Speaking in the Name of God
Speaking in the Name of God
A Manual for Preachers

Klaus Nürnberg
Sermons are tools of the Spirit of God. They are meant to convey God’s redeeming love to God’s lost and suffering creatures. Tools must serve the goal for which they are designed.

Sermons are designed and delivered by preachers, so preachers are tools of the Spirit. Inspired by the Spirit, they develop their gifts and do their work to the best of their ability.

This book offers an on-the-job training and self-enhancement programme for lay preachers and ordained ministers. Its interactive approach encourages preachers to develop their own best way of going about their task in critical dialogue with the author.

In Part I, short chapters reflect on the attitude and status of the preacher and spell out the basic of sermon preparation: retrieval of the biblical message, clarification of the message, sermon design, and sermon delivery. They end with remarks on the context of the sermon and alternative types of sermons.

In Part II, the book offers a series of actual sermons. They are meant to provide material for exercises in critical analysis and quality enhancement, rather than perfect examples to be followed.

Part III describes two ways to train preachers at different levels of sophistication.
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TO MY READERS

Take a few minutes and reflect on the following questions:

*Are you one of those called to deliver God’s message?*

*Do you think you know how to preach and need no further help?*

*If you do think you need to improve, which aspects need to be improved?*

*What is the best way to do so?*

In contrast to the written word, the sermon is the living voice of the gospel. One person proclaims the gospel to other persons by speaking to them face to face. A living sermon proclaims God’s redeeming and empowering response to human needs, predicaments, and deprivities. It makes people sit up and listen. Why that? Because the very foundations of their lives are at stake. Humans are always at the crossroads between an authentic and an inauthentic life. When we realise that we are on the wrong track, God opens a new way for us and does so now and here.

Sermons are the living voice of the Gospel! Anything alive may get sick. When you are healthy and strong, thank God for it! But if you are sick, you may want to do something about it. Like biological life, spiritual life can ail. It can even die. An ailing proclamation can lead to an ailing faith, thus to an ailing congregation. A congregation can die; a whole church can die. It has often happened. This is serious! It may not happen.

We will not allow this to happen to our body if we can help it. We will adopt a healthy lifestyle, eat wholesome food, avoid stress, and keep moving. When sick, one’s body will mobilise its healing powers. We will try and enhance these natural processes. We may try out some home cures. If that does not help, we may want to go to the doctor. We expect doctors to know what they are doing.

Let us imagine what a healthy sermon leading to a healthy spiritual life and a healthy community of believers would look like and aspire towards it. Then we imagine ourselves being doctors treating ailing sermons. A doctor will first make a diagnosis and then prescribe a remedy. The task of the doctor is not to hurt, but to heal, yet her prescriptions may cause discomfort and involve financial costs. It may also necessitate radical changes in lifestyle.

But the aim is a healthy and flourishing body, in this case a vivid and effective sermon. If you will, we can embark on something like that together!

**Who am I to tell you what to do?**

Is your preaching so healthy and strong that it needs no doctor? If you think so, I rejoice and hope that you are right! If not, am I the right kind of person to turn to? I do not take that for granted! You may have gone through an elaborate training. You may be an experienced pastor or a renowned evangelist or an
educated elder of high standing or somebody who waits for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

No, I am not entitled to tell you what to do! I am not your teacher of theology or your bishop or your role model. Least of all can I take over the role of the Holy Spirit to inspire and direct you. Yes, I love to preach. I was called to preach. I abandoned my previous profession as an agricultural economist to become a preacher of the Word of God. I was entrusted with the training of preachers and did so for thirty years.

It was my task as a professional theologian to dig as deeply into the meaning of the Word of God as I possibly could. However, I always knew that theology is meant to facilitate the proclamation of the Word of God, rather than an academic pastime or the means to satisfy the ambitions of a few colleagues.

I have preached countless times over the last half century. I have listened to many more sermons preached by others, virtually every Sunday of my adult life. I have been impressed and deeply struck many times, but I have also been bored, even appalled by what I heard. These are my credentials. Have I become a star preacher? Not at all! Do I have all the answers? No way! Did I always follow the suggestions contained in this book? Alas, no!

However, I am haunted by the urgency of the matter. Preachers speak in the name of God and in the authority of God. This is serious! God is the one from whom our own lives, our communities, and reality as a whole proceeds and to whom they will ultimately return. We are accountable to this God. But this God offers us participation in an authentic life—free of charge, as it were. There can be no higher dignity and no deeper responsibility than proclaiming the message entrusted to us. But then our output must become commensurate with our task.

**We are in this together!**

I would have wanted to tackle this task together with others on a regular basis. Apart from groups of students in training, I have not experienced such cooperation very often among preachers. But it *can* happen! And for the sake of God’s Word, it *should* happen!

Most preachers work in splendid isolation. When they prepare their sermons, they sit in their lonely offices and depend on their own insight and ingenuity. They are not checked by others, do not cooperate with others, and receive no input from others.

They are also not exposed to critical and constructive feedback. Listeners do not dare to express their expectations and disappointments. They may believe that this would impair the dignity of the office or the sanctity of God’s Word. They may also be wary of offending a touchy preacher.

Why not share our insights and experiences, discuss our strengths and weaknesses, help each other to prepare for, construct, and deliver our sermons? Why not ask our colleagues or a few trusted laypeople to check our sermons before we deliver them? Why not conduct a short post-mortem of our sermons after they have been preached?
Just think how many engineers are involved in designing a subway in a
great city! How many architects are involved in designing a modern skyscraper!
How scrupulous are the efforts to cut out risks and deficiencies in designing
an airliner! How many checks are performed to make certain that nothing goes
wrong when a mission is sent to outer space!

At a spiritual level, the Word of God is way more profound and fundamental
than the subway and much higher than the skyscraper. There is no reason to be
touchy in a matter of such importance. We are not perfect. According to the New
Testament, the Spirit is granted to the community; individuals do not have it in
their pockets or in their private studies.

Cooperation can perhaps happen, even in a modest way, through this book.
As we go, I will ask you to articulate your insights, experiences, and opinions
first. Then I offer mine as clearly as I can. Then I prompt you to respond and
come to your own conclusions. Then you can apply them, change them, ignore
them, or replace them with better alternatives.

Surely this is second best. It would be better to sit around a table and do
it together. Perhaps you can gather a few colleagues or parishioners and do it
without me. And perhaps the points I make in this book can trigger fruitful
discussions, rekindle enthusiasm, and generate more profound, more lucid, and
more powerful sermons through a common effort. That would be wonderful!

So what can you expect in this book?

In this book, I share with you my own take on the gift of preaching the
Word of God. I limit my theological reflections and convictions to the minimum
of what I consider to be essential. I prompt you to agree or disagree with my
contentions and come to your own conclusions. I encourage you to explore your
own experiences and mobilise your own resources to proclaim our priceless
message to the best of your ability.

My aim is to join you on your pilgrimage. This is not a textbook. It is not
to be read and studied from cover to cover but used like a road map. Just start
walking from where you are right now. Take a small bite at a time. I know that
you have no time to read a book like this, let alone absorb its contents all at once.

This would even be counterproductive because you would not be able to
reflect on the suggestions made and insights gained and translate them into
practice all at once. You do not have to! Part I of the book is subdivided into
twenty-two short chapters. Each one is relatively self-contained and can be read
as such.

I suggest you read one chapter at a time, say on Monday morning. Give your
subconscious a chance to work on it while continuing with your pastoral duties.
One chapter per week will do the trick. It just takes 20–30 minutes.

Reflect on it, critique it. If it makes sense, try to apply it. If it does not, work
on your alternative. Then read the next chapter. Eventually, things may fall into
place and give you a picture of what you think is required and what you want to
achieve. Then integrate what you found desirable and workable into your routine.
Part II consists of a couple of sermons. They are not meant to be perfect examples but to provide material for exercising your critical and constructive judgement. They represent different types of sermon. If you read them carefully, you will detect their strengths and weaknesses.

Part III gives an impression of how training can be done across the wide spectrum from lay training at parish level to academic training at a seminary or university.

After reading the above, would you like to see whether this book can help you?
Or do you think you should just carry on as before?
Or would you rather establish a group of fellow preachers as suggested?
If the latter, will you see whether this book can act as a guideline in the group?
PART I

DEVELOPING YOUR GIFTS
A. THE MESSAGE
CHAPTER 1

The glory and the gravity of the task

Getting serious about preaching

What do you think?

If you are a preacher, why do you want to preach? Try to be as honest with God and yourself as you can.

If you are a listener, what do you expect from the weekly sermon?

If you are training to become a preacher, what kind of motivation do you think should lead you in your ministry?

Which skills do you think should a preacher acquire?

I have often asked myself, ‘What the hell are we doing when we preach?’ No, preaching is not about hell! In fact, those who preach hell do not know what they are doing to the gospel of Christ and to their fellow human beings! Preaching is about delivering a wonderful message: the message of the redeeming, liberating, empowering love of God as manifest in Jesus Christ.

‘That is the message that we heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and there is no darkness in him!’ (1 John 1: 5, KN) That is the message! There is no deeper truth than the assurance that God is for us and with us and not against us. This message is so fundamental for human life, so critically important for society, so protective of nature that it cannot be replaced or surpassed by any other. It is infinitely precious. Are we conscious of the glory and the gravity of the task?

By whose authority do we preach?

Let us consider just who it is that has called us to become preachers of the Word of God! Yes, we are called by a Christian community to act on its behalf. But the Word of God is the message of God himself, entrusted to the community of believers. And God is the ultimate Source and Destiny of our lives, our life worlds, and the whole of cosmic reality.

Just imagine! We are called upon to speak in the name of the God who is the Creator of reality in its vast dimensions: quantum dynamics and the rotation of galaxies, living cells and organisms, neurons and brain states, daily life and human history, convictions and worldviews, science and faith. When we preach, we are speaking in the name of ultimate authority! Do we not have to tremble when we realize that we are to speak in the name of God?
Yet throughout the centuries, the message of Christ was widely and shamelessly abused to legitimate the most wayward human motivations and the most atrocious deeds in the quest for power, wealth, and status. It has caused bloody wars, conquests, persecutions, and enslavements. Surely we do not want to find ourselves in that company! We also do not want to belong to those who are so careless and casual about their task, as if preaching was not more important than brushing your teeth or checking your mail.

Human beings are human! They can miss the intention of God and they usually do; they can miss the message that conveys this intention of God and they usually do. They can be put off by the way preachers convey their message, rather than be sucked into the power sphere of God's creative and redeeming love. Preachers too are human. Hearers are human. Are we letting God down?

**Consider the message we are to convey!**

It is the message of God's creative power that enables whatever exists and happens, and God's redeeming love for God's flourishing and suffering creatures. It is a message meant to change uprooted, disoriented, derailed human lives into what they are meant to become: free, joyful, loving human lives.

It is a message that calls us all to live in fellowship with God, to be liberated from idols and other masters, to be transformed in God's presence, to be motivated by God's vision, and to share in God's creative and redeeming work in this world. That is what preaching is all about!

When it was first proclaimed and enacted by Jesus, this message was so explosive that they had to get rid of him. Just imagine the situation on that first night after his crucifixion: this most gifted and most promising of all human beings was put out of action by the religious and political leaders of the time through an incredibly cruel and violent action.

But why that! He had only proclaimed and enacted God's redeeming love. His ministry lasted only a few years. His disciples had misunderstood him. He was betrayed by one of them and denied by another; the rest had fled. His enemies thought they had blotted out his mission. It was an unmitigated catastrophe! All seems to have been lost.

Yet the seed had been sown. The message of God's redeeming love blossomed when the Spirit of the crucified Christ became active among his disciples. It changed the lives of millions of people since—liberating, transforming, empowering, and involving them in God's redeeming love.

Yes, the Holy Spirit can do marvellous things even with the most incapable preachers under the most adverse circumstances. That is the simple truth! But that does not relieve us from the responsibility of conveying the message to the best of our ability. Are we letting the message down?
Consider the receivers of the message!

Take a typical Sunday service. Most of those present are members. They are willing to make financial contributions to the viability of the congregation. They may have travelled quite some distance. They may be tired after the weekly rat race. They are willing to spend some quality time with us, forfeiting more exhilarating forms of entertainment available in modern society. They have legitimate expectations.

They may have been brutalised by the disdain, callousness, and irresponsibility of their secular environments. They may have entangled themselves in fateful circumstances from which they cannot extricate themselves. They may have been marginalised by the economy, the society, or the community. They may labour under the burden of their failures and their culpability. They may face painful conflicts in their families or workplaces. They may have lost loved ones. They may be enraged or disheartened by what happens in the world today.

They may also want to praise God with an overflowing heart. They may want to thank God for all his blessings with their fellow believers. They want to be enlightened, reoriented, reassured in their faith, and empowered to face their daily lives in the presence of God. That is why they have come. Will they go home with renewed courage and joy? There may also be some strangers that want to experience what faith in Christ is all about. What kind of impression will they get when attending the service? Are we letting our listeners down?

Consider the social context!

We are not solitary individuals; we are also not alone as congregations or churches. We are embedded in a society with great achievements, great ambitions, and massive problems. At the level of collective consciousness, we find the breakdown of traditional commitments and inhibitions; loss of responsibility; rampant selfishness, avarice and entitlement; reckless profit-seeking and consumerism; domestic violence; organised crime; armed gang warfare; unscrupulous drug cartels; rising levels of fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism.

At the international level, we find rising conflict potentials in poor and failed states; a lucrative arms trade; devastating civil wars with millions of casualties, maimed people, refugees, destroyed buildings and infrastructure; dangerous superpower rivalries; development of weapons of mass destruction; leftovers of the cold war with close on 80,000 nuclear warheads at the disposal of the United States and Russia alone.

Humanity as a whole is moving into a self-destructive direction: growing wastage of natural resources; cancerous growth of the population; rising discrepancies in life chances between a few super-rich and masses of poor people; growing expectations of the less endowed; replacement of human labour
with machines and computers; destruction of the natural world on which all life depends; pollution of land, air, and water.

That is the reality in which the Word of God wants to develop its healing power. Are we letting down the world that God loves and wants to redeem? No, a few feeble preachers will not save the world, but we are called to share God’s redeeming action in the world regardless!

If there is any spiritual power that could prevent this gigantic Titanic from crashing into the iceberg, it is the message of God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable, which we are called upon to share. How many of these atrocious developments would have a chance to continue if humans were involved in the redeeming love of God as manifest in Christ and shared the sacrifices necessary to maintain this world and allow its inhabitants to flourish!

I am not a dreamer! I have written many pages on the brute facts of the evolving global situation. The handful of serious Christians found in this world is not going to redeem humanity, overcome an economy based on ruthless selfishness, or safeguard the health and continued existence of our ecological infrastructure. And yet it is called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth! We do have a message, a critically important message!

Oh no, let me opt out of this!

Being called to do the seemingly impossible, Moses tried to shake it off, as did Jeremiah, as did Jesus in Gethsemane. A colleague wrote to me: if we are in danger of ‘letting God, the message, the listeners and the world down, who will still want to venture into preaching at all? The chance for failure is almost 100 per cent guaranteed . . . Which preacher sees himself as stopping the Titanic? Rather say: be a lighthouse to make the Titanic turn from the iceberg!’

Indeed, we are helpless and useless! Yet when we preach, we speak in the name and the authority of God. A great God can do great things. While we address the concerns and aspirations of the little flock of Christians before us, our horizons must be as wide as the world that God loves. Christians must keep the great sweeps of history in mind. They must learn to see themselves in the context of their communities, society, humanity, and nature as a whole.

Do our sermons make a difference?

They might! Our seemingly insignificant input is part of the vast redemptive project of God. Examples of what can happen readily come to mind. Jesus was a single individual preaching and healing in a remote part of the Roman Empire. When he was put out of action, twelve of his followers took up the slack. Countless preachers proclaiming the message to countless hearers followed. Millions of lives have been impacted, challenged, changed, reassured, and empowered. Over time, the smallest of all seeds has grown into a towering tree.
During the Reformation, a simple message formulated by a single monk turned the medieval social system upside down. In time, slavery was abolished, human rights were promulgated, women were emancipated. Much was achieved by progressive humanists rather than conservative Christians, but this fact should be a challenge rather than an excuse for us to sit back.

Before the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994, we were staring into an abyss. Hundreds of thousands of Christians agonised and prayed to God. Has this something to do with the fact that not a single fist was raised and not a single shot was fired when blacks and whites, the poorest and the richest, the VIPs and the marginalised stood next to each other in endless queues? It does matter what Christians believe, say, and do!

Of course, the opposite is also true. In the 1930s, a single resentful politician, Adolf Hitler, threw a fiery message into the humiliated and embittered German population. His fiery rhetoric enthused enough people to latch on a vision of German power and greatness that turned Europe and much of the rest of the world into a nightmare.

Try to think of other such cases! A tiny seed can grow into a mighty tree. God has longer time spans at God’s disposal than we do. God also has more people in God’s service than just us. If what sociologists call a critical mass is reached by the right kind of message, it will have an effect. And even if we see no fruits, we have the task of sowing the seed and watering the plants anyway.

What about our performance?

It is against this background that I asked the question ‘What the hell are we doing when we preach?’ Prophets are called upon to pluck up and to plant, to tear down and to build. Apostles proclaimed a message that challenged people to let the flesh die so that the Spirit can take over. Preachers are called to convey a message that condemns the old Adam in us so that we can share in the new life of Christ. What are we doing when we preach?

Note than I am not saying you, I am saying we! Are we aware of the gravity of the message entrusted to us? Are we intent on delivering the kind of quality God, the congregation, and the world can expect from us? Can we afford to be casual, careless, and self-absorbed in our ministry? My concern is not based on theory, but on my experience as a disappointed listener and as a preacher who has missed the mark.

I am not kidding! Deep into my retirement, God gave me a year as a part-time pastor. I could try and apply the insights that I had gathered over a lifetime. At the end of the year, however, I had to acknowledge before God that I had not been the model preacher I wanted to be. I had not responded to the actual needs of the congregation. I had not loved my listeners. I had not attracted the masses. I had not reached out to the world outside. In short, I had made no real difference.

Most of the time, I muddled on from week to week to construct the next service and share a few thoughts that sprung up from the text. There seemed to be no time, no energy, and no motivation to do a really good job. And I am not
alone. Repentance is the first step of becoming a servant of God. Repentance is built on ruthless honesty. So, let us not beat around the bush but place ourselves under the scrutiny of God.

To drive home the point, let me compare our task with the tasks entrusted to some other people. Are the keepers of bunkers housing intercontinental missiles with nuclear warheads aware of the seriousness of their job, however boring it may be? Does a pharmacist understand that the slightest mistake can change the medication scribbled by the doctor on his prescription into a death warrant?

Is the pilot of an airliner carrying 500 people conscious of the consequences of falling asleep during the small hours of the night? When having a bypass operation, do you expect less than professional excellence from your surgeon? We preachers are challenged to emulate the conscientiousness we expect from the laity in our work. We preachers can do more harm to God’s creative and redemptive project than we realise!

So let us develop a vision! Let us envision the unassuming shepherd who really cares for her sheep. She delivers a message that is theologically profound, yet accessible for the uneducated, absorbing for the teenagers, credible for the scientists, and prophetic for the highly placed. Her listeners go home called, challenged, liberated, empowered, enriched. Her message builds up the congregation and draws outsiders into the fold. It motivates the listeners to become witnesses of Christ in their daily lives and the wider society. Can we aspire to emulate her example?

Is preaching not a gift of the Spirit?

Indeed, preaching is one of the gifts of the Spirit. When God speaks, it is God’s Spirit that speaks. The Spirit does it all. But God’s Spirit uses preachers to speak. So at the human level, the preacher does it all. The Spirit activates our gifts. We become active instruments of God. They say that art is 10 per cent intuition and 90 per cent hard work. The same is true for preaching. If the Holy Spirit inspires us, we become ready and eager to tackle the hard work that is involved to the best of our ability.

The point is not whether or not the Holy Spirit can use rather pitiful sermons to bring across the Word of God. As we learn from Paul, the Holy Spirit can do marvellous things when it comes to using feeble and fallible human instruments, which we all are! The point is, rather, that the Spirit wants to mobilise and empower our limited gifts for the work of God and bless the outcome.

Some preachers are naturals. Preaching lies in their blood, as it were. But less endowed mortals are also called to preach, and they should do so with confidence and joy. Moses and Jeremiah thought they were not up to the task. Paul conceded that his performance was pitiful if compared with Apollos, who impressed the Corinthians. Yet God used these ‘unworthy’ preachers more than all the star preachers taken together. Having been called, they were serious about their tasks!
We must convey a message—it is as simple as that—but we must be serious about it. We must allow the Spirit to use us, to inspire us to sow the seed, to do that to the best of our ability, and to commit its growth into the hands of God. Nobody forces us to preach, but if we do, we must realise that we do so as representatives of God. We convey the message of God in the authority of God to the people of God. That is no small matter!

It is also no private matter. It is a matter of building up the Body of Christ as a credible witness to the world. It is a matter of taking the wild bull of a lost humanity by the horns. We just cannot afford to be superficial and careless about what we are doing. Nobody expects us to be perfect, but we can help each other to become better preachers. We can enhance the gifts God gave us and make them available to God.

What did you find helpful, or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘You play the humble person; in fact, you are as arrogant as a peacock. The gospel has been preached for two millennia by simple people and without your advice. You should learn from those who have been at the coal face week after week for decades, rather than telling us what to do while sitting in your comfortable office.’

b) ‘The sermon is not the centre of the Sunday service; the worship of God is! The mediocre speech of a minister is not the most powerful communicator of the Word of God; the practical witness and service of a vibrant congregation is!’

c) ‘When preparing a sermon, the preacher should listen to the Word of God, found in the Holy Scripture and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Those of us who are sitting in the pew want to hear what God has to say, not what a clever and overzealous preacher has concocted.’

Lord, I am overawed by the privilege and the responsibility to speak your Word to your people in your name, in your authority. Take control of my body, my thoughts, and my words!
What do you think?

Were the biblical documents written for us, or for their ancient readers, or for all people in all places and at all times?

Is the Word of God a written or a spoken word?

Is it the preacher who is called to proclaim the Word of God, or is it the community of believers?

Why should the proclaimed Word of God be so important for the Christian faith rather than worship, ritual, acts of love or fellowship?

The proclamation of God’s Word creates our faith

The Word of God is a message that God sends and we receive. It is primarily God’s Word, not our word. But this happens here on earth within human history and through human beings. The Word of God became human and entered human history. It responded creatively and redemptively to changing human needs over a thousand years of biblical history. Seen from a human point of view, it emerged, evolved, and differentiated as a cluster of human traditions.

Many preachers and communities of believers in a great number of historical and cultural situations have been responsible for its transmission. It is now for us to take this process forward. We now have to formulate the Word of God as God’s creative and redemptive response to the needs of our times. When human beings communicate with each other, there is a sender, a recipient, and a message. So when we speak of the Word of God, we have to keep three aspects in mind:

1. The message, empowered by God’s Spirit
2. The preachers (or writers) of the message
3. The hearers (or readers) of the message.

In this chapter, we concentrate on the message. God reveals Godself to us in three ways: first, God is the ultimate Source and Destiny of the reality we experience. He is the Creator. Second, God has manifested his redeeming love in Jesus of Nazareth. And third, God is speaking to us in the Spirit of Christ that permeates the Body of Christ, the community of believers. In short, we experience
God’s creative power in reality, we proclaim God’s redeeming love in Christ, and we live in God’s creative and redemptive presence in the community. You will recognise that these three aspects describe God’s Trinity.

How do we know all this? We know of God only because God speaks to us. He uses human instruments to do so. As God speaks to us, God becomes real for us. We realise that we owe our very lives and our life worlds to God and praise him for his wonderful creation. We realise that our lives and our life worlds are not what they ought to be and entrust ourselves to the forgiving and healing love of God as manifest in Christ, and we share the new life that God opens up for us among ourselves and with outsiders in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is rather like picking up a telephone. The telephone is a wonderful means of communication. Say I am on a journey a thousand kilometres away from home. The phone rings, and I hear the voice of my wife. Suddenly she is there, very close to me. I am no longer alone. But then we are cut off, and again she is a thousand kilometres away. That is what communication can do.

God has his own telephone; that is, his own means of communication. God speaks to us through those who have come to believe in him. They carry a tradition which recounts how God has acted on behalf of humankind in the past: in the long history of the natural world, in the much shorter history of humankind, in the history of the people of Israel, in the brief events surrounding the life, death, and elevation of Jesus Christ, and then through the faith history of millions of believers after that. Through this tradition, God communicates his love for us, and then through us, here and now and wherever we may go in the future.

When God speaks to us, we respond. We respond by either turning away from God or turning towards God. When we turn to God, we are accepted into his fellowship. In this fellowship, we are close to him. God makes himself available to us and we make ourselves available to God. We share God’s authority over the world, God’s concern for the world, and God’s vision for the world. In this way, we become God’s instruments in the world.

This is not an individual but a communal process. When people are in fellowship with God, they are in fellowship with each other. It is the community of believers which shares the creative authority, the redemptive concern, and the vision of God for his world. The prime task of the community of believers is to proclaim God’s Word, thus making God’s presence accessible to others as well.

When God speaks to us, God speaks; God does not write. So, when I use the term ‘Word of God’, I do not refer to the Bible. The Bible is a series of historical witnesses to the Word of God. It is the earliest set of witnesses that we have. It brings us closest to the time when it was first heard and formulated. It is the bond of unity between all Christians. So we base our own witness on these early documents.

But it is not identical with the Word of God. It still needs to be interpreted and reformulated as a response to our own situations. The divine Spirit must use these ancient words to speak to us. Similarly, the Word of God is not the written draft of a sermon but the address of the preacher to a community through which
God speaks. The Word of God is the living voice of the gospel, as the Reformers said. And again, it is the divine Spirit who has to speak through the words of the preacher; otherwise, it is not the Word of God.

So the Word of God is

- the living address
- of the living God
- to living human beings,
- through the words, attitudes, and actions of a living community of believers,
- used by God’s Spirit to speak to us and through us,
- based on God’s creative and redemptive acts in the history of Israel and the Christ event,
- as found in the witness of the biblical scriptures.

That is quite a mouthful, but each part of this statement is important! The most important, however, is that we realise that it is God who is speaking. When we prepare ourselves and when we preach, we must move about in an atmosphere of the presence and power of God. To remind ourselves of God’s presence, every chapter of this book closes with a short prayer.

The proclamation of the Word of God is fundamental for the life of the church

The proclamation of the Word of God is the prime task of the community of believers. Why that? Because it creates faith, and faith is the basis for everything else that happens in and through the community of believers: It calls us into a new life in fellowship with God; it exposes what is not in line with God’s redeeming love; it accepts us into the fellowship of God although we are not acceptable; it liberates us from wrong masters and enslavements; it empowers us to be involved in God’s redemptive project; it opens up God’s vision of comprehensive well-being for us.

In doing so, it builds the community of believers as a network of creative and redemptive relationships with God at the centre. It nurtures faith to become ever more powerful and creative in God’s world. It leads faith to discover ever-new dimensions of God’s vision for the world. It empowers individual believers to play critical and constructive roles in their secular contexts. It activates Christian groups to take the initiative and tackle particular problems in God’s world.

So the proclaimed Word of God is the pivot around which the life of the community of believers revolves. It is the main dish which feeds the flock of Christ. It reformulates the ancient biblical message for a contemporary audience in its particular situation. It leads to mission work and pastoral care. It is embedded in liturgy; it is expressed in songs and works of art. It is accompanied by Christian education; it includes the prophetic ministry over against the
powers that be. It calls for action. For the church of the Word, the proclamation of the Word of God is the centre of the office of the ministry.

**Talk, talk, talk—what about action?**

The church of the Reformation has always seen the ordained ministry as the task of proclaiming the Word. Even the sacraments are deemed to be a *verbum visibile*, the Word of God in visible form. In the Catholic and the Orthodox traditions, we find different emphases. But the constitution on the liturgy of the Second Vatican Council (1963) strongly underscored the importance of feeding the flock with the Word of God as the central task of the priesthood. So we are no longer as far apart on this issue as we used to be.

The centrality of the preached Word has been challenged time and again from various quarters. For secular people, the word ‘sermon’ has a distinctly distasteful flavour. They do not want to be preached at. They believe that those who think they know the truth and speak in the authority of God are arrogant. The Christian faith is just one conviction among others and not the most persuasive one either. Why not rather listen to the natural sciences or social analysis or the vast resources of our cultural history?

In contrast, many Christians insist that the literal text of the Bible, rather than the sermon, is the eternal and verbally inspired Word of God for all people at all times in all situations. Others again emphasise the importance of the symbolic Word, especially the sacraments and the liturgy. Others again concentrate on speaking in tongues, ecstasy, prophecy, healing, and visions. There are some who believe in inspiration during a period of contemplative silence. Many people feel that action speaks louder than words. For them, the sermon is nothing but blah, blah, blah.

Indeed it can be, but then it is no longer the Word of God. We cannot deny that there is a lot of meaningless prattle and superficial moralising on our pulpits. Other forms of the Word certainly have their place and may not be neglected. Nevertheless, the articulation of the Word is not only indispensable but central. All other forms of the Word depend on the proclaimed Word for their meaning.

Jeremiah and Jesus and Paul first preached the Word. Some of what they said was written down so that it would not get lost but reach other people too. Actions, symbols, and silence are important, but they do not speak on their own. Nor do tongues, ecstasy, and visions. Nor do the beauties of nature and the pangs of fate. They all need to be interpreted. Without action, the Word of God lacks reality, but without articulation, the Word of God lacks clarity. Actions need to be inspired and guided by the spoken Word.

The fact that words have become cheap and empty in the world and in the church today is true, but that just means that we must regain the depth and authority of the Word of God.
The task of the community and the task of the preacher

If everything depends on God's presence in his Word, the proclamation of the Word of God cannot be left to chance. It has been entrusted by God to the community of believers. The community must find ways and means to make the Word heard. The community in turn entrusts the Word to those whom it finds most capable of doing so. It trains, appoints, empowers, and supports preachers to perform this task on its behalf.

God entrusts his Word to the community so that he can speak through the community. God uses the community as God’s instrument. The community entrusts the Word to a preacher so that it can use the preacher as its instrument. The preacher articulates what God wants to say to the community and through the community to the world.

So the community is deeply involved. Preachers are not meant to be lone individuals who struggle in the solitude of their studies to find God’s Word for their congregations. They do what they do in the authority and on behalf of the community. The congregation is meant to empower and support the preacher just as the congregation is empowered by God’s Spirit.

Conversely, the task of the preacher is to empower the members of the congregation to be witnesses of the Word of God. The preacher is not meant to be a dictator but a facilitator: ‘We do not lord it over your faith; we are co-workers of your joy’ (2 Cor. 1: 24, KN).

How does this happen?

The Word of God wants to speak to us here and now in our actual situations. That is why preachers must gain at least some understanding of how the different biblical documents came about and what they were saying at the time when they originated. But preachers must also gain some understanding of the problems of contemporary life.

They should be keenly interested in fields such as psychology, sociology, economics, politics, and ecology. They should read newspapers and participate in public life. They should never tire of learning more about the problems of their congregation members through visiting them in their homes and at their places of work.

Yet in all these things, they cannot hope to become experts. A jack of all trades is a master of none. That is why preachers must prepare their sermons in cooperation with other members of the congregation who have first-hand knowledge in all these fields. It is one of the central contentions of this book that preaching the Word of God should become a team effort. The specific contribution of theologians in such teams consists of what they have been trained for; that is, the theological insight gained from the scriptures.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this section?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘If you do not accept that the Bible is the inspired Word of God just as it stands for all times and all situations, you cannot call yourself a Christian and you should not presume to tell preachers of the Word of God what to do.’

b) ‘If I go to a doctor, I assume that she knows her job and I pay for her services. Likewise, we pay for the services of a preacher with our church dues. It is not our responsibility to see to it that there will be a good sermon every Sunday; that is the job of the preacher!’

c) ‘To claim that the ridiculous ramblings we hear from the pulpit are divine messages, rather than human opinions and fantasies, is indicative of the arrogance and credulity of Christian preachers.’

Lord, teach me to listen, to empty myself, to allow your Spirit to fill my heart. And then speak to your people through my thoughts and my words.
B. THE MESSENGER
CHAPTER 3

Being a servant of Christ

The status, attitude, and equipment of the preacher

What do you think?

Does being a preacher imply a higher status, a more humble attitude, a more profound theological knowledge, or a deeper spirituality than expected from the average parishioner?

Which title reflects the special nature of the ordained clergy best: priest (= one who offers sacrifices and prayers to God), pastor (= shepherd), father (= male family head), dominee (= lord), minister (= servant), rector (= authorised executive), vicar (= deputy), bishop (= overseer)?

Why are our churches empty while the football stadiums are bursting with enthusiasts?

Who is responsible for the Word of God?

Let me recap what I said in the previous chapter. Faith is created by the Word of God. The Word of God must be preached to be heard. Somebody must be called and empowered to do so. Who is that? I assume with the Protestant tradition of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ that the Word of God is entrusted to the community of believers, thus to every member.

Because we cannot all preach at the same time and because we do not all have the gift, the calling, and the expertise to do so appropriately, the community entrusts this task to a person who has a calling and who seems capable of shouldering such a task. This person is then trained and authorised to act on behalf of the community.

But that does not mean that the other members can be dispensed with. It is rather as if all the gifts of the congregation are activated and drawn into the whirlpool of the preached Word, which is entrusted to the preacher. So in this sense the preacher is the leader of the congregation. But what does Christian leadership mean?

The status of the preacher

Spiritual leadership is indispensable. Leadership can make or break a congregation. It can give new life to an ailing community. Leadership
presupposes insight: ‘If one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit’ (Matt. 15: 14, NRSV). Leadership requires a high sense of commitment and responsibility. Those entrusted with a special task seem to carry a special status. If the ambassador of a country is dishonoured, the country is dishonoured.

But we must be clear about what kind of status that is. Like the ambassador, the preacher is a messenger, nothing more. What matters is God’s glory, not the glory of the preacher. And God’s glory is not pomp and splendour, but God’s suffering, redeeming love, culminating in the cross of Christ. It is this glory that the preacher shares, the glory of selfless love. Preachers who proclaim the crucified Christ as Lord cannot seek status and power for themselves.

The aim of preaching is to build up the recipients of the message, rather than to serve the ambitions of the preacher. The congregants are to be emancipated, nurtured, and empowered. They should not be humiliated, reduced to a lower status, made to feel unimportant or incompetent.. So we can speak of the glory of the message, the dignity of the recipients, and the humility of the messenger.

The humility! There can be nothing more fundamental, more important, more transformative, more precious, more elevating, and more exhilarating than to bring the message of God’s redeeming love to the people of God in the authority of God. Yet water flows most freely through an empty channel: God’s power manifests itself in human weakness; God’s majesty shines through the modesty of the believer (1 Cor. 2-4; 2 Cor. 4: 6-10; 2 Cor. 12: 9).

The most powerful preachers have always understood that they are servants rather than masters, followers rather than leaders, facilitators rather than CEOs. This is true of great leaders inside and outside the Christian fold: Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi. This is where Christ placed himself in the social hierarchy, and he expects his disciples to share his lowly position.

The words of Jesus and Paul are clear on this point (Mark 10: 35–45, John 13: 1–17, 1 Cor. 2: 1–3, 9; Phil. 2: 5–11; 2 Cor. 1: 24). We pray that the glory of God may display itself through our ministry, rather than our own glory. We speak in the authority of God, rather than our own authority. We claim the divine authority of the gospel while we proclaim the gospel and as long as we proclaim the gospel, not a minute before and not a minute after. Our status is located in our task. Whatever does not convey God’s suffering, transforming love is not part of our task and thus not part of our status, plain and simple!

The attitude of the preacher

Our attitude must be commensurate with our message. Self-regard, vanity, and status-seeking have always been the typical temptations of preachers. Some follow a preaching career precisely because they have a desire to shine. Some build their self-esteem on their capacity to dominate a subservient group of people. Such attitudes have always been counterproductive. They have always undermined the power and credibility of the message. They have always put their listeners off. The attitude of the preacher is of fundamental importance for the credibility of the message.
We all need recognition and appreciation. But let that come from the fact that we are serving God, the ultimate authority, who has sent us to fulfil a task. Let us listen to critical voices because we are not infallible. Let us acknowledge gratitude expressed by listeners but not hanker for praise! The renowned Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh said that the donkey on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem might have thought that the jubilation of the crowd throwing garments and branches on the road was meant to honour him/her rather than Jesus. How ridiculous!

Our attitude trickles down into our sermon delivery. It can either reinforce or jeopardise the power of the gospel. The basic question is whether we are radiating light and life and love or whether we try to pull off a show. The moment we want to impress our audience, whether by a rousing rhetoric, elaborate gowns and rituals, special privileges, exorbitant lifestyles, crippling asceticism, demonstration of higher learning, or sanctimonious language, we have lost it! Never try to impress when you are called to preach! It always undermines the very message entrusted to you!

This is more serious than meets the eye!

Spurgeon compared the personal watch with the clock of the city hall: If my personal watch is wrong, I will be late; if the clock of the city hall is wrong, many people will miss their appointments. Arrogance, ambition, and status seeking are heavily counterproductive in terms of God’s redemptive project. Go through the history of the church, and you will be sickened by the harm done to the cause of Christ by so many preachers and church leaders.

They assumed dictatorial authority over their flock, claimed to possess infallible truth, persecuted, oppressed, and killed those who differed. They emulated ill-advised kings and aristocrats who sucked a poor populace dry to build impressive palaces and cathedrals. They fought bloody wars to gain territories and amass fortunes. They threw in their weight behind corrupt political leaders. They dispensed the remission of sins like a commodity to spin money.

All that is not a thing of the past. Today there are preachers who massage the souls of their television audiences to get rich and influential, others who pretend to be moved by the Spirit to impress their fellow believers, others who claim a special status and demonstrate their dignity with elaborate gowns and rituals. There are preachers who want to chair all the meetings, administrative councils and synods; others who want to manipulate political outcomes. Some wives of ministers claim leadership over women’s groups purely by virtue of being married to the minister. It is said that Gandhi, when he was asked what the greatest obstacle for Christianity to spread in India was, replied: the Christians! However, there are also countless humble, dedicated, loving, serving ministers. Let us aspire to join this crowd!
A liberated and empowered ambition

Have I been too negative about ambition? Is ambition always wrong? Is it not ambition that motivates human beings to do their best? Are the high performers in sports, music, drama, business, or politics not driven by a burning desire to reach the top? Are they not admired and envied precisely for their excellence? Do certain people not become role models because they do impress us? Is motivation not a wonderful gift of God designed to bring out and develop our hidden talents?

Indeed, our desire to aim high and reach the top is a wonderful gift of God. It is also typically human, and God wants us to be human! Ambition does not have to be selfish. It can be liberated from self-seeking and status-hunting and empowered to do God’s work for God’s people. I have often marvelled how Paul could be so humble and self-effacing and, at the same time, so driven to do his work, so jealous of his reputation, and so unashamed in boasting about his achievements and his trials (2 Cor. 11: 16 – 12: 13; Phil. 3: 2–16).

The secret was, I believe, that his ambition coincided with the ambition of his Lord to reach, liberate, and transform the people who were lost. Christ was dedicated so absolutely to his task that he faced and endured rejection, condemnation, torture, and execution on the cross. And this eagerness of Christ manifested itself again in the eagerness of his apostle.

This is something other than personal vanity! Oh yes—let the power of the Spirit excite you, make you enthusiastic, use you, flow through you, engage your healthy brain, activate your rhetorical gifts, become one with Christ in his redeeming love! Then it will not be your own power and ingenuity that impresses your audience, but the power of the Spirit working through you.

The snare of titles

Preachers have titles assigned to them according to their ecclesial traditions and these cannot easily be changed. But titles can become serious temptations for those who carry them. I advise you to pause for a moment and reflect on which title would be most appropriate for a preacher:

Disciple means learner or apprentice; apostle means messenger; bishop (Greek episkopos) means overseer; elder means somebody trusted due to his/her age and sense of responsibility; prophet means somebody called to announce God’s judgement and God’s grace; evangelist means bringer of good news; pastor means shepherd of a flock, minister means servant; father means male parent; dominee (from Latin dominus) means lord or owner; rector means authorised executive; vicar means representative; a reverend is somebody particularly honoured; a priest is somebody who presides over sacrificial rituals.

Titles can be tricky! Does the beautiful title of ‘pastor’ imply that the parishioners are dumb sheep? Does the intimate title ‘father’ mean that the parishioners are immature children? Most problematic are titles that elevate a person above others, such as ‘your holiness’, ‘your grace’, or ‘the most reverend’.
Over the centuries, church leaders have accumulated magnificent titles to indicate their elevated positions in ecclesial hierarchies.

Just look at this example: ‘His Most Divine All-Holiness the Archbishop of Constantinople New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch’! Compare it with the modest title CEO (chief executive officer) used by leaders of modern multinational enterprises commanding billions of dollars and thousands of people! I do not want to suggest that these people are humbler than the church leaders of old—their lifestyle tells a different story—but the title CEO simply refers to their job, rather than to their status.

The spirituality of the preacher

The spirituality of the preacher is the living fountain of his/her action. What is true of Christ is true of those who witness to Christ: The Word of God becomes incarnate (embodied) in their lives. This is not something we must achieve, but a gift of the Word of God in the power of the Spirit.

Preachers must expose themselves to the Word of God—not only that found in the Bible and in theological literature, but in the sermons and writings of others and in the pastoral interaction with others. The message of the Word of God must flow into their consciousness, clean out and transform their lives, empower and motivate them for their task, open up their imagination for the vision of God. It is on this basis that they convey the Word of God.

Two images can make this clear. The first one says that the preacher is like a bowl: it has to be filled before it can run over to others. This is a beautiful and helpful image. But it is problematic when it suggests that you cannot preach until you are filled to the brim with God’s Spirit. This is not likely to happen, because preachers will never be perfect. God’s Word cleans out and fills the mind of the preacher with new content in the very process in which it cleans out and fills the minds of the listeners with new content.

Another image suggests that the preacher is like a hosepipe: only as much water as flows into the pipe can flow out of the pipe. A hosepipe removed from the tap is empty and dry. The preacher who does not receive has nothing to give. A hosepipe can also have been lying around in the garden without being used and be filled with mud and the larvae of wasps. Then the flow of the water is obstructed. That is why the New Testament authors encourage us to be alert and active all the time. Muscles that are not used waste away!

Again this is true for all believers: the Word is entrusted to the whole people of God; preachers act on behalf of and in cooperation with all other believers. They need to listen, to learn, to discuss, to cooperate, not only with fellow preachers, but with their congregants.
The equipment of the preacher

Any job needs tools. Imagine a motor mechanic without spanners and screwdrivers! Preachers should equip themselves with the tools they need for their ministry: at least one good translation of the Bible, a hymn book, the liturgy book of the church. If you can afford it, invest in a concordance (where all occurrences of the different concepts in the Bible are listed) and good commentaries on as many important books of the Bible as you can: Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Matthew, Luke, John, Paul’s letters, Hebrews.

Any job needs time. Don’t expect to present a quality sermon to your listeners if you are not prepared to sacrifice quality time for your preparation. As I will suggest later, it is a good habit to expose yourself again and again to a text on which you are going to preach over a couple of days, if not weeks.

Any job done well needs training. Preachers must at least have a rudimentary knowledge of the message they are to proclaim: its origin, its content, its way through history, and its relevance for today’s world. Ordinary believers draw on what they have heard in Sunday school, confirmation class, Bible studies, hymns, liturgies, and sermons. This is an ongoing process that needs to be spurred on by those who are slightly ahead of the crowd.

Lay preachers need at least some basic on-the-job training. Aspirant ministers are usually required to undergo from three to seven years of formal studies. Ordained ministers are expected to read theological literature and participate in courses on a regularly basis. Established preachers must draw on the continuing discussions among theologians; otherwise, their message may become empty and stale as time goes on. We will come back to training in the next chapter.

To do any job well a human being needs a healthy body. Preachers should not allow their bodies to deteriorate. The basic requirements of a healthy lifestyle are well known and easy to follow: regular exercise, a balanced and wholesome diet, sufficient sleep, a disciplined but unstressed daily schedule. Sickly, elderly, and handicapped people can also be used by God for his purposes—just remember Paul’s description of his miserable physical disposition—but that is no excuse for us to neglect or abuse God’s gift of a healthy and capable body!

Again, is preaching not a gift of the Spirit?

Indeed it is! But does that mean that we do not have to bother about learning the art of preaching, preparing ourselves properly, and doing our best to communicate the message? Not at all! God and the preacher do not operate at the same level. God’s action does not compete or cooperate with our action. God’s Spirit works through our spirit; God’s action involves our action. God’s vision evokes our motivation; God’s initiative triggers our initiative.

Are some preachers not more gifted than others? Indeed they are. But the gifts we really need to do that are quite pedestrian. We have eyes to read, brains to comprehend, eyes to observe, ears to listen, empathy to sense where our
listeners are, intelligence to think, experience to fall back on, insights of others to retrieve, language to formulate, tongues to talk. It is these simple and common gifts that God wants to utilise to bring across his message. We proclaim God’s Word, rather than earth-shaking insights, clever arguments, or a rousing rhetoric.

These simple gifts may indeed be enhanced by certain personality traits of the preacher. Some people seem to be born preachers. But it is not necessary for each violinist to be a Yehudi Menuhin before he/she can please an audience. Nor is it true that gifted people simply drop from heaven with their excellence. Violinists spend many hours every day over decades to enhance and maintain their virtuosity. Any art must be learnt and practised.

Whatever gifts we may have, they are the gifts given by God to accomplish God’s purposes. They are meant to build the community and to witness to the world (cf. 1 Cor. 14: 12, 23–25). This is why professional preachers get the opportunity to engage in academic studies and why preachers are officially inducted in a public service.

Know yourself!

What I have said above applies to preachers in general. But preachers are individuals, each with his/her character, strengths, and weaknesses. Becoming conscious of one’s personal identity and character can help one to avoid pitfalls and develop one’s potentials. Introspection is not without its dangers. It concentrates on the person of the preacher at the expense of the community. It may breed an overly self-conscious attitude, rather than focusing on the objective task to be accomplished. Introspection can throw a preacher into desperation and self-hatred.

Yet self-discovery can help one to understand one’s relationships to the community and the reaction of the community to one’s ministry. It can prevent one from committing mistakes and help one to be creative with one’s gifts. Personal hang-ups, hopes, and fears do have an impact on the choice of texts, their interpretations, and the message conveyed to the listeners. It is better to offload them before God.

So who are you as a preacher? Take a little time off to check your type of personality. Better still, do that together with a trusted member of the congregation.

a) The deep thinker or the loving empathiser
b) The meticulous guardian over law and order or the flexible advocate of freedom
c) The faithful keeper of the tradition or the bold innovator and reformer
d) The lover of rational argument and logical clarity or the lover of music and art
e) The great organiser or the concerned shepherd
f) The cheerful extrovert or the scrupulous and depressed introvert
g) The carefree optimist or the serious prophet of danger and doom
h) The person who threatens punishment or the person who proclaims God’s grace
i) The pillar of faith or the suspicious and cynical critic
j) The caring mother or the demanding father

There are many other types. They can also overlap. Each type, when cultivated to extremes, is deficient, one-sided, even dangerous. A balanced person is relaxed, outgoing, loving. While emotions are powerful and stubborn, we can control and work on them!

Personalities are created by hereditary factors and biographies. The latter include childhood and primary group experiences; religious, social, cultural, and geographical events; successes, frustrations and disappointments; the history of the relation between the preacher and his/her congregation and so on.

But personalities are not fixed forever. Preachers who notice resentments, prejudices, dependencies, or anxieties in their hearts should reflect on the historical sources of their attitudes and come to terms with them in prayerful meditation before God. In serious cases, they should get pastoral help.

What did you find helpful, or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘You say you want to empower, rather than discourage. But your demanding and judgemental statements have deprived me of the little self-confidence I have been able to muster as a preacher of the Word of God!’

b) ‘So far I have depended not on my excellence but on the Holy Spirit moving in my heart. You seem to suggest that it is our own disposition, effort, and achievement that produce acceptable sermons.’

c) ‘Preachers have always been an arrogant lot who believe that they have the truth in their pockets, claim the authority to tell us what to believe and what to do, blow themselves up with titles, garments, and rituals, speak in an unnatural language, bully the congregation, and display a hypocritical life. I just cannot stomach that!’

Lord, I do not want to be anything or do anything except be your messenger. Clean out my selfish ambitions. Create in me a fervent motivation to serve and glorify you!
CHAPTER 4

Making the best of your potential

Lifelong training

What do you think?

If you have been a regular churchgoer and Bible reader for many years, is that a sufficient qualification to preach the Word of God?

Are there lay preachers who are more educated and better equipped to preach the Word of God than trained theologians and ordained ministers?

What must the church do if it does not have enough full-time ministers and cannot afford to train and employ more?

What must a small Christian community do if it cannot support a full-time minister?

This chapter is, in a way, superfluous. I want to convince you that we preachers, whether lay preachers or qualified theologians, must enhance our competence on a regular basis. I also want to suggest that regular and disciplined sermon preparation is an excellent way of doing so. If you think that you do not need that or that it is of minor importance or that there is no time to do it, you will hardly want to do it. Then this book will be of no benefit to you. So here we go!

How important is training?

Personal certainty that one should be in the ministry is important for one’s authority and inner strength. But equally important is the institutional transfer of one’s task through ordination. We are part of an organised community! Christianity is a faith based on a historical tradition we have to know before we can convey its message. So we cannot do without training. This is not just an intellectual exercise done once and for all, but a process of spiritual formation. Preachers should be perpetual students.

Some churches expect their ministers to undergo a training programme that can last for seven years or more. For other churches, two or three years of seminary training and parish experience are deemed sufficient. For yet others, a correspondence course will do the trick. But there are also countless elders or trusted congregants who preach regularly without having undergone any formal training whatsoever.
Well, why not? Should we not allow all the disparate arguments, metaphors, and myths to sprout up in the fertile spiritual garden of our post-modern consciousness? Surely believers must be free to develop and share their opinions and convictions with others, whatever they may be. Is faith not a matter of the heart rather than the intellect? Did Paul not say that God uses precisely the uneducated and foolish to display God’s wisdom?

These are powerful arguments indeed! But does true freedom not imply accountability? Does God’s graceful acceptance and utilisation of the uneducated and the foolish legitimate lethargy or irresponsibility? In the pursuit of his calling, Paul was a Pharisee, trained in the Mosaic Law. He was exceptionally dedicated, hard-working, and ready to suffer pain and deprivation. As in any other field of knowledge and expertise, too little knowledge or wrong knowledge can be misleading. It can even become dangerous.

There are countless examples in history and the contemporary world that show how uninformed or wrong assumptions about the Bible and the Word of God may have disastrous consequences. People can be lured into superstition, legalistic attitudes, fundamentalist assumptions, fanaticism, the horror of eternal damnation, unrealistic expectations about the end of the world, and so much more. More important, discerning people can be put off so thoroughly by the sermons they hear that they abandon their faith and leave the church.

Think of the way enthusiastic preachers have misinterpreted, again and again, the mysterious images and numbers found in the Book of Revelation, predicting the end of the world at a particular date, harming themselves and others and making fools of themselves! Think of those who have caused untold spiritual agony by preaching God’s wrath and the fires of hell! Think of those who have promulgated superstitious healing practices based on biblical miracle stories, often with devastating results!

Think of those who used biblical texts to sweep masses of people into violence, destruction, and ‘holy’ wars. Think of those who brutally persecuted, tortured, and killed ‘heretics’ and ‘witches’! Think of those who have legitimated their claim to dictatorial authority with biblical texts or quasi-theological arguments! Think of the spread of boredom and irrelevance in conventional congregations, due to the laziness and dreariness of preachers!

Untold harm can be done and has indeed been done over the centuries by people who act in the name of God, yet in conflict with the life-giving gospel of Christ. At the very least, we must make sure that what is being preached is the message of the creative power, the redeeming love and the comprehensive vision of God as manifest in Christ, and not some other message, whether clever or silly, biblical or secular, fascinating or boring, political or otherworldly. So yes, I do think it is important for preachers to be trained!

Does training quench our inspiration?

You may not be keen to sacrifice the time and energy needed. You may be discouraged by the complexity of what is involved. Your enthusiasm to proclaim
the Word of God may be cooled down when confronted with procedures and techniques. You may be thrown off balance when facing the historical character of the Bible. I do understand! But training is about skills. Skills facilitate rather than obstruct inspiration! It has been said that art is 10 per cent inspiration and 90 per cent hard work. The same is true for a crisp, exhilarating sermon!

We admire the ease with which the fingers of a typist fly over the keyboard, or the precision with which a pilot lands an airliner on the tarmac in a misty night. But it took hard work and time before they were able to do that. Mozart did not write those wonderful sonatas without knowing how to play the piano! Inspiration utilises skills to manifest itself.

Preachers who do not learn the skills of their profession remain amateurs. Amateurs tend to be insecure, nervous, and oversensitive to critique. They lack the self-confidence and the authority of the professional. They may also become overconfident and think they can preach anyway. I do not envy those who are expected to preach a crisp and nourishing sermon every week for thirty or forty years without having learnt the skills or continuing to read relevant literature.

In the long run, a lack of training leads to frustration. But those who suffer most, psychologically and spiritually, are the congregations. If we do not allow an untrained person to pilot an aircraft or to perform a heart operation, should we be satisfied with prattle on the pulpit? If we do not take our profession seriously, nobody will. This is true for both ordained and lay preachers. In the exhibits, I offer examples of what can be done to train preachers at parish level and at graduate level.

