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The Plague of Generic Preaching

Donald L. Deffner

Walter Burghardt stated an essential concern of preachers in an especially provocative way when he entitled an article “Saturday Night Live, Sunday Morning Deadly?”¹ That question reminds me of a conversation which I once had with a friend as we walked away—unfed—from a particularly boring sermon:

Attempting to defend the fiasco, he began, “Well, at least he preached the gospel.”

“No, he didn’t,” I replied.

“But the words of the gospel were there. . .,” my friend continued falteringly, “and Scripture says, ‘My Word shall not return void!’”

“True,” I rejoined. “The word of God has power beyond measure. But the statement, ‘The word of God does its own work,’ can also be misapplied to defend a loutish sermon. We can find comfort in that statement, but not support from it for bad preaching. To ‘preach the gospel’ means to communicate it. Even with a sermon which is perfectly arranged, if one preaches it in French to a Japanese congregation, he hasn’t ‘preached the gospel.’ ‘Communication’ means that someone sends out a signal, people understand it, react to it, and respond to it—even if it means a punch in the nose at the church door. That’s communication. It’s a two-way street. But that preacher is just not connecting with his people.”

The particular preacher in question had been guilty of generic preaching. The word “generic” means “of, applied to, or referring to a kind, class, or group; inclusive or general; opposed to specific, special.” The preacher in the anecdote had not addressed the text to the specific needs of people and so had not applied the law and gospel which they needed to hear, as Scripture does. The preaching had been general, broad, vague, even bland. Thus, the people had become “the bland being led by the bland.”

Savonarola once compared some parishioners to birds roosting on a church steeple. At first the striking of the bell aroused and frightened them. But the days came when, accustomed to the sound, they perched quietly on the bell, no matter how loudly it rang.

A review in *The Cresset* once commented in this way on the irrelevance of much preaching:

One of the nice things about going to church on Sunday is that it is about the only contact that most of us still have with the dear dead days of the nineteenth century. The vocabulary of piety is still redolent of those “good old days” when the parson was the most learned man in the village and his sermon was as much a literary *oeuvre* as it was a disquisition upon the Word of God. Whether it was at all intelligible to our grandfathers is a question which would be difficult, at this late date, to answer. Certainly much of the charm of much modern preaching derives from the fact that the grand old words—unintelligible as they may be to modern ears—still roll from the pulpit familiarly and predictably, saying nothing in particular but enfolding the congregation in a mantle of familiar sounds.²

Simeon Stylites described a preacher who was not reaching his people in picturesque words:

To hear him was like quietly getting drunk. He led his hearers by easy stages into an unreal world of effortless peace, dragging them gradually into unconsciousness by the melody that was himself. They went home to eat their Sunday dinners in dazed silence, and remained befuddled until Monday morning, when they woke up and went about their business.³

Why do some people fall asleep during the sermon? Is it because the secular world in which they live has so absorbed them that “God-talk” is no longer relevant to them? Is it because the preacher is not speaking to the specific needs and problems they are encountering? Is it simply because the preacher is the same every Sunday—a generic preacher? Here is an example of generic preaching:

God created a perfect world. He created it in all its splendor and beauty. The world was perfect until Adam’s fall. God could see it coming. God foresaw man’s rebellion. I’m sure God was very disappointed with man, but He did not give up on us. Right after the fall, God cursed the devil: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head and you will strike His heel” (Genesis 3:15). God promised that Satan’s evil would be defeated. The prophet Isaiah writes, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign:

the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son and will call Him Immanuel (God with us)" (Isaiah 7:14). Imagine—God incarnate walking among His people—and we nailed Him to a cross.

God knew from the beginning that, even though He gave Moses the law, that was not going to be enough for man's reunion with Him in eternity. The law had become tainted and twisted to serve man more than God. Satan was establishing a stronghold on the earth. Many people were secure in their sins. Oh, there was the cry for a deliverer, a Messiah, but more for relief from the Romans—to bring earthly peace and prosperity. Through all this, God never gave up on man. . . .

The world was wilting, dying—full of guilt. Man needed to be saved from his death in sin. He could do nothing on his own to save himself.

