, as the guarantor of the biblical meaning, gave Christians in later days a charter for translation—provided always that it is the gospel, its setting and its significance, that we are translating, and not some bright and novel ideas of our own.

Surely I need not labour the point. No preacher with any sensitivity can do other than agree that he does not easily "get the message across." Nor would he claim, if he is honest with himself and about those to whom he speaks, that it is the sinfulness of his hearers, and that alone, which gets in his way. He would say that to a considerable degree it is just that he is not understood. And he would admit that he is not understood because he is talking in patterns which have little or no point of contact with those who listen. His statement of the gospel is couched too often in language and in a context which bear little or no relationship to the circumstances, the accepted ways of thinking of the world both scientifically and philosophically, in which the hearers live.

We must recognize, too, that not all of these circumstances, these accepted ways of thinking, are wicked and wrong. That would be an easy way out of our problems. We could simply denounce the evil world and leave it there. But God has been speaking in secular ways to men and women through the

ages; he has led them into more of the truth about the structure and functioning of the world in which they live; he is at work in the areas of human study, exploration, research, and enquiry, which have given us this "new" world. Doubtless much of what is believed and taught about it is wrong or partially wrong. But in any event this is *where the people live*. This is their *condition*. It is in these terms that they will be reached or they will not be reached at all.

So we need a new kind of approach in our preaching of the gospel; and this approach depends upon a new way of envisaging the gospel itself. On the one hand we dare not attempt to minimize or reduce the historic faith as this centres in the Church's age-old evangel. But on the other hand, we must be willing to take the risk of finding for the gospel new ways of expression which will speak directly and vividly to the hearts of men in this age. One of the corollaries of this attitude and approach will be theological in nature; we shall recognize that there are things central and indispensable, things peripheral and secondary. In fact we shall come to see, as Erasmus once remarked, *quae pertinent ad fidem paucissimis articulis absoluantur*: that the things which pertain to the faith are to be phrased in as few articles as possible.

What is needed is to see that we dare not seek a "new thing," but we must seek to understand and preach the old gospel in a "new way"—some of my readers will notice that I am paraphrasing Vincent of Lerins' great phrase, *non nova sed nove*. The gospel which we preach is the Church's gospel and we preach it in the context of the life of the Church. The gospel is the very meaning of the Church's existence; it *is* the Church's existence. It—or rather, he who is its heart—is the *raison d'être* of "the Holy Church throughout all the world." If the Church did not have this gospel, it would be simply a more or less interesting sociological phenomenon. Because it has this gospel, it is the community of faith in which men respond to him whom the gospel proclaims: Jesus Christ the Lord as God's definitive and focal action for man's wholeness. But the converse is also true. The gospel without the Church would be the gospel without a setting and therefore a barren and sterile thing. Preachers of the gospel would be voices "crying in the wilderness." But the gospel in the Church *can* be stale and meaningless; my contention is that this need not be so, if we who are preachers know our duty today.

This is not the place, nor would space permit me, to develop in detail some of the suggestions which might be made concerning the preaching of "the old gospel in a new way." Perhaps in a later paper this could be done. All I have sought to say in the present essay is that the task is urgent; that we should all concern ourselves with it; and that self-examination along these lines will be more likely to give our preaching of the gospel of Christ a contemporary relevance because it will make us more aware of the basic problem, than will the easy and popular placing of all blame upon the supposed "materialism," "secularism," or "humanism" of our people.