**Sermon preparation is an excellent way of on-the-job training**

Training is a lifelong process. All serious preachers, whether well trained or not, whether experienced or not, will want to enhance their competence. Most preachers in the field have no time for continuous and intensive theological reading. Even if they had, their reading would be passive and unrelated to their work. Passive learning does not necessarily lead to more appropriate practice. The result is that preachers can easily run dry. They must give and give, without a chance to replenish their spiritual resources. ‘He always says the same thing!’ my old mother once said about a particular preacher.

The best remedy for this ailment is regular, deep-going sermon preparation with a group of colleagues or laity called together specifically for this purpose. Here the preachers are actively involved in the process of doing theology with their fellow Christians, rather than reading abstract works of remote professors. Dialogue helps them keep their minds alert and their feet on the ground.

The steps necessary to prepare a good sermon again and again take them through the major fields of theology: biblical exegesis, systematic theology, and practical theology. They provide the spiritual depth needed for other chores during the week. Well-prepared preachers speak with authority. In short, I suggest that conscientious sermon preparation is the mainspring of the ministry.
The demand is greater than the supply

But that is where we hit a snag. In many cases, sufficiently trained preachers are just not available. In other cases, congregations and churches cannot afford to maintain them. My predecessor in our first parish had more than thirty congregations and preaching places to serve. The average rural parish during our time had twelve to fifteen. The field was ripe for the harvest while the workers were too few to bring it in.

The Word of God must be preached regardless! Constraints in terms of time, space, financial resources, and training cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the proclamation of the Word of God. So elders, teachers, and leaders of women’s leagues were entrusted with the task of holding services and proclaiming the Word of God.

Well, why not? Wherever there is a need in any sphere of life, humans make the best of whatever potentials they can muster to meet that need. But these potentials must be dug up and developed. So let us assume that training in some way or other is indispensable and go on with the job!

The untrained lay preacher

This book is not about seminary or university training, but about empowering preachers in the field. Let me begin with the assets of the lay preacher. A lay preacher is usually a relatively mature person who has gone through life as a believer, has been through Sunday school and confirmation class, has heard countless sermons, has reflected on what it means to believe in Christ, and has come to a reasonably coherent set of spiritual certainties.

Such a person is known and trusted by the local community, speaks their language, knows their circumstances, has been confronted with the vagaries of life, has had to take responsibility in his/her secular pursuits and profession, has a great and varied set of social relationships, and relatively wide horizons.

In short, mature lay preachers may have much more profound insights than young preachers who have just graduated. The latter may have a lot more information but a lot less wisdom and practical experience.

And yet even these mature lay preachers must be trained!

Ways to train lay preachers

Training is costly, even at the level of lay preachers’ training. But there is nothing of value in this world that does not imply cost, sacrifice, and dedication. We must ask how we can make most of the potential gifts that exist within the community of believers.

The trained and ordained minister can prepare a sermon and ask a layperson to read it off from his script. This is probably the least desirable method because it lacks the personal conviction, creativity, and spontaneity of the preacher. It is
better to allow the lay preacher to design his/her own sermon and then require him/her to discuss it with the trained minister before it is delivered.

An even better way is to form a group of lay preachers and let them discuss the sermon and the service to be held with the trained minister present. The minister would provide the historical background and theological meaning of the text, while the lay members fill in their experience of daily life. The more regularly this is done, the more profound and appropriate the sermons will become.

Some churches organise formal lay preacher training programmes. Candidates are required to read some basic literature, do assignments, and attend short courses once or twice a year. Lay preachers can also be required to take basic courses in the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) or a distance university such as Unisa.

These institutions require a minimum level of basic education. But what about those who can hardly read and write? You may want to have a look at a procedure that I once followed, and which is described in the first exhibit in Part III under the subtitle ‘On-the-job training in Africa’.

The trained but overburdened minister

What about the trained and ordained minister? A diploma or degree does not mean that you have all you need for the rest of your life. Preachers should read as much as they can, undergo refresher courses, meet with colleagues in retreats and study groups on a regular basis. Where possible, they should be granted occasional study leaves to enhance their qualifications.

In today’s accelerating world, any specialised profession requires continued updating and enhancement. Secular professionals expose themselves regularly to new developments in their fields and new insights gained by experts, researchers, or colleagues. To offer such input, we need professional theologians whose task it is to equip and empower others with their expertise.

But how realistic is that? It may work in large parishes that have two or three ministers who share the work and complement each other. But there are also parishes that are run by tent-making ministers who pursue their secular occupations during the week.¹ I have been a member of a large and lively urban parish whose pastor was the principal of a school during the week, and yet the parish functioned exceptionally well.

In this case, the laity took over most of the non-theological tasks. Some non-essential tasks were simply omitted. But some ministers are control freaks that cannot entrust tasks to others. Some are perfectionists who cannot tolerate imperfections. Some are threatened by capable laypersons and afraid that their special status would be undermined.

¹ The expression ‘tent-making’ is derived from the practice of Paul to support himself with his profession of making tents, offering his energies to the church free of charge.
We must all learn to share God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable and utilise the gifts the parish can offer.

Many well-trained ministers cannot make full use of their potential because they are overburdened. I suggest three remedies: First, well-prepared sermon material can be used in multiple contexts. Begin with a text in the Bible study group, then use the material in the confirmation class, then fall back on it in home or hospital visits. Finally, use it as a sermon text. By that time, it will have matured considerably.

Second, for many of the tasks preachers are expected to do or wish to do, they have not been trained or ordained. Are professional teachers not better equipped to take care of some of the teaching tasks in the church than the pastor? Must a minister chair the parish council or take its minutes? Must the preacher be in charge of the financial administration of the parish? Must the pastor repair the roof and clean the toilets?

Surely it is not below the dignity of the pastor to do all these chores! Surely a preacher should jump into the breach if there is nobody to do them or when they are not done adequately by others. The point is that such chores, however important they may be, should not be done at the expense of the quality of the preached Word of God!

Finally, many ministers are overcommitted, not only in the parish but in the community and the wider society. In itself, the social concern of a preacher is highly desirable. God loves the world, not just the church. Yet I suggest that such preachers may want to reschedule their priorities.

Their prime task and mandate are to dispense the Word of God, not to shine as leaders in social contexts. Do not try to fix the whole world all on your own. Prompt others to take note and get involved; give others a chance to do their part and entrust the rest to God.

So now, having found the door, let us enter the hall and prepare the feast.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?

How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘The preachers we encounter in the Bible have never received formal training but were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Just think of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Peter, Paul, and the other apostles. Why do you focus on training, rather than discipleship, spiritual maturity, and motivation?’

b) ‘I offered myself as a lay preacher, but I became totally frustrated! Ministers do not want to share the pulpit and the gown with the laity because they are afraid to lose their special status. They also do not want better educated lay persons to steal their thunder.’

c) ‘I do not want to spend quality time in church and listen to a preacher who moralises and vents his/her resentments from the pulpit. I expect to listen
to a preacher who knows his/her job. Those who do not know what to say should not feel free to say it!'

Dear Lord, I realise that I still have so much to learn, to gain more experience, to be enriched by the insights of others. Open my heart; make me eager to improve my ministry.
CHAPTER 5

The struggle with God

The afflictions of a preacher

What do you think?

Can you jot down a few thoughts on what you expect a preacher of the Word of God to be and to do? Do you think that preachers live up to your expectations?

Is the preacher a normal believer who struggles with temptations and afflictions just as much as everybody else, or is the preacher somebody set apart to represent a true, sacred and pure life before the world?

Do you consider the task of the preacher to be relatively undemanding or particularly difficult?

Should a preacher be disturbed if her efforts do not seem to bear fruit?

No profession is without its obstacles and frustrations. The task to preach the Word of God is no exception. There are afflictions and temptations that are built into the profession, as it were, and we must come to terms with them; otherwise, they will undermine our authority and harm our ministry. In this chapter, I shall concentrate on the trained, full-time minister, but much of what I say also applies to the lay preacher.

1. The lonely preacher and the community of believers

The traditional approach to the ministry sets preachers apart from the community. This can lead to a sense of isolation and loneliness. Preachers are supposed to have received a calling. They are given special training. They are authorised to preach through the ritual of ordination. They are held responsible for all ministerial duties, such as preparing and delivering the sermon, designing and conducting the worship service, holding confirmation classes, baptising, distributing Holy Communion, blessing marriages, conducting funerals, and visiting the sick.

At a deeper level, they are supposed to live a life holier than that of the rest of the congregation, to remain aloof from controversial issues such as politics and economics, to be available at all hours of the day and the night, to dress in a respectable fashion, and to have an exemplary family. Parishioners are surprised when they see a minister lying on the beach or working in the garage. All that can become very painful and depressing for the minister. The first reaction of
many prophets to their calling was to object and argue. So, do not rush into this kind of job!

Similarly, the minister’s wife is generally expected to be a special person. She must always be available, always friendly, a tower of faith and strength, the self-sacrificing mother for the entire congregation, always open to put up or feed a drop-in visitor, while she may have a tough time simply to be a good mother of her own children! In many cases, she must be the chairlady of women’s organisations and meetings, although there may be others who could do the job much better.

Not coping too well with such a task can become an emotional burden. Does the mere fact of being married to a minister convey all these gifts? Congregations must be realistic and merciful with the spouses of their ministers.

The husband of an ordained female pastor has his own predicaments to master. Must he abandon his profession to care for the children and run the household? What is his status in society? It is not (yet) generally accepted that men can stay at home and look after the kids. What is his status in the congregation? Being the husband of the pastor, can he express views in the Bible study group that may raise theological eyebrows?

Of course, there are preachers and their spouses who consciously cultivate the image of being special because they want to be special. They jealously guard over the privileges of wearing a gown, distributing sacraments, acting as chairpersons and masters of ceremonies. They put on dog collars even in ordinary life, not necessarily to be witnesses to Christ, but to be recognised in society as VIPs.

There are also congregations who are only too happy to offload all the responsibilities of the Christian congregation onto the preacher. It is so much easier to claim overload in one’s own profession or incompetence in church matters and expect to be served rather than pull one’s weight. All this is understandable, but it cannot be condoned.

We have dealt with the status and attitude of the preacher in chapter 3. The point here is that priests, ministers, pastors, evangelists, and lay preachers are not supposed to be set apart and condemned to be loners. They are normal members of the Body of Christ. They just have a particular task.

Note that in 1 Corinthians12: 21, the head of the body is depicted as one of the members among others, on par with the feet. In Ephesians 1: 20ff, the status of the head as commanding centre of the body is reserved for Christ. This head is not represented in the world by a single believer or a particular office, but by the Body as a whole.

In Ephesians 4: 11ff, the gift of the prophet (preacher) functions as one among others, and its sole function is to build up the Body, not to rule over it. Unfortunately, 1 Corinthians14: 34ff, Ephesians 5: 21ff, and 1 Timothy 2: 11ff revert to patriarchal arguments that no longer reflect contemporary realities.
2. The authority of the preacher

As the bearer of this particular gift of the Spirit, the minister has a special burden to bear. The primary job of a minister is to struggle with God for the truth, clarity, and power of the Word of God. Preachers do not inform people about scientific findings; they do not teach them technological skills. They do not help them to make money on the stock exchange; they do not offer them bargains. They do not tell them which party to vote for. They are channels of God’s expectation and God’s gift of an authentic life. That is no small matter!

We need the inner and the outer authority to say uncomfortable truths in love. We need the inner and the outer authority to grant forgiveness to repentant sinners in the name of Christ. We need the inner and outer authority to proclaim God’s liberating and transforming power in concrete situations. We do not possess this authority; we cannot take it for granted. It is based on our spiritual and institutional calling.

In politics, a cabinet minister has authority as long as he/she is entrusted with the job of heading a department, not a minute longer. Preachers do not choose to carry this responsibility; it is laid upon them. We speak about a calling in this regard. There are two aspects to the calling: the certainty that one should be in the ministry and the request of the community to do the job on their behalf.

Jesus said, ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit’ (John 15: 16, NRSV). And Paul said that he was under obligation to preach; it was not his own choice (cf. 1 Cor. 9: 16). To be up to this task, we must believe that it is Christ who appointed us through our inner certainty and the outer authorisation of the community, and that God is going to sustain and bless our efforts despite all failures.

Once appointed, it is not healthy to torture ourselves with doubts about our calling. God’s Word is mediated by the community of believers. If you feel the urge to preach, make yourself available. If they appoint and authorise you, pray that God may use you. Then go ahead and serve with joy and confidence.

3. Coping with the task

The biblical message is not simply available for anyone to pick up. It had a long history of formation, which is concealed in the ancient documents of the canon. And it had a long history of applications, which has jelled in doctrines, hymns, liturgies, constitutions, and accepted procedures. It is not so easy to separate the kernels from the husks. It is also not easy to translate an ancient truth into contemporary relevance.

We are confronted with simple questions in our Bible studies and confirmation classes. If we cannot answer, we become insecure and lose our authority. We may also be tempted to give facile answers which cannot stand the test of evidence and reflection. One may even lead others astray or confirm popular superstitions and prejudices. All this means that a minimum of basic training is indispensable. We dealt with that in the last chapter.
However, theological insight does not only affect the brains, but also the heart. One cannot learn theology like mathematics; that is, without getting existentially involved. More than any other profession, theology demands the commitment of the total person. To gain clarity on the logical structure of the Christian faith and to be able to represent it with one’s whole person requires a process of formation which takes time and needs to be nurtured in a lifelong pilgrimage.

4. Struggling with doubt

Doubt is the twin sister of faith. True faith is afflicted faith. If you are too certain of what you believe, you no longer believe but know. Things that can be known are part of the world. So if you think you know, you may be busy with an idol. It is important to realise that doubt is not only normal but inevitable. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Bonhoeffer, and countless others struggled with God for certainty and reassurance. Here are a few ways doubt can pester us:

a) If we always assumed that the Bible is the eternal, immutable, and inerrant Word of God, the discovery that it is a collection of historical documents that spoke to times long gone can knock us off our feet. It contains a number of different traditions, each in historical flux. Earlier certainties were superseded by later ones. There is no way we can escape this affliction, and we should not even try. There is no merit in dishonesty. If we have built our faith on questionable foundations, we must dig deeper until we can again preach with conviction.

b) Doubt can arise from the fact that we are called to abandon our inauthentic lives and participate in the new authentic life of Christ in communion with God. We must leave our sinful ways behind and opt for what we are meant to be. This is tough because the urge to survive, feed, procreate, and flourish is programmed into our genetic make-up. It can easily get on top of our sense of responsibility. Then we may be tempted to assume that the call to follow Christ is spurious and deceptive.

c) If we had always assumed that God is perfect and that whatever God does is perfect, we may be deeply troubled by the fact that the world we experience and we attribute to God’s creative power is anything but perfect. The faith of countless believers has collapsed when confronted with the question of how a God who has unlimited power and unfailing love can cause or allow so much meaninglessness, injustice, suffering, and the horrors of death.

Preachers must come to terms with this affliction if they are to help others. Suffering does not disprove faith in a loving God but calls for it! The world we know and attribute to God’s creative power is anything but perfect. That is a simple fact! God has built certain regularities and constraints into reality, such as the laws of nature, because they are necessary for reality to function. In his limitless benevolence, God himself puts up with the fact that potent energy changes into spent energy, that processes can move in wrong directions, that
life implies death, that freedom can be abused. When we agonise about that, we share God’s agony.

d) The natural and social sciences, which inform everybody who went through high school, restrict their research, explanations, and prediction to the reality that, at least in principle, can be shown to exist. God is not part of this reality, among other parts, but its transcendent Source and Destiny. If God cannot be shown to exist or to intervene, how do we know that there is such a God in the first place?

e) A powerful source of affliction is our own failure. When we become conscious of our inadequacy, we feel rotten and despondent. We feel helpless and clueless because we cannot go back into the past to put right what went wrong. We cannot easily change our characters. We may begin to hate ourselves. If we then doubt God’s unconditional, redeeming love and imagine that God will judge, condemn, and reject us, life can become really miserable.

f) Finally, we must persevere in the trials and temptations that the ordained ministry as a profession entails. When our message hits the rock of resistance and aggression, we have to face the consequences for our status, our income, our security, maybe even our life. Jesus explicitly warned his disciples that they are going to face the cross together with him. Just expect this to be normal; otherwise, you will find no peace in your ministry!

5. Planning one’s time

Time is one of the major constraints of any demanding profession. Or is it? Let us begin with something elementary: a full-time minister is supposed to put in a full day’s work for six days a week, just as anybody else entrusted with a job. During much of the week, ministers are on their own, without institutional demands and guidelines. As a result, one may be tempted to become too relaxed.

One can always say a few things about a text on the pulpit without much preparation. One can take the next best hymns and get away with it. One can simply follow the liturgical agenda. One can keep the children in confirmation class busy somehow instead of offering first-class tuition. Nobody forces one to go out and visit congregation members.

I have come across outstations in a rural parish that had not been visited by the minister for more than two years. I have also come across the typical couch-and-tea minister whom you can visit at any time during the week for company and endless gossip. But this is not what ministers are called and paid for!

The opposite danger is just as serious. Some ministers keep rushing around throughout the day and into the night for seven days a week, trying to keep up with the never-ending demands of the profession. They radiate an atmosphere of nervousness, enslavement, and frustration. They come to church in a hurry, run through the liturgy in a hurry, climb onto the pulpit in a hurry, leave the church in a hurry.

Everything is on top of them: administration, finances, meetings, builders, committees, correspondence, marriages, funerals, and a host of other
engagements chasing each other. There is never a minute for catching one’s breath, for prayer, for study, for reflection, for proper preparation. If that is the case, we must learn to apply the gospel to ourselves: we are saved by grace, not by works! To be whipped into exhaustion is not a Christian virtue.

Another problem is the competition between the demands of the family and the demands of the congregation. Because a minister usually works from home, it is easy for the wife or the children to assume that he is available all the time: Darling, please go to the shop for me quickly. Daddy, help me with this essay. Baby needs a new nappy. The car must go to the garage. The tap in the toilet is leaking. Granny will visit us tomorrow. The same kind of affliction can come to an ordained wife and her male spouse.

On the other hand, there are ministers and their spouses who simply have no time for their families. The impact on marriage relationships and the development of the children can be considerable. The problem may become unbearable when the minister is a wife and a mother and is expected by her husband and children to perform all associated functions and duties on top of her ministerial schedule.

There is only one way of solving this problem, and that is to budget and structure our time. We must prioritise our chores so that the unimportant do not crowd out the important. We must delegate what can be delegated. As in any other profession, church employees should have a job description and be accountable to their employers concerning the use of their time. Employers in turn should understand that employees need time to execute their jobs effectively.

Convene a special meeting of the council of elders, therefore, and put on paper all the duties expected of the minister. Prioritise these duties. Then draw up a weekly plan. Include time for reflection, formal study, preparation, recreation, and the family. Your main task is the feeding of the flock with the Word of God in all its forms. But leaving the administration in a mess also devours time. Find a limited but regular time slot to check whether the administration is running as it should.

Discuss this plan with the family. Then discuss it with the congregation. Do not be ashamed of the fact that you are a normal human being who needs spiritual peace and physical health to be effective. Many parishes respect Monday as ‘minister’s Sunday’. They also respect special hours when the minister cannot be visited, except in cases of emergency.

I have kept a simple diary since my student days, with nothing on it but my use of time. I use an exercise book with blocks. Each day of the month gets one line across, subdivided into hours. I use crayons with different colours signifying time spent on different tasks during that day. It has helped me greatly to get my life under control. It also provides a precise record of what has happened for later reference. This is easy to do and takes less than a minute at the end of the day.
6. Money matters

There are few things in life which can poison human relationships more than money matters. Financial problems can completely bedevil a ministry. Ministers should exercise tight financial discipline, stay out of debts, and not get entangled by the snares of the money demon. For many people, this is a constant source of affliction. Draw up a budget with your family and stick to it!

A minister should not be in charge of the finances of the parish. It is a seedbed of temptation for the minister and of suspicion on the side of the congregation. The minister may also not have sufficient expertise in financial administration. Usually there are congregation members who have enough training and experience, and who are trusted enough to be appointed as treasurers.

Yet the minister must insist on accountability and transparency. The books must be kept meticulously, audited by a third party, and made accessible to the congregation at regular intervals. Accountability and transparency must also apply to personal gifts made to the minister. Such gifts must pass through the treasurer, be recorded and audited before they are handed to the minister's family.

Material gifts to ministers are quite problematic. One appreciates the concern of congregation members for the well-being of a minister who receives a miserable stipend. But personal gifts can also lead to serious abuses of which neither the minister nor the donor may be fully aware. If politicians and bureaucrats accept personal favours for their services, one speaks of corruption. We should apply the same criteria in the church.

Personal gifts to the minister are also not an acceptable substitute for a living wage. Ministers and their families are entitled to a modest but healthy lifestyle. If the church cannot afford a living wage or if a minister cannot live from the stipend provided, the obvious way out is the tent-making ministry. This is a term used for people who have secular professions and serve the church in their spare time.

One might think that a tent-maker will not achieve as much as a full-time minister. But this is not necessarily the case. It prompts the minister to empower congregation members to take over duties they can do perfectly well. One of the liveliest congregations to which I ever belonged was led by a minister who was a school principal during the week.

Tent-making also helps theologians not to spiritualise the gospel but to keep their feet on the ground. Their message is taken more seriously if they face the realities of a profession in the real world. This may also lead to more generous giving.

Obviously, the tent-making ministry is less costly for the church. Tent-makers receive no salary but a fair compensation for their expenses. The church can afford to employ many more qualified theologians on tent-making than on a full-time basis. This again reduces the load on each. The money saved can be invested in training more theologians or improving their qualifications.
7. The fallibility of the minister

Preachers are sinful and fallible human beings like everybody else. This fact can easily be obscured because preachers are usually not confronted with the same sort of temptation and ambiguity as politicians, business folk, factory workers, lawyers, and so on. But they have to battle with their own temptations and come to terms with their own failures.

No sensitive preacher will ever get rid of a sense of inadequacy and failure. In fact, we should be most suspicious when we feel great about a sermon or when we harvest a lot of praise. Once an old lady told a preacher that his sermon was wonderful. He replied, ‘Yes, I know, the devil has just told me so!’

The sense of failure can have two reasons. In the first place, we may apply wrong criteria to what we are doing. A minister is not supposed to be a genius or a star, to become popular or to harvest praise. Preachers are supposed to feed the congregation with the wholesome bread of the Word of God.

The proof of a good dish is whether it nourishes the body, not whether it tickles the taste buds. Paul says that he knows nothing but Christ—and Christ crucified. God’s power works through human weakness (cf. 1 Cor. 2: 1ff). He also says that God has laid extreme hardship on him so that he might no longer rely on his own strength but on God’s (cf. 2 Cor. 1: 9).

Ministers should also not compare themselves with others. Each one of us is uniquely gifted and uniquely entrusted with a task. Some are powerful preachers and hopeless counsellors. Some are magnificent with the youth but cannot relate to old people. We are to be faithful in what we have been given, not feel bad about what we have not been given. We should try to empower others and rejoice in the gifts that these others have.

In the second place, there is no ministry without real failures, and they can be quite serious. Not every sermon will be excellent. One can easily antagonise congregation members with careless formulations, political slogans, or a lack of personal concern. One can see with horror that the youth is beginning to drift away. One can forget names and faces. Once, a minister told me that he met an old lady on the street and asked how her husband was. She replied, ‘But, Pastor, you buried him two weeks ago!’

Many pangs of conscience arise from trivial issues and should be treated as such. In more serious cases, the first step is to own up. One should go to those who have been harmed or disappointed, ask for forgiveness and be reconciled. It can be the entire congregation or a group or an individual. To be reconciled one has to say that one is sorry. Christians can acknowledge their failures! There are ministers who will never concede that they have made a mistake. But if they cannot, what kind of gospel do they preach?

Then bring the failure before Christ in the presence of a fellow believer, obtain forgiveness, leave it at the cross, and do not carry it endlessly on your heart. Trust that God can transform failures into blessings. After having regained your peace, adopt a clinical attitude: what went wrong, why did it go wrong, and what can I learn from that for the future?
Many failures cannot be pinpointed. Sincere preachers tend to be haunted by the discrepancy between what they preach and what they do. There are poverty-stricken people all around us. Are we entitled to eat a decent meal every day, drive a car, and live in a solid house? There are thousands of people who have never heard the Word of God in a meaningful way. Can we afford to enjoy a free day on the beach without going out and preaching the gospel to them?

Some of these agonies, once again, are derived from wrong criteria. Who says that you should be the saviour of the entire world all the time and all on your own? Each one of us is given a limited task and a circumscribed sphere of influence. The only question is whether we are faithful in doing what we are expected to do (cf. 1 Cor. 4: 1–2).

But the question remains: If we do not live up to the Word of God ourselves, are we entitled to proclaim it from the pulpit? The answer is clear: In the first place, we are not entitled to preach the Word, but we are entrusted with proclaiming the Word, whether we are able to live up to it or not. We must continue to preach, even if we have a bad conscience.

In the second place, we are not super-Christians. We are sinners in need of redemption like everybody else. The Word we preach is never a Word only for others. The Word we preach is directed as much at us as it is directed at others. It wants to transform our own lives as much as that of others. When on the pulpit, we should never say ‘you’ but always ‘we’. While we are preaching to others, we must listen to our own sermon. Better still, we should be exposed to the Word of God preached by other preachers.

In the third place, Christians are not driven by a demand of God, but motivated by the gift of God. I recently heard a sermon on Galatians 3: 23–4:7 that began with the words ‘To begin with I have to do nothing!’ As Paul emphasises, Christians are free from any compulsion. They are just open enough to let the love of God flow through their lives to others.

Trusting in God’s ability to use fallible human beings for his purposes and to convert our failure into his blessing, preachers must learn not to take their after-sermon depressions too seriously. Such depressions are a common experience among preachers. One has spent time and energy to agonise over a text and do one’s best. Then the congregation comes, listens, and goes. The sermon does not seem to have made a noticeable impression.

It is not unlike the experience of a wife and mother who has invested time and love in preparing a tasty meal, but the family never notices how special the meal is, quarrels over lunch, or discusses the cricket score. She is left with nothing but the dirty dishes. The point of this parallel is that the congregation has been fed with solid spiritual food, whether they have noticed it or not, and that is all that matters.

8. The lack of impact

Many preachers get to a stage where they begin to doubt their calling and the meaningfulness of their ministry. The youth are not interested, nor the men
in their prime, nor the workers, nor the business class, nor the academics. Sunday after Sunday, they find the same faces, most of them white-haired ladies. The congregation does not grow; there is no sparkle, no fascination, no motivation. Compare our attendance with those of a football match! Why have we studied for all those years? What difference does our ministry make?

In modern times, the media pose a particular challenge. Newspapers, sitcoms, and tweets are not weighed down by an ancient tradition, compulsory religious observances, and elaborate rituals. They can deliver what people are craving: fun, excitement, sexual extravagance, culinary indulgence, tantalising information, discovery of the world, political conflicts, economic prospects, news of social upheavals, and what have you! Programs and advertisements are put together by psychologically and rhetorically trained experts, who know how to catch attention and make people spend their money; they bombard us twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week with their products.

Can the preacher compete with the impact of the media on the consciousness of the population? In terms of volume, force, and persistence, this seems impossible. David faces Goliath! But the Word of God shows its power when it touches the ultimate foundations of life. It invites us to build our lives on a rock, rather than on drift sand. It offers whole-wheat brown bread rather than junk food and cool drinks. It pursues true love rather than sexual pleasure, healing rather than palliative, joy rather than fun.

It can expose the shallowness, the sham, the ephemeral character of the messages, promises, and deceptions that fly around like moths in the night. It exposes the idols, the detrimental motivations, the spiritual and psychological slave masters, the blockages in the way of true life, the endless circling around one’s own desires and interests.

But it can do so only if it speaks the language of its listeners. According to Paul, we must ‘become Jews to the Jews and all things to all people’ (cf. 1 Cor. 9: 19–23). Most secular people are put off by our obsolete patterns of thought, our ancient rituals, and our dreary services. We shall deal with this problem extensively as we go.

Recast in terms of modern insights and responding to current patterns of behaviour, our message has enormous potential. It is overwhelmingly important in our current cultural climate. It is only when we lose the core of the matter—the exposure of an inauthentic life and the invitation to an authentic life—that our message loses its power.

To impact their audiences, preachers must themselves be impacted by the gospel! We must regain the force of God’s expectation and God’s gift, which is participation in the new life of Christ.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?
a) ‘Compared to what people in secular life have to face, the life of ministers is relaxed, void of risks, well looked after, and pleasant. Their products are not bound to the criteria of empirical evidence, technological efficiency, political prudence, or financial profitability. Ministers really do not need a shoulder to cry on!’

b) ‘If ministers want to be considered normal human beings, they should behave like normal human beings: wear normal clothes, speak normal language, be interested in cricket scores, and enjoy a braai.’

c) ‘If ministers do not believe what they preach, if they have to struggle for the truth, or lose their motivation, well, why not leave the profession alone and be involved in something more obvious and sensible?’

Lord, I am so often intimidated, frustrated, and disheartened. So often, less important things grab my heart and carry me away. Time and again, I am tempted and cannot resist. Embrace my life with the power of your love!
CHAPTER 6

Keeping on track

Some useful tips

What do you think?

Should preachers be more careful than others in the way they live, the things they say, and their general attitude towards fellow human beings?

How important is the general lifestyle of preachers for the credibility and persuasive power of their message?

What kinds of attitude or behaviour of a preacher would put you off sufficiently to loathe going to church?

We are in this together! I have a few good ideas that I never put into practice. If I were my own spiritual mentor, I would give the following advice to myself. Whether I would be willing and able to follow the advice is a different matter. But here we go!

Maintain self-discipline!

Human beings are sinful and fallible. The preacher is no exception! However, this is no excuse for carelessness and complacency. Clean water does not flow from muddy springs. Being entrusted with the Word of God places upon us the obligation to maintain our spiritual integrity as far as we possibly can. Nothing can undermine our joy and our authority more than manifest guilt or secret sins.

An authoritative sermon calls for both a good conscience and a good reputation. Being conscious of the fact that we have neither should make us humble and ready to give up what is wrong in our lives. If you have fallen into sin, confess it, seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Oh yes, I know that this is much easier said than done!

Try to overcome even less serious weaknesses. You are the carrier of the Word of God. You are the most visible representative of the church. You are the person to whom people look for guidance. You are the person whom outsiders would most eagerly like to ridicule as a proof that Christians are hypocrites. Spurgeon said that if my watch is wrong, I will be late; if the clock of the city hall is wrong, many people will miss their appointments. I have mentioned this before.

Only if the battle against the flesh is waged in your own life will you be able to carry it into the congregation and into the wider world without becoming
arrogant and judgemental. Paul says that he does not consider himself to be perfect, but he does make an all-out effort to reach the perfection of Christ (cf. Phil. 3: 12ff). He severely disciplines himself so that after he was preaching to others, he does not miss the mark himself (cf. 1 Cor. 9: 27). Let us mention a few random virtues and vices connected with the ministry.

**Keep fit!**

You may be surprised that I begin with a healthy body. But the body of the preacher is what the violin is for the violinist. No violinist will allow his/her violin to be kicked around and lose its shape. A preacher needs a balanced diet, regular exercise, sufficient sleep, and some pleasant recreation. We should never fall into the trap of thinking that we should only be a spiritual example for the congregation; God wills the comprehensive well-being of the total human being. We are not spirits; we are bodies!

Some preachers, for instance, become obese. There may be genetic or medical factors involved, and we should not be judgemental about that. But if caused by a lack of personal discipline, one should try to overcome it. One’s office may just be too close to the kitchen. One may have to attend too many official dinners; one may be offered tea and biscuits too often when one visits. One may sit too much in easy chairs; one may even eat too much and drink too much because of boredom and frustration. Let us keep our bodies in shape!

**Work with your hands!**

Again you may be surprised that I talk about manual work so high up on the agenda. For me, this is the touchstone of a right attitude to one’s ministry. We must be able and eager to do any job for Christ and his flock. We should be the first to move chairs in the hall, wash up dishes, or help to transform the churchyard into a fertile garden. Some preachers believe that it is below their dignity to help the ladies dish up food or clean the toilets. You remember Jesus washing the feet of the disciples?

Some pastors even grow long fingernails as a sign of their white-collar dignity. What nonsense! To work is part of the special privilege and dignity of the human being. Having free hands and versatile fingers distinguishes the human being from animals. And Christ defined his lordship as one of service to others (cf. Mark 10: 35–45; John 13: 1-5).

According to one creation story in the Bible, Adam was put into the garden to till it and keep it, and that was before he fell into sin (cf. Gen. 2: 15). Work is not a punishment but a blessing. It is the futility of work that is the curse (cf. Gen. 3: 17–19), and what is more futile than not being able to make a contribution? Not those who have to work should be pitied, but those who have no work. The pastor’s own behaviour should be an expression of the joy and the dignity of work.
Be on time!

Some preachers believe that it enhances their dignity if their congregations have to wait for them. This is inexcusably naughty! Who do you think you are—a chief? An arrogant politician? If 200 people wait for half an hour, you have wasted 100 precious hours of the lifetimes of your fellow Christians! That is four full days—days that do not belong to you but to them! Be present well before time and begin the service punctually. Only then will the congregants also take time seriously and come on time.

Keep your fingers out of the pie!

Never, never, never take money from the church’s coffers, even if you think you will return it shortly. Remember that you are human! You may forget. You may not have the cash. You may lose the sense of urgency and postpone indefinitely. You never had the authority to take it in the first place. Rather do without than take God’s money!

It is also unwise for a pastor to run into debts. Do not borrow money from your congregation members, because this will disturb your relationships with them. Suspicions concerning money matters easily translate into gossip. They can have devastating consequences for the credibility of your message.

When temptations come, think of the good work that you endanger, the wonderful example of great people who could do without personal comfort and satisfaction, the many sources of joy that God provides in nature and in culture that do not cost anything at all, the knowledge that suffering leads to spiritual depth, while indulgence leads to superficiality and barrenness.

You can also steal God’s time in other ways. Some preachers are secret taxi drivers. Others run businesses or farms. That is fine if it is part of your contract. It is not fine if you do it in secret and neglect your duties. If you think you should be a tent-maker, be honest about it and do not cash in on two salaries.

Keep your eyes in check!

Most sexual transgressions begin with the eyes. It is for good reasons that Jesus warns us not to look at a person with sexual lust (cf. Matt. 6: 28). Human beings have sexual hormones, which are not switched off when they are ordained. Preachers work with human beings, often with lonely and disappointed people who are longing for warmth and acceptance. There are obvious but hidden dangers in this situation.

Acquire the factuality of a doctor who makes all her skills available but keeps her emotional distance from the patient! You cannot help but find some people of the opposite sex (possibly even of your own sex) attractive. After all, you are a normal human being! Be on your guard—a small fire can be snuffed out or ignored. But it can become uncontrollable in no time!
There is nothing wrong with enjoying a beautiful flower. But an attractive human being is different from a beautiful flower! Attraction is healthy, but deadly if not kept in check. Even a seemingly innocent glance may go straight into the other person’s heart, evoke a response, and land you in troubled waters. Some of the most powerful politicians and the most courageous generals have come to grief by falling in love with the wrong person at the wrong time. The same is true for some famous preachers. As a pastor, you simply cannot afford the emotional upheavals and the distorted relationships caused by illicit attachments. Believe me—I am speaking from experience!

Do not be overly impressed by praise or critique!

Every human being needs a word of appreciation and encouragement, and the preacher is no exception. But if the congregation enjoys your sermons, praise the Lord for it and do not allow it to puff up your breast. Pride is the graveyard for any profound sermon. I have dealt with this aspect extensively in chapter 3.

The message of Christ, the great servant, is mediated through humble and unassuming people. Do not generate the ambition to become a star preacher because you may make a fool of yourself in doing so. Paul believed that God made the apostles, of all people, suffer to keep them humble (cf. 1 Cor. 4: 9ff; 2 Cor. 1: 5ff; 4: 7ff; 6: 4ff; 11: 23ff; 12: 7ff).

When people show disapproval, do not be overly depressed. Investigate the matter and see whether you can improve on your performance. Then commit the limitations you cannot change to Christ and continue regardless. Paul too was not a star preacher or an impressive figure, yet God’s Spirit could work powerfully through him (cf. 1 Cor. 2: 1–5).

Do not pretend to be omniscient!

You cannot know the answers to all questions, and you should not pretend that you can. Never be too proud to say, ‘I do not know, but I shall try to find out.’ Then go and ask somebody who knows. Or read it up. Or simply acknowledge that you are out of your depths.

Let the congregation feel that you are a student of the Word yourself, that you are still on your way, that there is more ignorance than knowledge in your head. Build up your own theological knowledge so that you can build up the theological insight of the congregation.

Refrain from the nasty habit of arguing with people about things they are bound to know better. Theologians are not multi-disciplinary experts, and nobody expects them to be. Even if you do know better, do not let the people feel your superiority; offer an opinion or make a suggestion, but do not impose your views.
Avoid being partial!

A congregation is, by definition, pluralistic. There will be different opinions and commitments among the members, especially in political and economic terms. If they are politically awake, preachers are bound to have their own views, but they must not be perceived to be on the side of one of the factions.

This is a question of identity and loyalty: the representative of Christ belongs to Christ! Christ is not on the side of this or that party but on the side of God’s justice and God’s healing love. Precisely because God is impartial, God takes the side of the weak, the vulnerable, the oppressed, the victim, the outcast, the suffering, the guilty, the dying, the victim of prejudice.

This does not mean that God overlooks the sin of the poor (cf. Lev. 19: 15). It does not mean that evil should not be exposed and attacked. There will be some truth and some deception on both sides. The truth must be retrieved and affirmed, the deception exposed and overcome.

Important clues are given in 1 Corinthians 9: 19ff concerning the identity of the preacher: (a) Paul is free from every party because he belongs to Christ; (b) being free, he can become a Jew to the Jew and all things to all people; (c) his motive in doing so is to win them for Christ and his redemptive cause; (d) it is this self-effacing act that makes him share in the gospel of Christ, because Christ came to pick us up where we are and lead us towards the truth of God.

Never put up a show!

Never try to impress! I have dealt with this extensively in chapter 3. Never hide behind a mask! Be yourself in all your weaknesses, doubts, and problems! The most important attitude of the preacher is personal sincerity, honesty, and credibility.

The knowledge that the preacher battles as much with sin and temptation as they do can be a relief for other Christians and prompt them to carry the weaknesses of the preacher to God in prayer. But if the congregants get the impression that a preacher is not sincere, they will find it difficult to glean the Word of God from his/her lips.

Speak in your normal day-to-day language! For the sake of sincerity, you should never use artificial language, whether in a sermon, at a funeral or when speaking to children. Don’t whine; don’t pontificate. Don’t emulate the style of opera or poetry. Sanctimonious language, in particular, is unbearable! Speak in the normal tone you also use at your family table or on the street!

Build up the confidence of the congregation!

Trust is a prerequisite of successful communication. People accept the truth from people they trust. If you have lost their confidence, you will find it difficult to regain it. If you have to say unpopular things, make certain that it is true and
package it in the redeeming love of Christ. Include yourself under the verdict. Be careful not to deplete the deposit of trust the congregation has invested in you.

Nevertheless, you must retain your intellectual honesty! Your theological education may have led you to question many assumptions found in the church. While you are not entitled to ride roughshod over the convictions of the people of God, you should also not become a hypocrite in what you proclaim to be true. The truth of the Word of God is the only foundation on which you can stand. And this truth must be your own truth; otherwise, you cannot proclaim it to be God’s truth.

This implies that you do your preparatory steps carefully. Consult commentaries and theologies to see whether a problematic aspect of a text or a doctrine makes sense. Never pretend to believe something that you don’t! Remember that your doubts may be lingering in the minds of others as well, and you are supposed to work through them with your fellow Christians. Tell them that you find it difficult to accept a questionable aspect of the text or a doctrine, that you will offer an explanation which makes sense to you, but that your opinion is not conclusive.

**Do not neglect your house visits!**

People are social creatures. It is important to sustain an ongoing personal encounter between preacher and congregation. Greet and chat with the people before and after the service. Do not be scarce. A gifted South African preacher once said to us at a pastors’ convention, ‘If you have not visited your members during the week, you have nothing to say to them on Sunday!’

Do not neglect the children. They are the congregation of the future. Some preachers believe that it is below their dignity to concern themselves with Sunday school or youth groups. Jesus was of a different opinion! For kids without fathers (or mothers), or with abusive fathers, you may be an important role model. Your attitude will also impress itself on the mind of the youth as the kind of atmosphere they expect when going to church.

**Cultivate the art of silence!**

People who must talk a lot, such as preachers, can easily fall into the habit of talking a lot where they should not. They must make a special effort to develop the ability to keep quiet and listen. They must listen to God; regular silent retreats are an incredible source of strength.

They also must listen to people, especially their congregants. Never bulldoze an opinion, however problematic or weakly expressed it may be. If their opinion is dismissed with scorn, it will shatter their self-confidence and their sense of acceptance. It can also make them stubborn. Give people a chance to say their say. Respond positively if you can, for instance by saying, ‘Yes, that is true, but on the other hand, we may not forget that . . .’
Pray for your congregation! Speak with your ‘employer’ about the job he has entrusted to your care. Rejoice and praise God that the congregation exists, and you have been called to serve it. In this way, you will lose all fear, anxiety, and resentment. Pray for specific people, especially those that you find troublesome, mentioning their specific needs and concerns.

**Remember names and faces!**

For me, this is one of the greatest sources of frustration and humiliation: I cannot remember names! It is also an indictment because if you really care for a person, you will not forget his/her name.

Participate in God’s redemptive concern. A mentor once said to his probationer at the end of his year of service, ‘I want to give you threefold advice before you go on your way. The first is, love your congregation! The second is, love your congregation! The third is, love your congregation!’ As a pastor he made a point of greeting every member by name when they moved out of the church door after the service.

**Spiritual hygiene**

This goes beyond the self-discipline I mentioned before. The preacher is the first mission field of the Word of God. In being transformed, he/she becomes a medium of the transformation of the congregation and its secular environment. We wash our bodies daily. We change our clothes when they are soiled; we do our hair. All this is important for human relationships. But should we not do the same with our spiritual life?

I have a prayer card in which I jot down my most troubling weaknesses and their desired opposites: moaning–gratitude, depression–joy, anxiety–authority, stress–relaxation, enslavement–freedom, and so on. They have become part of my personal liturgy on a daily basis. They have proved to be very effective in restoring my spiritual health.

As a preacher, one can occasionally subject oneself to a checklist with four or five undesirable habits or omissions that one wants to overcome. Because we do not always recognise our weaknesses or take them seriously enough, we can ask a trusted friend, co-worker, or fellow member to point them out to us. The idea is not to undermine one’s self-esteem and become depressed, but to expose oneself to the transforming power of the Word of God in practical ways.

To alert you to possibilities, here is a list from which you may want to choose two or three pertinent ones. Of course, there can be many others.

Have I been

- a preacher who makes constant demands?
- a moody, cheerless preacher?
- a moaning preacher?
an enslaved preacher?
a resentful preacher?
a promiscuous preacher?
a lonely, self-sufficient preacher?
a depressed preacher?
an anxious preacher?
a fearful preacher?
a preacher who is a thief of God’s money?
a preacher who is a thief of God’s time?
a holy-garment preacher?
a lazy preacher?
a busybody preacher?
a chieftain preacher?
a taxi-driver preacher?
a homeboy preacher?
a biased preacher?
a talkative preacher?
a gossiping preacher?
a castigating preacher?
a vindictive preacher?
a slanderous preacher?
a disorganised preacher?
a gullible preacher?
an ambitious preacher?
a late preacher?
a dragging-on preacher?
a preacher who tries to impress?
a preacher who blows him/herself up?

What did you find helpful, or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘This is old-style boarding-school admonition—I find it nauseating!’
b) ‘Is this not again a recipe for justification by works, rather than by faith?’
c) ‘The attempt to be different from other people is intrinsically arrogant and selfish. It is exactly the reason why preachers are isolated from the community and the society at large!’

Lord, I am overwhelmed by what I am expected to be and to do. Help me to relax and allow you to do your redeeming and transforming work in my life.
C. REPACKAGING THE MESSAGE
CHAPTER 7

Translating the message

The basic process

What do you think?

Is the biblical text the eternal Word of God, which is valid and applicable as it is for all people in all situations and at all times, or does it have to be translated from its ancient forms of communication into contemporary patterns of thought?

Is the Word of God plain human sense so that all who read the Bible and use their brains can understand God’s gift and God’s expectations? Or does it need some specially trained people to interpret it? Or is it so hidden and mysterious that we need a supernatural revelation of some kind to unlock its meaning?

Does it matter whether the life and the attitude of a preacher reflect the redeeming love of God, or will God also speak through a resentful, ambitious, and arrogant preacher?

When has the Word of God reached its purpose: when the listeners begin to live holy lives, or when they are motivated to go into the world and serve in spite of their shortcomings?

The Word of God uses human means of communication

The message of God’s benevolence was transmitted over many centuries to many communities. On its way, it travelled through many different situations and world views. It responded to countless personal joys and agonies, communal loyalties and expectations, social and political contexts, economic and ecological backgrounds. Now it wants to speak to us here and now. In this chapter, we consider the way this actually happens.

The first and most basic thing to realise is that it is God who speaks God’s Word. So before you even begin with your preparations, sit back for a moment and become aware of the presence of God. It is God who now wants to use your thoughts, words, and actions to speak to his people, to call them, challenge them, reassure them, liberate them, empower them, open the future for them. Keep this awareness prayerfully alive throughout the process.

However, God uses human beings to speak his Word to other human beings. Communication between human beings happens within a linguistic culture, a spiritual tradition, and a network of relationships. The individuals involved come to the party with different needs, experiences, assumptions, and certainties. All
these colour their understanding of what is being said and what is being heard. The message must move from the lifeworld of the sender to that of the receivers. It is like an aeroplane that starts in sunny weather at Johannesburg and ends up in a blizzard at Chicago.

For a preacher to discover that the hearers seem to hear what the preacher never wanted to say can be disconcerting. But there is a reason for this discrepancy. As the message leaves the preacher, it leaves the language, the culture, and the world view of the preacher and enters the language, the culture, and the world view of the listeners. If the discrepancy between the two is too great, the message may not reach them at all. If it does, it lodges itself into a new set of assumptions, experiences, and expectations. If it falls on fertile ground, it does so because it responds to the spiritual needs of the recipients rather than satisfying the intentions and ambitions of the sender.

The flexibility of the Word

To reach the listeners, the message must be translatable. It must be versatile enough to move from one language to another, from one culture to another, from one situation to another. It must be a living message, a dynamic tradition, rather than a static ‘truth’ formulated once and for all. And that is indeed the case. Rightly understood, the Word of God is powered by God’s redeeming love, which seeks human beings in whatever condition and situation they find themselves. It is God’s creative and redemptive response to human needs, predicaments, assumptions, and temptations.

Because human communities differ, a living tradition evolves and differentiates into sub-traditions. When it ceases to respond to changing needs and situations, the tradition is ailing, or it stagnates altogether. That is why the great variability of the Word of God is intrinsic to its very nature. We may become despondent when we see the enormous breadth of Christian beliefs from Russian Orthodox liturgies to Charismatic ecstasies, from the noisy street evangelisations of the Salvation Army to the silence of the Quakers.

But the flexibility of the Word of God is its strength rather than its weakness. Christians believe in a living God who is concerned about living human beings, rather than a static idol that cannot move. God’s aim is not perfection but transformation. How does it happen? Let me use the parable of going on a journey. In fact, when it comes to proclaiming the Word of God, we must think of two journeys: the journey into the biblical past and the journey into the future of our listeners.

The journey into the past

When we read biblical documents, we are confronted with worlds almost entirely different from our own: other cultures, other languages with their peculiar
vocabularies, idioms, and thought patterns, other historical situations, other social structures, other types of personality.

We are also confronted with stages in the historical evolution of the Word that may have been superseded by later stages. For a secularised person who is not used to biblical language and imagery, the statement that Jesus was taken to heaven in a cloud or that the Word became flesh needs explanation.

To meet David, Isaiah or John within their circumstances and their worlds of meaning requires a journey into past history. We must leave our own historical place and spiritual world, as it were, and pay a visit to the home of strangers who are living on another continent. We encounter the Word of God as it was formulated in that other context, or we miss it.

We also need to keep in mind the history that the Word went through since the biblical texts were written. Whether we like it or not, this history has an impact on our understanding. Catholic theologians cannot pretend that Thomas Aquinas is irrelevant for their reading of the Bible, and Protestants cannot ignore the influence of Luther or Calvin on their faith.

Going home

But the home of a stranger is not a place to settle down. If we remain caught up in the biblical past, we will be unable to be Christ’s witnesses in our own contexts here and now. Some Christians feel so much at home in the biblical world that their faith has become a stranger in their own world. Like the disciples of Jesus, they want to build their tents among their spiritual ancestors on the mountaintop, as it were, while their own people are waiting for them in the valley (cf. Matt. 17: 4 and 14).

If our encounter with the Word in that distant context is for real, we shall be involved in its missionary dynamic that will take us forward to our own historical and cultural situation, our own people, our own world of meaning, our own problems. It will settle in with us where we belong. It will become the core of a new system of meaning that will become the foundation of our own renewed lives. What matters in the end is not what Jeremiah or Paul proclaimed to be true for their own audiences, but how the Word they proclaimed challenges, liberates, and transforms our own lives. If it does not, there is something wrong.

Academic theology speaks of the hermeneutical circle in this regard: we go from our present understanding to the biblical past, allow our assumptions to be transformed by the biblical texts, and return from the biblical past to our present situation. This can happen again and again.

The journey into the situation of the listeners

But there is also a missionary circle: going from our own life world into the situation of our listeners and back again. To bring the Word into the lives of other
people, we leave our spiritual home, our world of meaning, our situation and our
problems, and pay a visit to strangers who live, as it were, on another continent.

Our listeners are embedded in their own physical and social environments and
their own spiritual atmospheres. They have gathered their own experiences and
 gained their own insights. They uphold their own convictions, whether valid or not.
They struggle with their own needs and long for a redemptive response to those
needs.

Their faith is conditioned by their philosophical, ideological, religious, or
denominational traditions. Their brains have processed all the preaching they
have been exposed to before. It is useful to know which traditions they come
with when they listen to us. But it is even more important to listen to what they
themselves have experienced, come to believe, and require for their faith to
prosper.

Effective pastors do regular house visits. They listen intently and engage
their hosts in profound discussions. A friendly chat around a cup of tea will
not do the trick. One must get inside their worlds so that the Word becomes
relevant to, and appropriate for, their situations. If one neglects this ‘journey into
a foreign land’, one may answer questions nobody asks and use language nobody
understands, even if this is biblical language.

This insight was formulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9: 19–23: In Christ
God became a Jew to the Jews because Jesus was a Jew. So if you want to
become part of the gospel, you have to become a Jew to the Jews. But you must
also become a person without the law to people without the law, and in fact, ‘all
things to all people’. Because in Christ, God seeks to redeem the lost, God enters
their situation to transform it from within.

Obviously, there are limits to what we can do in this regard, but the
principle is important. Go into a disco and try to fathom the spiritual atmosphere
obtaining there. Sit among the unemployed at a building site who are waiting
for a job. If you are invited to a cocktail party, accept the invitation. Witness the
midnight carnage in an emergency ward on New Year’s Eve. Teach teenagers in
a high school.

This practice enables us to formulate and live the Word in a way that the
new life of Christ becomes a real and demanding possibility for those to whom
we minister, a possibility which they have to accept or reject.

The transformative power of the Word of God

The Word we proclaim is not just an interesting way of looking at the world.
It must offer an alternative to the current lives of our listeners, one that would be
authentically theirs. Faith in Christ is not something foreign to them, to which
they must be converted. It is not something that is imposed upon their lives from
the outside. Christ wants to transform their very own being from what it ought
not to be to what it ought to be.

The missionary circle also includes the journey into the future. What are the
needs, predicaments, and dangers that seem to lie ahead of our listeners, their
communities, society, humankind as a whole, and future generations? How does the Word of God respond to these needs? Preaching must become prophetic. Prophecy does not predict the future; it warns and reassures people in precarious situations. For us to do that credibly, we need to know what seems to be looming on the horizon as sensitive experts see it.

Theologians cannot be experts in economics, ecology, criminology, political science, information technology, and so on. A ‘jack of all trades and a master of none’ is irritating to those who are informed. If you express an opinion on something that lies outside your expertise, say, ‘According to some economists . . .’

Better still, consult with those who can be expected to know. We have to design sermons, lectures, and seminars on specialised topics in groups composed of knowledgeable laypersons. The theologian would then only contribute aspects and perspectives derived from the text and subsequent theological insight, while the others fill in the challenges and the applications.

What about calling together five or six people of different walks of life, placing the meaning of a text before them, and asking them to spell out what it would mean in their different walks of life? One can even construct collaborative sermons and ask the participants to share their take on the message in the context of their own experiences and fields of expertise. We shall come back to that option in chapter 19.

**Going home**

Again, having paid the visit and delivered the goods, there is a time to go home. We cannot live the lives of our fellow human beings, because we have our own lives to live. More-over, we cannot take their decisions and organise their lives for them. They are supposed to be mature and responsible daughters and sons of God who are in charge of their own lives and have to work through their challenges as believers.

Let me elaborate: when they enter the lives of other people, preachers must understand that they are visitors, not masters of the house. Visitors are pleasant to have, but they become a nuisance when they outstay their welcome. When they begin to take over control, visitors create either humiliation and dependence, or anger and rebellion. Paul always established a congregation and then left it alone, except when it needed his help (cf. 2 Cor. 1: 23–24).