The Son of God, Christ Jesus, came to save man. In Jesus' baptism, Jesus being a humble servant to the Father, was anointed into His ministry. On this occasion, as well as others, God spoke out from the heavens and said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him." Instead, we nailed Him to a cross.

All through Jesus' ministry, He sought to bring peace, comfort, and order to individual hearts. For this we crucified Him on a cross. . . .

God has revealed to us who Jesus is through His word and sacraments. It is by these means of grace that the Holy Spirit works on our hearts to believe. Scripture reveals that God cared enough about us to come down to earth and live with us. Jesus experienced temptation, pain, sorrow, and death, so that we might be saved from eternal separation from God. It is this man, Jesus, the Son of God, whom we confess to be born of a virgin, who suffered the daily strife of life, who humbled Himself to serve and not be served—that is Jesus Christ who saved mankind from eternal damnation because of sin. . . .

How can we lift high the cross? We can do this by worshipping together, bringing our children to baptism, and remembering our own baptismal promise. We lift high the cross by partaking of the Lord's Supper where

He is still present with us in His flesh and by studying His word daily where His tender mercies are revealed. We can look to the cross when we pray, for Jesus promises to help bear the crosses in our lives. We can come to that cross out of love and not out of shame. As we go out into our world in the light of that cross, we can say:

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred name!⁴

What the preacher said above is true. But it is stated in simplistic terms—and as if people had never heard it before. Our people need to hear the law and gospel again and again, but in fresh and picturesque speech. We are not to talk *about* the fall and the atonement, but to apply it in illustrative and contemporary language to people's lives.

What is missing in generic preaching? First of all, the hearer is not immediately involved. Wallace E. Fisher states:

Americans go to the theater to be entertained, to the university to be educated, to a daily job to make a livelihood, and to the beach, the mountains, Las Vegas, and the Alps for recreation. But they must shift their intellectual and emotional gears hard to hear the Word—and harder still to do it.⁵

What is needed is more problem-resolution preaching (which is law and gospel).⁶ There are various types of outlines, of course, and there is a time and place for the "teaching sermon" (we used to have Sunday evening services). But the man on the street who wanders into a church—indeed, our own secular-world people—will not be grabbed by a sermon with the theme "Christ is Your (A.) Prophet, (B.) Priest, and (C.) King."

In *The Homiletical Plot* Eugene L. Lowry suggests a sequence for the sermonic process which will shake the natural man's cocoon and confront the *peccator* in our own people. Again law and gospel are implicit here. One can visualize a loop along which the following states appear:

1. upsetting the equilibrium
2. analyzing the discrepancy
3. disclosing the clue to resolution
4. experiencing the gospel
5. anticipating the consequences

One can sense the progression quite vividly: (1.) "Oops!" We experience imbalance. We see that something is wrong here! (2.) "Ugh!" We see the dilemma. (3.) "Aha!" We see a clue. The puzzle is snapping into place. (4.) "Whee!" Here comes the "good news"—the experience of the gospel. The preacher is not moralizing: "Stop it." "Do this." "Don't do that." He is actually proclaiming the gospel's power. (5.) "Yeah!" The response is not "I've got it made," but "I've got the point, Pastor."⁷

A specific application of the law must be made early in the sermon (as well as specific non-generic application of the gospel later). The response is quite predictable if the preacher rambles on and on about the text for fifteen minutes and then finally says, "Well, what does this mean for us here today?" People will not only "nod noetically and go home"; they will have gone home already.

The "Oops!-Ugh!" of the dilemma (the "malady," as Caemmerer would call it) must grab people within the first minute of the sermon, and so we need an arresting introduction. This requisite does not mean we are to titillate. But we are to involve the hearer early on in the law's indictment in the text as it applies to the individual hearer. Otherwise "preaching-in-general" ensues.

Generic preaching also results when a preacher mistakenly tries to be an "exegetical-expositional" preacher in contrast to a false understanding of what "topical" preaching is. Bad "exegetical-expositional preaching" occurs when too much exegesis is dragged into the pulpit, and there is a dull verse-by-verse commentary on the text. Again the presumption is that the sheer statement of biblical truth is communication. People may be left to make application on their own. The preacher rambles over several ideas in the text, but fails to focus on one central theme. There is bad "topical preaching," to be sure. It occurs when a preacher chooses a theme and alludes to the text, but does not develop it. Such "topical preaching" involves little of the Bible and much religious-moral talk.

Actually, good "topical preaching" and good "exegetical-expositional preaching" are one and the same. The sermon is biblical and fully textual, but one clear theme is addressed, not several. Exegesis is implicit and interpretation of the text is thorough, but it is applied to life in the light of the "one clear idea."⁸

It is particularly boring when a preacher thinks he is a “biblical preacher” because he gives an account of the whole history of salvation every Sunday, even adding another rerun of the Garden of Eden story, as if people have never heard it before.⁹ In contrast, fresh language produces a clear presentation of law and gospel in the following paragraphs by Richard Kapfer in a Lenten sermon on servanthood:

Perhaps we need to equip our offices with fewer crosses and more towels and basins. Maybe instead of fish symbols on our doors and crosses on the walls of our homes we need pictures of feet and hands and a towel and basin. It’s too bad Albrecht Dürer painted praying hands, for maybe wet hands would have been better! And maybe we ought to have drills on how to use towels and basins, much like learning CPR.

Why are you and I here, anyway? That’s the tap on the shoulder, the word from God dropped into our midst. Why was footwashing so important that Jesus did it? What has that to do with the 65 or 75 years that we are probably going to be here on this planet? How could *Jesus* stoop so low—and why would He tell us that we must stoop so low? What did He see in footwashing that He wants *us* to see? John tells us (John 13:3-4): “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside His garments. . . .”

Servant Jesus bends down from heaven to earth in order to wash us clean from sin. The One crowned with thorns comes to crown us as children of the Kingdom. The naked One comes to place on us the robes of righteousness. The crucified Christ arises from the grave to free us from the world’s deadness and to give us a new vision of life and greatness.

Conclusion: Renewal. Where should it begin, this renewal of servanthood? It may need to begin in your home, in your marriage, in your place of work. But most important, it must begin at the cross. Then let it happen from the cross through you, for Jesus Himself will hand you the towel and basin. He Himself will point you to where you should go. Most important, He Himself will go with you.¹⁰

There is, to be sure, a plague of generic preaching, but there are also many excellent preachers around who do preach creative, evangelical, and heart-warming sermons. Kapfer is just one example. Such preachers are to be heartily commended. What is it about their preaching that makes us want to come to hear them? Kapfer's treatment and application of the text is rich homiletical meat to savor. He has done all his exegetical work also. But it is not fed to his hearers undigested, lest the hearers should choke on it. Instead Kapfer makes exegesis an implicit part of what is finally preached. As W.A. Poovey says, exegesis "is not material to be lugged into the pulpit. . . . A good sermon is like a good dinner. You don't need to know all the processes that have been carried out in the kitchen, or in the study, but you want to know that something happened there."¹¹

Alfred O. Fuerbringer (once president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis) used to say that some seminary professors had a way of "preaching in the classroom and lecturing in the pulpit." Some preachers today have a habit of preaching in the adult Bible class and conducting a Bible study in the pulpit. We should be biblical preachers and expound the text. But a sermon is not a Greek word study. The distinction between the aorist and the pluperfect is not unimportant. Determining the full significance of a Greek or Hebrew word is critical, and intricate textual analysis can be appropriate to the Bible class. In the sermon, however, the requisite exegesis is to be implicit and applied.

A "well-turned word" is a word that speaks afresh to a person today. "But I don't have that gift of language!" a preacher may respond. One can, however, preach a richer message—by the Holy Spirit's power and in one's own unique way of preaching with one's own gifts and limitations. The preacher must look to his Lord's style of preaching. (1.) He used illustrations. (2.) He asked inductive questions of His hearers. (3.) He utilized rich imagery.

What are "illustrations"? They are "the windows that let in the light" (Spurgeon). They intensify the applicability of biblical truth to everyday life and may take a variety of forms. Here are two examples, the first excerpted from a Good Friday sermon and the second from a sermon on the work of the Holy Spirit:

[A Good Friday Sermon: Introduction]

A pastor in the Pacific Northwest tells a moving story of the dramatization of Christ's trial and crucifixion by the youth group at his church. The youth director played the role of Christ, the youth the jeering mob.