Only when the hosts know that the preacher is a temporary visitor can they interact with the latter on the basis of equal dignity and personal freedom. One can always pay a second, more profound visit, and these visits can become mutual. Free interaction deepens the friendship and enriches both partners. Just as each time we read the Bible we discover new aspects of the Word, so we meet with surprises every time we revisit a group whom we thought we knew so well. This is what makes the missionary circle so rewarding.

The process described above is reflected in the academic disciplines that make up theological research and training: historical theology (biblical studies, history of doctrine, church history), systematic theology (doctrine, ethics), and
practical theology (homiletics, Christian education, pastoral care). In the field, the preacher has to apply his mind to all three of these aspects, only that here the processes concentrate on the message of a specific text.

Is this programme not too demanding?

Yes, it is! I first applied it when I was a student preparing a sermon for examination purposes. Fulfilling the demands of the examiners took me a couple of days! Few ministers and preachers can afford such an investment of time. However, having gone through the process a couple of times, the different steps settled in the back of my mind and became second nature. Over the years, sermon preparation became easier, flowing from stage to stage as it were, without me noticing it.

I can no longer read a text without becoming conscious of its ancient contexts. I cannot help but ask what the thrust of its message is. I cannot help but wonder how it would have to be formulated to become relevant for us today. This is just a matter of constant practice. A pianist will go through endless hours of rehearsal every day until her fingers begin to move automatically when her eyes see a particular configuration of notes. Preachers can emulate her dedication and go through the steps each time they prepare a sermon.

But why the effort? Going through the stages prevents us from falling into deadly routine and preaching our pet ideas over and over again. And it is infinitely worth it! The Word of God can become tantalisingly fresh each time we go into a text and find the depth and relevance of its meaning. It is a source of joy when the faces of our listeners brighten up because they have begun to understand something that had bothered them or gained a life-transforming impetus.

My advice is that you draw the diagram above on a piece of paper and put it against the wall behind your desk. It will subconsciously prod you to keep the different steps of the process in mind. Even if you spend only ten minutes on each stage, it will eventually make a difference to your preaching.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this section?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘Your proposal is totally unrealistic in practice. A normal parish pastor does not even have the time or the training to dig into the historical intricacies of the biblical texts, let alone understand the complex professional world of the nuclear scientist or the psychopathologist. Too little knowledge is more dangerous than no knowledge. Preachers should confine themselves to their field.’

b) ‘Preachers should not pretend to understand the real needs, conflicts, and predicaments of their parishioners. If they misunderstand and misrepresent the life and the situation of their listeners, the latter will be enraged and alienated. Let the preacher interpret the text and allow the listeners to apply what seems to fit to their lives on their own.’

c) ‘Again you think you can ignore the work of the Holy Spirit. It is not the preacher who makes the text speak in the heart of both believers and non-believers but the Spirit of God. There is no need to go on journeys into other worlds, because there is only one world, the world of God, and one Word, the Word of God.’

Lord, help me not to lose my way but reach your goal!
CHAPTER 8

Retrieving the message

Exegesis of the text

What do you think?

Must every sermon be based on a biblical text, or should the preacher also preach on the Creed, a classical doctrine like the Trinity, or on a pressing social issue such as gender, the HIV-AIDS epidemic, or the retrenchment of workers?

Should the preacher be allowed to choose any text that comes to mind, or should particular sermon texts be prescribed by the church, or should the liturgical readings of the Sunday (psalm, epistle, and gospel) be used?

Must we assume that God speaks directly to us through a biblical text as we read it, or that God inspired the biblical authors to speak the Word of God to their own contemporaries within their own cultural and historical situations?

Are untrained readers generally capable of understanding a biblical text, or must they be assisted by a trained theologian?

Should the preacher try to retrieve the message of a text on his/her own, or should the laity be involved in reading and interpreting a text?

Must the sermon be based on a biblical text?

This is a tricky question. With its principle of sola scriptura (scriptures only, rather than the ecclesial tradition), the Reformation made preaching on a biblical text all but non-negotiable. The identification of the Bible with the Word of God in evangelical circles has reinforced the idea that no sermon can become God’s Word that is not based on the Bible.

Moreover, devout Christians live with their Bibles, expecting God to speak to them through the scriptures. They must be empowered to read the scriptures in as appropriate a way as possible. So let us assume that, with some exceptions, we preach on a text. That does not mean that other topics are not needed or illegitimate. It only means that these topics are dealt with in ways other than the sermon.

One can offer lectures on such topics. It is quite important to enhance the theological competence of the congregation. The creeds or the catechisms could be used for this kind of input. One can also organise seminars on issues such as science and faith, sexual relations, political ethics, health issues, the use of technological innovations, and so on.
Choice of texts

That raises the question which texts should be chosen. The Bible is an awfully thick book containing numerous traditions that responded to changing human needs, predicaments, and world views over more than a millennium of biblical history. We have to choose. And when we choose, we will be selective.

In many churches, preachers select their own texts. The danger is that they preach on their pet texts again and again, while others are ignored. Other churches provide a lectionary. Particular psalms, Old Testament readings, epistles, and gospels are allocated to each Sunday in the church year. This procedure too is selective. For many centuries, the epistles and the gospels were the only texts used in the services of high churches. Some churches provide more variable lectionaries. The advantage of prescribed texts is that it avoids the subjective preferences of the preacher. But a prescribed series of texts can be quite arbitrary.

Moreover, the prescribed texts tend to be taken as timeless truth, and their location in the ongoing tradition is ignored. Preaching on the same assortment of texts year in and year out is bound to yield a truncated understanding of the biblical faith. One also has to concede that the church year, which forms the grid for prescribed texts, is rather out of kilter. Too little attention is given to important topics such as the Creator, the Holy Spirit, or God’s future. I will deal with that in chapter 18.

I suggest that the preacher should consciously try to reach a balance in the topics to be dealt with and choose texts that seem appropriate for those topics. For that to succeed, we have to develop some kind of vision of the Christian faith as a whole and locate particular topics at particular locations within this whole. To gain such a comprehensive vision is the task of systematic theology, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

A. Five ways of reading the Bible

Now for the topic of this chapter! To begin with, we sit down and read a text. How do we read a biblical text? There are at least five ways we can approach ancient documents like those found in the Bible. Let me call them behind-the-text reading, in-front-of-the-text reading, above-the-text reading, in-the-text reading, and below-the-text reading. We can depict the differences between these approaches with a little diagram:
Behind-the-text reading: Here you try to establish the situation that has led to the text and what the text said in response to that situation. It is obvious that every text originated in a particular cultural, political, social, and spiritual environment. In biblical times, the Word of God acted as a creative and redemptive response to changing human world views, needs, predicaments, and derailments.

So each text has its own message, which is geared to the circumstances to which it responded. You imagine what these circumstances, needs, and world views might have been and what the author wanted to convey to his readers or listeners under those circumstances. Some texts have been used again and again in situations other than those under which they have first been formulated. Often they have been changed to fit the new situations.

Isaiah 40–55, for example, originated when Cyrus, the Persian king, overpowered the Babylonian empire. This opened up the prospect for the despondent Jewish exiles in Babylon to return home. The first letter to the Corinthians 1–4 was written when a gifted preacher, Apollos, had visited the congregation and impressed some congregants with his rhetorical excellence.

To imagine the situation that led to a text seems to require at least some historical knowledge and theological expertise. So does this approach allocate too much importance to the trained theologian, marginalising and disempowering the laity? No, the theologian is trained precisely to enable the laity to understand biblical texts in their historical contexts! In many cases, the theologian too does not have the knowledge and must make do.

Another objection is that in most cases, it is almost impossible to reconstruct the circumstances under which a text has been written because there is just too little historical data to go by. That is quite true, of course. On the other hand, scriptural, historical, and archaeological research has led to a surprising lot of detail that we can use to venture an informed guess of the likely course of events (this is called a conjecture). Vivid debate between scholars can then lead to a more refined picture.

A third objection is that in ancient times, historical precision was not part of the agenda of the authors of the texts or their later compilers. They wanted to convey a message and freely changed the tradition they inherited to fit a new
situation better. Again, this is true, but in many cases, these changes can easily be traced and added to the overall picture.

**In-front-of-the-text reading:** In this case, you read the text as it is and allow it to impact your current spiritual, emotional, and social situation. How the text came into being is not an issue. The text acts like a mirror reflecting what you are at and where you fall short. Though never written with your life in mind, the text can enlighten you, warn you, or comfort and reassure you. Revelation happens now and here, rather than long ago and far away.

This is how most believers read the Bible anyway. But it can be deceptive! We tend to read our own assumptions, prejudices, and desires into the text. Men who oppress their wives can quote biblical texts to legitimate their behaviour. Colonialists can claim to be the new Israelites who are entitled to subdue or drive out the original inhabitants of a country.

**Above-the-text reading:** Most believers have a lot of traditional doctrines in their heads—whether acquired through years of listening to sermons, through reading relevant literature, or through formal theological studies. Doctrinal traditions differ between denominations. Subconsciously, readers expect the text to confirm the doctrines they inherited. They interpret the text to accommodate the doctrine, or simply ignore what does not fall in with the doctrine.

When reading about an unlikely miracle, such as Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, for instance, you can simply say he was the Son of God and God is almighty! But does the Bible claim that Jesus of Nazareth, a human being, was almighty? Or you assume that the snake in Genesis 3 was not an animal but the devil that was to be overpowered by Christ. But does the text actually say so? If you impose a doctrine onto the text, it is not the Bible that speaks to you, but the doctrinal assumptions of your church.

**In-the-text reading:** Here you assume that neither the historical origin of the text, nor its contemporary relevance, nor the doctrines of the church are important, but the eternal and infallible Word of God, which is identical with the Bible taken as a whole. Different texts within that whole explain each other. Genesis 1 says that the world was created in six days, for instance, and another text says that for God a day is a thousand years (cf. Ps. 90: 4). So creation must have happened in a time span of 6,000 years.

This approach does not take the historical character of biblical statements seriously. It forces disparate biblical traditions into a harmonious framework of our own making. It ignores the linguistic character of these ancient texts. Biblical writers utilise all linguistic tools available at their time to convey their message: parables, metaphors, poetry, historical accounts, legends, myths—you name them! They also freely change the traditions they inherited to convey the intended message in a new situation.

The story found in the parable of the prodigal son (cf. Luke 15), for instance, never happened historically. Yet it is a true formulation of the gospel. The fall
into sin in Genesis 3 does not refer to a historical event but characterises the human situation before God. The word ‘Adam’ means ‘human being’. We are all Adam; we all forfeit our birth right by moving beyond the realm of God’s benevolence. Does God literally stretch out the heavens like a tent and make the clouds his chariot (cf. Ps. 104: 2–3)? A metaphor should not take the place of what it is meant to signify!

**Below-the-text reading:** This approach also looks at the Bible as a whole. But it takes the fact seriously that the Word of God entered human history. The biblical tradition evolved and differentiated over more than a thousand years of ancient history. It constantly addressed new situations in new ways. It is not static like a monument that cannot move, but dynamic like a living stream of water.

As circumstances changed, traditions such as the creation of the world or the covenant law of Israel or the status of the king or the importance of bloody sacrifices to gain God’s forgiveness underwent profound changes, often turning the original on its head.

The authoritarian leadership model found in Psalm 2, for instance, was replaced with a leadership model based on humble service (cf. Mark 10: 35–45). Israelite exclusiveness, as found in Deuteronomy 7, made way to inclusiveness in Ephesians 2. Conditional acceptance changed into unconditional acceptance. To discern the thrust of the message, therefore, you must ask what came before a particular text was written and what followed after.

I think it is the only approach that does justice to the actual character of the biblical tradition. The biblical authors themselves harkened back to what happened before and applied it to the new situations they had to face. Moses referred back to the God of the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Deuteronomy referred back to the God who liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery. New Testament authors insisted that God’s promises in the Old Testament were fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus.

Below-the-text reading reveals that the biblical tradition is a long series of in-front-of-the-text readings. Yet it gives us an impression of the historical dynamics of the biblical tradition as a whole over a thousand years. This is the approach that I use and that I suggest you keep in mind when reading the Bible.

The Word of God responded to different circumstances in different times. This explains why there are various versions of events such as the exodus, Jesus walking on the water, or the resurrection. It also explains why Old Testament texts that clash with New Testament texts cannot be equally valid with the latter.

Christians cannot condone genocide, the expulsion of non-believers from their land, or the hatred of enemies, all of which occur in Old Testament texts but have been superseded by Christ. Likewise, we can no longer condone slavery and the discrimination of women that are still found in the New Testament.

This approach does not discredit the other approaches but integrates them in a critical way. You still have to ask what kinds of situation led to particular
texts (behind-the-text reading), how they could be made to speak to the current situation (in-front-of-the-text reading), in which ways our traditional doctrines reflect this history (above-the-text reading), and how they fit into the biblical tradition as a whole (in-the-text reading). The more we learn to critically apply these kinds of reading, the richer the texture of the text becomes.

Who can master this approach?

Now there is a hitch. Lay preachers cannot be expected to command the kind of expertise necessary for this approach. Even trained theologians may be overtaxed. So is it practically unattainable? No, it is not! Even less-informed readers can sense the difference between Old Testament texts and New Testament texts. The hatred of enemies found in the Psalms was superseded by the love of enemies in the life of Christ. Brutal punishment for transgressions of the law (stoning to death) turned into divine forgiveness. Animal sacrifices have vanished. The temple and the priesthood have lost their importance. Progeny no longer has the significance it had for Abraham. The Jews are no longer expected to return to the Promised Land.

Below-the-text reading opens a wide field of explorations for vivid Bible readers. It can keep them busy for a lifetime. The awareness that a particular text is located in a particular cultural situation, that it is part of the historical flow of a tradition, that there are parallels that differ, and that an earlier text has been superseded by a later text can lead to profound insights. So while it is true that we know far too little, let us make the best out of what we can indeed come to know.

For starters, make yourself a simple grid of the time span between 1000 BC and 200 AD. That is the time in which the biblical texts have been written. Put the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, and Roman empires on the left-hand side. Jot down the most important phases in the history of Israel in the middle (the empire of David, the end of the Northern and the Southern kingdoms, the exile, the life of Christ, the journeys of Paul). Then fit in the most important books of the Bible on the right-hand side of this grid. It helps you to see the texts in a grand historical perspective. You find such an overview at the end of some Bibles.

B. The exegesis of a text

Having an idea of where the text fits into the ongoing tradition is one thing; climbing into the text itself is quite another. It is like diving into a deep well of refreshing water. The careful analysis of a text is called exegesis. It comes from a Greek word meaning ‘leading out of’. The exegete wants to read the meaning intended by the author out of a given text. The opposite would be to read a preconceived meaning into the text.

The aim of exegesis is to establish what a biblical author wanted to convey to his contemporaries. If exegesis is taken seriously, it will include
behind-the-text reading. What made the author say what he says the way he says it? There are a number of important tools we can apply in this process. Let me just mention a few that can be used by any reader, whether trained or not.

The **linguistic** character of a text: Is it a narrative, a legend, a myth, a historical account, an abstract theological argument, a prophetic announcement, a parable, a song, or what else? Take the Book of Jonah or the story of Peter walking on the sea for an example and try to answer this question.

The underlying **logic**: What are the assumptions made and which are the inferences deduced from them? Does the author believe, for instance, that we have to follow the Mosaic Law to the letter or that we are free to use our God-given brains and take responsible decisions? Does ‘Son of God’ refer to a divine person in heaven or to the king as God’s representative on earth?

The **structure** of a text: What are the main steps in the argument? How does the argument flow from one verse to the other in Genesis 1? How does Paul link up the death and resurrection of Christ with the transformation of believers in Romans 6? The easiest way of doing this is to make a rough sketch on a piece of paper depicting the main aspects, combining them with arrows and juggle them until everything fits. This takes some patience, but in the end, it pays off handsomely.

Here is an example depicting Paul’s assessment of the value of speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14. I chose it deliberately because it is a rather complex text, and one can easily miss the underlying argument. The sketch makes it clear that in the end, the question is whether speaking in tongues manifests the love of God by building up the Body of Christ (the community of believers) and acting as a witness to outsiders, or whether it is serving only the spiritual interests of the individual believer. There is no doubt that preaching the Word of God (prophecy) builds the community and witnesses to outsiders. That is why Paul prefers it.

The parable of the prodigal son is a narrative and more straightforward, but the sketch helps one not to miss an important point, in this case that both sons
are estranged from the father (symbolised by the broken lines) and the father accepts them both without condition or reproach.

Next is the meaning of particular concepts used in the text: What does *anamnesis* (remembrance) mean in the texts on the Last Supper: to think back to an event in past history, or to make the death of Christ real and accessible again for us here and now? What does ‘seated at the right hand of God’ refer to: some golden throne above the clouds, or the authority of God’s ‘prime minister’ for us here and now? Do the words ‘flesh’ and ‘Spirit’ in Paul’s letters refer to human reality as a whole apart from God and human reality in fellowship with God (which is the Israelite tradition), or do they mean the biological body and the immortal spirit (which is the Greek tradition)?

**Parallels:** The existence of parallels shows how a particular tradition unfolded and differentiated in history. Many such parallels exist between the four gospels but also between narratives concerning the creation of the world, the exodus from Egypt, the relation between law and grace in Paul’s writings, and so on.

The historical sequence between these parallels: Which came first, which followed? The creation narrative in Genesis 2 is older than that found in Genesis 1. Galatians is older than Romans. Mark is older than both Matthew and Luke. How has the story of Jesus calming the storm changed from one version to the other? Why has it changed?

The language of the original and its possible translations: If you do not know Greek and Hebrew, it is always instructive to read various translations of the text. Choose the one that seems to make most sense within the context of the argument.

By digging deeply into a text in this way, you will come up with an idea of the central message of the text. What did Paul want to convey to the Romans when he compared Adam with Christ in Romans 5?

Now try to formulate this message as concisely and precisely as possible, because this is the message you want to convey to your listeners. One sentence
should be enough to express the basic concern; then you can differentiate between aspects of that concern or add additional topics that are also found in the text.

**Is this programme not unrealistic?**

Just going over these tools, you may be overwhelmed by the task. Who has enough background knowledge to do this? Who has the time to do it? Does it not disqualify lay preachers from the outset? No, God does not expect us to be omniscient or perfect; God just expects us to be trustworthy in being God’s mouthpiece (cf. 1 Cor. 4: 2).

But that is not an excuse for not even trying. Let us do the best we can under the circumstances and trust the Holy Spirit to do the rest. In the end, it is God’s Word that has to speak, not our feeble understanding and rendering of it!

I found the following approach helpful: I open a separate file for each text that I have to preach on within the next three or four weeks. Then I read one of these texts every morning in my personal devotions and simply jot down what comes to mind when doing so. It is amazing how our subconscious mind gathers aspects of a text and sorts them out over time!

Never begin with your preparation of a sermon the night before you have to preach! It cannot reach the maturity and the depths required in such a short time. To present something second best will cause frustration for the preacher and disappointment for the listeners! Let the text accompany you for days, even weeks, and you will be at home in it when you begin to speak.

**Don’t chase after perfection!**

To understand the situation that led to a particular text is not always straightforward. Many texts do not reveal their historical backgrounds. In most cases, even biblical experts do not have all the answers. In most cases, we have to rely on conjecture; that is, on an intelligent guess of what the situation might have been.

This is an important principle in biblical interpretation: The point is not to establish without doubt what precisely happened in historical terms, but how the author responded in a creative and redemptive way to human needs in the name and authority of God. Theologians are not professional historians. It is the underlying motivation and message that counts, rather than historical precision!

*What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?*

*Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?*

*How would you react to the following critique?*

*a) ‘Why make things so complicated? The message of the Bible is simple enough: Praise God as your Creator! Accept Jesus as your Saviour! Repent of your sin! Be filled with the Spirit! Love God above all things and your neighbour*
as yourself! Follow his commandments. Do we really need much more than that?’

b) ‘God either speaks in your heart or God does not speak at all! You either listen to his voice or not hear him at all. No sophistication is needed, just the humble attitude of a child of God!’

c) ‘Why base your life on such a vast and confused collection of ancient religious documents with their flawed assumptions and indigestible logic in the first place? Science offers us clear, up-to-date, and reliable information of how the world operates and how we should deal with it!’

Dear Lord, I never realised that there is such a depth in a text. Give me the courage, the love and the patience to dig deep and find the hidden treasures.
CHAPTER 9

Clarifying the message

Theological reflection

What do you think?

We know that our convictions have come from the Bible. Is it necessary to reformulate them before they can become relevant for us?

Have you come across believers who are so deeply steeped in the biblical world that they can no longer deal with their own changed circumstances in rational and appropriate ways?

When listening to a sermon, do you get the impression that the Word of God speaks to you in your everyday life, or is it something too foreign or too abstract to be of any use?

Should preachers address issues that concern their own private lives, which the listeners do not share, or speak about their professional expertise that they do not understand?

Must a preacher address trends in politics, economics, and society that lead into dangerous if not perilous directions?

In the last chapter, we talked about the retrieval of the message from its ancient settings. The next step is to clarify and appropriate this message. How does it fit into the Christian faith as a whole? How has the underlying world view changed since the text was written? In which ways does the message speak to us today? How must we reformulate the message to reach our contemporary listeners? In this chapter, I highlight a few aspects that will help us not to lose our way when reformulating the message.

How does the message fit into the Christian faith as a whole?

1. The Christian faith is based on a critically important message: the relation between God’s expectations and God’s gift of an authentic life. This is the classical problem of God’s law and God’s grace as manifest in the ministry of Jesus, formulated by Paul and picked up during the Reformation. It lies at the root of the conflict of Jesus with his Jewish counterparts that led to his crucifixion. It is the issue that makes our faith a Christian faith.

The critical insight of the Christian faith is that God’s expectation of a transformed life is not a precondition for God’s acceptance, but a consequence. As the parable of the prodigal son so vividly demonstrates, acceptance into
God’s fellowship comes first; transformation follows from God’s acceptance. It is not as if either the one or the other can be dispensed with; they are both valid, but the order between them is important. We call such a relationship a dialectic.

So where does the message of a particular text fit into the dialectic between God’s law and God’s grace? When Jesus scolds the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, is that the law (God’s demand to be fulfilled) or is it the offer of an authentic life based on God’s grace? When the Old Testament prophets lash out against those who follow other gods, do they condemn the Israelites (because they did not keep the law), or do they invite them to come back to God and be redeemed?

For preaching, this is very important. Many lay preachers hammer their audiences with reprimands and moral precepts, threatening them with God’s punishment within their lifetimes or with the fires of hell in eternity. Even the death of Christ is used only to impress the listeners with the gravity of transgressing the law of God. Do they not also condemn themselves when they do so?

We are meant to preach the good news, which is the redeeming love of God in Christ. Yes, God expects an authentic human life within a healthy human lifeworld! But Christians believe that God’s suffering acceptance of the sinner comes first, and that the transformation of the sinner and his world follows from God’s acceptance. Once again, this is what makes the Christian faith a Christian faith as opposed to convictions based on a law that we must fulfill to become acceptable, whether religious or secular. So how does the message you are about to preach reflect that?

2. Is God’s expectation composed of detailed commandments, regulations, and observances that must be followed precisely as they stand, or are the biblical exhortations meant to be examples of how the will of God, namely love of God and love of neighbour, can work out in practical terms under particular circumstances? In my view, it can only be the latter because faith in Christ is not a faith based on the law, whether biblical or secular, but on divine grace.

Now apply that to the message you are about to preach. Must women be subservient to their husbands, no matter what, or do husband and wife share the dignity of free children of God? Are women not allowed to preach, although they have all the gifts needed to do so? Must slaves remain submissive to their masters, or should they seek their freedom, or must slavery be abolished as a social institution?

3. What is the relation between God’s action and human action? God is not part of the reality we experience, but its ultimate Source. God is not a factor within reality that competes or cooperates with other such factors, but the Source of all these factors. So God’s initiative does not obviate our initiative but evokes it. God’s action does not disempower our action but empowers it; God’s creative activity does not compete with the laws of nature but works through them.

According to the classical Christological doctrine formulated by the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in the year 451, the one person of Christ is
constituted by a divine nature and a human nature, which both remain intact in themselves (not confused), but also not independent of each other (not separated). Because this doctrine is based on Greek metaphysics, which expresses the truth in the form of being, rather than action, it sounds strange to our ears. How can the same animal be both a cat and a dog? But when we translate it into terms of action, it suddenly makes sense: in Christ, the true God acts through the actions of the true human being.

This is also true for the believers. The fact that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh does not mean that Pharaoh did not harden his heart. The fact that faith is a gift of God does not mean that we should not ‘work out our salvation with fear and trembling’ (cf. Phil. 2: 12–13). The gift of God makes it possible for us to attain it. If God is at work, we have reason to do our best because God’s motivation and power work in us. How does your message reflect this?

4. Are we dealing with God’s creative power as we experience it in daily reality, or with God’s benevolence as it manifested itself in Jesus of Nazareth, or with God’s creative and benevolent presence in the life of the community of believers? This is the problem that the doctrine of the Trinity wants to address: We experience the one God in three ways: his creative power, his redeeming love in Christ, and his creative and redemptive presence in us and among us.

Greek metaphysics makes the classical formulation of this doctrine hard to understand. It sounds as if there were three independent persons in the one God that relate with each other somewhere in heaven and quite apart from us! Rightly understood, however, it is the one and only God that we encounter in the natural world, in the life and ministry of Jesus, and in the loving Spirit of a Christian congregation.

So where does the message of the text fit into this threefold experience of Christians? Does the Gospel of John perhaps reflect the presence of the risen Christ in the life of the believing community, rather than a historical account of what happened when he was walking about in Palestine? That would explain the great differences between the first three gospels and the fourth gospel.

Does the weird symbolic language of Revelation perhaps want to reassure believers in great danger and distress that God, the Creator, is still in charge of a derailed world and will bring his benevolent intentions to fruition? Does the creation narrative in Genesis 1 perhaps want to say that it is God who overpowers chaos by creating structures in this world within which life can flourish? We will pick up these issues again in chapter 21.

5. Denominational interpretations. The message of the text has been interpreted in a number of ways in the past, and these different interpretations by different faith communities still impact both preachers and listeners today. It is important to become aware that our interpretation may have been impacted by our church’s tradition and in which way. It is also important to ask whether this tradition is the best option or whether other traditions may also have a point.
How would the text concerning the confession of Peter in Matthew 16: 13–23 be interpreted by Catholics on the one hand, and by Protestants on the other? How would the text on the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12–14 be interpreted by Pentecostals on the one hand and by Reformed believers on the other? How would a preacher of the Seventh Day Adventists interpret the creation of the world in seven days in Genesis 1: 1–2:3?

6. How did the underlying worldview change?

We cannot overlook the fact that our current world view differs fundamentally from the different world views found in the ancient Near East. Let me use two examples.

a) Say you want to preach about Jesus walking on the sea and the sinking Peter in Matthew 14: 22–33. Contemporary listeners are bound to wonder how this story is to be understood. Can a human being really walk on water? It does not really help to say that Jesus was God, so he could walk on water, because according to the narrative Peter also walked on water. So must we understand the story literally or figuratively?

If we take the story literally, there are two dangers. The first is that believers may come to the conclusion that if they only believe hard enough, they can do miracles themselves: walk on water, restore an amputated leg, or resurrect the body of a child that drowned. Then faith becomes a demand that we cannot fulfil, that is bound to lead to disillusionment, and that enslaves rather than liberates us.

The other danger is that faith turns into superstition. Superstitions are common but dangerous. Say a child hears the story in Sunday school, tries it out in the swimming pool when nobody looks, and drowns. You cannot walk on water! If you think that a diviner can heal AIDS by applying certain charms, a patient that could have been saved by using appropriate medication may die. Note that in Matthew 4: 1–11, it is the devil who wanted to lure Jesus into doing miracles that God did not want him to perform.

So are such narratives perhaps meant to be understood figuratively? We have to recognise that just like all traditional cultures, biblical texts are embedded in a pre-scientific world view, while most of us are informed by modern science. We also have to recognise that biblical authors used all linguistic tools available to convey their message and that the miracle story is one of them. Miracle stories used to highlight the significance of extraordinary people were commonplace in ancient times.

While we cannot know for sure what precisely happened in Jesus’ time, we can know for sure that when understood figuratively, this narrative helped countless believers to overcome their anxiety and timidity and can do so today. When faced with an examination, a dangerous disease, or a bankruptcy, the text can reassure and empower us. So I think the figurative interpretation is the safe and profitable one to use.
b) Say you want to preach on the creation narrative in Genesis 1. Modern science believes that the universe has unfolded into what it is today over about 13.8 billion years, rather than six days. This discrepancy between modern insight and biblical traditions has caused endless spiritual agony and a lot of untenable solutions.

We simply have to face the fact that Genesis 1 was never meant to be a scientific account of how the universe came into being! The text is a theological construct that responded to the situation of the Jews towards the end of the Babylonian exile. In this text, Yahweh is proclaimed as the Creator and Master of the universe, rather than Marduk, the god of Babylon. The sun, moon, and stars are deprived of the divine dignity they enjoyed in the pagan religions of the time.

The human being was proclaimed to be created in the image of God (the representative of God), rather than a slave of the gods as suggested in the Enuma elish, the Babylonian myth of creation. The Sabbath was a critical identity marker of the dispersed Jews after the exile. In this text, the priestly writer rooted it firmly in cosmic reality to emphasise its divine validity.

For contemporary believers, it is helpful to realise that the Bible uses many metaphors for God’s creative activity: in Genesis 2, God creates with his hands; in Genesis 1 by means of an imperial decree; in Proverbs and Sirach with his wisdom; in John 1 with the logos (divine rationality). Biblical authors used such metaphors freely to express a religious truth.

So there is nothing to prevent us from saying that God created reality through an evolutionary process. This seems to be the best explanation of how the universe came into being that we have at present. If the sciences come up with a better model, we can adopt that also. In the meantime, we believers do not and cannot know better.

7. Do we use authoritarian or participatory images and concepts?

Up to very recently, virtually all societies were based on authoritarian assumptions. Decision-making power was concentrated in privileged individuals or groups: husbands, fathers, teachers, experts, chiefs, kings, aristocrats, generals, presidents, social elites, CEOs—you name them! The rank and file were supposed to be subservient and obedient to the decision makers.

But since the Enlightenment, the thrust towards emancipation and participation in decision-making processes has swept through Western societies and, from there, across the globe. Freedom to determine one’s life and develop one’s potential has become a human right. Women have the same dignity as men. Workers have a right to negotiate with employers. Societies opt for democratic rather than dictatorial organisations.

This concern already emerged and evolved in biblical history. The liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery is the foundation of the Jewish creed. Paul has developed a whole theology of spiritual freedom in the Letter to the Galatians. Freedom replaces subservience and obedience with responsibility and
accountability. Luther wrote a celebrated treatise on Christian freedom: we are subject to nobody, but willing to serve everybody.

Unfortunately, the authoritarian images and narratives we inherited from the past—including the biblical scriptures—linger on in our subconscious and impact our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour. Instead of being vanguards of liberation, Christians have often opposed liberation. To sharpen your critical faculties, you may want to look at each of the following images and metaphors and ask yourself the following questions:

a) Is it authoritarian or participatory?
b) Does it belong to social conventions prevalent in certain cultures at particular times, or does it belong to the essence of the gospel?
c) Which ones have guided your own thinking so far?
d) Which ones guide your congregation and your church as a whole?

king and people
prophet and people
priest and people
head and body
husband and wife
father and child
mother and child
teacher and learner
chief and tribe
diviner and client
doctor and patient
shepherd and flock
boss and worker
chairperson and gathering
master of ceremonies and audience
body and members
coordinator and participants
facilitator and participants
resource person who empowers others

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts could you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘Once you question the veracity and validity of the biblical account, you fall down a cataract: every aspect of the biblical faith will become problematic and you will have no foundation left to base your life on! The substitutes you may come up with will always be arbitrary, fallible, and misleading.’
b) ‘The classical creeds and doctrinal statements of the Ecumenical Councils were formulated after centuries of conflict, agony, and reflection. We
better stick to them because our own feeble sorties into the mysteries of God are not likely to produce something more profound and more lasting!’

c) ‘Scientists simply abandon theories that have become obsolete and replace them with theories that yield more satisfactory explanations. The Ptolemaic world view, for instance, was not reformulated in modern forms to make it more plausible, but replaced with that of Copernicus, which makes more sense. Why can theology not do the same?’

Lord, when I embark on this kind of critical reflection, I tend to land in a maze. Give me the boldness and the perseverance to go as far as I can without losing my way!
What do you think?

Is the task of the preacher simply to retell the biblical story or the message of the text in his/her own words expecting the listeners to apply it to their own lives and situations? Or must the preacher help the listeners to detect the relevance of the message for their lives and their situations?

Say you realise with some consternation that, although you are a preacher, you have not really been redeemed, that the message has not really changed your life. For instance, you have not overcome an addiction or abandoned an outstanding resentment. Does this mean that you should not convey the message to the listeners before you have learnt to practice what you preach?

The previous two chapters dealt with the retrieval and clarification of the message. The next step is to appropriate the message for our own life and for the lives of the receivers of the message. In this step, we do not yet design and formulate the sermon itself but simply reflect on how the message might touch our life and the lives of the congregants.

Let us again take the narrative of Jesus and Peter walking on the water as an example. Remember that the Word of God is God’s redemptive response to human needs. To be able to figure out what this response might be, we must become aware of the situation that needs to be addressed. There are three aspects to this: the situation of the preacher, the situation of his/her listeners, and the greater context.

The situation of the preacher

In this step, we take time off for reflection. We open up our life and our life world before God. On what precisely do we base our life? What can we be grateful for? What are our goals? What are the tasks that lie before us? What are the challenges we face? Which relationships have become problematic? What are we anxious about: the future of an adolescent child, or an illegitimate love affair, or making ends meet with a meagre salary?

Or is the problem more profound: the general feeling of frustration and futility, a hard-hitting critic of our work or our faith, difficult relationships with the elders, the anger of our partner, irrational teenagers, a guilty conscience, a
potential loss of status and esteem in the community, fear of divine punishment for an ill-considered act, uncertainty about the existence and benevolence of God?

Now consider how the message of the text may speak to particular aspects of this situation. Does the story of Jesus and Peter walking on water say that you should not be foolhardy and try to do what you know you cannot do? Or does it say that with a bit of common sense, foresight, and planning, your difficulties can be overcome? Or does it say that you should trust Christ and move forward in faith when he calls you to enter into unfamiliar territory?

The situation of the listeners

The next step is to consider the situations of the listeners. Obviously, there are countless reasons for the members of a big congregation to become anxious and/or frustrated, and you cannot possibly respond to all of them. So think of a few pertinent and representative cases: persistent unemployment, family violence, failing an examination, depression due to negative cell phone messages, drug addiction, loss of a lover, death of a spouse, being on the verge of bankruptcy, reaching home without having been robbed of one’s pension payout, a breadwinner in prison or in hospital, loss of hope for the country and thinking of emigrating.

This exercise can best be done in a group composed of believers from different walks of life. We shall develop a cooperative way of sermon preparation in chapter 19. It also stands to reason that the importance of visits at the homes of the congregants cannot be overemphasised. Ideally, preachers should come to know their listeners by name and be familiar with their circumstances by engaging them within their own lifeworlds in a holistic way. Alas, I never managed to do that, but I know preachers who could and did.

A house visit should not just be a courtesy exercise, a little friendly tea party, but the opportunity to get to know the family as comprehensively and deeply as possible: their life histories, professions, hobbies, concerns, and especially their children, but also their spiritual certainties and problems. One way of doing this is to present them with a problematic aspect of the sermon text, such as patriarchal assumptions, and ask them what they think about it.

Do lay preachers have an advantage?

I briefly touched on the assets of lay preachers in chapter 4. It now has become a serious question! In a study on a lively church in Madagascar, the author found that the parishioners reacted quite differently to the sermons of trained pastors on the one hand and lay preachers on the other. Listeners to Sunday sermons appreciated the pastor’s theological education. They considered it a prerequisite to be able to explain the biblical texts, to open up new insights, and to show what is hidden in the text. Listeners to the weekday sermons of
lay preachers, in contrast, appreciated the blunt spiritual appeal and reassurance of the latter and felt that theological training makes it harder for people to understand the sermons.

It would seem, therefore, that superior knowledge does not translate into greater accessibility or clarity. Theologians live in their own little world of thought and assume that the listeners share that world. They often do not bother to enter the lives of their parishioners in a serious kind of way. They receive their stipends and do not have to fight for an income in the real world. Lay preachers, in contrast, are located in the vagaries and of daily life; they are able to relate the message, simple as it may seem, with much greater immediacy to what their listeners experience and what their spiritual needs are.

The greater context

This step in sermon preparation is also the opportunity to think of how the horizons of the faith of the listeners (and one’s own) can be widened. Christians are not isolated individuals nursing their private spirituality; they are embedded in communities, the wider society, and the natural environment. All this impacts their income, their social lives, and their spirituality. Here are a few examples:

Crime statistics have just come out. A fire has destroyed hundreds of shacks in an informal settlement. A demonstration to demand service delivery turned violent. Corruption charges have been levelled against a leading politician. A current of refugees from the Middle East and Central Africa flows into Europe. Terrorists blow up a popular tourist resort. Thousands of mineworkers are to be replaced with machines. It becomes known that explorations on planet Mars devour millions of dollars. Does the message of the text say anything to such events? Believers must break out of the spiritual safe haven of their private convictions.

It is a useful practice to jot down, on a piece of paper, the whole spectrum of human needs and attach it to your office door: there are spiritual needs such as reassurance, identity, belonging, acceptance, and direction; there are biological needs such as food, a balanced diet, sleep, and sexual gratification; there are communal needs such as trust and mutual support; there are social needs such as stability, security, education and entertainment; there are economic needs such as professional training, employment, economic equity, and food security; there are environmental needs such as an adequate and unpolluted supply of water, clean air, fertile soil, and so on.

Before leaving your office, just reflect for a brief moment which of these needs may be most pressing for some of your parishioners right now. It will have an impact on the way you preach!
Why do we do all this?

Once again, the aim of this exercise is not to find answers to all problems of life but to alert the preacher to the realities of the world into which the Word of God is to be channelled, rather than getting bogged down by the mysteries of an ancient text, abstract doctrinal certainties, personal piety, or purely theoretical considerations.

We want the message of the text to speak into the lives of our listeners, not as interesting or boring information but as the Word of God for them, a message that engages them, challenges them, liberates them, and empowers them. Yes, the Holy Spirit must speak to them; otherwise, they will hear nothing of importance. But the Holy Spirit uses human insights and human language to communicate the message.

And this is where the gap between ancient times and modern times comes into play. We cannot take it for granted that ancient texts will automatically respond to modern problems. Their authors spoke to their own situations, not to ours; they assumed the world views of their times, not ours. They addressed the problems of their ancient readers, rather than ours; they used the linguistic tools at their disposal to bring across their message: historical narratives, legends, myths, poetry, parables, miracle stories, mysteries, symbolic numbers—you name them!

The result is that contemporary readers of the Bible may find themselves in a strange, chaotic, and mysterious world that they cannot easily penetrate. Maybe they want the Bible to be mysterious. Maybe they experience precisely this biblical world as something sacred as opposed to the predictable and boring trivialities of daily life. Maybe for them it is an indication that the world we experience is not all there is. They may even crave the excitement of exploring some hidden meaning in an unlikely narrative or a strange argument.

All this can be appreciated, but can we not do better? Can God not speak more clearly? We want to retrieve the message from its ancient settings, clarify and reflect upon it, and then proclaim it to our contemporaries. We do not want to get stuck in the ancient world in which the Bible was written; we do not want our message to be confused and superficial, and we do not want to pretend that
God’s Word can be gained by simply analysing the current situation. That is why we follow this procedure.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter? Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose? How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘Some preachers become jacks of all trades and masters of none. They claim competence in fields in which they cannot possibly have sufficient expertise and experience. Please don’t speak about economics from the pulpit! Don’t think that you can offer an opinion about nuclear physics! Don’t tell people in other spheres of life what to do! Uninformed presumptuousness is simply nauseating.’

b) ‘I have never had the privilege of listening to a sermon that dealt with things that really matter. Most sermons are composed of moral demands or abstract theological theories that have no relevance for practical life. Preachers should enter into a secular profession to learn what life is all about!’

c) ‘If I were to follow your advice I would never ever complete a sermon. There is just no time in my weekly schedule. Regular and profound reflections on my personal life or the multifaceted life of my parishioners is a luxury I cannot afford.’

Dear Lord, there are too many things in this world that go wrong and need our attention. Help me to find those issues where my life and those of my parishioners can be transformed and make a difference.
CHAPTER 11

Sermon design

A classic format

What do you think?

When designing your sermon, do you simply read a text and jot down a few thoughts that come to mind?
Or do you share a particular concern with your listeners that is close to your heart?
Or do you follow the classical format of a short introduction followed by an elaboration of three or four points and a short conclusion or summary?
Or do you try to present a consistent and powerful argument, whose logic cannot be doubted or refuted?
Or do you simply retell the story or rephrase the argument in your own words?
What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches?

As we shall see in chapter 19, there are many ways to construct a sermon. In this chapter, I want to discuss what has become the classic type in many Protestant churches. If you are a beginner or an untrained preacher, I suggest you follow this format at least for some time. When you have gained more experience and self-confidence, you can venture into unknown territory. To use a metaphor: if you want to be a musician, learn the basics of harmony and metre first, then you can become creative within that framework.

The first step is to draw up a rough outline. It helps you to clarify what the core message of the sermon should be and how it can be subdivided into different aspects. The introduction acts as a gateway to the contents of the sermon, while the conclusion wraps up the message that has been developed in the sermon. The content is placed between entrance and exit, as it were. It is only when this basic structure has become clear that we write out the sermon. Let us go step by step.

A. The Introduction: All on board!

It is important to catch the imagination of the listeners right from the start. When they are bored already by the first few words, chances are that they will readily doze off further on or secretly resort to their cell phones. With so much
happening in modern life, our brains can easily entertain themselves with more exciting or more troubling topics.

A good introduction makes people sit up. It leads straight to the core message of the sermon. It is accessible for all kinds of listeners. It is brief. Consider the following examples:

1 Corinthians 2: 1–8

This week, I paged through a book with photos of the Hitler regime. I was struck by the picture of a man who had been hanged on a tree outside his home. He had dared to question the prevailing ideology; he had been courageous enough to act according to his conviction, and so he was hanging there: rejected, abused, tortured, and executed, and that in full view of the public! I began to shudder when it suddenly occurred to me that this is the image of the man whom we Christians call our Lord, Jesus of Nazareth!

To which kind of listeners do you think was the sermon addressed?
Would this introduction catch the imagination of these listeners?
Does it lead straight to the message of the text?
Is it generally accessible?
Is it brief enough?

Ephesians 5: 1–14

Let me ask you a very private question: Are you going to the toilet during the night? [general nodding of heads] Do you use a torch when you do so? [nodding again] Well, my wife and I know our house well enough to find our way about in darkness. One night, I did not realise that my wife had gone there before. So when I went and she came back, we crashed into one another. Next morning, I had a swollen, blue eye. My colleagues asked me, ‘Wow, who has beaten you up like that?’ I replied, ‘My wife!’ [roaring laughter] You see, my friends, it is not safe to move about in darkness without a light!

Does this introduction catch the imagination of the listeners?
Does it lead straight to the message of the text?
Is it generally accessible?
Is it brief enough?
Is humour a good starter?

Again, Ephesians 5: 1–14

At a retreat, a professional evangelist once asked us, ‘Why did God begin his creation by calling for light to shine?’ After we ventured a few guesses, he said, ‘Well, God wanted to see what he was doing!’ We laughed: what a neat answer! But is God really like a human being who needs light to do his work? Probably
not. But we do! When groping in the dark, it is unlikely that we shall achieve anything useful. We may even stumble and fall.

*Does this introduction catch the imagination of the listeners?*
*Does it lead straight to the message of the text?*
*Is it generally accessible?*
*Is it brief enough?*

**Psalm 8: 1–6:**

The world in which we live is one oversized miracle! Just consider this: We all have 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 16 great-grandparents, 32 great-great-grandparents, then 64, then 128. Homo sapiens, the human being as a species, may have gone through something like 8,000 generations over the last 200,000 years. Going back for only 20 generations, each one of us has had more than 2 million ancestors. You can work that out on your calculator!

Just imagine! For you and me to have come into existence, each of these ancestors must have copulated precisely with that particular spouse. In every conception, it had to be that particular sperm cell that reached that particular egg cell in competition with about 250 million other sperm cells. If only one of them had reached the egg cell a second earlier in each of these millions of cases, you would not exist, but somebody else in your place!

*Does this introduction catch the imagination of the listeners?*
*Does it lead straight to the message of the text?*
*Is it generally accessible?*
*Is it brief enough?*

**1 Kings 21: 1–16**

When Alexander the Great, the king of Macedonia, a small country along the Mediterranean Sea, conquered the countries in the ancient Near East almost as far as India, do you think he did that to serve the interests of the people he subdued?

When Hitler conquered the better part of Europe during World War II, was he committed to establish a peaceful and prosperous Europe? When our politicians, whether in the United States or in South Africa, bend the truth and promise paradise, do they have a suspicious agenda?

*Does this introduction catch the imagination of the listeners?*
*Does it lead straight to the message of the text?*
*Is it generally accessible?*
*Is it brief enough? (See exhibit 37 for a sermon on this text!)*
B. The conclusion: A parcel to take home

Just as important as the introduction is the conclusion of a sermon. It must convey the thrust of the message in a nutshell. It must capture the imagination of the listeners. It must be lucid enough to be understood by everybody. It must be simple enough to be remembered by everybody present. It must be brief. It must provide the listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home.

And most important: It must come at the right time! A good sermon has a particular rhythm. Usually it works up to a plateau and then winds down in a natural sort of way. There is a critical point when you must say Amen! Many good sermons are compromised by dragging on and on after everything the preacher wanted to say has already been said.

This failure may be due to the impression of the preacher that the listeners did not get the point or have not really listened, or that the sermon was not clear enough. But even if that were true, dragging on will only make the situation worse! Consider the following conclusions to the sermons on the same texts as above:

1 Corinthians 2: 1–8

As the Creator, God is present everywhere and all the time: in every insect on earth and every cell of our body, in every culture and every religion, in every success and every failure. Looking at this chaotic variety, we may be confused and alienated. Is this Creator God really a loving God? However, look at Jesus Christ! Here God’s redeeming love became clear like the sun: Jesus Christ. In him, we are invited to believe, to share his new life, and to radiate God’s love into the world.

Does it look like a convincing summary of the message of this text?
Does it capture the imagination of the listeners?
Is it lucid enough to be understood by everybody?
Is it simple enough to be remembered?
Does it provide the listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
Is it brief enough?

Ephesians 5: 1–14

In Christ, God gave us an example of a true human being: a human being that is motivated by the redeeming love of God, a human being who forgoes pleasures and enjoyments that fail to fulfil, a human being courageous enough to be different, to expose whatever destroys God’s precious creation. Christ is the light of the world and he invites us to be the light of the world with him.

Does it look like a convincing summary of the message of this text?
Does it capture the imagination?
Is it lucid enough to be understood by everybody?
Is it simple enough to be remembered?
Does it provide the listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
Is it brief enough?

Psalm 8: 1–6

Our earth is a speck of dust in the universe. Humans are one species among billions of others. You and I live on this planet among eight billion other people. What makes us think that we are important in God’s overall enterprise?

And yet God calls us into his fellowship. God liberates and empowers us to share his redemptive project in the world. God entrusts us with part of his creation. God expects us to take care of this tiny part to the best of our ability. Let us go and do so!

Does it look like a convincing summary of the message of this text?
Does it capture the imagination?
Is it lucid enough to be understood by everybody?
Is it simple enough to be remembered?
Does it provide the listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
Is it brief enough?

1 Kings 21: 1–16

We have all been given some power, some authority over other people—whether in the family, in the community, at the workplace, in education, in business, in recreation, or in politics. We love to use our power over others to our advantage and then find good reasons for doing so. A wise politician once said, ‘Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ Let us be aware of this danger, fight it down in our own lives, and resist it in the society with all means at our disposal.

Does it look like a convincing summary of the message of this text?
Does it capture the imagination?
Is it lucid enough to be understood by everybody?
Is it simple enough to be remembered?
Does it provide the listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
Is it brief enough?

A little trick to think about

Steve Jobs, the founder of the Apple computer company, used this technique in his famous presentations: At the very end, he said, ‘One more point . . .’ and then he added a short pithy piece of important information.
When preaching on the parable of the prodigal son, for instance, one can leave a decisively important statement in the story to the very end: ‘The father went out to the elder son and pleaded with him.’ God does not force us to become part of his love, his forgiveness, and his joy, but God pleads with us to join him in his love, his forgiveness, and his joy.

**By the way**

To ensure that the listeners will take something home to reflect upon, one can also print the core message of the sermon in *one or two* sentences (at the most) on small pieces of paper and distribute them after the service. Do not repeat the whole argument, because that will not be read. It must be very short and pithy.

Alternatively, one can draw up one or two short sentences for each day of the coming week on a single sheet of paper and invite the congregation to use it for their daily devotions. This will powerfully reinforce the message in the minds of the parishioners.

**Ending with a challenge?**

Some preachers insist that the sermon must end with a challenge. Here are a few examples:

*This is what God has done for you in Christ. Will you accept his gift without reservations? Which aspects of your life will you change? In which way will you get involved? Which gods and idols that enslave you will you give up? How will you reflect the love of God in your relation to your partner, your colleagues, your neighbours, your enemies? Will you stand up for Christ at your places of work? Are you part of the struggle for justice and peace?*

Evangelistic campaigns often end with a ritual. The evangelist calls, ‘Are you ready to abandon your sinful life and follow Christ as your personal Saviour? If so, come forward to the podium!’ Then hands are laid on those who come, and God’s forgiveness is proclaimed over them. Rituals often have a more powerful impact than mere words because they involve the body, happen in a public environment, reach deeper levels of consciousness, provide time to reflect, and are not easily forgotten. For committed Christians, the ritual of confession and forgiveness, say, before Holy Communion, can have a powerfully liberating and empowering effect.

But there are others who are put off by such challenges. They have the feeling that they are being bullied into something they are not ready for. To change your life is something too far-reaching and too profound to be undertaken on the spur of the moment, on the basis of whipped-up emotions. Just think of a business leader who has to dismiss workers for his company to stay afloat. It takes time, reflection, and persuasion to change a system. Moreover, it is the law
that requires us to fulfil demands. The gospel of grace invites us to be involved in the new life of Christ in a liberating and empowering way.

These arguments are important. Preachers should never try to put people under psychological pressure or work up their emotions. To invite people to give their lives to Christ is part of the gospel. However, to urge them to make up their minds here and now and not a minute later, because tomorrow it may be too late, or even threatening them with the fires of hell is deeply out of character with the liberating and empowering grace of God that embraces us however sinful and inadequate we may be. Our God is patient and merciful!

C. The body of the sermon

Introduction and conclusion form the framework of the sermon, like a container into which the precious content can be poured. How the body of the sermon is to be constructed depends on (a) the kind of text, for instance, whether it is a narrative, a logical argument, a doctrinal statement, or a list of moral precepts; (b) the core message to be conveyed and its various implications; and (c) the particular situation of the listeners.

We shall come to various sermon types in chapter 19. In this chapter, we stick to the classic model. At this stage, we do not yet write out the sermon but draw up the basic structure. This is like the building plan of an architect, according to which the house will be built. The basic procedure is to formulate the core message to be conveyed, preferably in one simple sentence, and then develop some of its aspects or implications. The latter should each clarify an aspect of the core message, rather than moving off on a tangent. Never try to say all that could be said! There should also be a flow from one aspect to the other. Here are a few examples:

**Ephesians 5: 1–5**

Say the core message of this text is, A way of life acceptable to God is one that has nothing to hide, whether before God or before other people. This message can then be developed as follows:

a) Our life becomes acceptable when we participate in the new life of Christ in fellowship with God, which is a life motivated by self-giving love.

b) Living in fellowship with God, we will not yield to harmful cravings but strive to serve our fellow human beings and communities. Take a few examples from the text.

c) In contrast with pandering to our desires, participating in the new life of Christ will lead us to true fulfilment and joy in fellowship with God.
Psalm 8: 1–8

Say the core message of the text is, Human beings are totally dependent on the creative power of God and yet privileged to share God’s authority over the rest of creation. This message can be subdivided into the following aspects:

a) All of reality is the product of God’s creative power and displays God’s splendour, including our own lives.

b) While we humans are totally dependent on God, we have been granted gifts that allow us to dominate all other creatures on planet Earth.

c) Such a privilege does not imply that we can do to other creatures what we like. Rather, it implies the responsibility to allow other creatures to develop their potential and display the glory of God the Creator.

2 Corinthians 4: 1–6

Say the core message is, While the redeeming love of God is hidden in the vagaries of daily reality, it has become crystal clear in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ, in whose new life we are now privileged to share. It can be subdivided in the following way:

a) Without Christ, human beings are lost in darkness because they do not recognise the redeeming love of God in their lives and so their lives become distorted and miserable.

b) In the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ, the love of God shone as brightly as the morning sun when it overcomes the darkness of the night.

c) We are privileged to share the new life of Christ, thus beaming the light of God’s redeeming love out into the world.

1 Kings 27: 1–16

Say the core message of the text is, According to God’s will, the state should not be based on the power interests of the incumbents, but on responsibility for the well-being of their subjects. It can be subdivided as follows:

a) When God grants power to rulers over their subjects, his intention is that they take responsibility for the well-being of their subjects, rather than pursuing their selfish interests. Prompt: Do our leaders (and we as leaders) reflect this attitude?

b) In contrast, the assumption of the Canaanite queen is that the king is the owner of his subjects and their possessions and can do what he likes with them. Prompt: Do our leaders (and we as leaders) reflect this attitude?

c) Where absolute power is the prime consideration, rulers will legitimate the pursuit of their self-interest with clever arguments and bend the truth to gain support. Prompt: Where does this happen in our society?
Get the logic straight

For the trend of thought of a sermon to be persuasive, we must get the logic straight. One aspect must flow smoothly into the other. Unless you use them as a strategy to challenge or prompt the listeners, there should be no riddles or contradictions.