"Crucify him! Crucify him!" they shouted, and then they dragged the youth director into the backyard of the church and hung him up on an improvised cross.

The pastor stood to the side of the assembly to "see how the drama was going." The youth were hushed now as "Christ" hung there and spoke these words to the youth group: "Even though you are doing this to me, I still love you."

And then, standing in the front of the group, the pastor noticed an eight-year-old girl, transfixed by the scene. He looked at her and saw real tears were streaming down her face.

"And," the pastor states, "I was envious of her. For us 'professionals' it was a 'performance.' For her, it was the real thing. She was there."

How often do you and I come to a Good Friday service and observe what is happening to Christ? But it is only that. We are spectators, not involved. And yet the Savior of the world is hanging there, suffering and dying for your and my sins on the cross.¹²

[A Sermon on the Holy Spirit's Work]

A minister tells of a woman, a happy and efficient wife of a fellow pastor, who was experiencing her full share of life's sunshine and shade, but no real darkness falling her way. And then, suddenly, without warning, her husband died of a heart attack, leaving her terribly alone and afraid—afraid of her own decisions, afraid of the present, afraid of the future. When the minister visited his colleague's wife, she related how she was in the viselike grip of fear—so tyrannized that most of her time was spent in bed. She was so terrified that she became bedridden.

When the minister saw her two years later, he was pleasantly surprised to find a poised, serene woman,

working as a receptionist in an insurance office. When the pastor asked her to explain her amazing recovery, the woman replied, “The work helped, of course, but I couldn’t work at all until I faced my fear and saw it was basically a selfish rebellion against God and what I thought was God’s will. When I saw that, I began to pray that God would forgive my selfishness. And as I prayed, I became aware of God’s hand reaching down to me, and the Holy Spirit moved me to clasp that hand. And then to my amazement, I found His hand clasping mine; and I knew that He really cared and that He would help me as long as I held His hand in faith.”

Is your faith like that woman’s? What burden or fear besets you today? Do you feel God’s hand clasping yours?¹³

Illustrations are certainly to be shunned if they (a.) do not flow from the text; (b.) are remote from the hearer’s world; (c.) are apocryphal; (d.) are sidetracking or lacking closure; (e.) are boringly analogical—being only a comparison of sorts; and therefore (f.) are lacking a denouement. But the preacher who eschews illustrations is ignoring our Lord’s own method: “He would not say a thing to them without using a story” (Matthew 13:34).

Jesus particularly used story-illustrations. And they were drawn from the real life of His hearers. He followed the principle of beginning with the “known” in the lives of people (a wedding, a robbery, a death) and then moving to the “unknown”—the theological principle, the new truth to be learned. He communicated because “He knew His own and His own knew Him” (John 10:14).

Some preachers have a way of “starting with the unknown and ending up with the unknown.” Jesus’ method was different. “Consider the lilies how they grow” (Luke 12:27). And the listener mentally responded: “Yes, Lord, I was just digging around my plants this morning!” “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when robbers attacked him. . .” (Luke 10:30). And again the hearer responded: “Yes, Lord, I know just what You are talking about! Why, Uncle Daniel was attacked on that road just last week!”¹⁴

Christ used illustrative material drawn from the contemporary world of His hearers. The Apostle Paul did also, quoting

the secular literature of his day: "as your poets have said. . ." (Acts 17:28). But Christ also utilized the rich treasury of biblical illustrations as well. Such use does not mean just another rehash of a Bible story which people already know well. Rather it means the fresh application of stories and images from the Scriptures themselves.

R.R. Caemmerer has provided a rich resource of these metaphors which he calls the "Modes of the Atonement." They should be kept in mind by the preacher in depicting corollary scriptural material germane to the text for the day. And the themes may well trigger use of other biblical images and illustrative material besides stereotypical law-gospel and judgment-mercy language.¹⁵ Caemmerer's list follows:¹⁶

Biblical Modes of Depicting the Atonement

Each complex of Law and Gospel is set on one line. Where Law complexes are repeated, the previous line is indicated by its numeral.

<i>Man's Problem (Law)</i>	<i>God's Answer (Gospel)</i>
<i>Effecting a Change in the Relation of Man to God</i>	
1. Separation from God, Isaiah 59:2; 53:6	Atonement, Romans 5:11 (KJV)
2. Hostility toward God	Reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5:18 ff.
3. Wrath of God, Ephesians 5:6	Peace, John 16:33; Healing, Isaiah 53:5; Mercy
4. Death, Romans 6:23; Genesis 2:17	Life, Romans 6:23; John 3:1-16
5. Sin: rebellion, disobedience, Titus 3:3	Kingdom, Spirit, Matthew 4:17; 2 Corinthians 3:17
6. Sin: guilt under judgment, Psalm 130	Forgiveness (like 3); Romans 3:19 ff.
7. Sin: debt, Matthew 6:12	Redemption (like 26)
8. Sorrow (due to sin), 2 Corinthians 7:10	Joy, John 16:20
9. Disquiet (due to unfaith), Psalm 42:5	Hope, faith, Hebrew 12:1 ff.
10. Darkness (life away from God)	Light, Luke 1:79; John 3:19; 12:35
11. Unrighteousness, Romans 1:18	Righteousness of God, Jeremiah 23:6; Romans 3:19 ff.

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| 12. Self-righteousness, Luke 18:9 ff. | Righteousness of God, Jeremiah 23:6; Romans 3:19 ff. |
| 13. Filth of sinful nature, Romans 1:21 ff. | Cleansing, John 1:29; Psalm 51 |

The One through Whom God Effects the Change

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| 14. 1-13 | The Anointed One, Psalm 2:2; Matthew 16:16 |
| 15. 1-13 | The Servant, Isaiah 53:13 ff.; Philippians 2:5-8 |
| 16. 3-7, enormity, helplessness | The Sacrifice; Lamb, John 1:29; Hebrews 10:12 |
| 17. 3-7, enormity, helplessness | The Priest, Hebrews 4:15; 5:7; 8; 9:24-28 |
| 18. 3, 6, 13; 1, 10 | The Mercy Seat, Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:1 |
| 19. Malice, wickedness, insincerity, 1 Corinthians 5 | The Passover, 1 Corinthians 5:7 |
| 20. Ignorance of God, John 1:18 | The Word, John 1:1-14 |
| 21. Temptation, 1, 9, 6, 7 | The Intercessor, Paraclete, 1 John 2:1; Romans 8:34 |
| 22. Waywardness, 1, 5, 9, 10 | The Shepherd, Ezekiel 34:23; John 10:2 ff., etc. |
| 23. 1, 4, man's total plight | Jesus, Savior, Matthew 1:21 |
| 24. 1, 2, 9, 10 | Immanuel, Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23 |

The Act by Which God Enables the Change

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| 25. 6, 11 | Christ's undergoing the indictment of the Law, Galatians 4:4; 2 Corinthians 5:21 |
| 26. Bondage, 4-8; Law | Christ's ransom through death, Matthew 20:28 |
| 27. 1-7 | Christ's death on the cross, Colossians 1:22 |
| 28. 26 | Christ's death and resurrection: victory, 1 Corinthians 15:57 |
| 29. Enormity of the wrath of God, 3 | Christ's going to the Father (cross), John 14:2 |

The Message Which Communicates the Change to Men

30. 1, 2	The Word of Reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5:18 ff.
31. 1-13	The Preaching of the Cross, 1 Corinthians 1:18
32. 4-12	The Gospel of Christ, to convert, 1 Peter 1:23
33. Continuing damage of sin, Romans 7:18 ff.	The Gospel of Christ, to build, 1 Peter 2:2
34. 4, 12	Baptism, Titus 3:4-7; Romans 6:4
35. 6, 9	Holy Communion, 1 Corinthians 11:24-26

Secondly, our Lord used inductive questions. In induction, upon observing the facts, the person is led to draw conclusions by inference, to arrive at a general principle. Deduction begins with a general truth and then seeks to apply it. Jesus said: "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" And the man said: "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:36-37).