The easiest way to achieve that is to make a rough sketch on a blank piece of paper, jotting down the main points to be made and combining them with arrows representing the flow of the argument. I have given two examples in chapter 8 when discussing the underlying logic of a text. Here is the example of the parable of the prodigal son again:

First step: the Father entrusts his property to his two sons. The younger son is disloyal and irresponsible and squanders the property; the elder son is loyal and responsible and serves the property.

Second step: the younger son comes to his senses and returns to the father. The father accepts him back into the family with great joy and without reproach or condition.

Third step: the elder son refuses to join the father in accepting the culprit. Loving his sons equally, the father goes out to him and pleads with him to join him in his joy.

In sum: Both sons are estranged from the father; the father loves them both. The parable symbolises God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable.

Write out the sermon in full

Now we have an idea of how the sermon will be constructed, and we are ready to write it out. Even if you have a good idea of what you want to say, I strongly advise you to write out the sermon in full.

This step is important because it gives the message to be delivered a clear shape in your consciousness; it clarifies the underlying logic; it reveals gaps and contradictions; it shows whether it is too packed, too long, or too superficial. It makes the vocabulary available.

You will have clarified and internalised what you want to convey to the congregation. You will not get stuck halfway through, not knowing how to continue. Your sermon will not be confused; you will not be fumbling for words. It will all be clear in your mind.

So the idea of writing it out is not that you will read off the sermon from the pulpit. On the contrary, it is precisely by putting it on paper first that you will gain the freedom to speak to the congregation freely and pastorally without constant reference to your draft.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this section?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?
a) ‘This way of designing a sermon is dreadful, as if the preacher was an engineer who constructs a machine. There is no spontaneity, no intuition, no soul, no poetic inspiration, no interaction with the listeners, no open-ended challenges, no space for the Holy Spirit to do its work!’

b) ‘There is a fundamental difference between writing and speaking. If you construct a sermon on paper, its character will turn out to be that of an essay, rather than a spoken address. Lectures delivered from the pulpit are tedious and deadening, whether they are read off or delivered in free speech.’

c) ‘The way you take control of the Word of God shows that you have no respect for the biblical text inspired by the Holy Spirit. What you say is your word, rather than the Word of God!’

Lord, I place my sermon before you. Have a look whether it says what you want me to say in a way they will understand.
CHAPTER 12

Checking the Outcome

Quality control

What do you think?

Guess what the average attention span of a teenager, an elderly person, and a student of economics or literature might be. Should these estimates determine the length of your sermon? With your sermon, should you use the maximum expected attention span or the average or the minimum?

When you hear a sermon that consists mainly of moral accusations and precepts, are you inclined to listen more carefully, or do you get irritated and switch off?

Should a preacher use vulgar street language to reach out to the common person, or would a refined kind of language be preferable?

In the last chapter, we spoke about drawing up a rough outline of the sermon and then writing it out in full. Now we have the draft. But a draft is not yet a finished piece of work. In this chapter, I will mention a few prerequisites of a good sermon. Go through your draft and see whether you can improve on its quality. In the next chapter, I will add further suggestions on how a sermon can be refined.

Demolish idolatry

Faith is having a relationship with the only true God. The only true God is the God who is the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality as a whole, and therefore the only ultimate authority, the only one who ultimately counts. That is an insight that we inherited from the ancient Israelites. Whenever we make a god of an aspect or part of the world, we commit idolatry. Idolatry invariably means that we become enslaved to the authority of quasi-gods.

Idolatry means that we attach more importance, more power, more authority, more significance to some aspect of reality than is due to it. Examples abound: money, career, sex, health, moral principles, political convictions, cultural traits, rights, obligations, hopes, fear of the future, fear of sorcery—whatever. The most powerful idol is the ego: I want to be my own god; I want to be in charge of my life and my life world; I want to be perfect; I want to impress; I want to enjoy myself.
Preach the grace of God, rather than the law

When that is clear, the most important question is whether your sermon reflects the fundamental message of the Christian faith: God’s grace! The kind of God we believe in is not a God of strict demands and merciless judgement, but a God of redeeming love. I mentioned this before.

The gospel proclaims God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable in Christ. It involves us in God’s redeeming love. While the law (any law) says that you must be transformed before you can be acceptable, the gospel says that God accepts you first into his fellowship and then transforms you in his fellowship. Just look at the parable of the prodigal son: The father does not reject, condemn, or scold the filthy culprit but embraces him, restores his dignity as a son (by giving him the ring), and throws a party. It is the suffering acceptance of the father that changes the son.

It is this message that makes the Christian faith a Christian faith as opposed to convictions based on a law that we must fulfil to become acceptable, whether religious or secular. This does not mean that God drops his expectations. But it does mean that our lives are changed by the grace of God, as manifest in Christ, not through our own achievements. Christ is the good tree that brings good fruit in us. God’s suffering acceptance into God’s fellowship transforms our lives. The new life of Christ constantly overcomes our old sinful lives.

One of the most common mistakes of preachers is that they call for repentance and a changed life without proclaiming the transforming love of God in Christ. It is this love that is capable of renewing us. It is unconditional. When we preach conditional acceptance or simply bombard people with all kinds of demands they must fulfil, we take sides with the enemies of Jesus and Paul, rather than falling in with their message of grace; we change the grace of God into the law and, as Paul puts it, lose Christ in the process!

There are subtle ways how this bad habit can work itself out. You can, for instance, ask an open question that puts your listeners on the spot without providing God’s redeeming offer. When you say, for instance, ‘Are you really filled with the Holy Spirit?’ your message is ‘You are not what you ought to be, so what are you going to do about it?’ It is a demand without the divine gift. Moreover, it is a demand that the listeners cannot fulfil because it is not in our power to fill ourselves with God’s Spirit. In contrast, you could say, ‘In Christ, God fills your empty and meaningless lives with God’s Spirit—the Spirit of joy and love and hope!’ This is the gospel of grace, rather than the demand of the law.

Avoid negative statements

This aspect follows from what I have said above. Negative statements are meant to tell others what is wrong with them or their lifeworld. Such statements always imply a norm or a value that must be fulfilled before one can be accepted. In short, negative statements belong to the law, as discussed above, rather than
the gospel. The law demands, accuses, and condemns. The recipients of the law will feel attacked, become angry, refute the accusation, or justify themselves. So my suggestion is that you avoid them. Let transformation flow out of acceptance.

Yes, the world we live in is in an appalling state and that has always been the case. Yes, we must say that God disapproves of unacceptable behaviour and unworthy conditions. Yes, God’s grace may not become cheap grace in our sermons. Yes, believers are meant to fulfil God’s expectations when they have accepted Christ as their Lord. Yes, the prophets in the Old Testament, John the Baptist, and Jesus called people to repentance!

But even the accusing and condemning law of God, as found in the Bible, is part of God’s redemptive action. The law exposes what is unacceptable so that it can be overcome. Jesus proclaimed the imminence of the Kingdom of God—the most wonderful news one can think of—and urged people to remove the obstacles in the way of the coming kingdom. As mentioned above, God’s acceptance as a gift of grace is first and fundamental; God’s expectations follow from that.

So always begin with the positive intentions of God and then show that negative human behaviour does not fit into the picture. Paul begins 1 Corinthians with thanking God for the congregation before raising the many issues that needed to be addressed. Whenever you have to speak against sin, selfishness, avarice, injustice, corruption, therefore, begin with God’s will to heal, to redeem, to forgive, to empower, to transform.

When spelling out God’s expectations, do not be cynical, bitter, or hateful. Do not accuse but expose what is harmful in terms of social justice, peace, sound relationships, and the healthy flow of life. God wants us to lead healthy and happy lives. And most important: always include yourself under God’s judgement rather than pointing fingers or pouring out your indignation. Indignation does not transform a bad situation; a new motivation does.

Be specific

How does the Word of God transform our lives? Transformation is a process in which our mental processes are redirected. The facets of this transformation must be specifically addressed. As I see it, there are six key functions of the Word of God:

The Word of God calls us out of a misguided life into a life in fellowship with God. We are challenged to disembark from a train that goes in the wrong direction, as it were, and embark on a train that goes in the right direction.

The Word of God exposes what ought not to be. We are selfish. We are anxious. We are irresponsible. We are enslaved. We are hopeless. We are depressed. We are grumpy. We do not care about the suffering all around us. We abuse God’s creation.

The Word of God accepts us into God’s fellowship regardless. God does not wait until we have become acceptable but opens the door for us and welcomes us
to his banquet. This is a joyful, exhilarating experience that evokes our gratitude and our praise.

The Word of God **liberates** us from spiritual powers that enslave us. These include our resentments, our cravings, our addictions, our uncontrolled sexual desires, the power of peer groups, our bondage to ambitions, our devotion to superiors, our worship of models, sports heroes, and political idols.

The Word of God **involves** us in the dynamics of God’s love. Because our own identity, belonging, and status have been taken care of by God, we can now concentrate on the needs of our fellow human beings, our community, our society, our natural environment.

The Word of God **opens up the future**. It focuses our lives on **God’s vision** of comprehensive optimal well-being. God endures and accepts the fact that reality is not what it ought to be and moves from there towards what it ought to be. This gives us hope in hopeless situations.

On this basis, we can invite our listeners to abandon their complaints and concentrate on gratitude; leave their failures behind and concentrate on their tasks; move from depression to joy; overcome meaninglessness by sharing God’s redemptive project; abandon the feeling of being oppressed by circumstances and stand with God above these circumstances.

We can channel indignation into involvement; change anxiety into empowerment; emerge from chaos and confusion to order and discipline; get out of stress into a relaxed frame of mind; stop abusing our bodies and adopt a healthy lifestyle; stop gossiping about others and build up their positive potentials. In your sermon, mention some of these things where they fit into your message.

**The length of the sermon**

A good rule of thumb is, the sermon must be long enough to do justice to the message and short enough to fall into the attention span of the average listener. Think of a wholesome meal: it must be both nourishing and satisfying. A short and superficial sermon leaves the congregation hungry and disappointed. They have not come to be fed with junk food! A drawn-out sermon with no extra content is boring.

Many popular jokes speak of listeners who snooze off during the sermon, a sure sign that they have switched off. Today they are more likely to entertain themselves with their cell phones. Others may just allow their thoughts to wander off into greener fields. Or they simply no longer come to church.

The attention span of our listener is shorter than we think, and it is getting shorter! A university student may be able to listen to a lecture of forty-five minutes if it is interesting and important; the average factory worker may manage fifteen minutes. A teenager exposed to a never-ending string of cell phone messages may not be able to concentrate for more than a minute or two.

I always have too much material, whether in my lectures, my conference presentations, or my sermons. After countless failures in this regard, I have
finally decided to discipline myself in a practical way. My sermon may not exceed three A4 pages typed in a 14-point Times Roman font. If the draft goes beyond that, I weed out parts that do not belong, or that are not essential for the message, until the length is right. Speaking in a normal calm way, it takes me roughly twenty minutes to preach that sermon.

**Make the message accessible**

The sciences follow a neat little principle called Occam’s Razor. It says that the simplest explanation should be given preference above all others. I have often told my graduate students that a proficient academic is not one who can make the simple complicated, but who can make the complicated simple—obviously without becoming simplistic.

A sermon is rendered ineffectual, and therefore useless, unless the listeners can easily follow and remember what is being said. Those who have studied theology, or the human sciences, must unlearn the highly abstract and technical language they got used to when at the seminary or university. I found to my dismay that ordinary people do not necessarily know what ‘covenant’ or ‘commitment’ or ‘restitution’ means.

The faith of established congregations also lives in a world of ancient traditions that are not immediately accessible to outsiders. Sociologists speak of a ‘symbolic universe’. A symbolic universe may be quite different from the actual universe in which we live our daily lives. Imagine that a few outsiders happen to come to church to see what Christians do and believe. They hear of angels and demons, of going to heaven in a cloud, of a kingdom that is coming, of God telling a prophet exactly what to do and to say. Will they understand?

Always begin with the lowest common denominator, which is the kind of language readily understood by the unschooled, the teenagers, the outsiders, and the elderly. I will elaborate on this principle in the next chapter. Of course, that does not mean that we should use the cryptic language of teenagers, which only they understand, or the vulgar language of the shebeen! Simple language can be accessible and beautiful at the same time.

Finally, remember that preaching means talking and listening, rather than writing and reading. You can read at your own pace and return to the text if you have not understood, but the spoken word does not wait until you have clarified something in your mind, nor does it allow you to go back to what has been said. Unless a spoken word sticks immediately in your mind when you hear it, it is pushed out by the following words and gets lost.

**Do not refer directly to problematic cases in the congregation**

This is a tricky matter. On the one hand, it is highly embarrassing to be singled out in a public gathering and be either praised or dressed down. So that should be avoided. We can honour a person at a special occasion such as
a birthday or a graduation. But problematic cases must be discussed in private with the individuals, families, or the intimate groups that are involved. Pastoral care can only bear fruit in a context in which people trust each other sufficiently to open up hidden aspects of their lives.

On the other hand, the sermon must be close enough to the actual life of congregants and to the society in which they are embedded. To achieve that, we can get our clues from newspapers, social research, and observation of the people around us. More time-consuming yet more revealing are house visits, where the joys, frustrations, resentments, and predicaments of the family members are discussed.

Such revelations help the preacher to remain in touch, but their use in the sermon must not impinge on the dignity of individuals or groups.

Beware of the literal interpretation of biblical metaphors

The biblical authors used all linguistic tools at their disposal to bring across their message to their own readers: historical accounts, poetry, fiction, myths, parables, metaphors, visions, and so on. The idea that only historical or empirical facts and rational arguments can be true was unknown in biblical times. Jesus invented parables to make a theological point; the fact that they did not literally happen does not mean that they are not true. There are countless other examples all over the scriptures.

In biblical times, an unexpected redemptive intervention of God, for instance, could be expressed in the form of a miracle story. A vision of God’s benevolent intentions could be expressed in the form of a prophetic promise or prediction. The disturbed relation between God and humanity could be cast into abstract concepts (sin and salvation, law and grace), a story (the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus), or a myth (such as found in Genesis 2 and 3).

By way of example, let me elaborate on the latter. The story is a typical myth, but it conveys profound truths: ‘Adam’ is the Hebrew word for human being; ‘adamah’ is the Hebrew word for soil. This play on words expresses that we are all humans. We are all made of earthly matter. We are all granted life. We all return to the dust when we die.

Moreover, we are all sinful. We are all taken to task. Sin always has awful consequences. Our world is not a paradise without hardship, but burdensome and painful. Yet in his grace, God allows us to live and prosper even under the most adverse circumstances.

The image of the snake is used as a symbol for temptation. Real snakes do not speak, and trees do not impart the knowledge of good and evil! In Paul, it is the law that tempts and accuses. In Job 1–2, it is Satan.

Satan is the Hebrew word for an accuser. In Job 1–2, he figures as the public prosecutor in God’s government. He tries to trick us into transgressions and mistrusting God. In Revelation 12: 10–12, he is thrown out of God’s cabinet, and Jesus, our advocate, becomes the prime minister!
Wonderful imagery, rich in meaning, suggestive of the depths of the human soul, but taken literally, this imagery can trigger all sorts of wrong perceptions and fears. Tell the congregation that it was never meant to refer to an occasion in human history but to communicate spiritual truths in the form of a symbolic story.

Theologians are trained to distil the underlying message from these narratives, metaphors, and images and recast them into contemporary forms of thought. At least that is what I would like to expect! Endless confusion is caused when symbolic narratives are taken as history, metaphors are taken for facts, contextual expressions of a message are taken for universal truths, provisional formulations are taken for eternal truths. This brings us to the next point:

Nothing but the truth!

One should never tell small children something that one has to dismantle in later years. Don’t tell them that babies are brought by storks, or that Father Christmas presents them with gifts! They will find out soon enough, begin to doubt your sincerity, and feel that their sense of integrity has been violated. Never be dishonest. Never tell them something that is blatantly not true or that you do not believe yourself.

In the same way, you should never say something in a sermon that you do not believe, that you could not act upon or would not defend in open debate. Make-believe always shines through the facade. It undermines your authority as preacher of the Word of God, your integrity as a Christian, and the credibility of your message. Sooner or later, your listeners will discover that you are not honest in what you proclaim, and this will undermine their trust, not only in you, but in the message as well.

If the story of Jacob fighting God at the Jabbok is a legend, say so. If the weird images and mysterious numbers in Revelation are not facts or predictions, but symbols of God’s redemptive intentions, say so. If a miracle story must be taken figuratively rather than literally, say so. Don’t pretend that epilepsy is literally caused by demons, that the universe was literally created in six days, or that the sun literally stood still at Gibeon (cf. Josh. 10: 12f). The earth is not built on pillars but flies through space orbiting the sun. Christians are not meant to believe what cannot have happened.

Science has disclosed aspects of reality that the authors of these ancient texts could never have dreamt of. Just accept that they could not have known better. Also accept that they freely used metaphors, parables, legends, and poetry to bring across their message. To discredit science and alienate those who have been exposed to modern insights places serious obstacles in the way of God’s redemptive work. Do not hide the fact that modern sensitivities concerning slavery, female subservience, or genocide were not yet felt during biblical times but surfaced only centuries later.

If driving the Canaanites out of Palestine, which had been their homeland for generations (Deuteronomy), was an atrocity, say so! If wiping out a little
tribe that had refused to allow the Israelites to move through their territory many centuries before (cf. 1 Sam. 15) was an atrocity, say so! If killing off a whole priesthood (cf. 2 Kgs. 23: 19f) for whatever reason was an atrocity, say so! If the expressions of hatred and revenge found in the Psalms are out of line with faith in a merciful and loving God, say so! But say also that Jesus Christ brought a new Spirit into the world that superseded these ancient assumptions, opinions, and actions.

Truth, trust, and integrity are priceless in the work of God and should not be bartered away with cheap and easy explanations. Don’t argue that such occurrences were part of God’s history of salvation and God knows why they had to occur at that time. Just acknowledge the fact that the Israelite culture was not much different in these respects from its pagan environment.

In the same vein, one should never postulate something about other people, other nations, or public events of which one is not certain. If you are not conversant with African traditions, current political developments, or the doctrinal commitments of other churches, don’t refer to them.

**An example**

For me, the most troubling case is the Christmas service. I will say more on that in chapter 18. Masses of people come to church only once a year to enjoy some childhood nostalgia. They have been saturated to capacity by the advertising and marketing industries, their own shopping sprees, the expectations of children, friends, and relatives. They forked out whatever extra income they had gained. Elaborate preparations have tired them out. When they come to church, what do they expect?

They are treated with the most unlikely stories, richly elaborated in old hymns and liturgies. Eastern astrologers walk hundreds of kilometres to see an infant destined to become a king; they are inspired and guided by the appearance of a star that wanders from east to west, finally coming to rest above Palestine and pointing to the precise place of the birth of the child; a host of angels sing and announce this birth to some shepherds during the night, who leave their flocks in the field and hurry to Bethlehem. Who can take that seriously?

Do not assume that secularised listeners buy into an exercise of make-believe! In fact, they should not, and you should tell them so. The real question is whether the sermon (and the rest of the service) confronts them with the offer of a transformed life in fellowship with a loving God. If not, a wonderful missionary opportunity has been thrown into the wind. Consider the following way of dealing with the issue:

> We have come here tonight because we are deeply attached to these precious stories and songs of our childhood. We may believe that they are nothing but delightful fairy tales, and frankly speaking, they are! But fairy tales often have a profound meaning.
In this case, these tales want to say that Jesus of Nazareth was not just an ordinary teacher, preacher, or prophet. He was a human being all right. He was born, grew up, preached, suffered, and died. But he was the human being through whose life and ministry God displayed God’s liberating, healing, and empowering love.

This God is present and available for us, even when we are homeless and helpless like this child in the manger. He is present and available for us when we go through the most extreme suffering like this man on the cross. In fact, God identifies with those who have it tough in life and who need comfort and assistance most.

Let us open ourselves for God’s love so that we are drawn into a new life, the life of Christ in fellowship with a merciful God!

What did you find helpful, or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘You cannot please everybody. You can be over-concerned about your reputation as a preacher. Just follow your gut feeling when preaching and it will turn out to be more or less acceptable to most people!’

b) ‘If the convictions of preachers clash with the inspired Word of God found in the Scripture, and if they find human opinions and the assumptions of the secular world more convincing, they should shut up and not pretend that they are called to preach!’

c) ‘You forgot the most important issue: a sermon must be inspired by the Holy Spirit—not only as far as its content is concerned, but also in the way the preacher gets carried away by the wonderful message it conveys.’

Lord, I am confounded by the fact that your Word is always more profound and more complex than I first imagined, yet crystal clear once you challenge us with its truth. Please let my inadequate interpretation not stand in its way; lead me to its wonderful message.
CHAPTER 13

Dos and don’ts

Some useful tips

What do you think?

When a preacher moves to the pulpit or lectern, what are your expectations as a listener: a learned lecture, fatherly advice, information on the text, encouragement to face a precarious situation, ethical direction, an aesthetically pleasing oration, or what else?

If a sermon contains profound spiritual insights but does not help you to cope with a family crisis or address the economic situation of the country or expose the corruption of leading politicians, are you disappointed?

What is your emotional reaction if the preacher uses words that are unfamiliar to you?

In this chapter, I will add further suggestions on how a sermon can be refined. Think of a painter: she will step back again and again and let the impression of the painting work on her consciousness. She will change a shape here, add a colour there, balance out some elements. She will take time until she can say, ‘This is how it should be!’

It is true, of course, that preachers should not aim at perfection but at effective communication. We will never be perfect, and we do not need to be. So do not stress about it. You may also not have the time or the patience to fiddle with a sermon that you think is basically complete and adequate. So what follows are tips, not demands or rules. Use them or leave them!

I suggest that you read these tips a couple of times over a few weeks and allow them to work on your mind without trying to apply them every time. They will either begin to make sense to you or leave you cold. If they do appeal to you, you may subconsciously begin to apply them and eventually they may become second nature.

Replace abstract terms with actions and events

Actions make a greater impression than abstract terms. Compare the following two sentences:
a) Worldly patterns of behaviour, such as sexist attitudes, racial
discrimination, avarice, and promiscuity are incompatible with Christian
discipleship.

b) Looking down on women, treating other race groups like animals,
showing off with expensive clothes, and sleeping around—all this just does not
fit into the life of Christ, which we are privileged to share.

Humans follow a story much more easily than abstract thought. Paul’s
difficult discourse on law and grace becomes perfectly clear when looking at the
parable of the prodigal son. Compare the following two sentences:

a) We are justified by grace, not by works.
b) God is like the father who accepted his wayward son back into the family,
although his behaviour was so deeply out of step with the father’s love.

Use metaphors and images

Metaphors taken from concrete life also stick in our memories better
than abstract thoughts. Use them wherever they seem to be appropriate. Paul’s
difficult dialectic between flesh and Spirit can be clarified by using the metaphor
of jumping off a train that goes in the wrong direction at a railway station and
boarding a train that takes us where we want to go.

Paul himself uses the metaphor of taking off old clothes and putting on new
clothes. This metaphor is enacted in some African puberty rites, signifying that
the youths leave their childhood behind and become adults. It is quite powerful.
However, a metaphor can develop its own life and detract from what it is meant
to say. Its meaning must be clarified by way of concrete applications. Here are a
few examples:

From today, do not touch those drugs because they destroy your life!
Leave alone the spouse of another person because stealing sex causes
nothing but misery in the family!
Consider the plight of retrenched workers when you have to ‘rationalise’
your enterprise!

Note that these examples represent the law, something that God expects,
rather than his gifts. So you have to say that God’s grace can bring about the
necessary changes in us and through us in the community.

Faith is not a private affair

In the past few centuries, the Christian message increasingly concentrated
on the spiritual life of the individual. Just look at our hymnals: It is all about my
sin, my Saviour, my salvation, my praise, my faith, my joy, my hope, my death, my
resurrection, my heavenly glory, rather than our Lord who sends us into God’s
world with the message of *his* new life for *all* people in *all* dimensions of life. Today this has serious consequences.

The first is the privatisation of our convictions. No longer being credible in terms of contemporary scientific insights, technological pragmatism and commercial profitability, the gospel has been pushed into the corner of a private preoccupation. Religious conviction is tolerated in Western societies as long as it does not interfere with processes that really matter: politics, economics, business, sexuality, sport, and so on. It is just not taken seriously. If publicly confessed, it is embarrassing. It may also meet with ridicule and contempt.

To regain the vibrancy and relevance of our message, we have to overcome this marginalisation. To begin with, we should replace the first-person *singular* with the first-person *plural*—and that in our sermons, our hymns, and our prayers. What matters is not *my* Lord and Saviour, but *our* Lord and Saviour; not *my* sin, but *our* sins; not *my* salvation, but *our* salvation. We have left our private homes, after all, to join the community.

In 1 Corinthians 12–14, Paul uses the image of a body and its members to show that different gifts of the spirit are meant to serve the Body of Christ, referring to the Christian congregation. But the metaphor can also be applied to our integration into the wider community and to gifts that Paul does not enumerate. We each have important roles to fulfil in the family, the economy, and the society.

The image can also be developed further to cover, for instance, the urge to make a profit, gain power, attract public attention, in short, to pursue one’s individual or collective interest at the expense of the community, society, and nature. Here is an example:

> Each cell in the human body has a small but essential function. There are brain cells, blood cells, bone cells, muscle cells—millions of them. They are all part of a wonderfully coordinated network. Those that no longer fulfil their purpose are immediately eliminated by the immune system.

> When some cells emancipate themselves from the body and begin a life of their own, they form a cancer tumour. They begin to thrive at the expense of the body. Ultimately, they destroy the body from which they are derived and on which they depend. This is true for people who are hell-bent on pursuing their own interests, including their spiritual interests, at the expense of others.

**Gain comprehensive horizons**

In the second place, it is not *my* soul that matters, but *our* world, which is God’s world. The God in whom we believe is the ultimate Source and Destiny of *all* of reality in *all* its aspects *all* of the time. In his creative power, God is not just the Source of the universe, but of every atom, every cell, every thought, and every social organisation. Likewise, God indeed accepts you and me as persons, so as to liberate, transform, empower, and involve us. But we are embedded in a
large and complex social and natural network of relationships that God loves and that the gospel is meant to heal.

To do justice to this comprehensiveness, we can apply our message in concentric circles. Beginning with the relation between God and the individual, we go on to cover greater horizons: the family, the community, society, humanity, and nature. What does a particular message mean for you and me, for our congregation, for the economy, for politics, for race relations, sport, cultural activities, and so on? This cannot be done in detail every time, but a series of sermons should cover as many aspects of life as possible so that the congregation gets used to the relevance of the message for all spheres of life.

The father’s acceptance of the wayward son in the parable, for instance, can be applied to an enterprise that seeks alternative jobs for workers who have become redundant, or a society that accepts strangers and refugees although they are not acceptable in terms of the normal standards of the society concerned.

**Address contemporary experience**

The application the message to different spheres of life has become important because the Christian community suffers from cultural lag, as the sociologists call it. This means that the form of our message and its institutional manifestations are no longer abreast with the way the society experiences and deals with reality.

Examples are the relation between creation and evolution, the impact of the social media on human relations, the danger of nuclear weapons and nuclear power, the breakdown of traditional inhibitions and responsibilities, the causes of family violence and rape, the consequences of cultural clash in a pluralistic society, the rising discrepancy between the rich and the poor, the frightening impact of our civilisation on the natural infrastructure of life.

While preachers cannot be expected to be adequately informed about all these issues, let alone do justice to them in a simple sermon, their horizons must be wide enough to include in their sermons some references or allusions to spheres of life where this is appropriate and desirable. The aim here is not to provide the congregation with information it does not have (and which the preacher normally also does not have), but to prompt them to be aware of God’s gifts and God’s expectations in all spheres of life.

To spell out the relevance of the gospel in all spheres of life can hardly be achieved by a preacher without the cooperation of people in other walks of life: workers and unemployed, teachers and children, administrators and researchers in various fields. I will develop such collaborative approaches in chapter 19.

Where this cannot be done and preachers are insufficiently informed, they can simply allude to different spheres of life and allow the congregants to come with their own conclusions. Here is an example based on the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 30–37:

**Dos and don’ts**
Jesus is our example of the Good Samaritan: he picked up all kinds of people in all kinds of need and attended to them—corrupt officials, notorious sinners, people with incurable diseases, women deemed unclean, and so on.

Do you feel like having fallen into the hands of robbers in some way? Then turn to Christ! Christ will draw your attention to the needs of other people. Think of your family members, or the people at work, or your community. Who is sick or lonely or bereaved and needs your help or your comfort?

There are countless people all around us who are without work, without income, without hope. Can we do something about their plight together as a congregation? Can we push politicians to try and get the most desperate of them out of the mud? If you are an employer, will you think twice before you retrench workers?

Perhaps the most helpless victim of human rapaciousness and indifference is our natural environment: the soil, the air, the water, the plants, the animals. Let us become Samaritans for them too because God loves all of God’s creation!

Work through the ear, the eye, and the hand

What we hear makes a much more powerful and lasting impression when we also see it in a written form, and more powerful still if you add a striking illustration. That is why modern media are so successful in communicating their messages.

If you have the apparatus, use PowerPoint slides. It takes time to draw them up, but it pays out handsome dividends. When giving public lectures, I put short sentences on PowerPoint, never more than three sentences per screen, so that the hearers can also read what I am saying. It works miracles in bringing across the message! Use the same formulations that are on the screen; otherwise, your audience will be confused by two channels of communication demanding their attention at the same time.

Use pictures. One way is to find a picture that expresses the core message, put it on the screen at the beginning of the service and again at the end. Another way is to get one telling picture for every section of the sermon, but not more than that! To find pictures, mine your own resources or the Internet. Just google ‘prodigal son images’, and you will get plenty of unsuitable pictures! But you will also find some pictures from which to select the most appropriate.

Such pictures should depict the current cultural background rather than a foreign culture. We no longer live in ancient Palestine! Never use sentimental pictures that take the viewers into a religious fairyland! It is the best way to render the message irrelevant. No bunnies and eggs on Easter Sunday! No Father Christmas, kings in fancy attire, and cute little angels flying above the cradle on Christmas Eve!

Pictures must also express the message as closely as possible, because if they don’t, they will lead your listeners off on a tangent. Say you are preaching on Jesus driving out demons. Use a picture depicting the misery of drug addicts or the cruelty of domestic violence. This demonstrates actual ‘demonic
possession’ and the need for healing rather than discussing whether demons exist or not.

Then the ‘hand’. Speaking and hearing become infinitely more powerful when underpinned with action of some kind. A message that leads into action settles much deeper in human consciousness than a message that goes into the one ear and flies out of the other. Give parishioners something to live and to work for! A harvest festival can include a visit to a nearby informal settlement, distributing food or clothes to the destitute. A worship service calls believers out of the world into the presence of God to renew their strength and motivation and then sends them back into the world in the name of God.

Scale down the level of sophistication and reflection

On the one hand, there is the temptation of untrained preachers to try and impress their audiences with platitudes, powerful rhetoric, and shallow moralising. Congregants go home disappointed and may not come again. Remember the adage: If you have nothing to say, please do not say it here!

On the other hand, professional theologians tend to pack their sermons with more thoughts than their audience is able to digest within such a short time. Moreover, some people joke that theologians answer questions that nobody asks.

A sermon should always be a liberating and empowering response to the kind of questions, predicaments, guilt feelings, and world view assumptions that the listeners might have, rather than an exposition of the intellectual life of the preacher.

Biblical statements must be put into their historical context, but detailed historical information belongs in the Bible study, not in the sermon. More profound theological (or social) deliberations can be offered in lectures or seminars for those who are interested.

Reduce the amount of information

On the one hand, too little leaves the listeners dissatisfied and disappointed. A slice of dry bread leaves you hungry. On the other hand, lavish dinner parties cause indigestion rather than satisfaction. There are limits to what people can absorb at any one time. When you are full, you don’t want to be spoon-fed or urged to overfeed. Say ‘Amen’ as soon as you have brought the main point across.

So do not try to say everything that could be said on a topic. Concentrate on one clear message and treat three or four aspects of it. All the small remarks on the sidelines may be interesting, but many listeners will not even notice them, let alone remember them. If they are fascinating in their own right, they will draw the attention of the listeners away from what really matters.

If you feel towards the end of your sermon that you have not impressed your listeners or that your message was messy, you may be tempted to try and rescue
the situation. More likely than not, you will continue to say what has already been said and make the situation worse. A message comes to a natural closure—never go beyond that but pick up your courage and stop.

We call the presence of material that is not important for the message ‘redundancy’. In some cases, saying the same thing two or three times using other concepts each time is effective to make a point. It is a standard rhetorical method. Adding some detail can bring the statement closer to life. Spelling out some implications can make the statement more profound. However, in many cases, redundancy only increases the bulk with useless content and makes a sermon boring. Weed it out and fill the gap with brief periods of silence to give a substantive message the chance to sink in.

**Mind the emotional component**

A good meal does not only feed the body; it is also tasty. You are inclined to eat more of a tasty meal than of a bland one. Likewise, listeners are more inclined to open up and allow the message to reach their innermost if the preacher radiates a loving concern, a pleasant atmosphere, and a sense of beauty. They are also touched by pithy formulations and interesting thoughts.

Skilful preachers manage to find a balance between the three faculties of the human psyche: emotion, willpower, and thought. A purely rational argument leaves most people cold. Endless moralising is irksome. To allow emotions to boil over is dangerous. Different denominations tend to fall into one or the other trap. Think of the Reformed over against the Pentecostal tradition!

**Use vocabulary that is known**

Academically trained theologians often use a vocabulary with which ordinary churchgoers, let alone outsiders, are not familiar. After years of study at a university, they have acquired a technical language that others do not understand. What must a shopkeeper or a nurse make of sentences such as these:

- Paul here makes an eschatological statement!
- God is the ground of being and, as such, our ultimate concern!
- This is not a historical, but an existential statement.

This is not just a matter of aborted communication; it touches the very heart of the gospel. If you use technical terms that the listeners do not know, they feel left out and humiliated. They are expected to know what they don’t. Their own knowledge and experience are not taken seriously. So in an implicit and unintended way, you preach a disconcerting and degrading law rather than the empowering grace of God.

If at all possible, do not use terms you would not use in a normal conversation. If you really have to, add a brief explanation. Do not assume that your listeners are familiar with simple words like ‘incompatible’, ‘assumption’,
or ‘holistic’, let alone theological concepts like ‘eschatology’, ‘redemption’, or ‘atonement’. Replace words that do not belong to normal public language. Use a simple vocabulary—and that without becoming simplistic or superficial!

Compare the following pair of sentences:

a) We believe in the Trinitarian history of God.

b) God is the Creator who brings about everything that exists and happens around us; it is this God that has shown his great love for us in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, and it is the Spirit of this God that wants to radiate God’s love into the world through us.

**Construct simple sentences**

Many trained preachers use long and complex sentences with lots of auxiliary phrases added on, because that is what they have become used to when reading theological literature. We also find it in the Bible. Ephesians 1, for instance, has been called the longest sentence found in ancient Greek literature. Translations usually break it up into small sentences.

When you pack everything that can be said about a particular topic into one sentence, you will blow it up beyond proportions and make it unintelligible. The rule is, make short sentences, with one noun (or pronoun) as the subject, one verb, and one noun (or pronoun) as the object. Compare the following two examples:

a) God, the only real God, the eternal and universal and omnipotent God, who in his great power created the universe, including the earth, the solar system, the Milky Way galaxy and all the galaxies in the universe, but also each atom, each molecule, each cell, each organism, whose wisdom and glory we can never fathom, this God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, a humble Jewish teacher living in a remote province of the ancient Roman Empire who gathered a group of disciples, accepted the outcasts, healed the lepers, forgave the guilty in the name of God, who was rejected and condemned by his own religious authorities and executed by the Roman overlords but rose from the dead and went to sit at the right hand of God in heavenly glory and has sent the Holy Spirit for us to continue the work of Jesus on earth.

b) We experience God’s creative power in us and all around us. But God’s redeeming love was revealed to a few simple people through the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. And it is the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of divine love, that is present among us and that works through us in our daily lives.

**Link up with previous sermons**

It is sometimes advisable to refer back to what was said the week or the weeks before, because brief reminders and linkages reinforce the message. Some
preachers design a continuous series on four to five related topics. This opens up wider perspectives and deeper insights. Such a series must avoid constant repetitions. It should also not go beyond a month or so, because it can easily become tedious: ‘Here we go again!’

Finally, share your draft with a friend

When you have written out your draft, share it with one or two persons whom you trust will give you honest and constructive feedback. It can be a colleague, a lay member, or a spouse. Let them point out problematic arguments, muddled thinking, formulations that are not clear, or whatever comes to their mind. Then consider the changes they propose.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?  
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?  
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘You are an engineer rather than a pastor! A sermon should not resemble the cold beauty and lifeless perfection of a luxury car, but rather a lush garden where many different plants thrive on deep soil, manure, and compost!’

b) ‘I doubt whether you have ever been a minister serving a large congregation. If you were, you would know that your good suggestions are not realistic in practice!’

c) ‘It is definitely not the task of a preacher of the gospel to meddle in politics, business, or sports. Let the secular people sort out their secular problems!’

Lord, fill me with the zeal to find the best way of bringing across your message.
D. DELIVERING THE MESSAGE
CHAPTER 14
The living voice of the gospel
Sermon delivery

What do you think?

Musicians, actors, and performers of all kinds practice hard and rehearse their work many times before they go onto the stage. Would you think that this should also apply to preachers?

Is it necessary for preachers to write out their sermons, or is it enough to jot down a few relevant points? Or should they do neither but depend on the Holy Spirit to inspire them once they are on the pulpit?

Should preachers speak freely to the congregation even if their grammar, vocabulary, or flow of argument is less than perfect, or should they rather stick to a well-prepared draft?

Are you inspired or put off by gestures, habits, or ways of speaking of your preacher, or is that of no concern?

Should an ordained minister wear a gown, or a suit, or jeans and T-shirts?

Do you think that the message is compromised by an untidy church hall, dirty communion vessels, or an unkempt preacher, or do these things not matter?

Pre-event rehearsal

Let us assume that we have written out the draft of the sermon. When we did so, we were concerned about what we want to say and how we should put it into words and sentences. Now we must consciously change from design mode to delivery mode. In delivery mode, it is the listeners who matter, not the draft; more precisely, it is communication that matters, not an abstract statement. The draft is just a handy instrument to structure our message and should not command more attention than that.

So we should not over-prepare. That is to say, we should not attach so much importance to the wonderful formulations we arrived at in our draft that we are no longer open for an implicit but real dialogue with the listeners, that we do not allow the Holy Spirit to prompt us into new ad hoc reformulations when on the pulpit.

The best way to free ourselves from the draft is to do a pre-event rehearsal. Stand up, push the paper aside, imagine the actual members of the congregation sitting there in front of you, and deliver the sermon you have prepared. Do not look at your draft until you are through. When we convey the message in this
form, it will be reborn in a new and more lively form because it is now addressed
to actual people sitting there in front of you, each with his/her own experience,
needs, and expectations.
Rehearsing the sermon in this way, we detect things that are not clear
beforehand. We also detect the obstacles in the flow of the argument because
at these points, we tend to get stuck. We also check how long the delivery of the
sermon takes. Orators, politicians, and performers of all kinds practice hard and
rehearse furiously until they have mastered the job. Then they are ready to face
their audiences.
Steve Jobs, former CEO of Apple Corporation, for instance, reportedly spent
hours on the rehearsal of his famous announcements. He did this to sell the new
developments of his enterprise, and he did! Why should we preachers take it
more lightly? Thorough preparation gives us the peace of mind and the inner
authority to stand before the congregation in the name of God without anxiety
and self-consciousness.
Avoid stress. Try by all means to have everything ready by Friday, because
Saturdays tend to be hectic and unpredictable and you do not want to get into a
rush. Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and long hours before the TV screen the day before
the service. Get enough sleep during the night. Rise early to get everything ready
in good time.

**Be at the venue ahead of time**

When we set out to go to the venue, we make sure that we have all our
tools at hand: hymn book, liturgy, readings, gown, whatever. Discovering that
we have forgotten something is disconcerting and sure to undermine our inner
composure.
Preachers should be at the venue well ahead of time. This is very important!
Nothing works on our nerves and the nerves of the congregation as destructively
as a hurried and nervous late arrival. Let me expand on this aspect a little.
There is always so much to do to get ready: putting on the gown, checking
Holy Communion vessels, coordinating the various inputs, praying with readers
and musicians, welcoming arriving members, and finally sitting down and
calming down in the presence of God. We must have time for that.
By all means, *start* on time, even if half of the congregation has not yet
arrived! The church service is something serious, and the congregation must
learn to respect it as such. If it were a football match or a winter sale in a famous
shop, they would be there and stand in queues long before the gates open.
If members know that the service will not start as scheduled, they will
not bother to be on time either. They may miss some important aspects of the
service. They may come in a rush, rather than in a quiet and receptive mood. A
culture of indiscipline and sloppiness will establish itself and steadily but surely
undermine the commitment and dedication of the parishioners.
Don't be impressed by the argument that this is African time! All around the
world, you find disorganised and ill-disciplined communities. If that has become
a culture, the culture must change. I was once a member of a very well-organised African congregation. The (black) pastor was a school principal during the week. The services began at 7.00 a.m., and precisely at that time, the doors were shut by the elders. Latecomers were only let in when the sermon began, much to their own loss and embarrassment.

But there is a more insidious aspect as well: Nothing is as infuriating as when leaders try to demonstrate their dignity and superiority by letting their audiences wait for their arrival. This has become common practice in certain societies where political leaders care more for their status than for the well-being of their people.

In the church, it is entirely out of place. It is a sign of arrogance and brazenness on the side of the preacher. It is disrespectful against the members of the congregation who sacrifice quality time to be in church and whose dignity is by no means less important than that of the preacher.

Just make up the following calculation: If 240 people sit in church and wait for half an hour, this amounts to a total of 120 hours, which is ten days of precious life time wasted. Who are we to do that to grown-up people, who all have their own schedules and lives to live?

Stage fright

When before the altar, it is important to walk and talk in a relaxed, calm, and reassuring way. If you are a beginner, you may be suffering under stage fright. Beginners usually feel threatened when so many eyes rest upon them. But we are at home in God’s family—we have nothing to fear!

Actors and performers have their own tricks to retune their psychological set-up for the task they find intimidating. It may be helpful, for instance, to stand on the beach and shout at the raging sea in courageous defiance, or on a mountaintop and shout down into the valleys. It bolsters your self-confidence and sense of authority.

To overcome stage fright, it is sometimes suggested that we should take the heads you see in front of you as so many heads of cabbage in the garden. This is a rather rash recipe, which dehumanises your congregants. It is better to consider them as friends you have invited for tea, or as members of your family sitting around the dinner table. A relaxed attitude is created by love!

Some preachers are free enough to leave the pulpit, walk around in front of the altar, or even in the aisles. This practice can lead to more direct and personal communication. But not everybody can do it in such a natural way that it does not alienate the parishioners. It can be experienced as an imposition of the personality of the preacher, rather than a communication of the message. Grant the parishioners their space! The congregants should never feel threatened or exposed.
Body language

Preachers proclaim the Word of God with their mouths, right? Maybe less than we think! Maybe the way they relate to people speaks a clearer language than their words. Preachers are living human beings that represent the living Christ with their bodies when they lead a service. It is their attitude and their demeanour before, during and after the service that makes this representation real and credible.

I knew a preacher whose sermons were way too sophisticated for the average congregant to understand, but his body language reflected the humble, helpful, loving attitude of Jesus. And the congregants loved him! Preachers should never try to impress, dominate, or make the parishioners understand that they are something special as ordained ministers, deans, or bishops. I have dealt with this point extensively in chapter 3.

Some preachers adopt a liturgical pose that suggests otherworldliness and aloofness. Some are timid, tense, and awkward when standing before other people. Some are over-jovial and lack a sense of seriousness. Some speak to the congregation as if it were a class of schoolchildren. Whether we like it or not, all such modes of behaviour heavily impact the way the message comes across.

Personal attitude

Respect the congregation by giving them the best you have. Prepare your sermons, hymns, liturgy, and prayers well. They come with high expectations. Do what is in your power not to disappoint anybody who has come, whether regular members or visitors.

A preacher should be free from resentments, prejudices, or feelings of hurt against the parishioners, because they will subconsciously register that and close up. The sermon is not meant to teach them a lesson. Never nurse your grudges; bring them to the cross and leave them there. Get pastoral help if you cannot rid yourself of resentments.

We all know people that have a cheerful, open, and helpful demeanour. They can listen and sympathise. They may not speak much but simply respond to the other person in deep felt solidarity. It is good to be in their company. That is the attitude that communicates the gospel of divine love best.

Always begin with thanking God that the people before you have come to listen to God’s Word. The more you thank God for the congregation in front of you, the more positive and relaxed your attitude towards them will become. While you are on your way to the pulpit, ask God to take over, speak his Word, and prevent misunderstandings.

Remain in solidarity with congregation in its needs, hopes, and fears. If you must proclaim judgement, place yourself with them under that judgement. When you must tell them where they fail, tell them first in which ways they are great. God’s expectation follows from God’s gift. To avoid legalism, always begin with the gospel and let the exhortation flow from it.
**Speak to your audience, rather than to your draft**

Reading off a sermon from the pulpit is one of the most common and one of the worst mistakes preachers make. If you have prepared and rehearsed a sermon carefully, it will be well structured and clear. It will stick in your head. If it does not stick in your head, how can you expect it to stick in the heads of your listeners? Speak to your listeners in a seemingly spontaneous yet well-prepared way!

Writing and reading are means of communication that are quite different from speaking and listening. An essay is written, a speech is spoken. In an essay, you address an absent reader; in a speech, you address the living people sitting in front of you. Writing is indirect and impersonal communication; speaking is direct and personal communication. To reach its intended recipients, a message must go directly from the speaker as a person to the listeners as persons. Writing concentrates on some content, speaking concentrates on living people. When we preach, we want to communicate a message; we do not want to transmit information.

In plain language: do not read off your sermon but speak freely to the members of the congregation. The idea of writing out the sermon is to get your vocabulary ready and your logic straight. The idea is not that you preach it precisely the way it was drafted. If you concentrate on your draft, you will communicate with your draft rather than with the congregation. In fact, concentrating on your draft, you will find it difficult to concentrate on your listeners.

If you are afraid that you will get stuck, write out the sermon in full, then jot down the main points on a single sheet of paper, highlight the key words with different colours and take only that to the pulpit. Look at it only when necessary. If you forgot to put in some detail, don’t stress about it. The listeners won’t know that you have left out something. Here is an example based on John 10: 1–16 (the good shepherd):

**Introduction:** Jesus loves to use pastoral metaphors

1. **As shepherd, Christ** cares for the sheep and stakes his life
2. **The stranger** is not trusted
3. **The hired servant** looks after his own safety
4. **The thief** pursues his own interests at the expense of others

**Conclusion:** Christians represent Christ as shepherds.

**Never put up a show!**

Don’t try to be dignified! True dignity is rooted in sincerity. Sincerity shines through when we radiate the deep love of God for the congregation. Be relaxed.
Don’t become anxious. Take the time you need to make the point. Likewise, do not pretend to be happy when you are not. It is true that the Christian faith can lead to a profound joy derived from being accepted by God in Christ in spite of not being acceptable. But it is not true that the Christian faith catapults you into a state of permanent bliss. Hypocrisy shines through and undermines your credibility.

Unwarranted displays of happiness also alienate, if not insult, people who have reason to be deeply unhappy. What they need is solidarity with their pain, not an incessant smile that ignores, dismisses, or plays down the suffering they have to go through.

The best advice I can give is to be as natural as we would be in the inner circle of the family—hiding nothing, putting up no pretences, being who we are, yet in full cognisance of the presence of the Lord and therefore being the creatures we are meant to be, rather than our grumpy and resentful selves.

On the other hand, do not allow yourself a sloppy and unkempt appearance. You are not at the beach! For better or for worse, these seemingly outward demeanours make a powerful impression.

**Speak with your natural voice**

The importance of being relaxed and natural also applies to your voice. It is counterproductive to adopt a particular ‘holy’ way of speaking when praying or preaching. It seriously undermines the integrity of the preacher and the credibility of the message. An artificially sanctimonious behaviour can become so irritating that people no longer want to come to church.

Some preachers seem to be crying all the time, speaking with a whining voice as if they were the bereaved at a funeral. Nothing could be more off-putting than that! Other preachers adopt a sombre, over-serious ‘prophetic’ style when they are on the pulpit. Others again put on a mask of smiling pleasantness. We just have a message to convey. We do not need to put up a show to do that.

Our inner disposition is also critically important when we pray in front of the congregation. We are standing with the congregation before God in his infinite majesty and unconditional love. The congregation should experience a genuine prayer, a prayer that rings true in the sense that here somebody is actually speaking to that great Other, God.

Do not ramble down a liturgical prayer as if it were a magic formula. Do not repeat the contents of your sermon, preaching it to God as it were. Even if it was carefully designed beforehand, do not read off a prayer like an intellectual construct but make it a personal address to God. Everybody will sense whether a prayer is a genuine communication with God, or an empty ritual.

There are people who are unable to keep the pitch when singing. If you belong to them, please refrain from singing. For musically sensitive people a distorted melody is torture. Rather speak the sung parts of the liturgy or ask a lay person with a good voice to sing them for you. When joining the congregation in singing hymns, sing softly so that you do not cripple the harmony.
Gestures on the pulpit

Appropriate gestures, using both hands, are powerful means to underline what is being said. The reason is that listeners do not only use their ears to hear, but also their eyes to see. As mentioned above, body language is a powerful communicator. Such gestures must be modest. They should never develop a life of their own. They must not become habitual but underline what is being said. Watch the movements of gifted choir conductors whose movements display a high sensitivity to the music, the words sung, and the choir members!

Some preachers constantly hit on the pulpit with their fists; some gesticulate wildly in the air. Some are glued with their eyes to a particular part of the church hall; some always look at the same part of the congregation, say the left-hand side. Some always move only one of their hands, keeping the finger of the other hand on their texts; some hang on the pulpit like washing to be dried. Some nod with every sentence they say; some never dare to look up from their script. I hope you get the point.

Speed preaching

Some preachers try to impress their audiences by speaking at high pitch and high speed like a howling tornado. This may impress simple people, but it is counterproductive in terms of the communication of the message. The human psyche needs time to absorb and appropriate what is being said. Give your words a chance to sink in. If your words proceed from your mouth like the bullets of a machine gun, they do what guns usually do: they kill. In this case, they kill the congregation’s own creative reflection. If the content of one sentence is crowded out by the content of the next, you lose them both.

Young people can absorb information a lot faster than the elderly. As a preacher, mind the pedestrians rather than the motorcyclists! Your listeners are not students or academics who are used to absorbing and digesting a huge amount of input that gushes over them like a river in flood. You will observe that the congregation listens more attentively if you insert split-second pauses for reflection as you move from thought to thought.

The same is true for prayers. In some churches, especially in ladies’ groups, machine-gun prayers have become part of the religious culture. Jesus warns us not to use many words when we pray but speak personally, modestly, and meaningfully to our Father in heaven. Whether in the sermon or the prayers, what matters is not the number of words we can press into the allotted time, but the profundity and relevance of the message we want to get across.

Articulation!

A delivered sermon is useless if the members of the congregation do not hear what is being said. This happens more often than we think. There will
always be elderly people who are hard of hearing. There are the back pews where people tend to congregate. There are spaces in the church that have a bad acoustic.

The church hall is a large public space that can swallow your voice if you are not careful. Loudspeakers and earphones are not always available, and where they are, they do not always work. Never speak as you would around a dinner table. Ask somebody to sit at the back of the church and tell you whether your voice reaches him/her and whether all you say is clearly understood. In other words, practice public speaking until you know how to do it.

There are three imperatives here: (a) The voice must be loud enough. If you are not sure, ask the congregation whether they hear you and then encourage them to raise their hands if they don’t. (b) Every single syllable must be clearly articulated. Many preachers tend to swallow the last part of words and sentences. (c) As mentioned above, the speed with which you talk must be slow enough for all people to follow.

This is also true for the readings. It is important to involve laypeople in the worship service, and the readings are an obvious example. But they must be trained to speak loud enough, articulate the words, and speak slowly. Especially young people tend to demonstrate how fast they can read. Or is it that they are embarrassed and want the job done as quickly as possible? Just like a sermon and a prayer, a reading must allow for the contents to sink in; otherwise, it becomes a meaningless exercise.

In the last chapter, I dealt with the length of the sermon and the limited attention span of the congregation. Remember it when you are on the pulpit! Powerful sermons have their own rhythm with a beginning, a high point, and an end. Going beyond that dilutes the impression it makes. When the message has been delivered, stop talking!

The meaning and dignity of the ministerial gown

Some churches have elaborate gowns and rituals connected with these gowns. Other churches have very simple gowns; still others do not have gowns at all. I want to suggest that it is not the gown that is important, but its function.

I already mentioned the great Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh, who once compared himself with the donkey on which Christ rode into Jerusalem. The donkey can get the impression that the excited shouts and the branches put on its way are meant to glorify him rather than the rider. What a silly entitlement!

If gowns are used to emphasise the dignity, authority, and sanctity of the ordained ministry, they are out of step with the spirit of Christ. Christ told his followers to be servants (slaves) rather than rulers because he himself came to be a servant. I have dealt with that in chapter 3.