To avoid generic preaching one needs to apply the text to the hearer's personal life with inductive questions—as Jesus did. Otherwise, as spectator, I hear the pastor preach *about* the text (or generic "other people") but not *to* me. Such preaching does not involve me in the law in this text applied to my sinful nature. It does not call me personally to repentance *to* (not "and") the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 24:46-48 states the *sine qua non* of every biblical sermon.)¹⁷ The preacher does not apply the good news of the gospel to me personally unless he uses inductive questions. He must query me and make me say, "Oops! Ugh!"—and then—"Aha! Yeah! Whee!" The result is true "law and gospel preaching" (as opposed to mere assertions: "we all are sinners," "we all need God's grace," etc.).¹⁸

Not long ago I heard a "sermon." For eighteen minutes the preacher vividly talked about the "fact" that "you are a child of God." He told me nothing new. There was not a fresh thought in the message. His feeble attempts at what he probably thought were "illustrations" were pneumatic snippets: "I happened to be reading *Time* the other day. . ." "I

was driving to the hospital to make my calls when it suddenly occurred to me. . .” “I was on an airplane and happened to talk to. . .” There had obviously been no real preparation,¹⁹ no search for well-honed story-illustrations, no in-depth study of either the text or contemporary life in relation to it—and no inductive questions which pulled me into the law and gospel in the text as it applied to me.

I went home not only unfed, but also angry. Why do our people put up with such things? Some simply come to church—knowing they will hear another innocuous sermon—because they would feel guilty if they did not come. Some come not minding innocuity, preferring it to a sermon which would really call them to repentance. Some are there because, though the pastor is not a good preacher, he may be a good counselor or caller. Perhaps he is simply likeable. Perhaps he helped someone through a serious illness—one’s own or that of a loved one. But good, non-generic preaching could add so much more to that man’s ministry (to put it mildly).

Inductive questions applied to the listener’s life can obviate the bane of generic preaching. These two examples come from an Easter sermon:

[Part of the Introduction]

Do you live your life as if you are still in the pre-Easter gloom? Is your vision of life so low that you shuffle through life only marking time in the here and now? Does life consist in what you accumulate? Is your love only self-love for “me and mine”? Is there no anger at what is and no yearning for what should be and shall be? Have you simply made your peace with the world and joined it? Are you living without the vision of the kingdom and apart, in any meaningful way, from the King? Are you living as though Jesus did not rise from the dead to give you a living hope? Then before the Easter message can be heard, you need to go to the tomb today and pray with the psalmist, “If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” (Psalm 130:3).

[The Conclusion]

Now let the lights come on in your life, and live in the light! Now let the cross be unveiled, for it is a glorious cross of forgiveness! Now let the banners be raised in your

life of faith! Now let the lilies of joy trumpet the sound of praise to God: He is risen! Hallelujah! Hope is renewed forever and ever!²⁰

Thirdly, the use of richer imagery and fresher language is needed to make otherwise sedative words come to life. H. Grady Davis makes this observation:

It is not enough to speak the truth. Though your words may be as true as the Bible, yet if they are not relevant to the life of your people, and if your voice fails to give them the accent of personal concern, they will still fall unheeded.²¹

The preacher must take Roget's *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* down from his shelf and keep it open as he writes. Also useful are the new computer aids *Illusaurus* and *The Pastor's Autoillustrator*. Here are several examples of generic versus specific language:

<i>Generic</i>	<i>Specific</i>
God guides me through life.	It is the "crazy, holy grace of God" which leads me (Frederick Buechner).
God loves you.	The challenge is to know "a God madly in love with us, and then live as one must who is caught up in such a love affair" (Andrew Greeley).
We should love another.	Our parish should have "an atmosphere in which grace flourishes" (Randolph Crump Miller). "Even though they are Lutherans, they love each other" (Edward W. Wessling re his parishioners).
The theology of most television "evangelists" is faulty.	What we need is a new magazine called <i>Repenthouse</i> .
Are you searching for God? Are you a complainer? Do you just follow the crowd? Do you know Jesus?	"Are you a groper, a griper, a grouper, or a gripper?" (Edward W. Wessling).

The traffic is bad.

Welcome to "California, where the state flower is the Concrete Cloverleaf" (Edward W. Wessling).

We should learn better how to communicate with each other.

Our dialogue should not be "the construction of agreed-upon barricades from behind which" we "hurl" our "own ego-gratifying ammunition, but rather, a table spread for an event of Christian love" (Harry A. DeWire).²²

The sea was beautiful.