On the other hand, the gown can symbolise the fact that the preacher is now speaking not in his own name, but in the name of God. This should make preachers humble. They were ordained to do this work on behalf of the church.
What they say is not their private opinion, but their interpretation of the Word of God. The liturgy does not consist of their personal prayers but represents the prayers of the community.

If this is its interpretation, the gown can be a meaningful symbol. But then it should be simple, without unnecessary decorations on it and with no rituals connected with it.

**What about the venue?**

The Word of God can be proclaimed anywhere and at any time: at regular family prayers at home, during visits to the homes of parishioners, at a prayer meeting at work, during a visit in a hospital ward. The community can meet in a park, on the beach, beneath a tree, in a traditional homestead, a little mud building, a conventional church, or a cathedral.

However, the environment should reflect the seriousness and the dignity of the occasion. People should realise that they are now in the presence of God, the ultimate Source and Destiny of their lives and their lifeworlds. That is no small matter. The gown of the preacher (if any) should be washed and ironed. The altar should be neat; the communion vessels should be clean. The flowers should be fresh. The chairs or pews should be neatly arranged.

The singing should be joyful and uplifting. Cell phones and music boxes should be switched off. There should be no eating, drinking, or chatting during the prayer or service. Candles can be lit. A quiet time before or during the service can concentrate attention. A hymn or chorus can be sung. Devotional dancing can express inner release and joy. If there had been arguments, resentments, or hurts, one can ask the parties to apologise, forgive, and reconcile. A flourishing vegetable garden around the church is a powerful witness. All these aspects convey a message!

In contrast, dirty windows and walls, rubbish on the floor of the church, and a churchyard littered with cans and plastic bags communicate a sense of indifference rather than dedication to a great and noble cause. And nothing casts as bad a reflection on the preacher, the congregational leadership, the congregation itself and their commitment to Christ as a blocked and stinking toilet!

Preachers who are not humble enough to clean the toilet with their own hands are simply out of step with Christ, the great servant. First-time visitors may be put off by such an ugly impression of carelessness and irresponsibility and never return. Even regular visitors may go home with a bad taste in their mouth, rather than with joy and elevation. It may not happen!

**Get feedback when it is all over**

It is one of the typical afflictions of the preacher that they get no response from their congregations. There is no appreciation and no critique. You feel lonely and empty. You do not know whether your words have hurt, upset, or
meant anything to anybody. You feel as if all your work was in vain, like a housewife who spent time and dedication to cook a lovely meal and then the family eats mindlessly, discussing cricket or politics.

The traditional service is based on the authoritarian model we inherited from medieval times. Ordinary believers were expected to listen to the preacher, shut up, go home, and take the message to heart. This is a very problematic approach. If the Word of God is indeed entrusted to the community of believers and if the preachers only act on their behalf, the community must accept responsibility for what the preacher is doing.

We live in an egalitarian, democratic, and open society. Science, technology, commerce, sports, and music all reach their excellence by critically assessing and rigorously improving their performance on a regular basis. And they do that by listening carefully to each other’s observations and suggestions. There is no reason why the ministry should not do the same! The Word of God will have a much greater impact when it is openly discussed. To arrive in the twenty-first century, we must change our preaching culture.

When the congregation is small and intimate, we can allow for an open discussion after the sermon. In large congregations, I suggest that we find two or three mature members who will give us honest and constructive feedback both on the contents and on the delivery of the sermon, even on the conduct of the service as a whole. We will pick up this issue again in chapter 19 on different types of sermons.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘Go to the church service of any high church, whether Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Lutheran, and you will witness the liturgical re-enactment of the feudal hierarchy of the Middle Ages. Gowns and rituals are meant to emphasise status differences and have nothing to do with the simple message of the ‘man on a borrowed donkey’ (an expression coined by Denise Ackerman).’

b) ‘In our church, the majority of services are conducted by lay preachers. I would rather have them read off a prepared sermon than waffle about whatever comes to their mind!’

c) ‘You overestimate the importance of the preacher and the sermon. Well-known hymns, choruses, a familiar liturgy, the sacraments, the music of the organ or band, the presence of friends and family, in fact the whole atmosphere of being together and praising God may attract more people to the service than the sermons preached!’

Dear Lord, I am going to stand, walk, and speak before your people. As I do so, grant me the awareness at all times that I am representing you and not myself.
What do you think?

The task of the preacher is to proclaim the Word of God, right? Does it follow that the sermon of the preacher should not be scrutinised but humbly accepted as the Word of God?

Or should the fact that it is supposed to be the Word of God make it doubly important that it be scrutinised?

If so, who would be the most appropriate person to scrutinise the sermon: the preacher, a colleague, an expert in the art of preaching, or a group of trusted members of the congregation?

Can you think of a few aspects that are critically important when making such an assessment?

Scrubtiny is important

Leaders of commerce and industry, such as carmakers or cell phone companies, subject their products to constant and rigorous scrutiny. They study the market; they improve the quality; they innovate. Well-administered service providers like banks and hospitals set targets, ask the public to assess their performance, and engage in regular reviews. There is no reason why we should not do the same!

Let us not assume that people will take whatever we offer. They are not obliged to do so just because we assume that it is the Word of God. They may shrug off a message that does not convince them. They may be disappointed. They may get angry. They may simply abscond. If people motivated by market share and profit maximisation are on their toes, those who are called to convey God’s redemptive love should be even more alert and self-critical.

Yes, we too can lose our ‘market share’, put off our ‘customers’, and ‘go bankrupt’ if we are not careful! A whole congregation can ail and die! Avoidable mistakes can undermine our own effectiveness.

Let me share two experiences of mine. First, I have often been invited to give a lecture to a synod, a seminary, or a professional body. I wanted to give them the best I had. Invariably, I had too much material, which I was hell-bent to get across. I spoke too long; my paper was too packed. My audience got tired and
frustrated; they wanted to discuss and have their say. But nobody told me that this was a problem. They simply did not invite me again. What a pity!

Second, I became envious of colleagues who attracted more postgraduate students than I did. Again, I tried to give them the best I could offer, so why did they not appreciate it? I did not realise that I was too demanding, too strict, too bent on perfection. I did not sufficiently appreciate what they came up with. They became disheartened rather than motivated and went to more accommodating colleagues. If only somebody had told me in time!

Assessment after the service

I am regularly overcome by a feeling of inadequacy and failure after I have preached. On the one hand, it is frustrating if you have done your best and get no response. On the other hand, it is embarrassing to be flattered. You don’t want to be praised; you want feedback. You want a conversation; you want company in your search for the truth.

I may comfort myself with the fact that I have been entrusted with a job and that the Holy Spirit must do its part. I must sow the seed and let God look after the growth! If people do not listen, it is their problem, not mine. ‘Upon your word, I will cast out the net,’ Peter said. But is that an adequate solution to the problem? Probably not!

My suggestion is that the preacher asks three or four trusted congregants from various walks of life to gather briefly after the service to assess the sermon and the service as a whole. Just let them say what struck them, what bothered them, what can be improved, what must be avoided. Unless the participants already have strong feelings they want to share, one can hand out a brief checklist and ask them to indicate aspects that require attention. Below is a list of possible topics. Of course, it can be much shorter, highlighting only three or four key aspects, to be followed by an open conversation.

1. What was the attitude and body language of the preacher: gloomy or cheerful, grumpy or caring, nervous or relaxed, humble or arrogant?
2. Was the voice strong enough and the articulation clear enough to be understood by everybody in the church?
3. Did the preacher communicate personally with the listeners, or did he/she read off his draft from the pulpit?
4. Did the preacher speak in an unnatural, over-dignified, rhetorical, sloppy, arrogant, or sanctimonious way?
5. Were his/her gestures natural, suggestive, timid, or imposing?
6. Did the message only convey the demand of God, or focus on the gift of God?
7. Did the message of the sermon reflect the core message of the text?
8. Was the sermon structured in a way that could be easily followed and remembered?
9. Did the sermon contain appropriate illustrations and references to real-life situations or was it pure theory?
10. Did the preacher use unfamiliar concepts or sophisticated trends of thought?
11. Did the prayers suggest sincere communication with God on behalf of the congregation, or were they rattled off from a liturgical book?
12. Was the service of one piece—integrating the sermon, readings, and hymns?

Assessment before the service

I began with the assessment after delivery. Because the preacher is usually under time constraints before the service, an assessment may be easier to arrange in the relaxed atmosphere after the service. However, a correction before the event is preferable to a mistake highlighted after the event.

I take it for granted that the preacher will review his/her sermon carefully after it has been drafted and before it is delivered. As mentioned before, the best way of doing so is to put the draft aside, stand up, and preach the sermon to an imaginary congregation as if it were the real occasion. Imagine the reactions of certain people sitting in the pews.

It is amazing what such an exercise can yield! Obvious flaws in the flow of the argument, difficult formulations, unfamiliar concepts, duplications, instances of waffling, redundant sentences, lack of relevance of certain passages, and many other weaknesses will show up. Moreover, delivering the sermon without looking at the draft is a sure test of whether a sermon can be remembered, because if the preacher cannot recall it, the listeners cannot be expected to do so. So that is one way of scrutinizing a sermon—a fairly easy one.

A more thorough way is to take two or three points (no more) of the list below each week and see whether your sermon fulfils those requirements. Improve it where necessary. Going through the list systematically in this way, the criteria for a good sermon will become second nature and your sermons will gradually improve. Do not go through the whole checklist for each sermon because this would take too much time and you would overwork the sermon, thus making it artificial.

1. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
2. Does the sermon reflect God’s chastising demand or God’s reassuring grace?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (thematic, narrative, homily, etc.) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member understands?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. *Is the sermon too long or too short?*
11. *Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?*
12. *Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?*
13. *Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?*
14. *Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?*

I suggest that you go through this exercise on a regular basis. Sweeping and dusting is done once a week; thorough spring cleaning is done once a year. The spring-cleaning part is dealt with in chapter 22.

However, we are not always the best assessors of our own work. We tend to overlook our own weaknesses and fall in love with our preoccupations and formulations. I suggest, therefore, that wherever possible, a preacher should ask another person to look through the draft with a shortened checklist. It could be the spouse of the preacher, a colleague, or an educated layperson.

**The worship team**

The assessors could even be a worship team that is tasked to put the service together. In my view, this would be the best option by far. The preacher would deliver the sermon to the worship team, who would then make suggestions and coordinate it with the rest of the service. This procedure is time-consuming and labour intensive. When the preacher is overworked, it can only be applied at special occasions. But at such occasions, it will pay off handsomely, and the opportunity should not be lost!

However, if you are an enthusiastic preacher who has come to realise the immense importance of bringing across the Word of God, you may want to institutionalise this procedure even at the expense of other engagements and duties. It will then become the pillar around which the entire ministry is built. Such exercises can involve an increasing number of congregation members on a rotational basis. Collaboration hugely enhances interest and commitment, produces joy and fulfilment in the service of Christ, and radiates its power beyond the confines of the parish. The outcome may be quite astounding.

*What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?*

*Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?*

*How would you react to the following critique?*

a) ‘*No human being can be perfect, least of all a preacher of the Word of God. You must trust that the Holy Spirit will do its work regardless of the quality of the sermon!*’

b) ‘*You train preachers for three or four years. Can they not be expected to know their job by the time they graduate? Why must laypeople spend their precious time to get involved?*’
c) ‘You are wasting your time! After a few years, all preachers fall into their routine and will not easily be persuaded to change their habits and quirks!’

Dear Lord, it is so difficult to accept critique. Give me the humility to realise that I cannot be perfect and that there is always space for improvement.
E. THE CONTEXT OF THE MESSAGE
CHAPTER 16

One thing is needed

The sermon within the worship service

What do you think?

Could you imagine a church service without a sermon? Could you imagine a sermon without prayers, readings, and hymns? Is the combination of these aspects in our worship services mere coincidence, or is it important?

What is more discouraging, a waffling and moralising preacher or a worn-out, mechanically observed liturgy? Can a profound sermon make up for a tedious liturgy? Can a lively set of hymns and prayers make up for a badly prepared sermon?

Have you ever been disturbed by certain formulations found in hymns, creeds, and liturgical agendas? If so, do you think we should explain, replace, or delete them?

Structure the service around the message of the sermon

The form of the liturgy differs widely between local and denominational traditions. Common elements are a call to worship, praise of God, proclamation of the Word of God (readings and sermon), response to the Word of God (prayers and intercessions), and sending (blessing), all interspersed with appropriate hymns. Whatever it may be, our concern here is the relation of the sermon to the rest of the worship service.

For Protestants, the sermon forms the core of the worship service. Why should that be the case? The proclamation of the expectation and the gift of God creates faith in Christ. Faith in Christ constitutes the community of believers. The proclamation again prompts the response of this community. The sacraments are a visible form of the Word of God, because they convey the grace of God in tangible forms.

So it is not only the sermon that speaks, but whatever happens during the time we are in church together. Both proclamation and response can take the form of liturgies and hymns. The worship service as a whole communicates something: good or bad, right or wrong, depressing or uplifting.

A haphazard, boring, or mechanical liturgy can undermine the impact of a good sermon. The same is true for hymns that are badly outdated in terms of their assumptions, terminology, and musical expression. Conversely, good liturgies and hymns can compensate for bad sermons at least to some extent.
The worship service must communicate the divine message

Good preachers endeavour to construct the service around a central message. A good sermon has a central and important message. This message can be compromised or contradicted by unexplained readings, mechanical parts of the liturgy, the prayers, or the selected hymns.

Let me mention two examples. First, the preacher may have explained that the ascension of Christ in a cloud to the right hand of God in heaven should not be taken literally but metaphorically, thus making it more plausible to people informed by modern science. Jesus of Nazareth is taken out of the narrow constraints of a Jewish rabbi in Palestine during Roman times, into the universal presence and accessibility of God. God is not where heaven is, but heaven is where God is, namely among us!

But the Creed or the hymns may suggest otherwise. For sensitive believers, a cognitive dissonance opens up between what the liturgy says, what the preacher says, and what the believer believes, leading to uncertainty and confusion. Where is heaven above? How can a cloud, being nothing but vapour, carry somebody up into the air? Does it mean that Jesus simply disappeared when his followers needed him most?

Second, the meaning of the Kyrie eleison (Lord have mercy) sung in Greek in many liturgies is hardly understood by the congregation. It may be taken as a magical formula of some sort. In fact, it was the shout with which the Roman emperor was greeted when he visited a city. He had the power. He could help in times of need; he was asked for mercy. Once explained, it may become very meaningful.

The same is true for the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the formulations used in the sacraments, even the readings. Interpret the Creed at least once during the year or feed credible interpretations of particular statements of the Creed into your sermons where they fit. Spend a minute to explain the reading or its background at either the beginning or the end so that people sit up and listen.

A related problem is that of liturgical redundancy. It refers to parts of the liturgy that do not convey any additional meaning but simply fill the time with more bulk. Go through the liturgy carefully, and you will discover how much of it could simply be deleted without any loss of substance. Outsiders will experience it as nothing but pious talk.

But be careful: sometimes reiteration reinforces an important message or expression. Some key formulations are recited three times in succession and that for a good purpose.

The sacraments normally follow a prescribed agenda. However, they too should express the living fellowship we have with Christ and with each other; they may never degenerate into an observance that has to be practiced whether it makes sense or not, whether it proclaims God’s grace or not, whether it expresses our faith or not.
Respond to felt needs

The service should allow people to bring their concerns to the community and be taken seriously. The Word of God is, after all, God’s redemptive response to human needs and predicaments. That fact must find some concrete expression. This aspect is sorely neglected in most main-line churches, while it constitutes one of the attractions of the Spirit-based and African-initiated churches.

Giving space to the articulation of actual needs does not mean that all problems must be solved, all needs must be met, unfaithful lovers must be returned, and the sick must be healed there and then. But people in need must be supported, consoled, and brought before God by the community. One can invite people with needs to come forward for a laying on of hands. One can also allow free personal prayers during such times.

If the congregation feels that it would be embarrassing if individuals were allowed to pour out their personal frustrations and agonies, one could at least allow for a time of silence where individuals can bring their concerns to God while the congregation softly sings a hymn or a chorus. Or invite parishioners to write their anxieties and failures on a piece of paper and deposit it at the foot of the cross. Children and youths can be blessed individually before the term begins.

One should sometimes conduct an audit concerning attendance. Is the youth well represented? The men in their prime? The workers? The scientists? If certain social groups are missing, there is something wrong. Then the congregation must find ways to discuss the problem with those who do not feel welcome, catered for, or attracted. Think of economics: a product for which there is no demand, will attract no buyers.

Old and new

The liturgy is, like the church building and the doctrine, the ‘home of faith’ (Ted Peters). In your home, there will be old furniture, furniture with a history, or new furniture. Not all is perfect and beautiful, but it is yours; it is home. You don’t want it to be changed every day; you don’t want it to be replaced with something shining and modern. In all its imperfections, it has become part of you.

But there is a difference between old people (who do not want change), settled people (who will improve and innovate but not turn things upside down), and young people breaking out of the parental patterns, seeking their own identities, trying to restructure the world. Men have needs and tastes different from those of women, workers from those of the middle class, the uneducated from those of the educated.

Then the question arises whether the priority should be to satisfy the existing members or cater for those outside, for whom an old stuffy home can be thoroughly uninviting. The answer could be to gradually modernise, take the
existing members along, let them experience the exhilaration of something fresh. Even old furniture can be cleaned, reconditioned, and upholstered.

Alternatively, one can offer a traditional service for the established members and an innovative and cooperative service for the enterprising. This is more work: it takes more enthusiasm; it demands the willingness to give space to the young generation or outsiders and cooperate with them to construct a new kind of service (or new parts of the existing service). But this is how the church, once again, can become relevant, liberating, and empowering.

**Prayers**

Prayers are usually formulated by the preacher or taken from prayer books. If the preacher formulates them, they should not repeat the sermon (preaching it to God, as it were) but place contemporary concerns into the presence of God. These concerns should include issues faced in the community, the wider society, and the natural world: domestic violence, crime, drugs, corruption, economic decline, drought, air pollution, unemployment, war, etc.

It is a good idea to go through three stages: a prayer for the world in need, then for the empowerment of the community of believers to witness to Christ in these contexts and finally for the suffering. Always end up with a short period of silence to give every congregant an opportunity to place special needs, concerns, or loved ones before God.

Prayers taken from prayer books can be meaningful. Some are formulated by masters of the language and have a singular power and beauty. Others badly need to be updated and vitalised. But very few people listen to stereotyped, boring prayers that are read off an old liturgy book. I find it particularly inappropriate if a liturgist races through liturgical texts as if he/she wants to get done with the job as soon as possible.

Even pre-formulated prayers must be seriously prayed and not simply recited as a chore that the liturgist is expected to perform. A prayers is not magic formula that works by being recited! Parishioners keenly sense whether a prayer reflects a humble mind facing God, or whether it is rattled off, consists of handy slogans, purely rational thoughts, or pious vocabulary.

Who should do the prayers? It can be the preacher, a liturgist, a layperson, or a group of laypersons. Recently, I put formulated prayers on the screen and asked the congregation to pray them together. It is amazing how the congregation really gets involved, notes the contents, and internalises concerns worthy of praying for when they actually participate rather than dozing off or letting their thoughts wander.

In all cases, the liturgist prays on behalf of the congregation and not on his own behalf. Say ‘We pray that . . .’ rather than ‘I pray that . . .’ The communal nature of these prayers can be expressed by letting three or four people articulate different concerns, either standing in the front or praying from their places in the pews. Each concern can be affirmed by responses from the congregation, such
as ‘God have mercy!’ As mentioned above, one can also make space for personal prayers from the congregation.

**Hymns**

We have wonderful hymns. The formulations of well-known hymns are more enduring than any sermon. People remember their hymns and quote them on their deathbeds. This is reason enough for us to select our hymns or particular verses of these hymns carefully.

A troubling problem is that most of our traditional hymns originated during the time of Western pietism and romanticism. In many cases, their wording is obsolete. They are individualistic, egocentric, and confined to spiritual concerns. The community of believers hardly figures, let alone the wider society, and even less the natural environment.

The first-person singular dominates: *my enemies, my suffering, my fears, my sin, my Saviour, my salvation, my future in heaven*. Love is directed almost exclusively upwards to God or to Christ, one’s personal Saviour, rather than to other worshippers, fellow human beings, or other creatures of God. Believers are worried about their eternal salvation rather than galvanised into action as participants in the mission of God in this world.

If I have the luxury of a screen, I regularly replace the first-person singular (*I, my, me*) with the first-person plural (*we, our, us*) wherever possible, even if the rhyme has to be sacrificed. I also replace archaic language with modern equivalents: ‘thee, thou, thy, thine’ become ‘you, your, yours’; ‘didst’ becomes ‘did’; ‘deign’ becomes ‘consider worthy’ etc.

Sexist language must be avoided as far as possible. Concepts such as lord, king, and kingdom belong to the feudal order of bygone ages. City dwellers have no experience of shepherds, sheep, pastures, or fountains, not even of fortresses, city walls, and gates. Terms like ‘justification’ and ‘sanctification’ are no longer part of our daily language.

These concepts cannot always be replaced, but they must occasionally be explained. In some cases, I change the lyrics to communicate a more appropriate message. This may seem to be a sacrilege, but theologically flawed formulations or words nobody understands are not sacred. Needless to say, all this also applies to the prayers.

**Choruses**

The melodies and rhythms of traditional hymns usually sound boring in the ears of the younger generation. To cater for the needs of the youth is imperative! Once new hymns and choruses have become part of the liturgy, they are readily accepted by the older generation.

Choruses are short statements with appealing melodies and harmonies that are repeated over and over again. One does not easily forget a chorus sung in
church. They can be selected by the worshippers rather than prescribed by the preacher. They involve bodily activity like dancing or clapping, thus making for a more holistic experience. So choruses can be powerful substitutes for traditional hymns that have lost their appeal.

However, choruses can also be superficial and trivial to the extent of losing their significance for a vibrant faith. A well-known chorus repeats the word ‘Immanuel’ endlessly without saying who that is or what the name means. Another one just says ‘Amen’ without saying what is being confirmed here. They have become popular because of their catchy rhythm rather than their depth of insight and/or their message. So choruses too should be subjected to theological scrutiny and selected to fit the overall worship service.

Involving members in the church service

Finally, a church service must involve as many members of the congregation and from as wide a range of the community as possible. The more people have tasks to perform, the more their absence is felt, the more people become committed. Various age groups must feel needed and appreciated. Ideally, nobody must get the feeling that he/she won’t be missed if he/she stayed at home or watched a football match.

Not only must people be roped in, but they must take responsibility for decisions and become creative. The multiple tasks of the janitor can be distributed; people arriving can be welcomed at the door. The different readings can be done by different people. Hymns can be selected and announced by the members of a worship committee. Music can be provided by a band, trumpets, or a quartet; various choirs can be involved. Prayers can be drawn up and spoken by different people.

Kids’ church can be shared by different teachers. Providing and distributing bread and wine during communion can be done by different lay people; there can be a procession of all these participants at the beginning and the end of the service—provided that it is not designed to underscore the status and dignity of the preacher! In chapter 19, we will discuss ways of involving the laity even in the design and delivery of the sermon.

The children must participate at least in a sizeable part of the adult service, say until the epistle reading; otherwise, the church service will not become their home. They must also be missed by the adults when they stay away; otherwise, they will abscond once they grow more independent. Address them with a brief message, bless them, and let them march out with a candle to a catchy song sung by the congregation.

The helpers may complain that they need more time for their lessons. But this is not Sunday school; it is kids’ church. Not the material covered is decisive, but the proclamation of the Word of God and the atmosphere of communal prayer and praise. If there is no kids’ church, the address must be slightly more substantial. There is an example in chapter 31.
All this does not mean that the trained and ordained minister becomes superfluous. On the contrary, a cooperative service takes more time and effort to put together than a standard service prescribed by the altar book. Moreover, it involves at least some rudimentary training. Participants must be well prepared and equipped to fulfil their tasks.

Assistants at the Holy Communion table, for instance, must know how to distribute bread and wine without causing embarrassment. The helpers taking care of kids’ church must be well prepared. Readers must practice reading in a large hall, which is different from reading around the family table. Readings must never be rattled down. Read slowly and meaningfully, stressing important sentences or words. Let the readers practice reading the text before the service.

All this suggests that liturgy, hymns, and prayers should be taken much more seriously as channels of the communication than trained theologians habitually do. They are powerful transmitters and reinforcements of meaning. We do not want to disturb faithful parishioners who are used to the routine, but we cannot abdicate our theological responsibility to communicate a meaningful message to insiders and outsiders alike.

Liturgies, prayers, and hymns can become inappropriate, obsolete, or boring. If they are sanctimonious, stale, and outdated, they can seriously repulse outsiders—and they usually do! But they can also become exhilarating and uplifting. Ordained ministers should not leave traditions unchallenged. Innovations can be introduced gradually and with sensitivity so that the congregants feel enriched and not violated.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘Liturgies are dead wood! They simply do not convey the experience of a living relationship between worshipers and God, or between the individual worshipers. Just imagine what would happen if the relationship between two lovers or the members of a close family would be cast into pre-formulated sentences and rituals and repeated day after day!’

b) ‘Many of the formulations used in traditional liturgies originated centuries ago. Constant use has worn them down like old clothes. They no longer convey any meaning. If a liturgy is needed at all, it should be rewritten and recomposed on a regular basis.’

c) ‘In liturgies, hymns, and prescribed prayers, it is the church, including past generations, that speaks, while in the sermon, it is one believer who speaks. A sermon will never be able to match the impact of a liturgy, hymn, or chorus sung by the entire congregation!’

Lord, let this service become an uplifting celebration of your power and your grace.
Supplement

The liturgy as a means of communication

Is the liturgy indispensable? For many believers, the liturgy is more important than the sermon because it is experienced as an enactment of the sacred. In such cases, it has a deep emotional impact that is based on the atmosphere it exudes rather than the meaning of the words used. In addition, the music of some liturgies is very beautiful. The sermon may be experienced by such believers as mere rational thought or the explanation of a text or a spiritual reflection that varies from week to week and is not always clearly understood anyway.

Moreover, in the constant flux of modern life, people crave stability. Chaos makes life unmanageable. Habits, conventions, agreed procedures and liturgies provide predictability. And if the sermon is of inferior quality, the liturgy can make up at least to some extent. The psalms, hymns, and formulated prayers can lend us their words to speak to God just as they can lend God their words to speak to us. Countless congregations and churches have survived without trained and ordained preachers, simply by drawing strength from liturgies and hymns.

What really matters, therefore, is the personal relationship we have with God and with each other: God speaks, and we respond; we speak, and God responds. We also speak and respond to each other in the presence of God. The Reformers contrasted the ‘living voice of the gospel’ with ‘dead letters’. But readings, sermons, prayers, hymns, and sacraments—and any other creative way to communicate with God and each other—are different ways in which we can express our living relationship with God.

Personal interaction can indeed be formalised or ritualised as long as it remains a sincere form of communication. The sermon too may settle into a pattern over time because it is difficult to offer an endless series of ever-fresh sermons. Even Charismatic services tend to stabilise in the long run. The point is that the means of communication must never degenerate into empty observances that we think must be performed to please God or to uphold a tradition.

Liturgical preferences

Worship services differ vastly from denomination to denomination—from the highly formalised liturgies found in the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican traditions, through the much less elaborate liturgy of the Lutheran tradition, the austere pattern of prayer, sermon, and hymn in the Reformed tradition, the lively atmosphere in Charismatic and Pentecostal services, to almost complete silence in Quaker meetings.

Even without being able to offer theological reasons, a Lutheran may not feel at home when the host (consecrated bread) is carried around in a procession, as done in the Catholic Church, or when the pulpit rather than the cross is at the
centre of the front wall, as in Reformed churches. A Calvinist may again be upset when the figure of Mary has become more dominant than Christ in a church building or a worship service, as is the case in many Catholic contexts.

Liturgies follow traditions rather than merit or rationality. They are like furniture arrangements in a family home that are simply taken for granted and left unchanged for decades or centuries, irrespective of whether they are the most appropriate or the most rational arrangements or not. In fact, changes may be experienced as destabilising or disruptive.

It is sometimes argued that the sermon should not be considered the centre of the church service, but rather the celebration of the community as a whole. This celebration must remain in continuity with the celebrations of the church across the globe and over the centuries. So the inherited liturgies and hymns are important as expressions of the identity and unity of the church from generation to generation and from culture to culture.

**Liturgies as identity markers**

Particular liturgical expressions can also become powerful denominational identity markers. Most people know whether they are Catholics or Methodists simply by the way a service is conducted, rather than by the theological peculiarities of their denomination. All this explains why it is so difficult to change or improve on liturgies without encountering resistance and opposition.

Identity can take many forms. Some people need the fixed formulations of Bible texts, hymns, liturgies, and standard catchphrases that have sustained and reassured their faith for decades; others need the ever-fresh impetus of the sermon, yet others want to revel in the ecstasy of the Charismatic service. Just remember: people come to the service with expectations. If they are not fulfilled, they are disappointed, if not alienated.

While all this can be understood, liturgies can become stale observances. I am personally alienated by the obsolete language, the lack of theological rigour, and the piling up of pious formulations in many traditional liturgies. Just look at your baptism liturgy for an example! Liturgies must be fresh, concise, and precise. Under no circumstances must they contain redundant prattle.

For the youth, who have not yet settled into fixed patterns, traditional liturgies can become unbearable. For good reasons, innovations are most readily appreciated by youth groups and resented most by the elderly. It is understandable that many preachers use youth services to introduce more modern models in the congregation. But if introduced sensitively and gradually, even the elderly can begin to appreciate the freshness and vigour of new liturgies and songs.
CHAPTER 17

The trunk and the branches

The sermon within the overall ministry

What do you think?

If you are a full-time minister or priest, what do you consider to be your most basic task? Are you able to devote the necessary time and energy to that particular task, or are you torn between multiple expectations and chores?

What priority would you assign to the preparation of the Sunday service? How much time and energy do you invest in preparing a sermon and a worship service on average if compared with your other tasks?

Should the members of a congregation, who foot the bill of maintaining a minister, also invest their precious time in congregational duties, or expect the minister to run the parish on his/her own?

Should ministers get involved in community affairs outside their parish work? Should they shoulder administrative and maintenance tasks in the parish for which they have not been trained and ordained?

There is no time!

The suggestions contained in this booklet are useless if they (or the alternatives you propose) cannot be applied in practice because there is just no time to do so. This is a challenge inherent in the profession of a minister, priest, or pastor. It is also the case in many other professions. Can we resolve this predicament?

Ministers have multiple spiritual tasks: teaching confirmation classes, running youth camps, conducting Bible studies, preparing helpers for Sunday school, offering seminars on pressing issues such as homosexuality or abortion, visiting the sick, congratulating the elderly on their birthdays, being open for personal pastoral care, conducting memorial and funeral services for the bereaved, and so on.

Apart from that, ministers are de facto leaders of their congregations, even if the practical chores are performed by others. They have to see to it that the administration of the parish runs smoothly, that its financial affairs are above board, that levies are paid, that a leaking roof is repaired, that the church is clean, that the premises are tidy, that the toilets are not blocked.

Moreover, they have to represent the parish in the diocese or the church, often even in the wider community. They must attend council meetings,
conventions, and synods. They may be inundated with correspondence and phone calls. They also have families with their legitimate needs and expectations.

One can also argue that theologians are professionals that can be expected to keep abreast of developments in their field by reading relevant literature and attending conferences or refresher courses. They should also not be oblivious of developments in the society, even if they do not want to become outright activists.

Most importantly, ministers are expected to go about their business with a calm, loving, and reassuring attitude—being perfect examples of mature and well-grounded Christians, rather than stressed and frustrated managers. The popular perception that ministers work only for one hour on Sundays and should have time for whatever task or expectation is thrown at them can be disheartening. In fact, to run a parish conscientiously and effectively can be more demanding than to run a commercial farm or a business.

**Setting one’s priorities**

Frankly speaking, most ministers are overwhelmed by these tasks and simply try to muddle through. In many cases, the Sunday sermon becomes an important casualty of this state of affairs. Rushing from chore to chore during the week, the preacher only finds time for the preparation of the sermon when all the other expectations have been fulfilled. That means on Saturday evenings! If that is the case, one can hardly blame them for providing shallow and routine sermons and boring worship services.

Let us reflect on what could possibly be done to solve this problem. When multiple tasks are important and urgent and there is just not enough time to do justice to all of them, there is only one way out: set priorities! If you set priorities, some things become less important than others. Some opportunities must be sacrificed; some expectations have to be disappointed. Some engagements have to be cancelled; some chores must be delegated.

Which kinds of engagements are important? Most ministers have studied for years in their particular field. Should they be expected to do chores for which they have not been trained and ordained—and that at the expense of the tasks for which they have indeed been trained and ordained? Should they chair meetings, take minutes, run Sunday school outings, balance budgets, repair a broken window, or buy wine for Holy Communion? Yes, they should do all these things gladly if there is nobody else to do them. Yes, no task is below the dignity of a servant of Christ, the great servant. Yes, in the end they are responsible for the smooth running of the parish.

But they should indeed distinguish between key aspects and peripheral aspects of the ministry. And they should distinguish between what they are meant to do and what others could do just as well, or even better. Parishes must understand that they are corporate bodies. Just as a body has many limbs, there are many gifts in a congregation that can be activated to serve the common
purpose (cf. 1 Cor. 12–14). If everybody does his/her small part, nobody needs to be overburdened.

There may be members who are experts in finance, administration, education, law, corporate governance, music, gardening, baking, raising children, etc. They may come to church regularly, pay their dues, and never think of offering their services. These gifts can be mobilised and should be mobilised. The more that people are committed to a cause, the more involved they are in the cause. The more that people become indispensable for a church service or some other function, the more they attend that function.

Obviously, those who volunteer to take on responsibilities will have to reschedule their priorities as well. Time and energy invested in parish work will not be available elsewhere. That is what it takes to belong to a community of believers! Sadly, often the same people are called upon to take on a host of different responsibilities, while others just come and expect to be served. Some even do not bother to do that. Then the few helpers share the predicament of the preacher and become disillusioned and tired.

**The priority of the sermon**

We have to prioritise! But what are the top priorities? Faith is created by the proclaimed Word of God. Therefore, in most churches, the Sunday service is the centre of the life of a Christian community. At least in the Protestant tradition, the proclamation of the Word of God is again the centre of the worship service. We hear God’s Word, and we respond in praise and prayer. The readings underlie, complement, and reinforce the preached Word. The sacraments are the ‘visible Word’, as the Reformers taught us, the Word of God in a ritual form.

Where the Word is not preached, people will not come to faith in Christ. Where there is no faith, there is no church. If believers are no longer fed by the Word, their faith deteriorates, their commitment wanes, and they begin to abscond.

This means that constructing and delivering the sermon, and that in the context of a well-prepared service, is the most important task of the ordained minister. Where there is no ordained minister, it is the most important task of the lay preacher.

So the sermon should receive the energy, the time, and the commitment it deserves. It should not become the victim of an overloaded schedule. But how can that be done? Let me make a few suggestions.

**Beating time constraints**

a) Establish a daily and a weekly routine and stick to it as far as possible. Begin each day with personal prayers. Begin each week with the preparation of the sermon. Yes indeed, make this the first thing! Schedule the week’s and the day’s proceedings. A lot of time and energy is lost when one has to take ad hoc
decisions from moment to moment. Routine structures one’s time and relieves one of constant decision-making, suddenly emerging expectations, unnecessary burdens, and disappointed expectations.

b) This routine should include maintaining one’s spiritual and physical strength. A preacher is a human being, and a human being is not a machine. A sick coastal guard cannot help a drowning person. Yes, Paul taught us that God’s power is strong in human weakness (1 Cor. 1–4; 2 Cor. 12: 9). But that does not mean that we should allow ourselves to become weak when we can help it. Paul was strong enough to travel and preach and sustain himself financially!

Jesus withdrew time and again from the crowd and told his followers to rest awhile when they got tired (cf. Mark 6: 31). To regain their spiritual and physical strength, preachers of the Word of God should get enough sleep; keep a quiet time every morning; be granted a day off, say on Monday; find regular time for the family; take a regular annual holiday. This is as important as healthy food on the table and regular exercise.

c) Let your subconscious work for you! The human brain does not stop working when you switch your attention to other things. Often, a problem solves itself when one sleeps on it. I developed the habit of opening a file for every text on which I had to preach for the next month or so. I then let one of these texts impact me during my daily quiet time and jot down the thoughts that come to mind. It is amazing how a text unfolds its depth, scope, and significance when it simmers in the background while you do other things.

Let the texts float aimlessly in your subconscious over time. Assemble thoughts, aspects, and examples as they come. Allow your psyche to sort them out, to build them into a mosaic or into a logical structure. Jot down provisional schemes and play with them (cut and paste) without binding yourself. In the end, a consistent whole will emerge. And this will be so clear in your mind that you no longer need your written draft on the pulpit or the lectern!

d) Prepare one text properly and then draw on it when engaging in adjacent weekly chores: confirmation class, women’s group, house visits, and so on. As the text is utilised in various contexts, the message gains depth and applicability. Do not be afraid to repeat the insights you gained during the week when you preach on Sunday, because the message will be more developed, balanced, and full-bodied by that time. The congregants can only benefit from a further and more profound explication of the text. In short, consider the proclamation of the Word of God to be the trunk of the tree from which the branches can spread naturally in all directions.

e) It may seem audacious and impractical, yet I want to suggest that the preparation of the sermon and the worship service should be allocated at least one full day a week or an hour every day of the week. Retreat to some place where you are not disturbed (a park, a cafe, or the church hall), switch off your cell phone, and concentrate on the job. If you do that, a lot of other things will have to fall by the wayside, but the benefit for the congregation will certainly be worth the cost.
Which of the above remarks do you find helpful? Which do you consider unrealistic or flawed? What alternative would you suggest in each case?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘Your arguments show that you have never been in the thick of it yourself. You are like a bystander who shouts advice to a drowning person from the safety of the beach!’

b) ‘It is simply not true that ministers are overworked. Compared with serious secular professions, being a priest or minister is a very comfortable and laid-back way of life. Many engage in their own private businesses. Some are plain lazy. They expect to receive a salary and yet be served by their congregants, rather than serving them!’

c) ‘Concentrating on the sermon means concentrating on the glamour that public speaking affords to self-obsessed characters. It would be a more credible witness to Christ if preachers would concentrate on listening and attending to the needs of their fellow human beings in practical terms as Jesus did.’

Lord, there is so much to do. Give me the peace of mind to accept that I cannot do justice to every expectation or task that comes my way. Help me to get my priorities straight. Relieve me of unnecessary stresses and burdens. Give me the strength to do what can be done. Allow me to serve you with confidence and joy.
CHAPTER 18

Christmas and Easter only?

The sermon within the church year

What do you think?

Jot down on a piece of paper what you consider to be the foundational assumptions of the Christian faith. Then check whether they are catered for during the church year from the first Sunday in Advent to the last Sunday of the church year.

Should the pressing issues we face today be formally accommodated in the church year? Think of the burgeoning world population, growing discrepancies in life chances between rich and poor, ecological deterioration, the dangers of technological progress, weapons of mass destruction, ideological and religious conflicts, fundamentalist terrorism, the role of the social media in human relationships, and so on.

Compare the way Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost are celebrated. Are they equally important for churchgoing Christians? What kind of message do they send into the secular world?

The church year is a curious construct we inherited from antiquity. It does not follow the secular year (1 January to 31 December) but begins with the first Advent at the beginning of December. This is an oddity that we inherited from our predecessors centuries ago. Must the church have a year of its own? Probably not but we all got used to it, and it may be pointless to call for its abolition. More important is the rationale, or rather the lack of a clear rationale, that led to its present structure.

Historically, it goes back to the observance of certain festivals in the Jewish faith that emerged and evolved in ancient history. Some elements are derived from Roman, Greek or Germanic culture. In the Christian churches, it developed different versions: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, etc. We do not need to go into detail. What matters is how a preacher should deal with its present framework. In this chapter, I mention a few problems that the church year presents to the preacher and suggest ways to deal with them.

The uncanny world of the festival

Festivals and rituals are not about evidence or plausibility, but about entering an emotional atmosphere. Stars, candles, bells, Christmas trees,
sentimental songs, nativity plays—these things do not have a meaning that can be formulated, that inform and enlighten. They are triggers that evoke precious emotions ingrained in our memories. Think of Fasching, Oktoberfest, Sinterklaas, and Carnival in Europe, or Valentine’s Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving in America. Think of the many traditional rituals in Africa.

In a way, they are like modern art. To criticise Picasso or Chagall for their unrealistic depictions and lack of coherence misses the point. Allow a painting to work on your subconscious! Or popular music. Or modern poetry. The words do not necessarily have to say something concrete and significant that can be explained and understood. You also do not have to be a believer to celebrate the Passover, undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca, or enjoy a Christmas service. A ritual can develop a life of its own.

Christmas is the most obvious example. Commerce has long seized and re-functioned the emotional appeal of the festival to enhance sales—and that with the most sophisticated psychological means. The nativity narratives suggest that Christ was born into a situation of homelessness, insecurity, and poverty, but commerce transformed it into a tool to whip up the crudest instincts of greed and overindulgence, throwing countless people into debt, want, and violence.

The church can hardly compete with this massive onslaught. But it can try to counterbalance this aberration with a more wholesome and redemptive alternative, especially for those who cannot make sense of the projected meaning, who are uneasy about the abuse or hard-pressed by the imposed obligations going along with it. More important, Christian rituals do represent the tenuous link between present experience and the Christian tradition, and that tradition can again become a witness to what really matters in the Christian faith.

So do not try to deprecate the ritual but use it to point to God’s gift in Christ and its potential consequences: the temporary uncoupling from daily routine, the unburdening from heavy responsibilities, the refreshment and enhancement of relationships with peers and friends, and simply bringing joy into the lives of others.

A festival of goodwill, family cohesion, peace, the joy of children and other dependent persons, using the universal symbols of light and darkness, cannot be wrong, even where it is not linked with the Christian nativity story. Proclaim a sound Christian meaning, check what is acceptable in the tradition from a Christian point of view, keep the best, delegitimate the worst. Be tolerant and do not destroy the little goodwill and joy people may be able to generate.

**Problematic aspects of the church year**

We are so used to the church year that we simply take it for granted. However, the way the church year is structured is not without repercussions for the shape of the living faith of a congregation that follows its yearly rhythm. As it is now, it is very unbalanced. Some aspects are overemphasised, while others fall by the wayside altogether. Let me mention some of the most important issues.
a) The church year is structured around two incidents in the life history of Jesus that are considered fundamental for the Christian faith: his birth on the one hand and his death and resurrection on the other. They reflect two competing theological emphases: incarnation and regeneration. Each of them has a preceding and a subsequent period, together covering a great part of the church year. The rest of the year falls under the broad heading of the Trinity. The latter is like a basket in which all other concerns are deposited. Is this an optimal arrangement?

b) What do we do with the four Sundays of Advent? *Advent* is a Latin word meaning coming, appearance, approach, or arrival, used for instance to mark the arrival of the Roman emperor in a town. In our case, it refers to the arrival of Christ. The history of this tradition is quite involved and does not have to concern us here. It was often taken as a period of fasting to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

All kinds of biblical future expectations are assembled in this period: a variety of Old Testament prophecies taken out of their historical contexts, the announcement of the Kingdom of God by John the Baptist, the message of the angel to the virgin Mary that she would conceive, the expectation of the second coming of Christ at the end of times and so on. The tacit assumption seems to be that all these expectations point to the birth of Jesus that is about to be celebrated at Christmas.

But is it historically true that all these texts point to the birth of Christ? Is it logical? Is it theologically credible? Are we still in the time of waiting? Has Christ not come? Is the point not that time and again, Christ wants to arrive in our lives and transform it from within? Is that not linked to the coming of the Holy Spirit to us here and now?

Is the logical precondition of the birth of Christ not the fact that this world and humanity as part of it actually exist, thus God’s *creation*? Is the presupposition of redemption in Christ not a world and a humanity in need of *redemption*? The question is whether we can provide the congregation with a

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2 A Word and Worship team in South Africa offers the following rationale: ‘The first half of the Liturgical Year comprises the two great cycles of Incarnation (Advent, Christmas and Epiphany) and Redemption (Lent, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost). The focus of this part of the year is on the life and work of Jesus Christ in salvation. The remainder of the year reflects on the way in which this salvation is worked out through the Church in the world today as she seeks to equip people to serve the world in our own generation’ (General guidelines for contributors, 2016, unpublished). It would be interesting to reflect on the theological assumptions underlying this tradition. Are incarnation and redemption of equal weight? Do certain traditions (e.g. Eastern and Western) focus more on the one or the other? Why is the creation omitted? Why is the new creation—Holy Spirit and eschatological kingdom—not mentioned? We will discuss these issues below.
more plausible and coherent picture of what Advent stands for and what it could mean for us in existential and social terms.

c) The birth of Jesus receives the same emphasis as the death and resurrection of Christ. Is this theologically warranted? In the New Testament, the birth of Jesus is found only in the (legendary) introductions to the gospels of Matthew and Luke and nowhere else. They also do not agree. The main Gospel traditions (Mark, Q, and John) begin the story of Jesus of Nazareth with his baptism by John. This is when he was proclaimed the Son of God and empowered by the Spirit to embark on his messianic mission.

The prologue of John’s Gospel speaks of the ‘incarnation’ of the ‘Logos’, but that is a different trend of thought, namely the manifestation of God’s redeeming love in the ‘flesh’; that is, in the life of this particular human person, Jesus of Nazareth. Significantly, the prologue applies the motif of the virgin birth to the believers (cf. John 1: 12–13) rather than to Jesus. However, what Jesus and the believers share is the gift of the Spirit (cf. John 1: 33; 3: 1–8). The rest of the New Testament does not mention his birth and his childhood at all. So how important is it really?

The festival has pagan roots. It marked the turn of the seasons in the northern hemisphere at the end of December. In the coldest and darkest days of winter, one looked forward to the approaching spring. The sun began to return. In the Roman Empire, it was celebrated as the feast of the indomitable sun (Sol Invictus), which was one of the gods worshipped at the time. In Germanic cultures, big bonfires greeted the impending return of the sun. The evergreen fir tree symbolised life in the midst of winter, when all other plants had lost their foliage. It was basically a celebration of light in a dark world.

The medieval church declared the 25th of December the date when the birth of Christ was to be celebrated. It was part of the attempt to Christianise pagan rituals. The message was that Christ, rather than the sun-god, is the true ‘light’. Differential developments in the Eastern and the Western churches have led to the existence of two festivals for the arrival of the Saviour: Christmas and Epiphany. The notion of ‘light’ still constitutes the overwhelming emotional appeal of the Christmas season. In Europe, November is a dark, rainy, and cheerless month. In December, cities are drenched in artificial light. There are Christmas trees and candles all over.

The motif of the newly born baby in the manger, the young innocent mother, and the pensive caring father added another emotional appeal. Christmas became a festival for the children and the family. The ‘wise men’ are reported to have given gifts to the baby, so children received gifts. Receiving gifts was still something very special, even in my childhood. These three motifs, the Christmas tree with its glitter, the baby in the manger, and the increasing abundance of goodies, led to strong nostalgic feelings even among those who never go to church on normal Sundays. In my family, Christmas was exceptionally important, yet without any commitment to the Christian faith whatsoever.
The custom to exchange gifts turned the festival into the most important season for global capitalism. Companies grant their employees a thirteenth salary cheque. Shops begin with their advertisements and decorations earlier and earlier in the year. ‘Silent Night’, ‘O Come All Ye Faithful’, and other emotional melodies blare from loudspeakers wherever you go.

In short, Christmas is no longer rooted in the Christian faith but in the quest for profit and pleasure. It is celebrated across the globe, regardless of culture or religious conviction. Vast sums of money are spent and made. In contrast, Good Friday and Easter, arguably the most important Christian festivals in theological terms, have become an occasion to enjoy a long weekend at the beach. In short, paganism has repossessed its property. How do we deal with that?

d) **Pentecost**, which celebrates the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the Body of Christ, is allocated only one Sunday in the church year. This is odd. In the New Testament, the motif of the gift of the Spirit represents the empowerment of the church by Christ to continue his mission in the world. In Paul, being ‘in the Spirit’ is the same as being ‘in Christ’. In John’s Gospel, the risen Christ is present in the form of the Spirit. In the classical Trinitarian doctrine, the Spirit is allocated as much importance as the Father and the Son. How could it ever have been marginalised in this way?

The under-emphasis of this foundational aspect of our faith has had serious repercussions for the formation of the Christian faith. Concentrating on ritual or the Word of God, main-line churches often do not really know what to do with the Spirit. Churches in the Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions picked up the slack and mushroomed, but often with a rather one-sided emphasis on ecstatic experiences, rather than on the presence of Christ as the foundation of the church and its comprehensive mission in the world. How can we regain the full significance of the gift of the Spirit?

e) No Sunday is allocated to the topic of God as Creator of the universe. That is simply astonishing! According to the biblical faith, God is the ultimate Source and Destiny of the reality we experience and of which we are a part. According to the Israelite tradition, it is the Creator of the universe that entered into a covenant with Israel. The gospel tradition says that it is the God of Israel, thus the Creator, who revealed and enacted his benevolence in Jesus Christ.

The classical doctrine of the Trinity assigns the same weight to the Creator as it does to the Redeemer and the Spirit. But because of its meagre appearance

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3 The separation of the gift of the Spirit from the Easter event is not based on history, but on the fifty days between two major Jewish festivals, Passover and First fruits. We find it only in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles. Luke presents us with a sequence of periods in salvation history: the time of Israel, the time of Jesus of Nazareth, the time of the risen Christ, the time of the church, and the time of the eschatological end projected into the far future. John’s Gospel, in contrast, identifies the gift of the Spirit with the resurrection and elevation of Christ.
in the yearly routine of the church our ideas about God as the Creator of the universe have remained vague, rudimentary, and uncertain. Theologians, ordained ministers, and lay preachers simply spend too little research and reflection on this topic. They hardly ever preach on it.

Because too little effort is spent on clarifying and developing faith in the Creator many believers and many leading theologians remain stuck in pre-scientific assumptions that are no longer tenable. Congregations do not know how to deal with the relation between the biblical creation narratives and the scientific theory of evolution. In some fundamentalist Christian circles, it is believed that empirical evidence and scientific insight are based on the deception of the devil.

Believers also do not know how to relate their faith in a Creator to the pressing issues of the worsening ecological deterioration of the planet and the systematic destruction of our natural resource base. This is really serious! If in our consciousness, God is no longer the Creator of the reality that we actually experience and that the sciences explore, faith hovers off into the unreal space of an obsolete tradition. Scientifically informed people dismiss faith in the Creator as a mythological fairy tale. This cannot leave us unconcerned.

f) The message of God’s suffering, liberating, and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable (my rendering of the doctrine of justification by grace accepted in faith, rather than by human achievement or excellent disposition) is not given the prominence in the church year that its importance merits. This message, proclaimed and enacted by Jesus, sparked the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his time. It is the centre of Paul’s theology. It is the message of John’s writing. It is the ‘article on which the church stands or falls’, according to Protestant theology. As it is, it just appears as one of the many issues dealt with during the second half of the year. This shows not only that the centre of the gospel had become obscure in medieval times, but also that the church year was not impacted sufficiently by the Reformation.

g) Only one Sunday is allocated to the Trinity. The Sundays after Trinity do not speak of the Trinity. If sufficient attention is given to the Creator, Christ, and the Spirit, one Sunday to show how these three elements are connected may be enough. So that is not the problem.

The problem is that the classic doctrine of the Trinity was formulated in terms of Hellenistic metaphysics rather than faith experiences or biblical texts. This formulation no longer makes sense to our contemporaries. Three persons who interact with each other within one God—what could that possibly mean? As it stands, it is an insoluble paradox.

Recently the idea of a Season of Creation (encompassing mainly the month of September) gained prominence in ecumenical (Catholic and Protestant) circles. Hopefully this venture becomes an enduring and evolving tradition in the worldwide church.
Atheists laugh it off. Muslims and Jews are scandalised by it. Most members of the congregation do not know what to make of it. They believe that it is a mystery that has been revealed, that has to be accepted, respected and worshipped, rather than understood. Many preachers skirt around the issue. That is clearly not a solution. We have to grapple with the meaning of the doctrine in real earnest and come up with an interpretation that makes sense.

h) The allocation of only one Sunday to the topic of eschatology at the end of the church year is quite inadequate. In late post-exilic Judaism, apocalyptic visions emerged as a response to the humiliation, misery, and persecution of the ‘people of God’. They generated both excitement and apprehension. In New Testament times, the coming Kingdom of God was the centre of Jewish and Christian expectations. John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul proclaimed the Kingdom of God to be imminent.

In the meantime, two millennia have gone by. The hotly expected great transition between the present age and the age to come did not materialise. The motif of personal transformation shifted to the prospect of an eternity spent in the fires of hell, which undermined the proclamation of God’s redeeming love in Christ. The motif of cosmic transformation shifted to the distant future and lost its relevance. The eagerly awaited Kingdom of God became the institutional church.

For people informed by modern science, it is no longer a tenable expression of the hope that is in us. But what then would be a more appropriate version for our times? Many preachers simply continue with the classical eschatological topics as if nothing had happened. Because so much ignorance and uncertainty reigns in this respect, eschatology has led to most inappropriate ideas and actions right through the history of the church.

How often have people not developed theories about the signs of the times and calculated the date of the end of the world on the basis of the symbolic numbers found in the Book of Revelation! How many have been misled into irrational and detrimental behaviour as a result! We simply have to devote more attention to this important topic.

What can we do about this situation?