"The framing sea often seems to be of hand-hammered silver" (Margot Patterson Doss *re* Stinson Beach, California).

The Creative Task: Writing the Sermon by H. Gerard Knoche is a particularly helpful resource in the development of writing skills.²³ Sadly, the book is out of print. But it is worth tracking down in a library. It is loaded with fresh aids both for the sermon and for creativity of expression. Among many exciting illustrations of fecund description, it includes these from H. Grady Davis:²⁴

Abstract

The alarm. . .
He criticized them severely.

We avoid thinking of death.

Young people enjoy life.

The spot where Jesus lay. . .

The odors in Jesus' tomb. . .

Sensuous

The roar of the siren. . .
He blistered them with words (Fulton Sheen).

We disguise death with flowers (Peter Marshall).

Life is sweet on the tongue of youth.

The cold stone slab. . . (Marshall).

Strange scents of linen and bandages, and spices, and close air and blood. . . (Marshall).

There are many additional books available to help one move beyond a generic literary style.²⁵ Among them is Francis C. Rossow's *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*.²⁶ Rossow offers a variety of challenging approaches with respect to the gospel's "magic, music, rhythm, beauty, precision and dynamite":²⁷ multiple texts, literature, extended analogy, role playing, dialogue, letter format, inversion, cliché redemption, word study, grammar, logic, and mathematics.

In sum, one can enrich one's preaching style. The potential is there, ready to be untapped, aided by a variety of resources which are available. Many a preacher has found himself to be very like the man in prison for twenty years who one day tried the door of his cell and found it was unlocked.

I pray, then, that God may preserve us from today's plague of generic preaching, preaching which is lifeless and lethally dull, which uses the same God-talk every Sunday and which the preacher seeks to justify as "biblical" or "law and gospel" preaching. We need law and gospel preaching, but stated in fresh, contemporary language and illustrated in terms of real life—as Jesus did. "He would not say a thing to them without using a story" (Matthew 13:34). We must have done with the plague of generic preaching. Then the Lord will not have to look down on yet another Sunday morning when thousands of His people sit dazed, mummified, awash in bland theological jargon. And the Lord will not have to cry out, "Let my people go!"

ENDNOTES

1. Walter J. Burkhardt, "Saturday Night Live, Sunday Morning Deadly?" *Homiletic*, Winter 1989. God is not boring, but much preaching about Him is.
2. *The Cresset*, September 1961, p. 19. The quotation occurred in an introduction to a review of a book by Edward W. Wessling, *What's the Good Word?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961) concerning which the reviewer went on to say: "Pastor Wessling is one of the breed of youngish pastors who think that preachers should speak a language understood by the people. His style is colloquial, his illustrations are drawn from the life

of people living in the middle of the twentieth century, and he does not eschew the use of humor when it can be used to advantage. His purpose in this inexpensive little paperback is to rescue some of the great old words of the faith from the process of corrosion which has all but destroyed some of them and to put them back to work as symbols and vehicles of the truth."

3. "Journalistic Preaching," *The Christian Century*, November 5, 1958.
4. The paragraphs quoted are used by permission. The final couplet is the refrain of Hymn 311 in *Lutheran Worship*, ed. the Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982).
5. Wallace E. Fisher, *Who Dares to Preach?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), p. 143.
6. By "problem-resolution preaching" I do not mean "get-your-problems-solved-here" or "easy-answer" theology. I mean "attention-challenge-resolution" in the fullest sense of law and gospel.
7. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), p. 25.
8. Donald L. Deffner, "Myths about Preaching," unpublished manuscript.
9. Nor need we weekly recount the whole history of salvation — and pound the Bible as we do it—just to prove we are "orthodox."
10. Richard G. Kapfer, in *Lent: A Time for Renewal*, ed. Gerhard Aho, Donald L. Deffner, and Richard G. Kapfer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1990). The quotation reprinted here is used by permission.
11. W.A. Poovey, *Letting the Word Come Alive: Choosing and Studying the Text* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), p. 24.
12. Donald L. Deffner, in *Lent: A Time for Renewal*. The quotation reprinted here is used by permission.
13. Donald L. Deffner, in *Sermon Illustrations for the Gospel Lessons* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1980), p. 25. The quotation reprinted here is used by permission.
14. Donald L. Deffner, *Compassionate Preaching: A Primer/Primer in Homiletics* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1990).

15. For additional sources of illustrations correlated to biblical texts and themes see Richard Andersen and Donald L. Deffner, *For Example: Illustrations for Contemporary Preaching* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977). Particularly worthy of note is use of secular literature as a resource. See also David F. Burgess, *Encyclopedia of Sermon Illustrations* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988). See also *Context*, a commentary on the intersection of religion and culture, a six-page fortnightly newsletter by Martin E. Marty culled from 250 periodicals. *Time* calls Marty "the most influential living interpreter of religion in the United States" (twenty-two issues cost \$24.95).
16. Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. 330-331. The list reprinted here with minor adaptations (purely orthographical and grammatical) is used by permission.
17. The prophets' message, John the Baptist's call, and our Lord's ultimate, climactic words to His disciples were "the message about repentance to the forgiveness of sins. . ." This message "must be preached to all nations. . ." Significantly, "repentance to" (*eis*) is the preferable reading, not "repentance and." The preaching of the law serves the conviction of sin and so (indirectly) the reception of the good news of the gospel. This repentance is also the message essential to Paul's declaration of the gospel in 1 and 2 Corinthians and is the central core in the Book of Acts. Repentance to the forgiveness of sins is always the heart of the declaration—and it is linked to the resurrection.

Of course, the life of sanctification follows. In this connection see the article by David P. Scaer, "Sanctification in Lutheran Theology," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 49 (April-July, 1985). With respect to sanctification, preaching repentance to the forgiveness of sins also avoids the trap of moralism. Moralism focuses on certain values as ideals to follow, rather than seeing them as consequences of the gospel.

But we do not "work on" traits of Christian character. And Christ is not just "our example." He is rather prototype. He is the first fruits of those who believe in Him. Therefore we focus not on His humility, as a precept to follow, but on His humiliation—His sacrifice for us. For we fail totally, but by virtue of His death and resurrection we are forgiven and then called to the fruits of faith, empowered totally by the Holy Spirit. Christ is now in me, and I am "in Christ." Paul uses the phrase some thirty-two times in the New Testament (cf. also Galatians 5 and 6).

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18. The preacher must also avoid weak words: "I think sometimes we. . ."; "perhaps"; "maybe"; "it seems to me"; "I think what Paul is trying to say here is. . ." "Throw-away" sentences (those which are superfluous or repetitive) should also be deleted.
 19. I am convinced that much generic preaching arises from this, that the sermon was never fully written. Nor did the preacher take the time to develop a "single, clear idea." As John Henry Jowett said many years ago: "No sermon is ready for preaching, nor ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. I find the getting of that sentence the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labor in my study. . . I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon." (John Henry Jowett, *The Preacher, His Life and Work* (New York: Doran, 1912), p. 133.
 20. Richard G. Kapfer. The adaptation of his introduction and the quotation of his conclusion (op. cit.) are used by permission.
 21. H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958).
 22. Harry A. DeWire, *The Christian as Communicator* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 97, as quoted in "Establishing a Trust-Relationship with the Educated" in Donald L. Deffner, *The Compassionate Mind: Evangelization and the Educated* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1988), p. 180 (a work now being published by Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis).
 23. H. Gerard Knoche, *The Creative Task: Writing the Sermon* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977).
 24. Davis, op. cit., pp. 271-272.
 25. A widely heralded "little classic" is William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).
 26. Francis C. Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983). Rossow's unique forte is "Gospel-Handles," which he defines as "the selection from a biblical sermon text of a word (or words) which in itself contains no Gospel but which is used as an approach, transition, or handle to an account of the Gospel outside the text" (p. 50). This approach provides crucial help to those preachers who fail to preach the gospel consistently on such grounds as these: (1.) it is not present in the text of the day; (2.) it is still always present in the liturgy; (3.) they have heard it before. Rossow's goals in using "Gospel-Handles" are (1.) to get to the gospel when the

sermon text itself contains little or no gospel, (2.) to provide an alternate approach to the gospel in an overly familiar text, and (3.) to provide within the same sermon "extra" gospel in addition to that explicitly supplied by the text (p. 51).

27. Ibid., p. 154.