It is probably futile for established churches, let alone single preachers, to try and change the structure of the church year. But its contents can certainly be transformed! Preachers must simply give much more attention to the issues mentioned above. This is not the place to go into the profound theological reflections that seem to be called for. I have done that in other publications.5 I

5 For a concise treatment, see my book Informed by Science, Involved by Christ (2013); for a more elaborate reflection, see my work Faith in Christ Today, volumes I and II (2016).
have also offered a few proposals in chapter 21. For now, let me simply make the following practical suggestions:

1. We could devote the *Advent* season to the divine creation of the reality that we experience. Before we can be redeemed, we must first live. Before the world can be transformed, it must first exist. The Old Testament stories of the calling of Abraham and the covenant between Yahweh and Israel hark back to the origin of the universe as a creative act of God. In the New Testament, the Father of Jesus Christ is taken to be the Creator of the universe. This universe is experienced as being in dire need of redemption and transformation. Creation is the true prehistory of the appearance of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world.

   So this would be an appropriate motif for the expectation of the coming of Christ. It would give space to the important and overlooked motif of creation in the church year. We can highlight the ambiguous character of this reality that calls for a resolution: there is so much destruction, injustice, suffering, and death in the world that God has created and continues to create. This experience points us to what happened in Christ: The Creator has unconditionally benevolent intentions and invites us to join him in his redeeming work. The God who manifested his love in Christ is the very God who is the Creator and Lord of the universe.

2. For me, *Christmas* presents one of the greatest challenges of a serious preacher. On the one hand, you do not want to alienate those who have come to church, even if only this once during the year. They want to bathe, once again, in this fairy-tale emotional atmosphere. They want ritual and legends and myths and sentimental hymns. They want stars, angels, little bells, Christmas trees, the infant in the manger, the youthful mother, the ox and the ass, the shepherds kneeling, the kings bringing gifts.

   It is all part of a ‘holy narrative’ that is not meant to be an empirical-historical account or make logical sense. It is meant to conjure up a glittering, peaceful, and joyful alternative to the dreary, conflictual, and frustrating world of everyday life. The rationale of celebrations of all kinds is to create a festive emotional atmosphere that touches the heart rather than the mind.

   You do not want to spoil the festive mood of families and the glowing expectations of the children. You do not want to undermine the general sense of peace, prosperity, and happiness in the broader society. If you are too factual or too critical or too theological, you will spoil their festive mood, and they are even less likely to come again.

   On the other hand, you represent Christ. You are called upon to lead the marginal members and the religiously indifferent who come to church on that one day to encounter the living Christ as a foundation for their lives. You are also called upon to point out the deceptions and abuses of the festival as market stints, the hollowness of secular happiness, and its dangers of leading to violence and wastage.
What about using the prologue to John’s Gospel as the key to what Christmas means, rather than the narratives of the birth of Jesus? According to John, ‘incarnation’ means that we encounter the creative and redeeming love of the living God in the life and ministry of this particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was empowered by the Spirit of God to act as the Son of God, that is, God’s authorised representative on earth.\(^6\) And as we accept Christ, we share in the new life of Christ in fellowship with God, as those who are born of God or reborn in the Spirit (cf. John 1: 12–13; 3: 3–10).

3. We could structure the time between Christmas and the passion of Christ in such a way that it highlights the significance of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. This ministry centred on a new, healed relationship between God and humanity. Jesus proclaimed and enacted the God of Israel as a God of unconditional redeeming love, rather than a God who insists on meticulous compliance with a complicated and problematic code of laws.

   It is his ministry that caused the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his time, which ended in his crucifixion. It is God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable that makes the Christian faith Christian. It is God’s unconditional love that makes faith in the biblical God accessible to all human beings, whatever their culture, their gender, their social status, their race, and their failures. The significance of the coming of Christ is the manifestation of God’s redemptive love not only for the individual believer, but for the family, community, society, and the natural world!

   Let me mention some aspects of this momentous watershed in the history of convictions. The image of the king as Son of God, that is, as the representative of God, changed from that of a ruthless dictator (cf. Ps. 2) to that of a servant (cf. Mark 10: 35–45). Israelite exclusiveness (cf. Deut. 7) changed to the inclusiveness of the Christian church (cf. Eph. 2). The sacrifice offered to God by humans to reconcile God changed into God’s sacrifice to humans to reconcile humans. God’s conditional acceptance based on the covenant law of Moses (cf. Deut. 28) changed into God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable (the parable of the prodigal son, or the conversion of Zacchaeus).\(^7\)

4. The Sundays after Easter, which clarify the meaning of the resurrection of Christ lead us directly to Pentecost; that is, to God’s mission in the world. Highlight the fact that for Paul, Luke, and John, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Christ permeating, liberating, transforming, and empowering the Body of Christ, the community of believers, for their life and mission in this world.

5. Trinity Sunday can thus act as a kind of heading that launches us into the detail of God’s mission. In chapter 21, I offer an interpretation of the Trinity that

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\(^6\) Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man, Messiah (the Anointed) are Jewish royal titles proclaiming the king to be God’s representative on earth.

is more in line with current ways of thinking. Here it suffices to say that once we translate the doctrine from ontological terms (terms that speak of ‘being’) into experiential terms (terms that speak of events and actions), it makes perfect sense. Then the question is no longer what God is, but what God does: We experience the creative power of God in the world around us, the redeeming love of God as manifest in Jesus Christ, and the creative and redemptive presence of God at work in the community of believers. It is like a motorcar: it is built according to technical specifications, it has a purpose, and it is being used by its owners.

The rest of the church year gives us the opportunity to devote different Sunday services to special topics such as HIV/AIDS, violence against women and children, youth, ecology, remembrance of fallen soldiers, labour relations, poverty and employment, and so on. Because the preacher cannot be expected to be an expert on all these topics, knowledgeable and engaged laypersons should present the issues in detail, while the preacher provides the theological motivation to tackle them.

We often think of mission as carrying the Word of God to the unreached. This is surely important. However, God’s mission is much more profound and comprehensive than that. It begins with transformation of our own personal lives, then the transformation of the church, the family, the community, the society. The Word of God wants to respond to the problems of science, technology, commerce, and the consumer culture. It wants to impact political goals and programmes. The congregation must be led out of the narrow confines of personal piety into the world that God loves and that yearns for redemption.

6. Devote a full month at the end of the church year to the various aspects of eschatology. What do the words ‘death’ and ‘resurrection’ refer to in the New Testament: biological transformation or spiritual renewal? What does the death of the ‘old Adam’ and participation in the new life of Christ mean in the theology of Paul? What does the ‘last judgement’ mean in the existential terms of John’s Gospel? What does the biblical vision of a new world without injustice, suffering, and death mean for our practical lives and our society?

Last but not least, what are the challenges of modern science to the pre-scientific assumptions found in the Bible, and how should we respond to these challenges? Science does not allow for a bodiless soul or a future world without suffering, pain, and death. To make sense to people informed by scientific insights and their own life experiences, we must unpack the message of apocalyptic visions and repackage it in contemporary patterns of thought.

This is difficult, but it can be done! And if we don’t tackle this task, we leave our congregations in the lurch. My tentative proposal is that eschatology is about God’s vision (and our vision) of comprehensive optimal well-being, which translates into God’s concern (and our concern) for any deficiency in well-being in any dimension of life. This vision moves on as we approach it, opening ever-new vistas, challenges, and opportunities, and invites us to work for a more acceptable future in the name of a loving God.
What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘The liturgical year and the liturgy of the Christian tradition are like an oak tree that has grown over centuries. Generations have rested in its shade. You want to fell it and replace it with a whimsy thorn bush of your own choice, which has never yielded comfort and relief to anybody. Preach what you like, but do not touch what has been ours since childhood!’

b) ‘Continue with the stale traditions of the past and you will lose the younger generation for good! Rather go to the beach with the youth over the Easter weekend. Organise events that involve their youthful energies and discussions about topics that concern their lives, such as drugs, sex, and digital technology!’

c) ‘You want to abolish or change the outward contraptions of the church that have already become meaningless many centuries ago. But then you might just as well abandon the obsolete assumptions that linger on within the church, such as the fatherless birth of Christ, the death of Christ for our sins, his resurrection and ascension into heavenly glory, the pouring out of the divine Spirit and the coming of the Kingdom of God—none of which are based on evidence or sound reasoning.’

Lord, let me be grateful for the many generations that developed the traditions we have inherited. Let me rejoice that our mothers and fathers in the faith managed to construct their spiritual home in particular way. Let me respect their wisdom.

Yet give me the openness and the freedom to cater for the needs of the contemporary generation, especially the youth. Grant me the authority and self-confidence of a leader to adjust and innovate so that we all feel at home in your church.
F. CREATIVE FLEXIBILITY
CHAPTER 19

Types of sermon design

What do you think?

The standard sermon in many churches is a talk of 20–30 minutes with three or four main points, as described in chapter 11. Do you think that this model calls for drastic revision, or at least for some variation? If so, can you make a few suggestions?

The standard sermon in almost all churches is prepared solely by the preacher in the solitude of his/her study and delivered from a high pulpit to a silent congregation. Do you think that other persons should be involved as well?

Ever since feudal times, the congregation is supposed to listen to God’s Word, take it to heart, and go home without question or discussion. Do you think that this approach is appropriate in an age of equal dignity, human rights, and democracy?

It is usually taken for granted that the preacher knows his/her job. But have ordinary believers not also gained valid spiritual and theological insights over decades of involvement in the Christian community?

Do preachers know enough of the lives and lifeworlds of their congregants to apply their spiritual insights to everyday realities in their secular contexts?

What is the issue?

We have discussed a classic sermon design in chapter 11. It is simple, well structured, and easy to remember. But should we stick to this one pattern for the rest of our career?

On the one hand, using the same basic liturgical framework and sermon structure Sunday after Sunday has the advantage that the congregation knows what to expect. You feel at home in a house if the furniture is not moved around or replaced too often.

On the other hand, a deadening routine makes worship services tedious and uninviting, especially if the order of worship, the language used, and the topics covered belong to past history. Variation and innovation are the spice of life! Maybe sermons, at the very least, should not follow the same boring pattern throughout the year.

Once preachers have become comfortable in the classic style discussed in chapter 11, they can become innovative without losing their bearings. In this chapter, I describe a few other ways a sermon can be designed and presented. As you will soon discover, they are not all equally suitable or advisable under all circumstances.
We can distinguish broadly between monologue sermons where the preacher is the only speaker, responsive approaches where the congregants respond to what the preacher has to say, and collaborative approaches where more people are involved in the design and the delivery itself.

A. Monological approaches

1. The hotchpotch sermon

In this type, the preacher assembles all kinds of ideas that come to mind when reading the text, sometimes even going far beyond the text, without attempting to bring them into any logical order or to convey an overall message. Sometimes random associations lead into ever-new directions. Some preachers do not even bother to use the text but pour out their resentments or their indignation about current issues as if they were standing around the braaivleis, or bombard the congregation with shallow moral precepts.

This kind of sermon betrays inadequate preparation or no preparation at all. Anybody can assemble a few thoughts that come to mind when reading a text. At best, the listeners may pick up an interesting thought or be struck by the spontaneity of the preacher, but they will hardly discern, let alone remember, any central message. At best, they will remember a few snippets that they have picked up. They may also ignore and forget what they heard. At worst, they may become angry for being dished out such rubbish and not pitch up again.

But has this kind of approach not become acceptable in post-modern times? One can compare it with the collage in modern art. Here the artist throws all kinds of motives, colours, shapes, and materials into the mix, the weirder the better. When standing back, one may get some kind of impression of the whole, but in most cases, it is hard to say what the painter actually wanted to express, assuming that he/she wanted to express something in the first place. Because of its lack of meaningful communication, this kind of sermon is not suitable for the proclamation of the Word of God.

2. The pick-and-choose sermon

This is a slightly more acceptable variation of the hotchpotch sermon. The preacher may hunt for good ideas from various texts used during the service—the gospel, the epistle, the Old Testament reading, the psalm, the sermon text as found in lectionaries or even the hymns—and throw them all into the stew, regardless of their various historical contexts and original intentions.

The preacher may also consult popular books that provide examples, legends, anecdotes, and jokes that are meant to make the sermon more interesting. Random examples from ordinary life are usually added.

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8 The South African word for a barbeque.
This kind of sermon is very common. Depending on the ingenuity of the preacher, it may contain theologically valid thoughts, useful applications, and spiritual substance. But the historical background and the intended meaning of the texts are not heeded; what matters is what speaks to me. It is in-front-of-the-text reading as described in chapter 8. This is the way the Bible functions among the laity anyway most of the time. But perhaps a trained theologian can do better.

3. The thematic sermon

In this case, a central concern is formulated, stated as such in the beginning, and then analysed into three or four aspects, each of which forms the topic of a part of the main body of the sermon. The central concern and its sub-topics are summarised very briefly at the end. We have discussed this type in chapter 11.

As mentioned above, this was the standard procedure in Protestant churches for centuries. If done well, this approach presents a logical structure and a limited number of topics that can easily be understood and remembered. The danger is that it can become pedantic, producing a dry, lifeless lesson without spontaneity and vitality. One has to guard against this danger.

4. The theological lecture

This method is similar to the thematic sermon, only that the message is not necessarily taken from the Bible. You can give a theological exposition, for instance, on the doctrine of the Trinity. This type of a sermon is not geared to the proclamation of the good news, but to education in the Christian faith. It is important for the congregation to understand, for instance, the relation between creation and evolution. Most preachers include a little of this type in their normal sermons.

A mature congregation, whose members are interested in theological thought and who have unanswered questions, may be grateful for an occasional lecture of this type. However, to cater for this need, should one not rather convene a meeting where a lecture is followed by an open discussion? On the pulpit, the method should be used sparingly. A congregation is not a class of students at the seminary or a group of colleagues at a conference.

5. The spiral sermon

Here the preacher comes back to the same central message again and again, each time in another variation or application, but following a general direction. It is like a spiral winding up around the central topic, moving forward and picking up ever-new aspects on the way.

This sermon is akin to the chorus. Not surprisingly, one often finds it in traditional cultures, for instance in African rural congregations. In a chorus, the singers get more and more excited the more often the chorus is sung, dancing and gesticulating in abandoned enjoyment of rhythm and melody.
If it expresses a profound meaning that is appropriated by the singers, one can be sure that the message of the chorus will be remembered for a long time. It simply continues singing in your head. Similarly, the message of the spiral sermon may accompany the listeners throughout the week. However, in cultures more geared to progress and novelty, listeners may find this method tedious and boring. Not to ramble on and on demands careful preparation.

6. The homily

In the homily, the preacher goes from verse to verse or from argument to argument or from concept to concept found in the text, explaining and applying their meanings as the sermon proceeds.

Again, this is a very common approach. Its advantage is that the congregants learn to read their Bibles at a more profound level than they would normally do, taking heed of the details of the text and the intricacies of its historical setting.

The disadvantage is that the sermon becomes a Bible study, rather than the proclamation of the message in response to contemporary needs and predicaments. Of course, one can always build in the latter as one proceeds.

7. The paraphrase

This method is closely related to the homily. The preacher simply retells the story or the argument of the text in his/her own words using terms from everyday life in doing so. Instead of speaking of Christ as the king of the world, you can speak of him as a future president presiding over the United Nations. Or you can say that the fortifications of Jericho were not demolished by heavy artillery, but by a barrage of sound waves. But is this a credible statement?

The use of contemporary language may succeed in bringing home the message forcefully. But it is a demanding task. It presupposes that you have understood the text very deeply and found valid contemporary parallels. In many cases, the situation in which a text was written differs substantially from contemporary life. Royal authority (Christ the King) does not fit into a democratic social order. City fortifications do not tumble down when trumpets sound.

Moreover, the congregation may not immediately understand the parallel. There may be a clear similarity between peer pressure exerted by youth groups and the Mosaic Law as understood by Paul. But it is not likely that the average listeners would discern the relation on their own. So one would have to go beyond mere paraphrase and include a few explanations to make the message of the text truly relevant to the present situation.

8. The narrative sermon

If the text presents us with a story, the preacher can simply follow the sequence of events in the story, making comments as the story progresses. It is
also possible to take a story from outside the text, say from contemporary news, fiction, or personal experience, and use it to drive home the intended message.

The advantage of the narrative sermon is that stories communicate a message more forcefully and are remembered more easily than abstract concepts or logical derivations. Just compare Paul’s deliberations on law and grace with the parable of the prodigal son! It may seem to be an easy kind of sermon and untrained preachers use it extensively.

However, it can be quite tricky. There are various types of narrative found in the Bible: historical accounts, legends, parables, myths, poetry, metaphors, and so on. It is important that the preacher states what kind of story it is, so that a myth is not mistaken as history, or a parable as a literal account of what once happened or will happen in the future.

Premodern cultures, as found in biblical times, prefer narratives over abstract terms. A myth or a parable renders a deeply felt truth in the form of a story. It is not meant to communicate facts but meaning, and that in the form of symbolic representation. I have discussed this before.

When I told my students that the parable of the prodigal son never happened, but that Jesus made it up to convey the central meaning of the gospel, I met with quite some consternation. Some students thought that if it did not happen, Jesus told a lie, and so the Bible cannot be trusted. So it is imperative that the congregation becomes progressively more enlightened about the different linguistic forms in which the message can be expressed.

9. The historical sermon

In this type, a series of events in real history is used to demonstrate the historical dynamic of the Word of God in its response to changing situations and worldviews. For instance, when preaching on Romans 1: 16 (the power of salvation lies in the gospel, accepted in faith, rather than in the law), one can tell the story of how Martin Luther panicked about the prospect of his eternal condemnation and then came to his ground shaking discovery of the gospel of grace. This experience can then be applied to present experiences of failure and rejection.

When preaching on Mark 10: 35–45 (leadership based on service, as opposed to leadership based on domination as in Psalm 2), one can show how the understanding of Christ as an emperor during the early Middle Ages led to the abuse of power in the form of political and spiritual oppression, self-glorification, crusades, colonial conquests, and the persecution of heretics and Jews. Then one can apply it by calling for responsible congregational and political leadership patterns today.

When preaching on Acts 8: 26–40 (Philip’s conversion of the Ethiopian), one could go through the stages of the Israelite-Jewish faith from Abraham (the chosen family head), to the Sinaitic covenant (the chosen people of God), the strict isolation of the Jews after the exile (the Jews as universal privileged elite) and finally the gospel of God’s unconditional acceptance in Christ, causing
Christian missionaries to go to the ends of the earth and invite everybody into the fold.

In all these cases, one must (a) get one’s historical facts right, and (b) avoid a judgemental attitude. Include yourself and the congregation among those whose views must be corrected.

10. The monologue collage

As we have seen above, the collage is an approach used by modern art and the advertising industry. We also find it in education. You take a pair of scissors, cut out pictures, headings, and advertisements from old newspapers and magazines, and paste them together in suggestive patterns. This is often done in youth work. We shall come to its cooperative application below.

When applied to a monologue sermon, the term refers to a loose arrangement of different elements from different sources: Bible verses, hymns, quotations from great Christian leaders, daily experiences, common sense, and so on. The aim is not to construct a logically consistent argument, but to create an overall impression or an atmosphere of meaning. The message may remain hidden in the seemingly chaotic but suggestive material, but it may also become overt, even splashy.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this part of the chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) Whatever the type, a sermon delivered from the pulpit is a display of arrogance. The idea that somebody is entitled to present his/her personal opinions, beliefs and prejudices to an audience in the name of God, without allowing for critical questions or contributions from the listeners, belongs to the Middle Ages!

b) ‘If you begin to experiment with different kinds of worship services and sermons, the few people who still feel at home in their old traditions will be alienated and leave as well!’

c) ‘You presuppose a level of creativity and ingenuity that the average preacher cannot be expected to muster. Let them do what they can do reasonably well, rather than mess with what is beyond their capacity!’

Dear Lord, thank you that there are so many exciting ways to convey your message. Give me the courage and the curiosity to experiment with new ways. But let my prime concern be at all times to find the way that communicates a particular message best.
B. Responsive approaches

The monologue type of sermons has the disadvantage that the congregation is not given the opportunity to reflect on what is being said, ask questions, or share their own insights. Especially preachers who use machine-gun rhetoric (high-speed talking) leave no time to reflect on the message and let it sink in.

One should not forget that a sermon is worth as much as it can be appropriated by the listeners. If they cannot bring it home to their own lives, it is lost, even if they may be impressed by the preacher’s eloquence. To obviate this problem, one should allow the congregation to respond critically and constructively to the sermon. There are various ways of doing that.

11. The guided meditation

Here one offers first one guiding thought derived from the text and asks the congregation to reflect on it prayerfully and silently for a while. Then one offers another thought, and so on. I have used this method with great benefit at a theological college where students were overfed with theological material and needed to catch up in their spiritual life. This approach requires a lot of preparation. It should not be used as a way out when the preacher was unable to prepare his/her sermon properly. Here are a few guidelines:

a) The guiding thoughts must be short. They must also be clear. Because you say so little, what you say must be thought out carefully. Here is an example: ‘When the father (of the prodigal son) accepted his wayward son without posing conditions or making demands, does this mean that the life of the son never changed?’

b) The inputs must contain brief expositions of the sub-message to be reflected upon. Here is an example, again on the parable: ‘God can either demand that a sinful person be transformed before God will accept her, or God can accept her first and transform her in God’s fellowship. What do you think does God do with you?’

c) The suggestions must be non-directive and open-ended. The congregation members must be challenged to fill in the detail themselves from their own faith, thought, or experience. Here is an example: ‘What would you do when your teenage son or daughter suddenly gets a crazy idea and embarks upon a dangerous pursuit?’

d) The periods for meditation must not be longer than about one or two minutes each. Most people are not used to stay silent for longer periods of time and do not know how to use them. Then they get bored, and their thoughts wander off elsewhere. At a retreat, the silent times can be much longer.

e) Hand out the guidelines with spaces in between on a sheet of paper and invite the congregants to write down their responses. If there is enough time, these responses can then be shared and discussed.
12. The staggered sermon

This kind of sermon proceeds in short well-defined steps with pauses for reflection in-between. The organist or band can play a quiet piece in the interval. One can also ask the congregation to sing a verse after each section of the sermon. The content of the verse must fit the thrust of the sub-message just presented. The hymns used should be well known so that the atmosphere of concentration is not disturbed by the activity of looking them up the verses in the hymn book. To project them on the screen is even better.

One method is simply to stop preaching and begin singing a verse from a popular hymn. Usually the congregation will fall in. One can also ask the congregation to meditate and pray in silence for a short while after each section of the sermon. As in the guided meditation, these times of silence should be short because most people do not know how to fill in empty time.

One can also intersperse the sections of the sermon with brief dramatizations. Again, they must be short and to the point. Short dramatizations can easily leave the congregation bewildered or disturbed. So they must be prepared carefully, be entirely clear, and not steal the thunder. I suggest that the action should consist of silent but meaningful gestures, say a downhearted actor is embraced by a friend.

One can also stagger a sermon by addressing different groups in the congregation in different parts of the sermon. I repeat my warning that direct references to actual cases or persons can be embarrassing, if not insulting. People also do not like to be addressed personally when in a crowd. So this kind should be applied with utmost care, if at all.

If one applies the message to different groups, say men and women, employers and workers, young and old, blacks and whites, one must be tactful. While people are conscious of their collective identities and may appreciate being addressed as such, they do not like to be put into preconceived boxes, such as gender roles, or traditional cultures. Let them rather come to their own conclusions on the basis of the text.

Say you preach on loving your neighbour as you love yourself. Then you ask shareholders whether they are concerned only about their bottom line, or also about the workers who lose their jobs when the enterprise is rationalised. You ask the workers whether their demand for higher wages goes at the expense of work-seekers.

You can ask the men whether they notice that their wives may be more worn out and tired than they are themselves when they come home and help them with the household chores. You ask soldiers preparing for war whether they realise that believers in the enemy camp also want God to be on their side. The same is true for football teams. As you can imagine, this method can be explosive!

The easiest and most effective division is that between children and adults. I have often begun with a brief sermon (5 minutes) for the children, before addressing the adults. Chapter 29 is an example. My experience is that the adults listen far more attentively to the children’s sermon than to their own. Parents are
interested to hear what the preacher says to their kids, and a children’s sermon is much simpler and more vivid. It has also a good chance of being discussed over dinner, when the children return to the topic. This method has proved to be immensely popular when applied creatively, and it is not difficult to use.

13. The classroom sermon

Here the preacher acts like a teacher who gives some input and then asks questions and invites comments to which he again responds. This method involves the congregation more actively than any of the types discussed so far. It can work very well if the congregation is not too large. Care must be taken that it is not the same eloquent people who always do all the talking. It also presupposes that the message of the preacher was relevant and challenging enough to evoke discussion.

The danger is that the preacher treats the congregants as if they were schoolchildren. As I have emphasised before, preachers should never give the impression that they claim to have a higher status or dignity. They must deliberately acquire the attitude of a facilitator placed at the same level with the congregants, rather than a teacher teaching students. A good way is to say, “This is what I have gathered from the text. How would you understand it?”

As mentioned in another chapter, I knew a popular pastor who frequently left the pulpit during his sermon and walked up and down along the aisles, addressing and challenging his congregation members by name. The preacher was well known, loved, and respected. His comments were not taken personally, and the community greatly enjoyed his benevolent humour. In this case, his method was very effective.

But it is dangerous. Most congregations are not used to being treated in this manner. As mentioned before, people are very sensitive when being picked out. It may also leave the impression that the preacher is arrogant. The use of such forms presupposes that the preacher has won the full confidence of the congregation and that he/she introduces them tactfully and humorously.

*What did you find helpful or problematic in this part of the chapter?*
*Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?*

Lord, I am scared that I will come across like a teacher condescending to youngsters or the shepherd of dumb sheep. Give me the grace to position myself at the same level as the listeners. Rid me of all presumptions and prejudices that could offend or humiliate my people.
C. Collaborative approaches

The traditional sermon is a one-way form of communication: the preacher speaks and the congregation listens. Modern communication theory has taught us that this is not satisfactory. It assumes that preachers have the authority and ability to convey the truth of God and the congregants are supposed to submit to their authority, listen, be quiet, and obey.

Despite its long history, this approach is outdated and counterproductive. Our emancipated society no longer tolerates authoritarian attitudes. It also assumes that the listeners have nothing to contribute, which is simply not true. Listeners come with their own experiences, have their own questions, developed their own thoughts, found their own ways of being Christians.

Certainly, they know better what kinds of problems they are faced with during the week. Once they can respond, raise objections, present alternatives they have a stake and play a role. They begin to think and become interested. In what follows, I discuss a number of ways how the sermon can become a collaborative exercise.

14. The dialogue sermon

In the dialogue sermon, two people (say a theologian and a lawyer) talk to each other and the congregation listens. Although the congregation is still passive, at least the sermon is no longer a monologue. One can also add time for the rest of the congregation to react to what has been said. However, one must be careful that the service will not extend way beyond its normal length.

The dialogue sermon can take various forms. A minister may briefly present the central message of the text and its relevance, after which an eloquent layman responds. Or the preacher presents the theological message, and a layperson presents a psychological, sociological, or economic viewpoint. Or two theologians share their insights. Their respective views may complement each other, but they may also reveal differences in interpretation. This challenges the congregation members to develop their own stance and exercise their critical thinking.

15. The panel sermon

The panel sermon is akin to the dialogue sermon, but the number of speakers is increased, say to four or five. Obviously, this limits the time that each one can speak. The theologian can present the gist of the matter and then ask the other panellists to react or contribute inputs from their point of view and on the basis of their professional expertise, experience, and life situations.

The whole process must be planned carefully ahead of time rather than be left to the spur of the moment. Panellists must know what the issue to be discussed entails, have had time to reflect on their contribution, and perhaps do some necessary research beforehand.
Say the text is taken from the parable of the workers in the vineyard who, having worked different times, all get the same remuneration (cf. Matt. 20: 1–16). The theologian may provide the historical background and intended meaning of the parable. Then a social worker could ask whether this principle should not also be applied in a society where a great number of people are without work. An expert on labour relations could spell out the consequences in economic terms, and a politician could reflect on the chances of success of such a bill in parliament. The theologian could then sum up by saying that the parable refers to God’s grace, which does not depend on our achievements.

Within the available time, this can only be done in a very rudimentary form, but it may set the reflections of the congregation going, emphasise the relevance of the message, and possibly lead to a more elaborate seminar on the issue of unemployment and Christian social responsibility.

16. The interactive sermon

This is the democratic version of the classic sermon. As in the thematic sermon, the preacher formulates the central message and divides it into aspects or sub-topics. The preacher does not elaborate on these points but invites the congregants to share their thoughts, difficulties, and experiences on each point. Each input by the preacher is short, open ended and designed to provoke discussion. It will take a traditional congregation quite some time to get used to this exchange of ideas. Many will feel alienated at first. But one can begin slowly and let it gain momentum.

The approach is highly effective because it involves the believers, allows the preacher to rectify misunderstandings and misconceptions, ensures that the message relates to their different situations; takes their views, preoccupations, and reservations seriously; encourages them to stand up for their faith and voice their opinions in public; makes them more familiar with each other’s situations and views, thus building a more profound and intimate community. Most unfortunately, this method is hardly ever used.

17. The shared sermon

The shared sermon is a more organised and controlled version of the interactive sermon. The preacher invites a small number of congregation members from various walks of life to prepare the sermon together with him/her—say a medical doctor, an unemployed worker, a lawyer, a mother, and a businesswoman.

At their preparatory meeting, the theologian gives a very brief exposition of the text and its central message and then asks the members of the group to reflect on what the message might imply in their everyday lives. The various contributions are then streamlined into a coherent whole and presented to the congregation by the members of the group. The theologian offers a brief introduction and a brief conclusion.
Again, this is an excellent method because it is not the preacher who tells the congregants what to believe and to do, but laypersons airing their reaction to the message in concrete and practical terms. The disadvantage is that the preparation takes time and effort, which most professionals do not have in abundance. One can change the teams each time so that nobody is overburdened. Perhaps one could at least try to follow it once a month or once a quarter.

18. The dramatized sermon

The dramatized sermon is a variation of the narrative sermon. Instead of telling a story, it is dramatized. Because visual impressions are much more powerful than words, the effectiveness of the narrative sermon is enhanced by the actions that symbolise it.

The story is presented in the form of a play by a group of people while the preacher adds a few explanations and applications where necessary. The stories of the birth of Christ and the passion of Christ have been enacted millions of times. Youth groups love this kind of involvement, but it is also possible to involve the entire congregation in the drama. My wife has often done so in her passion plays, and each time, it was a huge success.

Again, a dramatized sermon needs a lot of explanation, deliberation, and rehearsal and cannot be done every Sunday. But those who are involved will not easily forget it. In a passion play, you identify with the role you are playing at least to some extent: the fact that you are enacting the role of Pilate or the high priest, or the soldier nailing Jesus to the cross may touch you very deeply. Sometimes debriefing, that is, sharing and healing of emotions may be necessary.

There is also a danger: a visually enacted story may conceal rather than reveal the meaning it is meant to communicate. It may leave the parishioners with a rather superficial impression of the significance of the story. The Roman soldiers and the passers-by witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus without attaching to it the meaning that his disciples later discerned in the event. This lack of concern may repeat itself in the enacted story.

When my wife enacted the parable of the prodigal son with youth groups, for instance, they really became excited and engaged when it came to the booze parties of the young man with the harlots, while the part where the son comes home evoked little enthusiasm.

19. The enacted sermon

This approach is akin to the dramatized sermon, but it is not a story that is being dramatized but a trend of thought that is being translated into symbolic actions. These gestures, postures, or dances should be clear in themselves to such an extent that they do not need the spoken word. It can be used on special occasions, say once a year.
One can juxtapose, for instance, the Jewish high priest with Jesus, the eternal high priest, as depicted in the Letter to the Hebrews. One can enact the dismantling of the wall that separated Jews and Greeks according to Ephesians 2. One can also confront an attitude of rejection with an attitude of acceptance with the behaviour of two people or groups to demonstrate the difference between the demanding law and the redeeming acceptance of God.

Again, this enactment can be done by single members, a group, or the congregation as a whole. If done well, this method can be very powerful, but it requires a lot of creative fantasy, critical thought, and preparation. The danger is that the gestures and actions do not really communicate the intended meaning, or that the performance becomes trivial and ridiculous. Often short dramatizations done by youths before a sermon fail to have the intended impact.

20. The collaborative collage

We discussed the monological collage above. When used in a collaborative way, one can involve many people with very brief roles. To drive home the Day of the Lord in contemporary terms, for instance, one can ask a number of members to shout contemporary catch words one after the other: nuclear missiles, AIDS pandemic, domestic violence, refugees, mass action, non-delivery, bankruptcy, corruption in high places, global warming, landslide, drug addiction, tornado, etc.

Such snippets of information put together impact the emotions, rather than the intellect. Moods are important communicators and should not be neglected, but it is important that they be controlled and formed by the gospel message. Sermons should go beyond random pictures and impressions. We have a message to deliver, and it must be clear, true, and relevant. So if you use a collage, make certain that its message stands out clearly from the seemingly chaotic collection of motifs and images of the collage.

21. The group work sermon

This is the most democratic approach of all. I recently experienced the following procedure. It was used in a Bible study at a retreat, but it can also be applied in a sermon.

Let the people turn their chairs to form groups of six. Give each person a blank sheet of A4 paper. Let each group read the text. Give a little time to reflect. Then ask every person to write down one thought that came to mind when hearing the text and pass it on to the next person. The next person then adds his or her one thought and so on until everybody has done so.

There should now be six sheets each with six thoughts on them in each group. Each person then shares with the group the six thoughts found on his/her paper. Allow time for a brief discussion. Then each group presents the content of one of the six papers to the plenary.
The gain up to this point is that each person has been prompted to own the text, to think for her/himself, and to formulate his/her own spontaneous thought, albeit very briefly. The outcome will be a wealth of different and disjointed comments, none of which were really thought out and formulated carefully—thus a perfect chaos! That in turn may cause some healthy frustration and the need for clarity among the participants.

The preacher then presents a short, well-researched, well-thought-out, well-structured sermon that transforms the chaos into a clear and persuasive message. It is obvious that when this approach is used in a normal Sunday service, both the liturgy and the sermon must be much shorter than usual.

It is also obvious that it cannot possibly integrate all the different thoughts presented by the groups. The task of the sermon is merely to highlight the one fundamental message of the text that the congregants can take home.

If there is ample time, say at a retreat, one can take the process further, let the groups discuss their initial contributions in the light of the input of the preacher, ask questions, find applications, and so forth.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘If you were about to face a heart bypass operation, you would be alarmed if the surgeon called together a few random people from the street to participate in the procedure. If laypersons are allowed to express their wayward opinions in a congregation assembled to hear the Word of God, why do you train ministers for as many years as doctors or lawyers?’

b) In a democratic society we are all supposed to be equal in dignity and authority. Those whom we vote into office represent us as human beings. However, the preacher represents not the people but God, the ultimate authority over our lives and reality as a whole. The Kingdom of God cannot be a democracy!’

c) ‘Preachers are unlikely to embark on such ventures. People become preachers because they crave status, power, and a safe income. Once placed in a position of status and dignity, they will hardly be willing to share their privileges with the laity!’

Dear Lord, give the wisdom to know when I have to say something in my authority as an ordained minister or a preacher who was entrusted with that task, and when I should involve the insights and gifts of my fellow believers.
CHaPTEr 20

Special occasions

Adjacent ministries

What do you think?

Did you ever have to conduct a funeral service and a marriage on the same day? Can you reflect on what you experienced in such a case?

If you are asked to open a conference, how long do you think your input may last? Is this the time to express a definite opinion on the issues to be discussed, or must you be strictly impartial and open to any opinion that may be voiced?

Can the same person do justice to both the expectations prevalent at a retreat for the elderly and at a youth camp?

Why do many secularised people want their marriages to be blessed in church and their funerals to be conducted by an ordained minister?

What are special occasions?

In a normal ministry, a great number of special occasions present themselves in which the preacher is expected to lead the proceedings, open and close with prayer, contribute an address, or preach a sermon. There are not only many types of such occasions, but even within these types, every occasion is unique. Here are a few instances that immediately come to mind:

- Baptism—whether infant or adult baptism
- Kids’ church—various age groups
- Confirmation
- Blessing a marriage
- Confession of sins and absolution
- Holy Communion
- Celebrating anniversaries, graduations, or promotions
- Inducting office-bearers
- Visits to hospital wards
- Memorial services and/or funerals
- Bible studies
- Inputs at camps and conferences
- Opening a public meeting
- Praying for justice and peace in times of war or social upheaval
- Praying for rain in times of drought
Lectures on pressing issues (gender, abortion, sexuality, drugs, unemployment, politics, economics, discrimination, ecology, etc.)

There are no rules or guidelines that apply to all of them. I do want to suggest, however, that whenever we prepare ourselves for such an occasion, we take some time to go through a few steps. This does not have to be in detail. It does not have to be in writing, although that always helps. The aim is simply to sharpen our awareness of what is at stake in a particular situation and what kind of response would be appropriate.

1. Define the occasion. Become conscious of the precise nature of the envisaged event because it helps us to avoid missteps. That a marriage is not a funeral may be self-evident, but both are emotionally charged and socially embedded. To reach our audience, we must enter the prevailing mood among the participants.

2. Meet those who are involved. Listen to their circumstances and their needs. In the case of bereavement, for instance, we must have ample time to listen to family members and friends. Simply share their grief, without trying to console or to teach! This helps us to tune in and gain a loving attitude.

3. Reflect on motives and expectations. In the case of a marriage, for instance, empathise with the bride, the groom, and the parents. They have come a long way already. They have high expectations and hidden apprehensions. They have spent a lot of time and money to set up the celebration. They are probably dead tired.

   They may be exhilarated and anxious at the same time. They may find themselves at centre stage for the first time and exposed to the gaze of many people. They are probably overwhelmed by the gravity and publicity of the occasion. Why do they want to be blessed in church? What precisely do they expect from this ceremony?

4. Reflect on redemptive responses to particular needs. A confirmation is not just an appropriation of the baptismal commitments made by parents, godparents, and the congregation long ago. It also has undertones of an initiation ritual: it celebrates the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is located in the difficult time of adolescence when teenagers are uncertain of their identities and commitments and parents are worried about the direction they are taking.

5. Reflect on your competence to handle the case in question. I was once requested to open an exhibition of the sculptures of a well-known artist and foolishly accepted the invitation. I knew nothing about this art form and made a proper fool of myself. Never agree to do something that you are not competent to do!
6. Find a text that encapsulates an appropriate response. This can be difficult. In some cases, such as the opening of a meeting, you may not need a text in the first place. In other cases, such as a lecture on faith and science, the issue to be addressed may not have existed in biblical times. Rather do without a text than introduce a text that does not fit.

7. Construct the address according to the guidelines we have discussed and adapt them where necessary. Don’t underestimate the importance of what you say at these emotionally charged occasions. Here people who are not at home in the church may encounter Christ again, perhaps even for the first time. Never just say what comes to mind on the spur of the moment. Never outstay your welcome; never take more time than allocated.

8. Don’t try to put your stamp on the proceedings but construct them in a way that fits the occasion. In many cases, such as youth camps or conferences, the preacher is not alone in designing the structure and cannot just decide what is to be done. Let the participants find their way and do their thing. At an anniversary, for instance, there may be toasts, popular old songs may be sung, photos may be projected on a screen, and so on. Do not expect to be at the centre of the celebrations. Do not go beyond your specific role.

9. Be conscious of your attitude to those involved! Overcome hidden resentments and attachments. Mind the impact of your body language within the general atmosphere of the occasion. When a happy crowd wants to lose itself in merry-making, a stiff preacher may be experienced as a misfit and spoiler. At least to some extent, we must let go and join in, without abandoning our convictions, our message, and our self-discipline.

10. Set limits to what can be done in a sacred ceremony. There are popular customs and rituals that do not fit into a church service. In many cases, the photographers dominate the proceedings to such an extent that they steal the show. This may not happen. I know of cases where confirmation is the occasion to make the youth drunk for the first time. You cannot want to be part of that. Do your thing in a dignified way and let them do their thing afterwards.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘I find it virtually impossible to think myself into the situation of a rebellious teenager, or an elderly person in unbearable pain who wants to die. A doctor or nurse cannot afford to share the emotional agonies of all her patients; she simply serves them with her particular expertise in a friendly and sensitive way. We should to the same!’

b) ‘Preachers are far too aloof to speak to ordinary people. We need speakers that are part of us, that share our woes, that speak our language, that
can sing and dance with us. Let the academics stay in their libraries and the bishops in their cathedrals—we have no use for them!’

c) ‘It is embarrassing, if not nauseating, when theologians believe that they can impose their wisdom on every aspect of life, from sports to commerce, from arts to science, from nutrition to sexuality. The Bible has no place in a laboratory or at a rugby match!’
CHAPTER 21

Heresy and honesty

Difficult theological topics

What do you think?

Can you mention a few aspects of the biblical faith, or the accepted doctrine of your church, that puzzle or antagonise you so much that you really would not like to preach about them? Can you jot down some of the difficulties you have with such statements?

Do you know of people who consider our faith assumptions contradictory, irrational, or even nonsensical?

Are we obliged to proclaim the biblical message in the forms in which it was presented during biblical times, the early Middle Ages, and the Reformation, or must we find new ways to make it speak again to our contemporaries?

I include this chapter with some hesitation. A friend of mine suggested that I should leave it away. This book is about how we preach, she said, not what we preach. The ‘what’ is covered quite adequately in other books of yours. The chapter would just detract from the main topic. It could also create doubt or controversy. Indeed!

However, theological uncertainty is one of the greatest challenges a preacher has to face. We are all tempted to suppress nagging doubts rather than tackle them. But our listeners subconsciously pick up that there is something fishy. Moreover, the listeners too wrestle with problems and often do not dare to admit it. To gloss over such issues with superficial and untenable answers undermines our integrity and the credibility of our message.

So I decided to include the topic after all. However, in no ways do I want the reader to feel that I am trying to impose my theological conclusions and convictions on them. All I want to do is to bring issues into the open that may puzzle and disturb preachers, albeit subconsciously, and undermine the authority with which they preach.

In this chapter, I select a few of these topics and suggest ways how to deal with them. After half a century of reading, teaching, and reflection, I arrived at findings and conclusions with which I can live and with which I can die. But I do not expect you to agree with me.

Look at my suggestions and see whether they make sense to you. If not, come up with your alternatives. In the end, every person is responsible for what he/she can or cannot accept. And, believing in a God of grace, we should not
stress over whether we have grasped it all or not. There is no perfection in this world, least of all in theological insight.

**Why is the Word of God not as clear as daylight?**

Christians are heirs of a tradition that evolved and differentiated over at least three millennia of human history. Human history moves from phase to phase, from culture to culture, from experience to experience, from insight to insight, from world view to world view. The Word of God responded creatively and redemptively to these changes. New answers to new questions constantly presented themselves within the history of the biblical tradition.

This accumulated wisdom is a great treasure house. But it is also an enormous amount of baggage that we continue to carry on our shoulders. We have inherited assumptions, formulations, and traditions from many cultural and historical contexts. Some are profound, others shallow; some are appropriate, others not. Some may have been valid at the time but do not fit current insights or circumstances.

The sun does not revolve around the earth. Diseases are not caused by demons. Sin is not a substance that can be transferred to an animal. Women are not inferior to men. Slavery is no longer acceptable. We no longer punish disobedience or adultery with stoning the culprit to death. Genocide is an atrocity. Eviction of people from their land by incoming settlers cannot be justified.

Many of these ancient assumptions have been internalised by our members yet continue to puzzle them. Some may feel uncomfortable every time they are expected to say the Apostolic Creed, let alone the Nicene Creed. Do you really have to understand and believe these cryptic formulations if you want to be a Christian? No. you don’t! We are not bound to take over the world views or the moral precepts of antiquity. Our task is to unpack the biblical message and repackage it in contemporary assumptions and insights so as to respond to contemporary needs and predicaments.

**The doctrine of the Trinity**

The classic doctrine of the Trinity says that there are *three persons* within the *one* God. These persons relate with us, but they also relate with each other *within* God. Three and yet one? That is confusing! Jews and Muslims are scandalised; they argue that we believe in three gods rather than one, which is blatant idolatry.

Most Christian believers are puzzled. They do not know which of the three persons is speaking to them. They do not know to which of the three persons they should pray. Theologians are prompted to speculate about what happens within God. Whole libraries can be filled with such speculations. In the end, our own logic can ensnare us in insoluble paradoxes.
There are four typical ways out: (a) we believe in three gods; (b) we concentrate on one of them, the Creator, the Redeemer, or the Spirit; (c) we consider the Trinity to be a mystery that has been revealed, that we must believe, whether it make sense or not, and praise its divine majesty; (d) critical people may simply dismiss the doctrine as nonsense or baseless fantasy. None of these options provide a valid solution.

You do not find the classical formulation of the Trinity in the Bible. The problem only emerged when the gospel moved from the Palestinian (Jewish) cultural and religious background into the Hellenistic world. The Hebrews concentrated on what happens in human history (what does God do to us?), while Hellenists concentrated on what is the being behind the appearance, the essence of something that is not subject to time and space (who is the eternal God?).

When we go back to the biblical way of thinking, the doctrine highlights two important aspects of our faith: (a) The God whose redeeming love was revealed in Christ is the very God whose power creates and sustains us and the entire universe. (b) This God, the God of creative power and redeeming love, is present, accessible, and effective in his Spirit, granted to the community of believers.

In short, the doctrine confirms that the one and only God, our Creator and Redeemer, is present among us in God’s Spirit. Formulated in this way, the doctrine is clear enough.

The doctrine of Christ (Christology)

The classic doctrine says that in the one person of Christ there are two natures: a divine nature and a human nature. Both natures are complete and intact as such. Christ is fully God and a full human being. But can a cat be a dog at the same time? Again, Jews and Muslims are scandalised, because a human being cannot be divine. Again our congregants are puzzled. Again there is a lot of theological speculation around this relationship.

Again there are four ways out: (a) for some, Christ is God plain and simple; (b) for others, Christ is a great human being but not God; (c) for others, the relation between the two natures is a mystery that we simply have to believe because it has been revealed; (d) critical people may accept that Jesus was a great moral example, like Moses or Buddha, but nothing more.

Again, the problem was caused by the Hellenistic approach, concentrating on ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’. They do not ask what God does to us in Christ, but what Christ is: God or a human being? In contrast, the New Testament simply witnessed to what the disciples and others experienced when they were with Jesus: God manifested his creative power and his redeeming love through this human being in exceptional ways.

And just as God acted through Christ, God now acts through those who share in the new life of Christ in the power of his Spirit. They become sons and daughters of God through the Son of God. According to the Bible, God...
always acts through humans and the rest of his creation. It is like the sun shining through a clean windowpane, or the full moon reflecting the light of the sun.

My favourite image is that of a pianist who performs a sonata. Both the pianist and the piano produce not part of the music each, but the entire music, but at two different levels. If we understand God working through Jesus of Nazareth in this way, it makes perfect sense.

**Justification and sanctification**

This doctrine has roots in the Old Testament. It has caused endless conflicts already in New Testament times, first between Jesus and his opponents, and then between Paul and his Jewish colleagues in Jerusalem. It was the main bone of contention during the Reformation, not only between Protestants and Catholics, but also between Lutheran and Reformed theologians and even within these denominations.

Numerous problems have emerged: if God declared a guilty person blameless, this would be a miscarriage of justice. To punish an innocent person so that the guilty person can go free is grossly unfair. The modern legal system does not allow for the transfer of punishment from the culprit to an innocent person. A single person cannot be punished for the sins of billions of other people. A loving God does not need a bloody sacrifice to be able to forgive. The God that Christians believe in is not a God of retributive justice, but a God of suffering acceptance. And so on.

There are a number of proposals to solve these problems: (a) God declares the sinners to be righteous as a pure act of grace, without the latter having to become righteous; (b) the sinners are forgiven their sins and then keep the law out of gratitude; (c) in his grace, God leads the sinner gradually into a more holy life, at the end of which they are found to be righteous; (d) the sinners are granted a share in the new life of Christ, and in as far as this is the case, they indeed become righteous.

The problem is mainly caused by the fact that the gospel was formulated in legal terms. This was done in response to Jewish legalism in New Testament times. The biblical formulation was picked up again during the Reformation in response to medieval legalism. In short, it is a contextualisation of the message in response to particular spiritual situations. But such contextualisations tend to have their limits.

The law posits conditions of acceptance that humans have to fulfil, while the gospel of grace proclaims God’s unconditional, suffering acceptance of the unacceptable. The legal framework cannot adequately express the free grace of God that liberates and empowers the human being. I suggest we use communal rather than legal terms, as found in the parable of the prodigal son: The Father accepts the wayward son into the family, suffering the fact that he is not acceptable.

It is being accepted into the fellowship of the father that transforms his life. The father invites the elder brother to join him in this suffering and transforming
acceptance. Understood in this way, the gospel proclaims God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship (the wayward son) and involves those who are likewise accepted in his redeeming love (the elder son). If we express the gospel in this way, the ambiguity disappears.

Creation and evolution

Many Christians informed by the biblical and doctrinal assertions on God’s creation are severely challenged, if not antagonised, by the scientific theory of evolution. On the other hand, many secular people informed by modern science consider the biblical accounts to be ancient myths or fairy tales that cannot be taken seriously. The conflict between the two schools of thought becomes quite nasty at times.

The problem is caused by the assumption that biblical pronouncements reflect God’s eternal truth, and because God is perfect, they must be eternally true. However, a careful reading of the Bible shows that the Word of God is a dynamic message that moves through human history, picking up people where they find themselves and addressing them in their changing situations and world views.

As a result, we find various narratives of creation in the Bible: God creates with his hands (cf. Gen. 2), or with an imperial decree (cf. Gen. 1), or with his wisdom (cf. Prov. 8), or with the Logos, which here means that God’s creative power is characterised by grace and truth and transforming love (cf. John 1). All these expressions are metaphors taken from human reality. They simply want to express that the world we live in, however it originated and however it continues to function, owes its existence to God, its ultimate Source and Destiny.

If that is the case, there is no reason why we cannot imagine God creating through a process in which reality unfolds and differentiates. Just think of the different types of bacteria, plants, and animals. The spiritual sphere also unfolds and differentiates. Situations and world views change, and so does the response of the Word of God to these situations and world views. Insights of one age are superseded by the insights of another.

Certainly, Genesis 1 and 2 never intended to provide scientific descriptions or explanations. They expressed theological insights in the form of narratives. That was the preferred way of communication in ancient cultures. We must do for our times what the biblical authors did for theirs; that is, witness to the creative power and the redeeming love of God in ever-changing contexts. Science has provided us with a new narrative of creation, one that is every bit as fascinating and awe-inspiring as those of ancient times.

My suggestion is that we first look at what actually happens in reality. The sciences can help us in doing so by augmenting our own experiences. We then attribute this reality to the creative activity of God. If we do that, it does not matter for faith in God whether the world was created in one go or whether it evolved over billions of years. In fact, it does not matter which theory the scientists come up with. Scientific insight constantly changes. God is still the
Creator, however the world may have originated and however it may continue to operate.

MIRACLES AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

This issue presents us with a similar dilemma. Again it causes endless agonies among believers and scorn among those informed by modern science. There are two problems here:

a) Was a miracle story in the Bible taken up into the canon because it represented historical fact or because it expressed a theological concern in the form of a narrative, namely the creative power and redeeming love of God? Because some of these stories, if taken literally, are hardly credible, I tend to agree with the latter.9

b) Does God have to suspend the laws of nature to act in human history, or can God use the laws of nature, which God created, to bring about unexpected and awe-inspiring creative and redemptive events? Because I have experienced numerous miracles in my life, none of which involved the suspension of the laws of nature, I tend to agree with the latter.10

This is not the place to argue out these differences. But we must take account of a few undesirable consequences of taking miracle stories literally:

a) They can lead to unrealistic expectations. An amputated leg will not regrow to its original length and shape, however hard we pray.

b) They can cause uncertainty if the miracle does not take place as expected. Believers can become so disillusioned that they abandon their faith altogether. This is paradoxical because these narratives were told precisely to reassure an afflicted faith.

c) If faith in the miracle becomes a demand that we must fulfil, it leads to legalism rather than joyful trust. This can lead to severe agonies when miracle workers tell those who are disappointed, ‘You did not have enough faith!’ As if we can create faith!

d) Faith in miracles has been abused by charlatans countless times. Some healers have become rich at the expense of their credulous clients.

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9 If God allowed the sun to stand still so that the Israelites could finish their battle (Joshua 10:12–14), the earth, rotating at about 1,670 kilometres per hour at the equator, would have had to come to a complete standstill. Because of the law of inertia, this would have caused a global tsunami that would have washed the Israelites and their enemies into the sea. God is not likely to upset the laws of nature to serve our interests at the expense of the rest of creation. To express God’s creative power and redemptive benevolence, texts such as Revelations 21 (the new Jerusalem) or John 11 (the revitalisation of a corpse in an advanced stage of decay) deliberately inflate their narratives beyond the limits of probability or possibility. That was a linguistic tool common in antiquity.

e) It can lead to irrational behaviour with fatal consequences, for instance, when people expect to be healed of AIDS through prayer and refuse to take appropriate medication.

f) Rejection of scientific insight can put serious obstacles in the way of the gospel among those who are informed by science.

My suggestion is that we deal with the content of the message that a miracle story is meant to convey rather than the question whether it happened as recorded or not. The story of Jesus grabbing the hand of Peter when he walked on water and began to sink, for instance, has encouraged countless believers when they were in trouble. Whether it happened as recorded or not, the content of the message is that our limitations are not God’s limitations!

Similarly, the stories of Jesus healing the blind and the deaf are often interpreted as saying that God can open our spiritual eyes and ears for the truth. The story of a star guiding Eastern astrologers to the manger is meant to show that the significance of the salvific event includes those outside the Jewish faith and the Roman-Greek world.

To prevent wrong assumptions and expectations, I would go further and say that the laws of nature are God’s laws; they are necessary for reality to function as it does. God is not likely to suspend them just to satisfy our petty needs and desires. God has a cosmos to look after, not just the desires of an individual!

If we dare to climb a steep rock face, we should not expect God to suspend the law of gravity so that we do not crash to the ground when we fall, because if God did, we would all fly off into outer space. And to perform a saving act, God does not have to suspend the laws of nature; God can very well use them for this purpose!

God can also show us possibilities hidden to us and motivate us to seek solutions that lie beyond current probabilities. Perhaps we will find a cure against cancer. Perhaps a sense of urgency and a change of heart among the nations can still get global warming under control.

**The problem of evil in a world created by a loving God**

This is a problem that has been inherent in the biblical faith since its very beginning. I have already referred to it in chapter 5 on the afflictions of a preacher. How can a powerful and loving God cause or allow so much error, injustice, suffering, meaningless and death in the world? Either God wants to redeem but cannot. Then God is a weak and useless God rather than the Creator of the universe. Or God could redeem but does not want to. Then God is a cruel tyrant rather than the Father of Jesus Christ.

Already in Old Testament times, various explanations have been suggested:
(a) Humans are to blame: suffering is caused by human sin that has to be punished by God. (b) God is to blame: he fails to be merciful. (c) God created the world and then left it to its own devices. (d) There is a powerful counter-god in the person of Satan, who is responsible for throwing spanners in the works. None of these attempts are very convincing.
Would you like to consider my suggestion? The problem is caused by the fact that we tend to see God as a person that is entirely free to do what God wants. God is not subject to any constraints whatsoever. But is that true? Do we have any experiential evidence that such a total freedom is at all possible?

We get our clues of what the divine person is from our experience of the human person. A person is characterised by intention and action. Intentions and actions can only operate within certain frameworks and structures. If there were no gravity, for instance, we would not be able to walk on earth; we would all fly into outer space. Assuming we could survive in outer space, all our movements would not have the slightest impact on anything.

The Bible tells us that God has become a person for humans because humans are persons. As persons, humans have a certain degree of freedom. But humans are much more than persons. They are also molecules, chemical reactions, organs, and nervous systems that follow the laws of nature.

God too is much more than a person. The impersonal features of our reality are also of God; otherwise, God would not be the Creator of this reality. The laws of nature are God’s laws. They are valid; they are necessary for reality to function. In creating this world, God has bound himself to them. This conclusion is borne out by evidence. God has created a structured world in which not everything is possible.

The world that God created and continues to create is subject to constraints of power, time, space, and regularity. We are limited by our biological nature and our spiritual faculties. These constraints are not unfortunate accidents or mistakes God made, but preconditions of the functioning of the world that we know. They are built into the system; otherwise, it would collapse. Harsh as they may be, they are willed by a loving God.

Everything of value in this world has its costs. If you want to have a planet on which life can evolve, you must put up with tectonic shifts that cause earthquakes and tsunamis. If you want to have living creatures, you must put up with biological mechanisms that imply death. If you want to have a creature with free will, you must put up with the possibility that freedom can be abused.

In his infinite love, God endlessly sacrifices parts of his creation to give other parts a chance to exist and prosper. The cross of Christ is only the highest expression of God’s sacrificial love. And we are invited to participate in this love and bear the cross with him. This insight has incredible consequences for our economic and ecological problems.

The virgin birth

Taken literally, the conviction that Jesus had no human father runs into considerable difficulties. (a) The biblical reference to the virgin birth is very scant and contradictory. It appears only in the legendary introductions to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and these two accounts contradict each other. It plays no role in any of the main theologies of the New Testament: the Gospel of Mark, the synoptic source called Q; Paul, John, Hebrews; the Deutero-Paulines
(Ephesians and Colossians); Revelation. (b) It contradicts the classic Christological doctrine, which insists that in the one person of Christ there is a divine nature and a human nature, both of which are complete and intact. (c) It makes no sense at all in terms of modern biological insight.

This forces us to ask what the intention behind these narratives might have been. The answer is quite straightforward: The authors of the New Testament wanted to witness to the extraordinary status and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. They did so in a great variety of ways, one of which is the narrative of the virgin birth. It is based on the Jewish tradition of the declaration of the king as Son of God at the occasion of his enthronement (cf. Ps. 2).

Jesus was taken to be the messianic king expected by the Jews. So he was taken to be the Son of God, but also the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Anointed (Hebrew *Mashiach*, Greek *Christos*), Immanuel, even the Shepherd—all of which were traditional royal titles at the time.

The declaration of Jesus as Son of God is found in the narrative of his baptism (cf. Matt. 3: 13–17, Mark 1: 9–11, Luke 3: 21–22, John 1: 31–34) and the story of his glorification (cf. Matt. 17: 5; Mark 9: 7; Luke 9: 35). According to Romans 1: 3–4, Jesus is *born* as Son of David and *proclaimed* Son of God through his resurrection. We can see that the motif is used in many different ways, but the intention is always the same: Jesus is the Messiah!

Parallel to the explanation of the title Son of God in the introductory chapters of Matthew and Luke is the title Son of David, which is explained with the help of genealogies, Matthew going back to Abraham, the father of Israel, Luke going back to Adam, the father of all of humankind. Both want to situate the life of Jesus in the sacred narrative of the people of God. But in ancient times, a genealogy always followed the male lineage.

John’s usage is particularly revealing. Harking back to God’s creative decree in Genesis 1, or the wisdom of God as God’s instrument of creation in Jewish Wisdom literature, or the divine rationality underlying the creation of the universe in Greek philosophy, John maintains that God’s ‘logos’ has manifested itself in Jesus of Nazareth so that human beings could experience it first-hand (cf. John 1: 14; 1 John 1: 1–4). *Logos* is a Greek word that covers the concepts of creative word, purpose, wisdom and rationality. It is God’s means of creation. John defines this rationality of God as ‘grace and truth’ in contradiction to the law of Moses (cf. John 1: 17).

It is significant that in John 1, Jesus receives the Spirit at his baptism (as an adult) and is declared Son of God. He then shares the Spirit with those who accept him as Son of God (1: 32–33). In both cases, it is the Spirit (the presence of the loving God) that makes the difference! So believers are reborn in the Spirit (John 3: 1–8). He can express this rebirth of the believers with another metaphor, namely a ‘fatherless birth’ (John 1: 12). What makes Jesus the Son of God, and the believers sons and daughters of God, is the *gift of the Spirit*. It establishes the close relationship between God, Jesus and the believing community (cf. John 14: 18–23).
So the concept must be understood spiritually rather than biologically. Taking it literally does not make sense in biblical, theological, and scientific terms. What matters is the theological message, variously expressed in terms of Jewish traditions.

It conveys the conviction that Jesus, a human being, was authorised by God’s Spirit to proclaim and enact the God of Israel as a God of forgiving grace, redeeming love, and healing concern. He was the only Son of God, the only true representative of God, because he was one with God in purpose and action, as opposed to sinful human beings. He is the true human being, the true ‘image of God’, as opposed to Adam, the sinful human being (cf. Rom. 5: 12–21). Being in Christ rather than Adam, we share his new life in undisturbed fellowship with God; we too become sons and daughters of God (cf. John 1: 12–13).

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead

Jesus of Nazareth acted as God’s messianic representative on earth. As such, he was condemned to death by the Jewish leaders and executed by the Roman leaders of the time. Yet precisely as the authorised representative of a loving God, he is alive for us and for all people at all times and in all situations. He has put our whole system of meaning on a new foundation. That is the common conviction of all Christians.

Why that? Because in him, God has made his creative and redeeming love real and effective for us and continues to do so. In which way does this actually happen? The Spirit of Christ calls, liberates, transforms, empowers the Body of Christ, the community of believers, and continues to do God’s redeeming work through them. That seems to be clear.

Less clear is what resurrection from the dead could mean in this case. Various interpretations are possible: (a) It happened literally as reported in the narratives of the empty grave. (b) The authors of the New Testament used metaphors and legends to convey a theological truth. (c) Jesus did not rise in his mortal body but in a transformed spiritual body, whatever that may mean.

The problem of a literal, historical interpretation is twofold: (a) The biblical accounts were written down decades after the event and differ substantially from each other. The different traditions found in the New Testament represent different interpretations. What happened historically is virtually impossible to reconstruct. (b) It is equally difficult to make the message plausible in terms of normal human insight. Some interpretations are less feasible than others, on theological, historical, and scientific grounds.

Here are a few of the interpretations found in the New Testament: Paul rejects the idea that the risen body was a biological body. He speaks of a spiritual body (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 44). This must be seen in the context of his dialectic between flesh and spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 5: 16–17; Rom. 1: 3–4). Matthew says that Jesus appeared to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, sent them into the world, and assured them of his continued presence (cf. Matt. 28: 16–20). For John, he appeared to his disciples in a locked room in Jerusalem and gave them.
the authority of the Spirit (cf. John 20: 19–23). Using the apocalyptic tradition, Revelation presents us with a vast symbolic drama culminating in the elevation of Christ to power and glory and the subsequent transformation of the world.

Cynics may come up with their own interpretations, for instance, that the corpse of Jesus was stolen by his disciples, or that Jesus was not dead when taken from the cross, but secretly escaped when he regained consciousness. But then he must have died later.

This is not the place to sort out these issues. But the message is so fundamental that we must try to make it credible and relevant for our listeners today. My suggestion is, again, that we avoid arguing for or against the historical probability of a physical resurrection and concentrate on four theological messages that the texts convey:

(a) God has vindicated the proclamation and enactment of the God of Israel as a God of redeeming love rather than retributive justice by Jesus of Nazareth; (b) with that, God has confirmed the authority of Christ to act as God’s messianic representative for us and for humanity as a whole; (c) the new life of Christ in fellowship with God, which was confined to Jesus as a human being before his death, has become universally real and accessible for all believers at all times and in all circumstances; (d) those who become conscious of the presence of the living Christ are sent into the world as witnesses to God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable. Whatever happened on Easter morning, these concerns are valid and indispensable.

The second coming of Christ and the Kingdom of God

This problem is twofold: (a) What is the character of these biblical statements—are they predictions of outstanding empirical-historical facts, or are they figurative expressions of theological concerns? (b) How can one make the message plausible and relevant in terms of normal human experience and the insights of modern science?

Again, the biblical record of future expectations is diffuse. Ancient Israel before the exile did not have a notion of a life after death or a new creation. Future expectations were geared to life in this world: land, progeny, freedom, prosperity, long life, victory, international recognition and domination. The expectation of a last judgement and the apocalyptic visions of an ideal world only emerged in the second century before Christ. On the whole, the Bible is remarkably realistic about the end of the world and the finality of death.

In early New Testament times, the end of the current world and the arrival of the Kingdom of God was believed to be imminent. In 1 Thessalonians (his earliest letter), Paul still expected to be alive when it happened. But when it did not materialise as expected, authors began to concentrate on what believers experience in this life under the impact of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has already come in the Spirit; he is already present wherever his disciples proclaim and enact his message; believers have already moved from death to life; they are already with Christ ‘in the heavenly places’ (Eph 2: 4-10).
In early Catholicism, the emphasis shifted to what might happen to us after death. The end of the world receded into the far future and lost much of its relevance, only to flare up again and again in enthusiastic groups, often in irrational and dangerous forms.

Political activists dismiss eschatological expectations as ‘a pie in the sky when you die’. It diverts the attention of the poor and oppressed from their struggle for liberation and social justice. Scientific cosmology predicts a catastrophic end of the universe, but without the prospect of a new world without evil, suffering, and death. Moreover, whether one is a believer or not, one cannot help but ask why the age to come did not materialise two millennia ago when it was first expected to happen.

And yet the expectation of a new and better world is part of the biblical tradition. To form an idea of what ought to be and to hope that it can be realised is also an indispensable characteristic of the human being. We owe our congregations an account of the hope that is in us. My suggestion is that the underlying concern can best be expressed as God’s vision of comprehensive optimal well-being. Note that a vision is not a prediction. A vision indicates a direction.

God’s vision translates into God’s concern for any deficiency in well-being in any aspect of life. It moves on like a horizon as we approach it, opening ever-new vistas, challenges, and opportunities. This notion is biblical; it motivates rather than stifles our resolve to work for a better world, and it does not contradict modern insight.

Life after death?

I suggest that we console the dying and the grieving with God’s unconditional commitment and redeeming love for each one of us. The gospel says that God is willing to forgive our sins and accept us into his fellowship, whether we are acceptable or not. Having lived at all, we have become part of God’s life as the Creator. Our lives cannot ever be erased again from cosmic history. Believing in God as our Redeemer, nothing whatsoever can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. Rom. 8: 38f). More than that we cannot know and do not need to know.

Although the motif of the Last Judgment has a prominent place in the early documents of the New Testament, frightening our sisters and brothers with the eternal fires of hell is out of step with the very substance of the gospel and must be avoided. Here is not the place to retrace the problematic history of this doctrine. The point is, rather, that instead of reassuring a troubled conscience of the mercy and forgiveness of God, it can produce unbearable spiritual agonies. It is the awareness of guilt and failure we have committed in the past, which cannot be changed or repaired, that is so hard to endure and to which the gospel of God’s forgiveness must be applied.

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I would also refrain from offering speculations about a life beyond death and what such a life might entail. Cheap and unconvincing comfort does not heal and does not last. The deceased no longer need comfort; it is the survivors that must be encouraged to leave the past in God’s hands and move boldly into the future at the hand of a loving God and embedded in a loving community.

Once again, these are suggestions that you may want to consider. You can accept, improve, change, reject, or replace them with alternatives that make more sense to you. I remind you that God’s self-disclosure in human history should not be understood in terms of an eternal truth that fell ready-made from heaven, but as a dynamic motivation that entered human history and that responds creatively and redemptively to the changing needs and insights of the people it encounters on its way.

What did you find helpful or problematic in this chapter?
Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?
How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘You are playing God! Why do you not accept the revelation of God as recorded in the scriptures rather than listening to what scientists or historians come up with?’

b) ‘If you put such novel ideas into the heads of your parishioners, you alienate them not only from the ancient traditions that have sustained the Christian faith and the fellowship of believers throughout the centuries, but also from their contemporary sisters and brothers in Christ!’

c) ‘Your reformulations are quite arbitrary. In fact, they are clever attempts to rescue the irrational fantasies found in ancient documents like the Bible that have no foundation in reality. Nobody with knowledge and integrity will be fooled by such tricks.’

Lord, grant me the honesty to face problematic issues, the insights that are liberating and reassuring, the boldness to state my convictions, and the humility to give space to convictions or opinions other than my own.
CHAPTER 22

Spring cleaning

Long-term quality assessment and enhancement

What do you think?

Have you ever wished that the worship service in your church was more appealing and uplifting?

Were you ever impressed by the different way of doing things when visiting a congregation from another denomination?

Do you think that because it all depends on the Holy Spirit, we should not bother about our performance as preachers or congregations?

Should the performance of a preacher called by God and authorised by the community of believers be subjected to scrutiny and required to improve?

Does the responsibility to conduct appropriate and inviting worship service rest on the preacher or on the assembled community of believers?

In chapter 15, I said that sweeping and dusting is done once a week; spring cleaning is done once a year. But is spring cleaning necessary? Is it important? This chapter looks like the grilling of a suspect found in a court of law, or a doctoral examination, or the Inquisition. You may find what follows pedantic and redundant. Why not do your best and let God do the rest?

Well, what is your best? Some people never bother to look into the mirror. They are unkempt; their clothes are ugly, dirty, and torn. They believe that it is cool to be natural. Their bedrooms and their studies are chaotic. And they don’t care. God loves them, to be sure, and yet!

There are others who are highly self-conscious. They compare their appearance with those of models, celebrities, sport giants, and brides, and find themselves wanting. They spend endless time and money on make-up, hairdo, or muscle building. Teenagers may get so depressed that they attempt suicide. God loves them, to be sure, and yet!

Let us avoid both attitudes! A mirror is not supposed to be a judge or a slave master but a tool. It helps us to look at ourselves from the outside, as it were, with the eyes of others and bring out the best in us.

God made you beautiful. Claim that beauty, by all means! Thank God for what you have become. Do not fret if it does not meet your expectations, or any other expectations for that matter! Be what God intended you to be. God loves you, to be sure, and God rejoices when you develop your full potential!
This chapter is meant to be such a mirror. Look into it occasionally to see whether you look your best, make up your hair, and put on a smile. Use it to keep yourself humble and set targets of improvement.

I suggest you go on a retreat. Look critically at two or three of your preached sermons and the liturgies used. Ask two or three trusted listeners to act as your ‘make-up specialists’ and ‘fashion designers’. Go with them through the list and see what can be done to bring out your best. Institutionalise this exercise once or twice a year.

A. The messenger

What was the general motivation of the preacher?

To be in the limelight, or to deliver a message?
To rule, or to serve?
To shine, or to appreciate the gifts of others?
To control, or to facilitate?
To do a routine job, or to build a community?
To satisfy his/her own needs, or the needs of the listeners?

Was the preacher humble, friendly, and loving or arrogant, aloof, and judgemental?
Did the preacher greet, chat, and laugh with the parishioners before and after the service?
Did the preacher display personal insecurity or a natural, unassuming authority?

B. Retrieving the message from the text

Does the preacher fall back on pet texts, or offer a wide biblical spectrum?
Was the text seen in its biblical, historical, and theological context?
Were historical mistakes or wrong assumptions made in the sermon?
Did the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?

Did biblical quotations (other than the sermon text) take account of their own contexts?
Were difficult concepts or arguments in the text adequately explained?
Were important aspects of the text overlooked or overemphasised?
Did the preacher interpret biblical metaphors and parables literally?

C. Clarifying the message

Which doctrinal statements were made or implied?
Did the message primarily reflect God’s demands or God’s gift?
Did the preacher concentrate on obeying a code of law, or being inspired by God’s love?
Were the exhortations liberating and empowering, or demotivating and enslaving?

Did the preacher assume that God’s action competes or cooperates with human action?
Did the preacher focus on God’s creative power or God’s benevolent intentions?
Did the preacher speculate about the transcendent and the unknown?
Did the preacher emphasise denominational or ecumenical concerns?

Did the preacher take the changes in world view since biblical times seriously?
Did the preacher use authoritarian or participatory images and concepts?
Did the sermon tackle unpalatable issues or beat about the bush?
Were the listeners left with ambiguity and uncertainty or with clarity and guidance?

D. Reaching the receivers (contextualisation)

Was the message down to earth, or vague and theoretical?
Did the sermon reflect everyday experiences of the listeners?
Did the sermon respond to actual needs of the listeners?
Were references to daily life too direct, flattering, embarrassing, hurtful, overdone?

Were the facts mentioned correct?
Did the preacher widen the horizons to include communal, social, and natural concerns?
Did the sermon spiritualise the message?
Did the sermon use sexist vocabulary, images, or assumptions?

Which groups within the congregation were addressed, and which were left out?
Did the preacher betray prejudices against certain groups or individuals?
Did the preacher pick particular persons out?
Did the preacher attack or chastise people who were not present?

Were there passages designed to hurt rather than to heal?
Did the preacher convey personal indignations and frustrations?
Did the preacher generalise what only applies to some?
Did the preacher place him/herself under the Word together with the listeners?
Did the preacher take sides on controversial issues?
Did the sermon interpret the signs of the times appropriately?
Did the sermon distinguish the spirits appropriately?
Did the sermon paint pictures of gloom and doom, or open horizons of hope and action?

E. Sermon design

Did the introduction catch the imagination of the listeners and lead to the message?
Did the conclusion provide a ‘parcel’ to take home?
Was the sermon too short or too long?
Did the preacher drag on at the end, rather than winding up in time?

What kind of sermon structure did the preacher use?
Was the structure simple and lucid enough to be remembered?
Was the structure appropriate and helpful, or artificial and confusing?
Could the preacher have used a more interactive or participatory approach?

F. Quality control

Did the preacher concentrate on positive or negative statements?
Was the substance shallow and meaningless or profound and enriching?
Was the sermon too lightweight, or overloaded?
Was the argument too simplistic or too sophisticated?

Did the preacher try to convey factual information or spiritual depth?
Did the sermon address human reason, human motivation, or human emotions?
Was the language used in the sermon accessible for all listeners present?
Could the preacher have replaced abstract terms with actions and events?

Did the preacher use metaphors taken from ordinary life?
Did the preacher construct simple sentences?
Did the preacher speak about aspects of reality he/she is insufficiently informed about?
Did the preacher pretend, or was he true to his/her own convictions?

Did the preacher question assumptions of the listeners in a sensitive way?
Was the preacher moralising, or offering helpful directives and solutions?
Did the preacher use shallow rhetoric or clichés?
Did the intended message come across?
G. Delivering the message

Was the physical environment outside and inside the church inviting or off-putting?
Were the vestments and the gowns clean and tidy?
Did the preacher arrive in good time for the worship service?
Did the preacher radiate stress and anxiety or joy and peace?

Were the movements of the preacher before the altar easy but dignified?
Did the preacher handle the books and vessels with competence and ease?
Did the preacher try to impress on the pulpit?
Did the preacher speak with his natural voice or switch to a sanctimonious mode?

Did the preacher speak freely to the listeners or read off his draft?
Was there eye contact? Was it natural or artificial? Was it loving or embarrassing?
Did the preacher display habitual gestures that did not underpin the message?
Did the preacher constantly stare at certain people or in certain directions?

Was the preacher’s voice too loud or too soft?
Did the preacher speak too fast or allow statements to sink in?
Did the preacher articulate all words and sentences clearly enough to be heard?
Were the audio-visual aids used helpful or distracting?

H. The sermon in the context of the worship service

Was the service a one-man show, or were the congregants involved?
Did the ritual highlight the status of the preacher or the presence of God?
Was the liturgy taken seriously as a means of communicating the Word of God?
Were the readings, hymns, and prayers in line with the message of the sermon?

Were there blatant contradictions between the sermon and the hymns and prayers?
Were the hymns obsolete, dreary, and stale, or refreshing and uplifting?
Did the worship service cater for different musical tastes, e.g. plainsong or choruses?
Was the liturgy done appropriately and aesthetically appealing?

Did the liturgist refrain from singing if he/she could not hold the pitch?
Did the conduct of the preacher suggest a prayerful disposition?
Did the prayers repeat the sermon or place the concerns of the congregation before God?
Did the prayers take account of the needy, the society, and nature?

What role did the attitudes and dispositions of the congregants play?
Could the worship service be made more inviting for visitors and outsiders?
How did the preacher cater for the particular season in the church year?
Did the preacher cater for concerns not adequately represented in the church year?

Should there be more quality control, feedback, and ‘market research’?
Should there be more imagination, innovation, and experimentation?
Should more use be made of multiple media: PowerPoint, artwork, drama, music, songs?
Can the digital media be utilised to communicate the Word of God?

Which questions in this list are redundant?
Which aspects have been left out?
Can commerce and industry provide the church with tools and procedures of quality control and product enhancement?
Should the church institutionalise this kind of exercise and make it obligatory for all preachers and parishes?
How can ingrained traditions and habits be changed without making the life of overburdened preachers even more difficult or antagonising established communities?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘The Word of God is not a commodity that needs quality control or enhancement. Because God is perfect, his Word is perfect; we just have to convey it to the world, whether people will listen or not.’

b) ‘You want to condemn preachers to the rat race of the modern economy. An exercise such as this can only lead to legalistic anxiety and pressure to perform. It will destroy all joy, spontaneity, and creativity.’

c) ‘Preachers tend to be self-sufficient and self-certain. It will take a lot of persuasion to convince them that they should spend time and energy on such an exercise!’

Dear Lord, having believed in the message of your unconditional, forgiving, healing grace I have never feared the Last Judgement. But being grilled like this by a human court is awful. Let me relax. Let me listen. Let me be willing to listen and to learn. Let me change what can be changed and accept what cannot be changed. Bless your Word as it goes into the world.
SOME RECENT BOOKS BY
KLAUS NÜRNBERGER


In part II, I offer a number of demonstration sermons. They are not meant to be examples to be followed, but material to be worked on. Read them, reflect on them, critique them! After having gone through the questions at the end of these sermons, you may acquire the habit of looking at your own sermons with a critical mind.

After careful reflection, I decided not to use the sermons of other preachers for these exercises, but only my own. I preached most of them in actual situations. A few were drawn up specifically to demonstrate a procedure or a style. Be alert: sometimes they are meant to demonstrate what should not be done!

Note that the styles overlap. A sermon may be an example of a spiral sermon and a participatory sermon at the same time. Most of them are examples of contextualisation, but to various degrees, and more or less appropriate.
If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13, NIV)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, some things on this earth are exceptionally expensive and yet entirely useless. Think of those diamonds that cost a fortune, but the owner does not dare to wear them precisely because they are too precious. So they are locked up in a safe. Think of the countless bars of gold locked up in the central banks of rich countries and sitting there for decades.

But let us be more practical: Somebody has bought a new Porsche Spyder. [A picture of the car is projected onto the screen.] It cost him R15,000,000. Boy oh boy! If I could just win the lotto! Its top speed is 280 km/hour. Wow! The
production of this little toy demands such an investment of financial resources, time, and professional expertise that its cost becomes staggering. It is an incredible machine—the best of the best, and the most expensive!

But now the poor chap does not know what to do with it. We are only allowed to travel at 120 km/hour on public roads. Even my Polo Vivo can do that. He is afraid to go to the shops with it because it may get scratches or bumps in the parking lot. He does not want everybody to stare at him, or see that he is so rich and break in.

So the Spyder is locked up in the garage. His friends admire it. They also admire the man who could afford that kind of money. But that is not the purpose that the car was made for. Do I want to spend that amount of money just to show off before a few friends? That would be ridiculous!

Could this kind of situation apply to God? We can hardly appreciate how much it has cost God, our Creator, over thousands of years, to make it possible for us to live and possess the gifts that we have. The sun and the earth first had to come into existence. Thousands of our ancestors invested their love, their time, their work, and their resources; otherwise, we would never have been born, would not have survived, and would not enjoy our current lifestyles.

Imagine what we cost the society to which we belong: water, electricity, ablution, streets, schools, colleges, administration, police, telephone networks—you name it! More than that, thousands of other living things must be sacrificed so that each one of us has food on the table every day.

So for God, our Creator, each one of us is more costly and more precious than a Porsche Spyder. Does this investment pay off for God? Does God produce such a wonderful creature like me and you just to brag a little? Or does he have another purpose for us? Let us look at our text!

Because 1 Corinthians 13 speaks about love, it is often used for marriages. However, the actual topic in chapters 12–14 is how we use the gifts that God gives us. We all have gifts—fantastic gifts! Material gifts like houses and cell phones. Bodily gifts such as arms and ears. Spiritual gifts such as insights and expertise. Do we use them at all? Do we use them in a way that they serve God’s purposes?

In chapters 12–14, Paul speaks about the spiritual gifts of God, especially about speaking in tongues, which you find in the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Let us begin with the story found in Acts 2. Here we are told that a group of believers in Jerusalem received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They came from all over the Roman Empire and spoke many different languages, and yet they all heard the same gospel. They were so overwhelmed with joy that their hearts poured out their praise. As a result the congregation grew in leaps and bounds.

It is an image of what happened over the centuries! The message of God’s love in Christ spread across the globe, reaching all kinds of people, irrespective of cultural backgrounds, social situations, and economic fortune. God accepts us all into his fellowship, although we are not acceptable in his sight. He suffers
our failures and our wrong motivations to change us from within. That is indeed a source of joy!

God’s acceptance brings about a community of believers who accept each other, although they are not acceptable to each other. Christ has accepted them, so they forgive each other, endure their differences, and serve each other because they love each other with the love of Christ.

In this story, the gift of speaking different languages led to the building up of a Christian community across cultural barriers. But these believers also spread the good news of Christ to those outside who are also loved by God. Missionaries went out to proclaim God’s acceptance to all peoples, from the San in the Kalahari to the Eskimos in the polar regions, Zulus and Afrikaners, Chinese and Arabs. So that is the first story, but Paul has another story in mind.

Let us look at what happened in Corinth. Here too the gospel was proclaimed. Here too the Holy Spirit was at work. There were apostles who went into the world to spread the gospel. There were prophets who applied the gospel to the concrete situation of the believers. Just as in Acts 2, the gift of the Spirit moves inwards into building the congregation and outwards spreading the gospel into the world.

But then there was another, very strange gift, which we call speaking in tongues. Here people got so excited about the good news that their emotions bubbled over. They spouted out words that nobody understood. To make sense, these words first had to be translated. But why not speak in words that make sense in the first place?

This gift of the Spirit led to conflicts in the congregation in Corinth. Some believed that the Spirit got hold of them; others thought they were crazy. Paul did not want to offend one of the parties or quench their enthusiasm. So he said, it is all right to speak in tongues. He even claimed that he too did it. But he did it at home, where it did not disturb anybody.

That is interesting! You can control a gift of the Spirit. You can use it for a good or a bad purpose. The Holy Spirit does not just overwhelm you like a drug so that you cannot help but burst into the crowd while others are speaking. No, the Holy Spirit empowers us for the redeeming work of Christ, rather than to please ourselves. If one speaks, the others must keep quiet, Paul says!

We must understand that all humans have the capacity to express intense emotions. You find this kind of ecstasy in many religions. Even in political life, people can get so excited that they do things they would normally not want to do. Clever politicians can sweep up such emotions to gain control over great masses of people.

So the question is not whether this is a gift of God. The question is what use is made of this gift. Is it used by the Spirit of Christ that empowers us to do the work of Christ in this world, or is it some other spirit with its own agenda?

Paul gives two clues in this respect. The first one is whether the gift of the Spirit builds up the congregation, or whether individuals enjoy it for their private pleasure. There is nothing wrong with having a very personal relationship with Christ—on the contrary. But if a gift causes conflicts in the congregation, we
have to look at what kind of spirit is using this gift. There is a kind of spiritual selfishness that does not care about the community of believers. A true gift of the Spirit builds up the congregation.

Secondly, Paul worries that speaking in tongues can put off outsiders who come to visit the congregation. Will they hear the Word of God? Will they experience the love of Christ among the believers? Will they feel the urge to repent and believe in Christ? Or will they say, ‘Oh my dear, this is a crazy lot. You cannot take them seriously!’

Now let us compare these two stories. In Acts 2, the gift of languages brought people from many backgrounds into the one new community. At the same time, it made people spread the message of God’s love in Christ to those outside. In Corinth, the gift of tongues did exactly the opposite: it disrupted the fellowship and it scared off outsiders. Paul was not impressed.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is very straightforward. He says that if you speak in the most beautiful language, even in the language of angels, but you are not motivated by God’s love, you are just making a noise. You are babbling, and nobody derives any benefit from it. Your gift has become a Porsche Spyder for God—very costly and very useless!

The same is true for all other spiritual gifts. The gift of prophecy is the gift of applying the Word of God to our concrete situations. As a professor of theology, I may have some knowledge that others do not have. But without love, it is useless. If I preach here from the pulpit like a prophet, but without the love of Christ, my words are empty and futile.

Then there is the gift of a strong faith. There are people whose convictions are so powerful that they can achieve results that nobody else can. Whether this is in the field of healing or political mobilisation or technology or economic performance does not matter. Is it driven by God’s love for your fellow human beings, or is it driven by greed for status, wealth, and power?

Then Paul speaks about sacrifices that people make: you spend all your money for a good cause, you spend all your time to serve others, or you blow yourself up for the sake of God, as some Muslim radicals do. But if you do all that without love, it is a useless exercise. Then the gift of God is a Porsche Spyder. It is very costly but yields no results. It can sit in the garage. It can also be used by some irresponsible person to run over people in a busy street.

We all have gifts, great gifts and small gifts. Some are motor mechanics, some are doctors, some are working mothers. Some can speak powerfully, some can sing beautifully, some can teach, some can cook. Some have a lot of money, some have a lot of time, some have a lot of energy, some have great wisdom.

Paul says, discover your gifts! Use your gifts! But use them for the right purpose. God gives us gifts so that we can spread the love of God in Christ. We can use them to build up the community of believers, and we can use them to be strong witnesses to Christ in the world out there.

There are lots of wonderful gifts in this congregation. Sit down and write down on a piece of paper what you can do well. Thank God for these gifts and
make them available for his work. But as you get involved, check why you do so. You don’t want to become a Porsche Spyder for God!

St Peter’s, Pretoria, 7-02-2015

1. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
2. Does the sermon reflect God’s demand or God’s grace?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (in this case a thematic sermon) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘This sermon is a thinly veiled attack on the Charismatic and Pentecostal movement! Main-line churches could do well by replacing their sticky atmosphere and sterile intellectualism with some Charismatic enthusiasm!’

b) ‘You confuse the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as specifically enumerated in the Bible, with the natural gifts endowed to all human beings in some way or another. Inspired prophecy has nothing in common with political rhetoric. Faith healing has nothing in common with modern medicine!’

c) ‘You completely disregarded Paul’s strong emphasis on the coming Kingdom of God. The result is that the sermon reflects nothing but a moralistic appeal to make yourself useful in the world.’
When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?’ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father left these instructions before he died: “This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.” Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.’ When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. ‘We are your slaves,’ they said. But Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.’ And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50: 15–21, NIV)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I wonder whether you have watched the fire in Knysna on television. It was frightening! Devastating fires occur regularly in informal settlements, recently also in high-rise buildings. People lose their homes, their possessions, even their loved ones.

But let us not forget the natural world on which we all depend! Knysna had the oldest and most beautiful forests in the country, and they are gone! It was the biggest natural catastrophe in South African history.

A fire starts small, maybe through a candle, a match, or a burning cigarette. But when it is not stopped, it grows bigger and bigger. Fanned by a strong wind, the fire jumps from tree to tree. Finally the whole forest or the whole informal settlement is burning.

This is how evil works: it begins small and you may think it is not worth writing home about, but it can blow up like a balloon.

Just a little unprotected sex, just for fun, over within a few minutes—and it can lead to teenage pregnancy, end of schooling, HIV infection. It has consequences for the mother, the child, the family, the society.
You smoke a little dagga, just for fun—and you get hooked. When it loses its kick, you go to heavier stuff and destroy your life. Don’t play with fire. Stop it in its tracks, or you will be sorry!

The story of Joseph and his brothers found in Genesis 50 has one of the most remarkable plots in the Bible. It shows us how evil begins small and grows—and how it can be stopped.

It all began with Isaac, the father of the twelve brothers. He did what no parent and no teacher must do: he had a favourite, Joseph, on whom he lavished all his love. The other sons were less important. They had to do the work, while Joseph was spoilt at home.

That is where the fire started. Then it jumped to the following tree: Joseph became proud. Although he was younger, he thought that he was better than the others, that he was entitled to his father’s love. He began to despise his brothers.

Then the fire jumped to the next tree: the brothers began to envy him, to resent his special status. Their anger grew into hatred. That is what favouritism and discrimination do: They cause envy, then resentment, then anger, then hatred, then violence.

The hatred grew so strong that they wanted to get rid of him. They would have killed him if the eldest brother had not been wise enough to look for an alternative. So they sold him into slavery.

The result was that Joseph went through many years of suffering. The father endured years of deepest sorrow. He had lost the son he loved most. The brothers had to endure the depression of the father. They were constantly reminded of what they had done. They never regained their peace of mind.

More than that, the evil the brothers had done poisoned their relationship with their brother Joseph for ever after. When they met Joseph again, they were mortally afraid that he would revenge himself. And that is what we could have expected.

Now consider this: Joseph had become the prime minister of the mighty Egyptian Empire. That was a forest with very tall trees! In a forest fire, the bigger the trees, the more furious the fire becomes, the more rapidly it spreads, the more harm it does. Joseph was the most powerful man in the empire.

The more powerful people are, the more devastating the consequences of their decisions and actions for the society. It is one thing if little John tells a lie to his teacher or steals a ballpoint; it is another thing if the president of a country tells a lie on mass media or steals millions from the state coffers to enrich himself.

So what would Joseph do when he recognised his brothers? He could have accused them of being spies for a foreign country. He could have thrown them into prison, tortured them, made them slaves. He could simply have ordered them to be executed.

Just imagine what could have happened if he had killed them! The twelve brothers were the prime ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. If Joseph had killed them, there would have been no people of Israel, no David, no Jeremiah,
no Jesus, no Paul, no Luther, no Christian congregation here in Pretoria or anywhere else on earth!

What would Joseph do? What will the president of our country do? What will be the consequences for generations to come? What will the president of the United States do with his vast powers—a man who commands enough nuclear weapons to devastate the earth a few times over? And what will be the consequences for humankind?

Let me remind you of the Second World War. For one and a half centuries, France and Germany had fought each other. Sometimes the French won, then the Germans, then the French again. Enmity can continue from generation to generation. In World War I, Germany was the loser. In the peace treaty of Versailles, the Germans were severely humiliated and impoverished.

The Germans were discouraged, resentful, and angry. A firebrand, Adolf Hitler, picked up the public anger, threw petrol on the fire, built a powerful army, and within a few years, Germany had conquered the better part of Europe, including France. But then the tide turned, Germany was again defeated and laid in ruins.

Fifty million people lost their lives in that war—about as many as the total population of South Africa. It is then that German and French leaders decided that enough was enough. Instead of revenge, they forged an understanding between the two nations. Together they built a united Europe, which has not seen war for sixty years now.

Others are not so fortunate. The Sunni and Shiite Muslims have been at loggerheads with each other for almost 1,600 years now. You can see the catastrophic consequences today in the Middle East. In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants have fought each other since the seventeenth century. Conflicts between tribes and nations can continue for generations.

Hatred leads to hatred, violence leads to violence. The same thing can happen between individuals, within families, communities, or nations. It can happen between Christians—as it happened between Catholics and Protestants. It can happen even here in our own congregation. Frustration, resentment, and anger can develop into devastating fires.

That is where God comes into the picture. God can change the heart of people that are full of resentment, revenge, and hatred. God can stop the fire from spreading. God can turn a fatal course of history into a positive direction.

Again, it starts small. A few responsible individuals in leadership positions take the first step. It may be a costly step for them. They must be humble enough to sacrifice their self-interest. Joseph was taken through intense suffering. This made him not only humble, but also compassionate and responsible.

Being humble and responsible, God could place him in a high position and use him for his purposes. He saved the Egyptians from starvation. And then he saved his own family from starvation—his father and his brothers who had wanted to kill him. The future of the people of Israel was opened up. Christianity could grow on the fertile soil of the Jewish faith.
This is what God can do when he changes the hearts of people in leadership positions. They turn the course of history away from misery, death, and destruction in the direction of peace, prosperity, and human flourishing.

That is what happened in the case of Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, and others who helped to draw up a new dispensation. We can hardly imagine what would have happened to South Africa if the resentment and hatred that had built up over decades had been allowed to explode. God had given us responsible leaders, and we could begin from scratch with a new history.

The power of forgiveness can overcome the power of revenge. Forgiveness does not mean that we pretend that the evil has not happened. Forgiveness means that we bear the burden of the past so that we can build a better future. Forgiveness does not mean that an evil situation must be allowed to continue. Forgiveness means that we cooperate to overcome the cause of the conflict.

Forgiveness means that we do not allow the evil of the past to determine the future. What has been done can never be undone again. The evil sits there in the past and continues to have consequences. It is like a land mine; it can explode any time. But responsible people can prevent this from happening.

Although Joseph had shown them mercy the first time, the brothers had no peace. They feared revenge all the time. When the father died, they panicked. Again, Joseph took the route of responsibility. Again, he was moved by compassion. Again, he had to forgive them. We can see that evil rears its head again and again, so forgiveness must happen again and again. Jesus said we must forgive seventy times seven times.

Now we understand what happens in Christ. God exposed himself to the evil done by human beings. He carried the burden of hatred and resentment. And because God forgives, we can start afresh. We have a future; our sick relations can heal. And in Christ, God does this again and again to overcome evil and its consequences.

We learn three important lessons from this story. The first one is, make certain that the fire never starts in the first place. Teenage pregnancies do not need to occur and should never occur. HIV infections do not have to occur and should never occur. Abject poverty does not need to occur and should never occur. Destructive violence does not have to occur and should never occur. Wars do not have to occur and should never occur. We must find responsible, life-supporting, just solutions when problems surface.

The second is that when a fire begins to burn, we must cooperate and put it out as soon as we possibly can. If we do not do that, it may get out of hand and do immeasurable harm. The causes of the conflict must be exposed and remedied before resentment explodes into hatred.

The third is that forgiveness implies sacrifices. There is no peace without justice. There is no reconciliation without sacrifice. Justice, peace, and reconciliation mean that parties must be willing to give up what is in the way of peace.
Dear sisters and brothers, we are again in a situation where great sections of the population are disillusioned, resentful, and angry. Some of them are very angry, especially young people without jobs and without a future. The danger is that the fire will get out of hand and throw our beautiful country into chaos, death, and destruction. This is serious.

We must deal with the underlying issues urgently and decisively. We must never allow our emotions to be whipped up by powerful speakers and tweets. This is just too dangerous! True leaders will try to prevent conflict, calm down, find solutions, negotiate, and give up their privileges and ambitions for the sake of the people. And this must start small, at the grass roots— with each one of us— because we can appoint our leaders and hold them accountable!

St Peter’s, Pretoria 9-07-2017

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13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘Christians have always emphasised forgiveness and reconciliation to calm down the poor and oppressed, rather than remove the injustices in society. The anger and violence of the downtrodden is justified and necessary, otherwise nothing will ever change!’

b) ‘It is highly irresponsible to attack legitimate leaders from the pulpit, leaders who have been voted into office by the people in a democratic process. You have debased the holy ministry to the level of the shallow gossip of social media and an irresponsible press!’

c) ‘You are an idealist! Love does not belong into the public arena! Political leaders, the courts, and the police must uphold law and order in a society that is bent on the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others.’
Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?

Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt. 22: 34–40, NIV).

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I love my mother; I love my wife. I love my job; I love my car. I love coffee and buns. Oh really? Do you love coffee and buns as much as your mother? And now the difficult question: Do you love God as much as your mother? If you had to choose, whom would you choose?

Fortunately, we do not have to choose! We can love God above all things and our mothers and our sweethearts and our children and our colleagues as much as we love ourselves.

So there seem to be three kinds of love: the love of God, the love of our fellow human beings, and the love of things or ideas. When it comes to the push, most people love things above all else: money, status, food, and so on.

The love of many dedicated Christians is directed upward towards God, rather than sideways towards their neighbours. It seems to be much easier to love God than to love our demanding and troublesome neighbours. Many of our hymns speak of the love of God and the love of Christ without mentioning the love of our fellow human beings at all.

My point is, Can we love God without loving other human beings? No, we cannot. ‘We love because God first loved us’, John says in his first letter. This is where it all begins: with God loving us! We are empowered by God’s love to love others. John also says that those who do not love their brothers and sisters cannot claim to love God.

Why that? The love of God is like a stream of water that reaches us, fills us to the brim, and flows through us to others. Loving God means becoming a channel of God’s love flowing into God’s world. So let us merge the two
commandments that Jesus quoted from the Old Testament into one: *Love God by sharing the love you receive from God with your neighbours!*

This is not really a commandment. It is a privilege. When I was a child, my father would allow me to sit on his lap and grab the steering wheel. You cannot imagine the exhilaration that went through my bones. He kept his own hand on the wheel to make sure I would not land the car in the ditch. But in my imagination, I was driving the car, and for kids, imaginations are real. I am not sure what the greater joy was, my joy or my father’s joy watching my joy.

Is love something that takes the *joy* out of life? No, it is something that brings us joy! Two boys aged four, Peter and Ngwato, are playing. Peter has just received a glittering toy car for his birthday. He is very proud of it. Ngwato’s envy grows. His desire grows.

When Peter is distracted, he grabs it to play with it. In a tantrum of fury, Peter pounces on him, tears the car away, while Ngwato runs away, deeply hurt and crying bitterly. Now Peter is alone—he no longer enjoys his toy. He has lost his playmate. Misery all over!

Let me tell the story again! Peter sees how Ngwato craves a chance to play with the toy. He says, ‘You drive the car up that sandhill, then I will drive it down the hill.’ Ngwato beams, Peter enjoys the fun of playing together. He loses nothing, he gains everything. Both are happy.

Do we have to *sacrifice* too much? I see two teenagers having fun. To impress each other, they are smoking heavily. I tell them, ‘Hey, you are destroying your lungs, and you will be sorry!’ One of them says, ‘Oh, I know, my father died of lung cancer!’ I ask him, ‘Why then do you do it?’ He says, ‘I am in charge of my life; it is my choice.’ I reply, ‘No, you are not in charge—you are enslaved. Otherwise, you would leave it alone!’

I forgot to tell him the most important thing: God loves you; he wants you to have a healthy body; he does not want you to end up in pain. Love yourself with the love of God, rather than yielding to this short-lived and treacherous pleasure. God wants you to have a healthy family. He does not want you to leave a widow and orphans behind when you are fifty. Love those whom you will love!

If I had opened his eyes to God’s love, it might have saved him from a premature and miserable death. We are liberated and empowered by God’s love. His sacrifice of the cigarette would have been infinitely worthwhile!

Is love a *heavy burden*, or is it not rather something that liberates us from our burdens? A middle-class family runs out of space. There is just too much furniture in the house. Some is precious because it is inherited; some is precious because it was bought for a steep price. There are also too many gadgets that are never really used. Declutter your life, a friend suggests.

They work out how much money they could get from selling the surplus. But it is not worth the trouble of finding buyers! Suddenly they have a bright idea. There is a family nearby that does not have the bare essentials. They give
whatever they do not need to them. Oh, what a joy in the poor family! And what a joy of having caused that joy, in the well-off family!

Love at the workplace. There is a new employee in the workshop. He is inexperienced. Hardly a day passes without some breakage or delay. The boss gets furious; he rebukes him; he threatens him with dismissal. The employee becomes ever more anxious and insecure. He makes mistakes he would normally not have made. The atmosphere in the workshop is sticky and foreboding.

Let me tell the story again. The boss sees the potential in the new employee. He wants his workers to develop their gifts and their creativity. He allows them to take their own initiatives and learn from their own mistakes. The workers feel that they are taken seriously. Their work is needed and appreciated. They identify with the firm. They are willing to work overtime just for the fun of it, and the firm flourishes.

Love in business. The economy falls into a recession. The bottom line of an enterprise shows a dramatic decline since last year. The shareholders demand radical action. The company must be rationalised; redundant workers must be dismissed. Procedures must be automated. Or so it seems.

But the CEO has wider horizons. She also has a heart for those who will suffer. While shareholders live off their capital, workers live off their work. Dismissed workers have families to feed. Rising unemployment destabilises the society. There will be demonstrations. Alcoholism and family violence will increase.

The enterprise itself will suffer because it has invested heavily in the training of its workers. It depends on the loyalty and dedication of its workers. When the economy picks up again, it needs experienced workers. Yes, profits for the shareholders will decline, but long-term advantages will outweigh the short-term sacrifices. We can see that in this case, love takes the form of responsibility.

What about love in politics? After an election, the society is deeply divided. The majority party does not have sufficient members in parliament to rule alone. It tries to push legislation through, but again and again, the opposition throws its sticks into the wheels. There is stalemate and stagnation.

Then the leader of the majority party analyses the situation: Does the opposition perhaps represent the legitimate needs of its constituency? Would it not be better for the nation if those needs were met rather than ignored? Would it not be better if the opposition would be involved in finding solutions? So a coalition is formed, and the society prospers. ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself’ has found political expression.

Love in sport! The soccer world cup is being played. Brazil is the host country. It has a strong team with a proud record. It is the favourite. Winning the world cup would create new solidarity in a badly unequal, restless, and divided society. But it is beaten by Germany in the most humiliating way.
The extravagant jubilation in Germany knows no limits. Although they have not contributed to the success of their team, nor do they benefit from the result, people just become crazy. The Brazilians are devastated; a feeling of hopelessness and gloom descends upon the population.

Now imagine that the German captain called his team together. They decided to make a public pronouncement, thanking the Brazilians for their lavish hospitality, saying that it was a very special privilege to play against their famous and valiant team, expressing their confidence that they will again demonstrate their capacities in the future.

What would the consequences of such a gesture be for the Brazilians? What would they be for the overbearing German public? Would it not soothe the pain of the Brazilians and curb the pride of the Germans? Would it not bring about a lot of goodwill between two great football nations?

*Love in nature.* Old gold mines pollute the water of rivers that sustain settled communities downstream. People throw their rubbish on the streets. Badly maintained water purification plants spill dangerous chemicals and bacteria into drinking water. Erosion eats into overstocked grasslands. Smog from power stations causes lung disease. Trees are chopped down for firewood or for golf courses. Plastic bags are washed into the sea and harm the fish.

But maybe God loves our children and grandchildren as much as he loves us. Maybe God wants us to love our children and grandchildren as much as we love ourselves. Maybe God wants our children and grandchildren to thank us, rather than curse us for what we have left behind when we leave this earth to them.

Love is the greatest commandment! God is serious with this commandment. Not because he wants to make life difficult and unpleasant for us, but because he wants to maintain and bless and fulfil our life! God wants us to prosper.

Only love produces healthy minds, healthy bodies, healthy communities, healthy societies, healthy natural environments. Only love overcomes hatred, conflict, misery, and hopelessness. Only love gives us a fulfilled life. Only love brings us peace and joy.

Love is the greatest commandment? No, to participate in God’s love, to let God’s love flow through us to others is the greatest privilege we can think of. Let us love, because God first loved us!

1. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
2. Does the sermon reflect God’s demand or God’s grace?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (in this case the spiral sermon) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

Do you notice that the sermon consists of two parts: first explanation, then application? In which of the two does the preacher use the spiral approach?
Has the spiral method made the sermon boring?
Did the preacher display his ignorance in certain areas of life?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘Love is such an overused word with so many different meanings that it should be avoided in a sermon! Rather call it responsibility!’

b) ‘Business is not about love, but about profitability. Politics is not about love but about power, justice, and peace. Sport is not about love, but about competition. Charity is not about love but about the rich salving their conscience by giving alms to the poor.’

c) ‘You do not have to believe in God to be a loving person. Those who focus on a fantasy god located in some ‘heaven above’ that does not exist will hardly love those around them who need their full attention and dedication!’
CHAPTER 26

The seed needs soil to grow (Luke 8: 4–8)

A homily

While a large crowd was gathering, and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown. When he said this, he called out, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear! (Luke 8: 4–8, NIV)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, what did you eat this morning—oat porridge? It is made of seeds! Maize porridge? It is made of seeds! Mabele porridge? It is made of seeds! Bread? It is made of seeds! Eggs? The hens that lay the eggs have eaten seeds! Pork sausage? Steaks? The pig or ox was fattened with seeds! You only had a cup of coffee? It is made of seeds!

God wants life. Therefore, God creates seeds—billions of them every year! They are necessary for a plant species to survive. But they are also necessary to feed other species—animals and human beings.

[An image of a field of ripe wheat appears on the screen.]

The seed of a plant is something wonderful. It seems to be dead, but it is alive. Give it water, and it springs into action. It is tiny, but it can grow into a great plant. It is adaptable: it can grow in many different places. It is tough: it can grow under harsh circumstances.

And yet it can only grow where the circumstances are right. There must be fertile soil. The soil must be opened so that it can get in. There must be compost in the soil to feed the plant. There must be water. There must be sunshine. The plant must eat; the plant must drink. The plant must be free to develop.

Jesus says that the Word of God is like a seed. It seems to be small and insignificant, but the creative power of God is in this Word. It can change your life. It can give you peace. It can give you joy. It can give you self-confidence and courage. It can empower you to do things that you thought you couldn’t do. It can
heal relationships. It can change your place of work. It can change your family; it can change our congregation. It can change society.

And yet, like a seed, it is part of the world God created. It needs space to grow. It needs time to turn into a plant. It must be nurtured. The hearts and minds of people must be open like a ploughed field for it to enter. With this parable, Jesus helps us to understand what must happen so that the gospel of Christ can yield its fruit. He sketches four different sorts of soil found in a field in Palestine. I will use examples from Southern Africa.

The hard ground

[A slide depicting a cobblestone pavement appears on the screen.]

My wife and I just moved into a retirement village. Our old house has been sold. It is being dismantled. All our trees, shrubs, and flowers are removed. They will build five new houses on the property. The spaces between the houses will be paved or filled with concrete. There will be no chance for any plant to grow. The ground is too hard for seeds to penetrate. If by chance some seeds would fall on the ground, the doves would quickly pick them up, and they are gone.

There are countries where the Word of God has a hard time to reach the hearts and minds of the people. In communist countries, the brains of the population are so tightly packed with Marxist-Leninist ideology that there is no space for anything else. When cracks appear in the tarmac, when people begin to listen to other voices and think for themselves, the heavy hand of the state immediately crushes anything that might grow there.

The same is true for conservative Muslim countries. It is a crime to do mission work. If you become a Christian, you will be punished severely. Your family and your community will cast you out. You will lose your job. Some Christians survive in such countries, but it is difficult for the Word of God to penetrate such a hard soil and grow into a flourishing community.

What about us? We must thank God that in South Africa, it is still possible to sow the seed of the Word of God into the population. However, hatred, violence, and envy have hardened the hearts of many people to such an extent that the Word of God just cannot penetrate.

The shallow ground

As a young man, I was working in rural development. We tried to make the most of the agricultural soil available in rural communities. In most places in South Africa, the fertile soil is only about one foot deep. Below this layer, the soil is completely barren. Nothing can grow there.

The fertile soil on top is the most precious asset for our country because it feeds the nation. If it is gone, it is gone. In many places, the land is overstocked with animals. The grass is almost gone. The soil is exposed. When strong rains
The seed needs soil to grow (Luke 8: 4–8)

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fall, the soil is washed away. The rivers are brown because they carry soil away into the sea.

[A slide with barren and heavily eroded soil appears on the screen.]

There may be a little topsoil left. People plough and throw in seed. The seed indeed germinates, but its roots do not go far. Plants do not get enough water. The supply of nutrients is feeble. The crop is poor. When there is no rain, they wither and die, so there is no crop.

In the same way, the Word of God must reach deeply into our lives, or it will not survive and prosper. It must draw on all our spiritual resources to flourish. The Bible says that we must love God with all our heart, all our mind, and all our spiritual strength. If we are Christians only at the surface of our lives, if the Word of God does not send its roots into the depth of our very being, it will not flourish.

This often happens when people convert to Christ. We may attend an evangelistic rally or a youth camp. We experience lots of excitement, dancing, singing, and praising the Lord. We are struck by fiery preaching. The spirit catches hold of us, and we are carried away. But then we go back into our ordinary life: our family quarrels, our dreary place of work, or the miserable situation of the unemployed. Then the whole excitement is gone. The fertile ground was not deep enough.

The thorn bushes

[A slide depicting land overgrown with an impenetrable carpet of thorn bush appears on the screen.]

I grew up in Namibia. There are large tracts of land in Namibia that are covered with a dense carpet of thorn bush. It is a result of overstocking. The bushes are so enmeshed with each other that no animal and no human being can walk around between them. There is also no place for other kinds of plants to grow. If you chop down one of these bushes, it immediately produces many more shoots, and the situation becomes worse. Whole tracts of land have become unusable.

Jesus says that the message of God’s love, which wants to liberate, heal, and empower us, can be crowded out in this way. There are so many things that occupy us that there is just no space in our minds for something else to enter in. The seed of the Word of God finds no room to germinate. This is tragic, because the thorn trees that have occupied the land are useless for humans and for animals.

In the same way, the things that occupy our minds and our hearts may not benefit us in any way. They do not make us happy; they do not give us peace of mind. They do not help us in our daily tasks; they yield us no income. They are not important in any way. They just use up our time, our energy, and our financial resources. And yet they sit there in our minds and do not go away.

If we had enough time, I would ask each one of you to reflect for a moment: What is it that claims my attention day in and day out? How much of this is
unimportant, useless, and perhaps even harmful? What is it that eats up my
time? What is it that eats up my money? What is it that occupies my mind, while
it does not benefit me? Perhaps you can find a quiet moment at home to do this
exercise.

I hate to give you examples, because you will hate me for doing so. Must we
take part in all that gossip on the cell phone? Do we benefit from being ‘liked’
by people on the other side of the earth whom we have never met and will never
meet? Must we waste our money on expensive drinks and parties? Must we
display our dignity by driving luxury cars? Must we take drugs and seduce girls
just to impress our peer group at school?

If you want to cut out this garbage in your life, I advise you to begin each
day with a period of silent reflection under the Word of God. Ask yourself what
is important; what is entitled to occupy your mind; what has the right to claim
your time, your thoughts, and your money; what is valuable and beneficial?

On the other hand, what is useless trash? It takes an enormous effort to cut
out those thorn trees in Namibia so that the grass can grow, and the animals can
eat again! It is also not easy to get rid of our ingrained habits and preoccupations.
But it is worthwhile—our life will change into something fruitful and beautiful!
Give the Word of God a chance to renew your life, and you will be surprised
what it can do for you and for your social environment!

What the farmers do

Seed is sown by human beings. They plough the field; they fertilise it. They
take out weeds; they give water. They harvest; they thrash. They store; they
transport. To produce food is hard work. It is costly; it needs an investment of
space, time, energy, and finances. Today great companies use machines to do all
that, but machines also use up energy. They cost a fortune; they put people out
of work.

In short, there is no yield without an input. You get nothing of real value for
cheap. The same is true for the Word of God. Christ just goes on and sows the
seed, always and everywhere. And he wants us to share his work. And that takes
time and effort. We are called upon to be witnesses to Christ wherever we go: by
the way we think, the way we speak, the way we act, the way we plan, the way
we organise, the way we work, the way we play football, the way we eat, the way
we love, the way we have sexual intercourse.

Whether people take note of our effort or not is not important. People also
do not notice the air they breathe, yet they need it to live. Christ does not want
to miss the slightest chance that God’s redeeming love finds a place to grow and
flourish. Yes, it will fall on hard ground, on shallow ground, on thorny ground.
If there is a drought, farmers suffer losses. That is part of the cost. But it will
also fall on fertile soil and yield a great harvest.

Pretoria, St Peter’s, 8-02-2015
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9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘Our youth grows up in the cities; they have no connection with the soil, the plants, and the animals that provide their food. They have never experienced how the land is cultivated by human hands. The parable used may not strike a chord in their minds and hearts. Should we not replace the parable with a modern equivalent?’

b) ‘The sermon concentrates on obstacles to the Word of God. It does not tell the listeners what the content of the Word of God is, what it does, how it does it, what “fruit” means, why we should assume that this Word will produce such fruit. In short, the message is not sufficiently translated into the life of the listeners.’

c) ‘The sermon is heavily prejudiced against what the modern youth craves and understands. They will feel misunderstood and excluded by the older generation and leave the church for more exciting pastimes.’
A body dedicated to the Lord

(Rom. 12:1–6)

A guided meditation

A handout with the text, the closing prayer, and space for notes on the following topics is distributed:

Is the body important for us as Christians?
Why is the body important for God?
Do Christians give sacrifices to God?
Which kind of spirit uses your body?
Can our spirits be transformed?

→ means 5 seconds silence
► means 10–15 seconds silence

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true spiritual worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, by considering what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the gift of faith God has distributed to each of us. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. (Rom. 12: 1–6, NIV)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, when we come together for a worship service, we sing together, praise God together, read texts from the Bible together, listen to the proclamation of the Word of God together, and pray together.

When having our quiet time at home, however, we are alone before the Lord. We request him to speak to us. We open our life before him. We allow his Spirit to reach its deepest foundations.
We call that silent meditation. Today we want to practice such a silent meditation in church so that we can do it better at home.

Paul speaks of our body rather than our spirit. Is the body all that important for a Christian? ►

Let us first become aware of our body. Try to relax! We can relax because we are at home in our Father’s house! Become conscious of your body. → Feel the pressure of your buttocks on the pew. → Imagine that it is the foundation of a monument. Now build up your spine vertically on this foundation. → Now put your head on top of the spine. Balance it so neatly that it will not topple down to any side when you let it go. → Now let the arms hang like washing on a washing line. →

Feel how your breath flows in and out. → Can you feel your heart pumping? → Become aware of how it pumps the blood around the body, up to the toes and fingertips. → Feel at home in your body. → This is your body, your very own body! → Enjoy having a functioning body! → Praise God for this body! → Make up your mind to care for this most precious gift of God! ►

Why should this body be important for God? ►

You do not have a body; you are this body! Your body cannot go out of this room and leave your spirit behind. → Without our body, we would not exist. Because God is interested in us, God is interested in our body. ►

That is true for Christ. God showed us his love through Jesus of Nazareth. Was Jesus a spirit, or was he a body? ►

The New Testament says that Jesus was a human being living as a body like we do. He was born a baby. He grew up. He was hungry and thirsty; he became tired and needed sleep. He had ears to listen, a tongue to speak, eyes to look, hands to touch. He was tortured. He was executed; he died. Jesus was not just a spirit; God’s love became real in this world through the body of Jesus.

Do you think that God’s love can become real through our body? ►

Isn’t it too feeble, too ugly, too old, too sickly, too clumsy, too shameful for that? → Paul does not think so! Paul appeals to us to make this body, precisely this our body, available to God as a living sacrifice. Why that? → God wants to use this vulnerable and mortal body to make his love real in this world, just as he did in Jesus of Nazareth. ►

Does God demand sacrifices from us? ►

We don’t like the idea of sacrificing something! We are too selfish to let go what is ours. Besides, God does not need our sacrifices. He accepts us because he loves us. God accepts us even with our problematic track record! ►

But is love possible without sacrifices? ►

If I help somebody in need, I part with some of my possessions. → If I accept somebody who is not acceptable, I bear that person like a burden. → If I forgive somebody, I let go what is due to me. → Think of somebody who makes you unhappy! Will you accept him or her? → Think of somebody whom
you made unhappy. Will that person be willing to accept you? There is no love without sacrifice! ►

In the cross of Christ, God exposed himself to the misconception, hatred, and arrogance of human beings. In the same way, he exposes himself to our failures, wrong ideas, and evil motivations! Think of the many times you have done something that causes God to suffer pain and disappointment! ►

In Christ, God was willing to sacrifice for humanity. In Christ, God is willing to sacrifice for us here today. If we love God, can we avoid sharing God’s sacrifice? ► Our sacrifices do not make us acceptable to God, but we join God in his sacrificial love. What he did in Christ, he wants to do through us. ►

Paul says the community of believers is now the Body of Christ through which God’s love spreads into the world. Our bodies have become members of this body. The Body of Christ is the means used by the Spirit of Christ, through which Christ becomes real and effective in this world. ►

Really? Is it really your body? → As you sit there? → Can this your body be a member of the Body of Christ? → Paul thinks so! We have ears to listen, we have tongues to comfort, we have hands to help, we have voices to sing, we have eyes to look, we have faces to smile, we have legs to go where help is needed. It is with our living bodies that we can build living and loving relationships. ►

[Depending on the time available and the response, the exercise can end here.

If used in a retreat, what follows can be the topic of a second session.]

Paul says that making our bodies available for God’s love is our spiritual worship. It is the Spirit of Christ that becomes real and effective in this world through our bodies. What kind of spirit is the Spirit of Christ? ►

Paul says we should not conform to this world. Our minds must be transformed by the love of God in Christ. All kinds of spirit can use our bodies to become real in this world. The same car can be driven by a doctor who serves her patients or by a criminal who blows up a money delivery van.

What kind of spirit motivates us in our daily lives? → Be honest! Is it a spirit of resentment? A spirit of ambition? A spirit of greed? A spirit of hatred? ►


Don’t conform but transform! We belong to Christ. Only the Spirit of God’s suffering, healing, redeeming love has a right to use our bodies. → Yes, our motivations can change! Our brains can be rewired! → When our brains are rewired, our bodies will follow the new direction of our brains. ►

How can our brains be rewired? ►
Think of your fingers! When your fingers tap the screen to send out a selfie, what kind of spirit do they send into the world? → Is it your hunger for self-glorification, or sending a smile to those whom you love? → Before you allow your fingers to type an SMS, reflect what kind of spirit will now use this gadget to get into the world! ►

Think of your face! When you enter the workshop in the morning, or the classroom, or the office, what kind of atmosphere does your face radiate? Is it gloomy and moody? Or is it radiant, joyful, loving? → If your eyes sparkle with goodwill and humour, others experience a little thrill; it can make their day! ►

Think of your mouth! What motivates you when you eat: feeding your body, sharing good things with others, or uncontrolled craving? ►

Think of your legs! When you go shopping with your spouse, the way you walk sends out a message! If you are a man, do you march ahead with your strong rugby legs, or do you allow your wife to go before you? ►

Think of your sexuality! Do you expect your partner to make you happy, or do you want to make your partner happy? God wants to liberate, transform, and empower our relationships, and he uses our body to do it. ►

Now let us pray the little prayer on the handout together:

Father, we praise you for the gift of our living, functioning bodies. We thank you that they are so unbelievably efficient. We thank you that they are so precious to you! We thank you for wanting to use them for your love to reach others.

Father, I want to dedicate my body to your purposes. I no longer want to abuse it to satisfy desires that are detrimental to me and to others. I no longer want to use it as a tool of resentment and selfish ambition. Father, transform my mind by the power of your Spirit. Make me a living member of your body, the community of believers.

Father, let us together like one body become a powerful witness to your suffering, transforming love in this world. Amen.

1. Does the message of the meditation reflect the message of the text?
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3. Does the meditation respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a 'parcel' to take home?
6. Is the meditation structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the design (meditation) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the meditation too long or too short?
11. Is the meditation overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘There is no provision for feedback, sharing, or discussion. It is still the preacher who imposes his/her opinion on the participants!’

b) ‘The leader talks too much! A true meditation prompts, but then allows the participants to find their own responses.’

c) ‘The leader employs psychological means to reach the deeper levels of the personality of the participants without being trained to do so. This can become very dangerous!’
Chapter 28

The Word became flesh (John 1: 15–18)

A lecture

The Greek word ‘logos’ means word, logical argument, or rationality. In the New Testament, the concept of the divine Logos only appears in John 1 and 1 John 1. For the average believer, this text belongs to the mysterious parts of the Bible. When I had to preach on John 1, I used the opportunity to explain the concept of the logos in terms of faith and science.

Although this sermon has actually been preached, it is here included as an example of what should not be done. Try to pinpoint what it is exactly that has gone wrong and how it could be changed.

The Logos (= Word) became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testified concerning Jesus, crying out, This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1: 15–18, NIV)

Dear Congregation, in 1970, my wife and I lived in a mission house in Johannesburg. The walls of this house had cracks. The cracks were so bad that we feared the house would collapse. When the problem was investigated, it became clear that the house had no foundations. The walls were simply built on the flat earth. That was dangerous. We had to get foundations under the existing walls, and that was not easy. And not cheap!

We need foundations! Human beings need foundations as much as houses do! When people lose their foundations, they are tossed about by fickle encounters and circumstances like driftwood in the ocean. Some build their lives on wrong foundations, like the Muslim fundamentalists that blow themselves and others up to inherit paradise. Whole nations can lose their foundations. Just think of the Germans under Hitler.

We are worried what may become of South Africa with its growing population, its rising unemployment, and its corrupt institutions. What may
happen to the world now that the president of the American superpower with its nuclear weapons and financial clout has become unpredictable? What about the future of the earth under the impact of escalating ecological destruction? Where foundations are shaking, we have reason to become anxious!

Let us look at various possible foundations for our lives.

The foundation in ancient Israel

Jesus said that prudent people build their houses on rocks, rather than drift sand. For the ancient Israelites, Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the foundation. He created the world. In his love, he entered into a contract with Israel. Yahweh would be Israel's God, and Israel would be Yahweh's people. Yahweh would look after his people, and his people would keep Yahweh's law.

But Israel was conquered and oppressed by one pagan empire after the other: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonians, and the Romans. So their foundation was shaking. Israel's faith was one desperate struggle to regain the stability of its foundations. The two pillars of the faith of Israel were God's creative power on the one hand and God's benevolent intentions on the other.

How did God create the world? In ancient Israel, a number of images were used to express their faith in God's creative power. The oldest image, found in Genesis 2, depicts the Creator as a potter who forms the human being out of clay with his bare hands. It also depicts the Creator as a gardener who plants a beautiful garden. In Genesis 1, which probably originated towards the end of the Babylonian exile, the image of an imperial decree is used. Like an ancient dictator, God commands and it happens: Let there be light and there was light!

A few centuries later, Jewish sages, such as Proverbs and Jesus Sirach, argued that God did not use his hands to create the world, nor his imperial authority, but his unfathomable wisdom. This magnificent and highly efficient universe, many believers would say today, can only have been designed by a higher intelligence. Let me read a few lines from Proverbs 8, where God's wisdom speaks like a person:

The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he gave the sea its boundary, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. I was constantly at his side, rejoicing in his world and delighting in humankind. For those who find me find life. But those who fail to find me harm themselves; those who hate me love death.

So for the author of Proverbs it is the wisdom of God that is the foundation of reality. In the ancient Near East, it was believed that God had established the cosmic order to keep chaos in check. The cosmic order included the laws of nature, the laws of society, and the laws of morality. You cannot live and flourish
if you do not fit into God’s system. At the social and moral levels, the wisdom of God manifested itself in the law of Moses.

Deuteronomy maintains that those who obey the law of Moses are blessed; those who transgress it are cursed. So if Israel was oppressed, it must have sinned! If people are handicapped or sick, they are punished for their transgressions. This logic became problematic when it was realised that the perpetrators of evil flourished, while their victims, however righteous they may have been, suffered.

The foundation in Greek philosophy

The ancient Greeks too reflected on the ultimate foundations of reality and came to various conclusions. In New Testament times, there was a popular Greek philosophy called the Stoa. This school too was impressed by the beauty and efficiency of the world. It argued that reality must have been based on the divine logos. The Greek word logos means ‘word’, but also the meaning of the word, or a logical argument, or rationality. We still use the word ‘logical’ for something that makes sense.

So the Stoa believed that the world was organised according to a rational order. Today we would simply say that the laws of nature cause the world to function so magnificently. According to the Stoa, human beings flourish when they live according to this divine order (kata logon zen). Be sensible; use your brains. Don’t do something foolish! In a way, this was similar to the Jewish conviction that human well-being depended on obedience to the law of Moses.

The foundation in John’s Gospel

Now we come to our text. At the beginning of his Gospel, John says that the foundation of the world is the logos. The choice of this word was quite ingenious because it was able to cover the idea of an imperial decree in Genesis 1, the wisdom of God in Sirach and Proverbs, and the divine rationality in the Stoa. Let me read a few lines from John 1.

In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not grasped it. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

We see that John uses Jewish and Greek wisdom to state that it is God who is the Creator, thus the ultimate foundation of the universe. The world is not
self-contained; it is not the product of some unknown monster. It is not based on pure chance. It is the creation of God.

But once this is clear, the question is, *Which* God are we talking about? Is it the Jewish God of incorruptible justice, who demands obedience and condemns us if we transgress? Or the Greek god of a cold and impersonal rationality? Or the god of a blind fate?

John says something that neither the Jewish nor the Greek sages could have said: the *Logos*, thus the imperial authority of God, the wisdom of God, or the divine rationality, manifested itself in the life, ministry, and death of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. As John says, the Logos became flesh; that is, human reality. In Christ God revealed his intentions to humanity.

We are no longer busy with a nice theory; we no longer engage in metaphysical speculations. We are no longer groping in the dark. We are busy with a reality that humans could experience and have experienced. The first letter of John 1 powerfully expresses what the disciples experienced in Jesus: We announce to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands—the *Logos* of life!

**What is so special about Jesus of Nazareth?**

The disciples had followed Jesus from one village in Galilee to another. They were physically with him. What precisely did they experience? Certainly not another Jewish teacher of the law of Moses! Certainly not a great Greek philosopher! They witnessed the *compassion* with which he cared for the sick, the outcasts, and the public sinners. They were overwhelmed by the *authority* with which he proclaimed the God of Israel as a God of redeeming love rather than a God of demands, threats, and accusations.

They were confronted with the courage and the commitment with which he stood for his message, even when he was accused and condemned as a heretic and executed as a revolutionary. The God that Jesus proclaimed and enacted was a God of redeeming love, of compassion, of grace. That is the gospel! John continues to say:

> From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. Because the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart, who has announced it to us.

This was something new! God had revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth as a God of suffering, redeeming, life-giving grace! Not as an imperial decree, as in the empires of the ancient Near East; not as uncompromising law as in Judaism; not as cold, loveless rationality as in Greek philosophy, but as fatherly love! God’s love is the ultimate foundation of the universe!
Of course, there is order in the universe. The laws of nature are God’s laws; the universe could not function without them. They are valid. Of course, society must have laws that must be kept; otherwise, there is social chaos. Of course, there are rules of common decency that must be respected; otherwise, human relationships become horrid. Of course, we need practical rationality to succeed in everyday life.

However, there is a deeper foundation that underlies all these regularities: In all his works, God is motivated by his creative and redeeming love. The laws and rules are nothing but tools in the hands of a loving God. They are not the mainspring of the cosmic process. They are not the driving motivation that keeps reality going. And so they cannot give our lives a dependable foundation, an ultimate purpose, a reliable direction. The ultimate foundation of reality is God’s love for his creation.

The foundation in modern science

Creative, redeeming, sacrificial love—is that really the driving force that brings about the world and that keeps it on course? We no longer live in the time of the ancient Jewish and Greek sages. We live in the age of science. Can we still maintain, with a good conscience, that it is divine love that is the driving force of the cosmic process, including galaxies, elementary particles, molecules, organisms, world views, and societies?

Yes, I believe we can! Whatever has value has its costs! Love is sacrificial. Science tells us that the energy that fires the cosmic process is provided by entropic dissolution. A car keeps going because combustible fuel changes into useless fumes. There is no construction without demolition, no life without the death of other life, no accumulation of wealth that does not go at the expense of other people or the natural world, no freedom without structures, no conviction without discarding alternative convictions, no forgiveness without bearing what is forgiven. Reality in all its forms is costly! As the economists say, there are no free lunches!

God ceaselessly sacrifices parts of reality so that new parts of reality can emerge and evolve. Love implies sacrifice for the sake of what is being loved. If the Logos is divine love, then the Logos is divine suffering. God’s suffering manifested itself in the cross of Christ, but it underlies reality as a whole. And only if we participate in this suffering of God for the sake of other people and other creatures can we claim to love God.

Our task today

We can hardly imagine the revolution that the insight of the disciples of Jesus brought about in the history of humankind. Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, a philosopher of science said, ‘Christianity, the religion of love, has changed the
world!” And that is true despite all the atrocities that have been committed in the name of the Christian faith!

If we look at what really happened in the ancient Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman cultures, we are simply sickened. People were treated like things; hundreds of thousands of human beings have simply been finished off after they were defeated. Conquest for the sake of wealth, power, glory, and pleasure were the prime motivations. Rebels were impaled, crucified, enslaved, chained to battleships as rowers, thrown to wild animals in the circuses. The abundant flow of blood and the screams of the tortured caused spectators to cheer in ecstasy.

Most embarrassingly, Christians continued with this horrific attitude. Hundreds of thousands were enslaved, executed, or burnt alive at the stake as witches or heretics. But can this atrocious mindset be attributed to Jesus Christ? Is this a reflection of the Holy Spirit, or has our precious faith been hijacked by naked greed, power- and status-seeking?

Just think how our country and humanity and the earth would change if we would all be drawn into this motivation of God as manifest in Christ. Think of the growing discrepancies between rich and poor. Think of the pervasive occurrence of violence in families, society, and international relations.

Think of the reckless pursuit of profit. Think of power seeking and corruption in politics. Think of the craving for pleasure in our modern consumer culture. Think of the destruction of the natural world. Time and again, wrong foundations have led humanity into glaring injustices, destruction, misery, and senseless death.

If the love of God is the most fundamental motivation that underlies the universe and keeps it on track, we no longer need to be ashamed of our faith. It is not those who let themselves in for God’s love in Christ that are irrational, but those who don’t! We are invited to join God in his sacrificial love. It wants to flow through us, the people of God, into the world of God. The ball is in our court!

St Peter’s, Pretoria, 8-01-2017

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2. Does the sermon reflect God’s demand or God’s grace?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (in this case an academic lecture) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘No, really, this is not a sermon! The preacher simply wants to show off his superior knowledge. For the simple faith of the parishioners, it is incomprehensible and irrelevant!’

b) ‘There is a place for such an informative talk, but not on the pulpit! It would be better if the preacher invited those who are interested to a lecture, followed by a discussion.’

c) ‘You mix up an ancient religious text with modern science. This is a travesty! Science and faith do not mesh.’

d) ‘The sermon is hopelessly overloaded. Say Amen before you come to modern science!’
It is important that children are taken seriously as part of the congregation. They must learn to feel at home in the Sunday service. In situations where many children attend the worship service and there were no special classes for them, I preached a mini-sermon for them just before the main sermon. I noticed that the adults listened to these sermonettes much more attentively and engaged than to the main sermon.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4: 9–12, NIV)

I see so many children in church today! That is wonderful—thank you for coming! Now tell me: What do we celebrate today? (A little girl: Christmas!) Oh, I see! But what are you so excited about? (What we will get!) Ah, the presents! I see that you can hardly wait to get home. But tell me: I always thought that we receive candles and cakes and gifts and nice parties on our birthdays, is that not true? (Many: Yes!)

Sure, but whose birthday is it today? (The Lord Jesus’!) The Lord Jesus’? Lovely that you remember that! But now I do not understand: If it is the birthday of Jesus, why do we get the presents? Should he not get the gifts, rather than we? (Embarrassed silence) Well, well, we have to think about this! Maybe Jesus wants to give presents rather than get presents. Is it not fun to give somebody a nice present? God loves to give presents!

Do you already know what presents you will get? (No!) Most of us don’t know. I also don’t know what I will get. But one very big present I already know. And you also know. It is the greatest gift we can get. It is a present that God gives us. I wonder whether you can guess what that is? (After a short silence, one of them shouts: The child Jesus!). Yeah, precisely!

Who knows what you will get tonight, when you will be called in? We can hardly bear the excitement! But after a few weeks, all that is over. Then the cakes have been eaten, the tree has withered and been taken away, and perhaps the doll
or the little car or the skates or whatever you will get may be broken. That is how it goes with presents that we get from human beings. What a pity!

Only one gift cannot break. It is the gift that God gives us. Jesus stays with us. When spring comes, he is still there. When summer comes, he is still there. When autumn comes, he is still there. The whole year round. Our whole life long. Even when we die, he will be there. That is why we celebrate the birthday of Jesus: God gave us a big, wonderful present. Our parents just add a few presents of their own because they want to join God in what he does.

Now we do not want to disappoint God tonight. Because God loved us so much, we should also love each other. So tonight, there will be no quarrel among us, OK? We will not be envious of another child who gets a nicer present, OK? We will allow others to play with our toys, OK? We shall share our cookies, OK? We will not make anybody cry, OK?

And when you have played with your presents tonight and have become tired and go to bed, don’t forget that there is still that one great present. We cannot see it, so we can easily forget it. But God will be very sad if we enjoy all the small gifts and overlook his big present: Jesus Christ! He may even be sorry that he gave it!

No, I don’t think that we can do that! Tonight, when we go to bed, we will tell God that we are so grateful for his great gift, the Lord Jesus. Shall we do that tonight? (Yes!) Are you sure? (Yes!) Don’t forget! But now I must speak to your parents. Otherwise, they become jealous.

(The normal sermon follows.)

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H. SOME CONTEXTUALISATIONS
A man in the crowd answered, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.’

‘You unbelieving generation,’ Jesus replied, ‘How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.’

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy’s father, ‘How long has he been like this?’

‘From childhood,’ he answered. ‘It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.’

‘If you can?’ said Jesus. ‘Everything is possible for one who believes.’

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. ‘You deaf and mute spirit,’ he said, ‘I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.’ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why couldn’t we drive it out?’ He replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer.’ (Mark 9: 17–27, NIV)

Dear Congregation,

Mark provides us with an unusually detailed description of the disorder afflicting this young man. He falls; he has seizures; his mouth foams; he grinds his teeth; he becomes rigid; he cannot speak. Today a neurologist (that is,
medical specialist) would probably have a good idea of what was wrong with him. And he would probably also know what kind of medication he would have prescribed.

The diagnosis and prescription of the neurologist would be based on scientific insight and not on faith or prayer. Does it matter? What is really important for a patient: that he is healed, or by which means he is healed? Modern medical insight was not available at the time when the biblical documents were written. They used whatever wisdom they could muster to make sense of the calamities they encountered and how to deal with them.

In this case, Mark used a world view that the Jews shared with their social environment. The Jews came into contact with the Persians when they conquered the Babylonian empire during the time of the exile. The Persian world view deeply impacted popular cultures in the ancient Near East ever after.

The Persians believed in two gods, Ahura Mazda, the good god, who had an army of angels, and Angra Mainyu, the evil god, who had an army of demons. World history was marked by the ongoing battle between these two forces. Humans were caught in the crossfire and had to opt for one side or the other.

Eventually, however, there would be a giant showdown: the battle of Armageddon. The evil forces, and the people who had opted for them, would be vanquished and thrown into a vast pit of fire. After that, evil would disappear from the world. It is quite a persuasive way of asserting that evil has no right to exist and that humans should not opt for it.

However, human beings can also become victims of evil forces. And then they had to be liberated by the power of the good god. That is what salvation meant in that world view. We can see how our narrative fits into this background: Jesus, the representative of the benevolent God, drives out one of the evil forces.

The narrative is an example of how the good news of the gospel is packaged in the world view of the time so as to become intelligible for those whom it wants to reach. In theology, we call that contextualisation. Again and again, right through the millennium of ancient biblical history, the Word of God was expressed in terms of changing cultural and social situations.

We must do for our times what the biblical authors did for theirs: take the message out of its ancient packaging and repackage it in the world view of our times. Then it can speak again to our contemporaries. What then is the message that Mark wants to convey? Three things:

1. **The authority of Jesus.** Just before our text in Mark’s Gospel, we find the narrative of the glorification of Jesus on the mountain. Moses and Elijah appear and speak with Jesus. They represent the law and the prophets. So there is continuity between the Old and the New Testament.

   But then Moses and Elijah disappear, and a voice from heaven says, ‘This is my beloved Son—listen to him!’ In those times, Son of God was the title of the messianic king, the authorised representative of God on earth.
The narrative says, therefore, that Jesus fulfils and replaces the authorities of the Old Testament. For Christians, Christ, rather than the law and the prophets, is the ultimate authority. In our story, Jesus acts in the authority of God by driving out the evil forces.

2. Why follow Jesus and not the old authorities? Jesus represents a God of unconditional benevolence. God does not want to punish and condemn sinful and enslaved humans, but to redeem and restore them to their God-given purposes. John says that God is light and there is no darkness in him.

In other words, Jesus acts in the authority of a God of redeeming love, rather than a God of merciless justice. He forgives the sinners; he heals the sick, He accepts the outcasts; he restores the fellowship between God and humanity. He overcomes evil; he opens the future.

3. Jesus finds himself in a society that does not share this authority and this love of God. The scribes argue about the reason for the man’s disease. In a similar story found in John’s Gospel, they ask whether the patient had sinned, or his parents. In this story, the man was sick from childhood, so who could have caused the calamity?

Jesus is upset: ‘How long must I live among these people?’ Instead of asking how the boy can be cured, they try to establish who was to blame. Instead of thinking of his future, they debate his past. ‘Bring him to me!’ he says. And then he does what must be done to liberate this poor man from his ailment.

This makes us curious! If it happened as reported, how did Jesus do it? We do not know, and we do not need to know! In fact, we are asking the wrong question! What matters for those who suffer is that they are healed, not how they are healed. Ancient believers simply assumed that evil is caused by evil forces and that Jesus, the representative of a loving God, has the authority of driving them out.

However, it is intriguing that, in the New Testament, it is assumed again and again that the followers of Jesus will able to do whatever Jesus did and that they should simply go ahead and do it. In this case, they could not drive out the demon. As the followers of Christ, we are challenged. Can we do it? Many Christians believe that if we only believe and pray hard enough, we will be able to heal the sick.

And every so often, this ends in disillusionment and desperation. Some faith healers tell people who have not been healed that they have not believed and prayed hard enough. What a terrible message! How can we believe and pray hard enough? The gift of God is turned into a demand we have to fulfil. Moreover, the argument rests on wrong foundations. Must we first believe that a disease is caused by evil spirits and then try to drive them out with magical means?

Today we have more differentiated and more precise explanations of natural evil. We are able to cure epilepsy with the appropriate medication. Tectonic shifts in the earth’s crust cause earthquakes and tsunamis. Viruses and bacteria cause diseases; mutations cause cancer. Steep discrepancies in income and
life chances cause social turmoil, and so we can continue. We also have more sophisticated means to overcome these calamities than our ancient forebears in the faith.

What matters here is the aim, not the means, and we should go ahead and use the means we have at our disposal. Have faith and prayer then become obsolete? On the contrary! What we lack is the motivation to get involved. What we need is that God empowers us. It is our selfishness and indifference that prevents us from doing what we can do to prevent, overcome, or alleviate evil in its various forms. That is what a living faith provides!

The father of the boy says, ‘If you can do anything about the situation, please have pity and help us!’ This is the plea that reaches us thousands of times whether expressed in words or not. Countless people are in need all around us. Are we willing to help as much as we can?

Jesus replies, ‘All things are possible for those who believe!’ Did Jesus want to say that true believers are omnipotent? Surely not! Only God is omnipotent. And in his omnipotence, God has instituted the regularities, structures, and laws of nature that are necessary for the cosmos to function the way it does. God will not suspend the law of gravity, for instance, to save a careless rock climber because we would all fly into outer space if he did.

But that does not mean that we are helpless and hopeless when confronted with hardships and mishaps. When we share the new life of Christ in fellowship with God, we will be drawn into God’s love for our lost and bruised world. We can act redemptively in the authority of a graceful and caring God. If we care enough, we can use the little knowledge and the little power that God has given us to help people in need.

Moreover, we have far more possibilities to alleviate suffering in the world than people had in the time of Jesus. Far more, in fact, than we realise! Jesus did what he could do, and he expects us to do what we can do. Let us assume that healing is possible for God and then do what we can to make it happen. Be creative, be original, be stubborn. Find a solution! Right through history, great inventors and discoverers have doggedly pursued their objectives against countless failures and disappointments until they succeeded.

We also have more means than we are prepared to invest. More often than not, it is our selfishness that is in the way of active love. Immediately after this narrative in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be betrayed and killed. Why that? His message and his behaviour undermined the spiritual certainties, the religious institutions, and the political powers of the day. They had to join him or get rid of him. What he represented was just too costly for them.

The cross of Christ reminds us that love is costly. Forgiveness is costly. Raising children is costly. Yielding to your colleague or to your spouse is costly. Alleviating suffering is costly. Standing for the truth is costly. Achieving justice in society is costly. Staking status, wealth, and power to fight corruption and
indifference is costly. Jesus was willing to pay the price, and he expects his followers to pay the price. But consider the reward! The joy of having helped somebody out of despair and misery is vastly more profound than the pleasure we gain from pursuing our self-interest!
St Peter, Pretoria, 8 October 2017

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14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘If you do not believe what the Bible says, you should not have the audacity to preach! If the Bible says that Jesus drove out demons, then this is what happened! And then it follows that demons do exist and make people sick!’

b) ‘This sermon reinforces age-old Christian prejudices against the Jewish faith. This is not exactly a witness to the love of God you are talking about!’

c) ‘If you dare to question ancient superstitions in the name of science, you might as well dump the Bible altogether, because it is simply a collection of pre-scientific and obsolete assumptions!’
During the 1980s, I acted as an assistant pastor in the black township of Mamelodi, Pretoria. The issues of freedom from oppression, equal dignity, and citizenship, on the one hand, the disintegration of African family and community cohesion, the rebelliousness of the youth, highly volatile social relations, fear of a loss of employment and income, and increasing political violence, on the other, were high on the agenda.

Before faith in Christ came, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. (Gal. 3: 24–4: 7, NIV).
Dear congregation,

Paul says that in Christ we have become children of God. Do we want to be children of God? Most of us want to be grown-ups, not children. We resent being treated like children by the government or our employers. We think that being a child is the same as being a slave. A child is not supposed to have an opinion and a will of its own, but to listen, keep quiet, and obey. Instead of doing our own thing, we must do what other people say we must do: the teachers, the parents, the bosses, the government. We don’t want that; we want to be free.

Some of us may not like to hear that God wants to be our Father. Maybe their fathers were unjust and violent. They scolded them and beat them. Maybe their fathers left their mothers at an early age. They do not even know who their father was. Some young people avoid their fathers as far as possible. Some ran away and never came back. They wanted to be their own masters; they wanted to be free. Deep down in their hearts, they are suspicious that God may want to be another big boss over them. One who shunts them around, who abuses and punishes them.

I can understand all that. But the Bible has a different idea. The Bible makes a difference between a slave and a child. A child is free; a slave is not free. The Bible also makes a difference between immature children and adult sons and daughters. To be free, Paul says, we must become adult sons and daughters of God. The Bible also makes a difference between bad fathers and good fathers. God is the real father, the good father, the father who wants us to stand on our feet and prosper. To be a son or daughter of God is a wonderful privilege, not a punishment.

To explain this, let me tell you a story. I saw a film some years ago. It was the story about a young Jewish man called Ben Hur. He lived during the time of Jesus in Jerusalem. He was one of the leaders of the Jewish people, a wealthy and influential man. He stayed together with his old mother and his sister who was still unmarried.

At that time, the Romans were ruling the country of the Jews. The Romans were cruel rulers. They did not tolerate any opposition. One day, Roman soldiers were moving into the city. As they passed through the street in which Ben Hur was living, his young sister ran to the balcony to look. Young girls are interested in young men in uniform. And as she leaned over the railing, one of the bricks came lose and fell. At that time, they did not have cement to stick the bricks together.

The brick fell right in front of the horse of the commander of the soldiers. The Romans were convinced that somebody had thrown down that brick at the commander. They immediately entered the house. The old mother and the young sister were thrown into prison without a charge or a court case. In those times, the prisons were dark and dirty. The food was inadequate. Soon both the mother and the sister became sick of leprosy.

They also arrested the young man, Ben Hur. They put him as a slave on a Roman battleship. At that time, ships were not driven by engines. Slaves had
to row the ships. Each ship had a great number of slaves to row it. The slaves were chained to their places. The work was so hard and the food so bad that most slaves did not live more than a few months. When they collapsed out of exhaustion, they were thrown overboard, and new slaves were put in their place.

Ben Hur was determined to survive. He loved his mother and his sister, and he wanted to save them. His strong character impressed the commander of the ship, who was the admiral of the fleet. One day, the Roman fleet prepared for a battle. Before the battle, the commander took off the chains of Ben Hur so that he could swim to safety in case the ship was sunk. And indeed, the battleship of Ben Hur was rammed by an enemy ship and began to sink. Ben Hur removed as many chains from the slaves as he could, but the others perished.

While the ship was sinking, the commander thought that he had lost the battle. The Romans were proud people. To lose a battle was a terrible shame for a Roman general. So the commander wanted to commit suicide. He jumped into the water. At that time, the uniforms had some heavy breastplates to protect them from the spears of the enemies. Some of our police still wear such breastplates. The commander quickly began to sink. But Ben Hur jumped into the water and pulled him onto one of the planks from the broken ship. Another ship came and pulled the two out of the water.

It is then that the admiral was told that his fleet had won the battle. It was an enormous honour. He was grateful to Ben Hur that he had saved his life. The commander was a Roman senator, a very important person with much power in the Roman Empire. He took Ben Hur to Rome and adopted him as his son. Because he was now the son of a Roman VIP, he was no longer a slave. He was given a ring with the name of the senator. He was given beautiful clothes. He received great honours. He went in and out of the court of the emperor. The young Roman ladies showed much interest in him. Everything in his life had become very good.

But he could not forget his mother and his sister. So he went back to Jerusalem. The commander in Jerusalem who had put him in prison was very surprised to see him. He was also very angry. But then Ben Hur showed him the ring with the name of the senator. He was a free man. He was also a powerful man. He could see to it that his mother and his sister were taken out of prison. By a miracle of God, they were also healed from their leprosy.

I will not tell you the rest of the story. I just want to show you what the Bible means when it says that we turn from slaves into children. When Ben Hur was a slave, his whole life was miserable. In fact, he almost died. But then he was adopted as a son of a Roman VIP. His whole life changed. He became a free, honoured, and powerful man.

Paul says that before Christ came into our lives, we were slaves. Not slaves of other gods, but slaves of God himself. God had placed a custodian above us because we were immature children. This custodian was the law of Moses. We had to obey it, or we would be punished. If you are a slave of God, you
never enjoy your life because even when you commit small and unimportant trespasses, your conscience eats you up. To be a slave is terrible.

Before Christ comes into our lives, God is not really a father but a big boss. We do not love to be under a big boss; we are afraid of him. Maybe we hate him. Maybe we try to run away from him. But it is not easy to run away from God, because God is everywhere. So when we are slaves of God, our life is miserable.

But all this changes when Christ comes. Christ is the Son of God. The Son of God represents God on earth. He has the authority of God. And Christ wants to share his life with us. This is a life of freedom. By sharing his life with us, we too become mature and responsible sons and daughters of God together with Christ, the Son of God. In fact, God adopts us as his sons and daughters, just as that Roman commander adopted the Jewish young man as his son. This is what the Bible means when it says that we are children of God!

Once we are sons and daughters of God we are free. We are no longer given orders like slaves. We belong to the family of God. Inside a good family, you do not live by orders. You do not live in fear. You are guided by love. When my wife and I got married, I did not draw up a list of rules and regulations that she had to follow. I did not expect her to serve me. There are no laws in our house. A good wife knows how to please her husband, and a good husband knows how to please his wife. Orders are out of place.

When we belong to God’s family, God no longer gives orders. We just please him because we love him. God allows us to do our thing because he knows that our thing is now God’s thing. We won’t do things which are against God’s will.

So once we are children of God, we are free. We go in and out of God’s house with joy. Nobody can despise us. Nobody can push us around. We need not be afraid of anybody. We are VIPs. God is the king of the whole world. He is the highest. If we are sons and daughters of God, the king of the world, we are princes and princesses. We can pick up our heads—not to be proud, but to be free.

That is the first thing: in Christ we are free. The second thing is that in Christ we are all equal. You cannot say that between two sons of one father, one is more of a son, the other is less of a son. If I am a son, I am a son. If you are a daughter, you are a daughter. Full stop. Human beings make a difference between older sons and younger sons, and between sons and daughters. God does not. God is not partial. He loves us equally.

Paul says it makes no difference whether you have been a Jew, that is, a member of the people of God, or whether you have been a pagan. Once you are baptised, once you have accepted Christ, you are adopted as a son or a daughter of God. Then you are equal with all the other sons and daughters of God. How wonderful it is to be a Christian!

In Paul’s time, the Jews did not like that. They wanted to be special. They even persecuted Paul for his message. Some of them said to the pagans: You must first keep the law of Moses. You must first be circumcised, before God
can accept you. You must first become Jews, then you can enter our fellowship. Even today, there are groups that pose all kinds of conditions that you must fulfil before you can join them. Paul says no! In Christ, there is no difference between Jew and pagan. Christians do not live by the law of Moses. Children do not live by the law. They live by love.

It also makes no difference whether you are a woman or a man. God does not make that difference. In Paul’s time, I am sure that the men did not like that. Even today in the Jewish church, the synagogue, the women were not allowed to enter with the men. Men always want to be something special. I am sure that even among us, there are men who do not like to hear that the women are just as important as the men.

But Paul is very clear: there is no difference between men and women in Christ. In the church of Christ, the women go to church with the men. The women even outnumber the men in the church. Sometimes it seems as if the men are squeezed out of the church by the women, possibly because out there in the world, the men squeeze out the women! Here in God’s house, they feel safe. So remember: Before God there is no difference!

Paul also says it makes no difference whether you are a slave or a master. Today we would say an employer and an employee. Or a madam and a ‘girl’. A shop steward and a worker. They have different jobs, but they have the same dignity. The state president and the women cleaning the floors have different jobs, but they have the same dignity. In the church, the bishop and the prayer woman have different jobs, but they have the same dignity. The professor and the students have different jobs. One must teach, the other must learn. But they have the same dignity. The one cannot despise the other. In Christ, we are all sons and daughters of God.

It also makes no difference whether you are white or black. In South Africa, whites think that they are better than blacks. But that is not how God wants it to be. It is a mistake for us whites to think that our interests are more important than the interests of blacks. And it is the mistake of blacks who think that they are not good enough. It is not the mistake of Christ. In Christ, blacks and whites are all sons and daughters of God. They are all free. Nobody is a slave. Nobody can be despised. Nobody can be shunted around. We must get rid of this idea of some people being more important than others. We are all equal in dignity. South Africa is not what God wants it to be! God wants it to change.

And now my final point. Why did Paul have to write down all these things? Because the Christians in Galatia were deceived. There were Jewish Christians who had not understood that God wants us to be free sons and daughters of God. They told the Galatians: Hey, you people have become cheeky! Don’t you know that God is a very great boss? Don’t you know that he has given his law? Don’t you know that all those who do not obey the law will be punished? You run about here as if God does not see you.
And then the Christians in Galatia got a fright. To play safe, they wanted to become Jews and obey the law. Even among us, there are those who are worried that God may punish them because of their transgressions. They try to fulfil all the regulations. From morning till night, they wonder whether they have done right or wrong. Their conscience bothers them day in and day out. If that is the case, we no longer love God, we fear him. Maybe we begin to hate him.

If that is the case, we may want to run away from him. Maybe we are looking for other helpers who are more sympathetic, such as our ancestors. We may become willing to submit to our ancestors and be children again. Then we are no longer adult sons and daughters of God. We are no longer free. We are slaves again. Paul says in chapter 5, verse 1: ‘It is for freedom that Christ has liberated us; stand firm and do not allow yourselves to be pushed again under the yoke of slavery.’

There are also blacks who think that if they do not become like whites, they will never be accepted. But Paul says that before God there is no difference between men and women, between slaves and free citizens, between Jews and non-Jews. If he was alive today, he would have added that there is no difference between whites and non-whites.

So please remember, my dear sisters and brothers, young and old, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, men and women, black and white: You are not slaves, you are sons and daughters of God, the highest king. Raise up your heads, stand tall and go through life like princes and princesses, because truly that is what you are.

St. Paul’s, Mamelodi, 7-2-1988

1. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
2. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
3. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
4. Does the story of Ben Hur help to make the point?
5. Does the sermon respond to concerns of the congregation?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is it too long or too packed with content? If so, what could be omitted?
8. Does the preacher use words that the average member will not understand?
9. Does the sermon reflect God’s law or God’s grace?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘That a white person could address a black township community in this way at the height of apartheid displays an extreme form of racial arrogance and insensitivity!’

b) ‘The scene of a maritime battle at the time of the Roman Empire can hardly be more removed from the experience of contemporary Africans...’
in the inland of South Africa! Why not take a story reflecting African family traditions?'

c) ‘If you deny the status differences between men and women and between parents and children, you undermine African communal traditions and hasten the current collapse of social cohesion and responsibility.’
CHAPTER 32

Sharing the bread and the fish
(John 6:1–15)

A socioeconomic sermon

In the 1970s and 1980s, Marxism had become an attractive alternative to capitalist world domination, not only for educated Westerners, but for blacks in South Africa fighting for liberation. Theological students, among others, hotly debated the relation between the Kingdom of God and the Marxist idea of a classless society. Does a change of personal attitudes lead to the transformation of social structures, or does the forced transformation of the society lead to a new mindset?

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias, and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, ‘It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!’ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said, ‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’ Jesus said, ‘Have the people sit down.’ There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

When they had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, ‘Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.’ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to
say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6: 1–15, NIV)

Dear congregation,

I cannot figure out why those people went so far into the desert without taking food along. Either they were so hungry for sensations that they just went on and on, even when the evening came and their wives were waiting with supper at home, or they were so immature that they just could not care less what happened to them. There are people, of course, who think that others owe them a living. But I cannot imagine that Jesus would have supported such irresponsibility! What if, in fact, exactly the opposite happened, namely that this miracle of Jesus was a lesson in responsibility? Let us have a look!

Each of the four gospels tells the story, but each tells it in a different way. Each wants to demonstrate the extraordinary authority of Jesus. Authority to do what? Let us use our imagination and piece together what might have happened!

Jesus had been preaching. Towards evening, he assumed that some of them would be hungry. According to the first three gospels, Jesus told his disciples to give them food. But they only had five loaves of bread and two fish. It was a hopeless case.

Philip was honest enough to say what I have thought so often myself: If I distributed all my money among all those who are in need, everybody would get a few cents at the most. So nobody really benefits, while I join the beggars. What is the use of such an exercise?

Jesus then asked: Who else has got some food? A young boy came forward, pulled out his bag with provisions, and gave it to Jesus. Jesus did not praise the boy; he praised God! God had changed the heart of a young lad. That was a good beginning. At least one among five thousand had understood what the Kingdom of God entailed that he had proclaimed. Become like children, like this small boy, then you know what the kingdom is!

Let’s continue to use our imagination. Jesus gave the food of the boy to his disciples and asked them to distribute it among those who were hungry. The first few people to receive a piece of bread must have felt terrible accepting the food of a hungry boy. But then, as Andrew approached Mr Ben-Sadiq and wanted to give him a piece of bread, he blushed.

How could he eat the food of the boy, knowing that he had his own provisions under the wide gown that people wore in those times? Embarrassed, he pulled out his own bag, full of bread and fish. Here you are, he said, you can distribute this also! Those standing around him did not know where to look. There was an awkward, chilly silence. But then another one did the same. And another one.
Once the ice was broken, the joy of sharing broke through. It spread like a veldt fire through the crowd. They formed groups and pooled their resources. It became a happy ‘bring and share’. They did not only enjoy the food, they also laughed about their own foolishness. Before the boy had handed over his food, none of them dared to reveal that he had also brought some food. So none could eat. Though there was plenty of food, everybody remained hungry.

When they decided to share, they were able to satisfy their own appetite and the appetite of all the others. Love of our neighbours makes us prosperous, because love liberates us from selfishness! To rub in the lesson, Jesus asked the disciples to collect the leftovers. They filled twelve baskets, one for each disciple. I am sure the people felt stupid and yet relieved and free. Jesus had performed a miracle, not by changing stones into bread, as the devil wanted him to do in the desert, but by changing the people from within!

Dear friends, I have used my imagination to tell the story in a new way. I was not there to see what really happened. What I do know, however, is that something like this could happen among us today. We live in a world where masses of people suffer want. Some starve to death. But there could be enough of food around—and not only food! There is immense luxury, concentrated in a very small proportion of the population.

The richest 1 per cent of the world population possess about half of the total wealth of humankind. The lowest 80 per cent share only about 5–6 per cent among themselves. Some possess yachts costing millions, while others do not know how to feed their kids tonight. This is horrific! And this kind of imbalance is reflected in our own country! What is most disconcerting, however, is that we have become so used to this situation that we take it for granted.

Our own selfishness allowed us to become brainwashed. Neo-liberal economic ideology tells us that when everybody looks after his/her own interest, the economy flourishes, prosperity grows, and the society benefits. Eventually, even the poor benefit. In contrast, sharing our resources destroys motivation, and the society suffers. The more freedom people have to do their thing, the greater the economic benefit.

This is true up to a point, but it is only part of the truth. The other part of the truth is that the capitalist economy is like a Formula One race. Those with greater engine power and ingenuity leave the others behind in the dust. Oh yes, prosperity grows, but it grows among those who already have plenty of resources, expertise, power, and lucrative contacts. Those who are able to compete successfully flourish at the expense of those who cannot—and at the expense of the natural world!

The simple fact is that those who command the resources get richer and richer. The poor are being replaced with machines and computers, retrenched, marginalised. In the end, masses of people are rendered redundant in economic terms. The rich also have the financial means and the political clout to protect
themselves and their possessions against any threat to their status. The sums invested in security systems and weapons of mass destruction could feed millions.

The elites also control the channels of communication. They spread the gospel of ‘the good life’ to sell their goods. The poor aspire to become rich and buy into their message. More and more people become too weak to fend for themselves and must be kept alive with social grants. They end up not being revolutionaries against the system but beggars on the doorsteps of the affluent. Income discrepancies and ecological destruction are out of control. According to experts, they may soon lead to massive catastrophes.

Can Christians close their eyes to this kind of development? We need a man like Jesus to change the situation. It takes a miracle to release thousands of people from their greed and fear. It takes a miracle to change grinding poverty into modest levels of prosperity. It takes a miracle to change selfishness into love and indifference into responsibility. It takes a miracle to convince liberal economists that their theory is flawed.

No, I am not naive! The task ahead of us is enormous and complex. I have devoted the better part of my academic career to analyse the underlying economic processes. The Marxist attempt to impose an egalitarian system on the modern economy failed dismally, and for very good reasons. All this cannot be spelt out in a brief sermon such as this. Perhaps we could discuss the available options in a seminar.

Here I only want to emphasise that to tackle the problem, we must develop the burning motivation to find solutions and the courage to implement them on a significant scale. For that to happen, our value system must change fundamentally. Employment for workers is more important than the efficiency of machines. Sufficient food for growing children is more important than football stadiums. Proper education is more important than space travel. Clean rivers and oceans are more important than the convenience of plastic bags.

In short, we must join Jesus in what he did in this story. When we think of the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced, we must think of the joy of a liberated and empowered community that takes responsibility for the welfare of society. Those of us who are gathered in this church today are called upon to be more prudent than the crowd that had followed Jesus into desert. They were not willing to take the first step until a little boy showed them the way. We should be responsible and courageous enough to swim against the stream!

1. Does the introduction make people sit up and listen? Does it lead straight to the theme?
2. Does the conclusion provide the listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
3. Is the structure lucid enough to be remembered?
4. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message intended by the text?
5. Which concerns of the listeners have been taken up? Which have been neglected?
6. Can the average congregation be expected to listen to a lecture on economic theory?
7. Are the listeners bullied? Would they be offended or challenged or encouraged?
8. Does the message entail an enslaving law or God’s liberating grace?
9. Is the way the preacher deals with the miracle credible?
10. Is the shift from spiritual to economic concerns theologically legitimate?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘This is not a sermon; it is thinly disguised propaganda for a failed socialist ideology! Preachers should stay out of economics because they do not know what they are talking about!’

b) ‘Preachers are reading out of the Bible whatever they fancy! Jesus had no socio-political agenda! By telling us this story, John wanted to convince his readers that Jesus was the Son of God, not to propagate social egalitarianism. The gospel is about a new spiritual relation with God, which the preacher never even mentions, not about food and drink or the political economy!’

c) ‘A sermon cannot possibly address an issue of that magnitude and complexity. Unsubstantiated claims and allusions produce indignation and resistance among uninformed listeners, rather than insight and appropriate action.’
CHAPTER 33

The seven stars (Rev. 2: 1–7)

A derailed contextualisation

This sermon has never been preached. It was constructed to demonstrate, in an exaggerated form, the dangers of using rhetorical power to convey a problematic message. It also shows how biblical statements can be changed into their precise opposites. It assumes a situation in a remote rural area in Limpopo Province, South Africa, where an African-initiated church has made inroads on the constituency of an established main-line church.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Rev. 2: 1–7, NIV)

Beloved in the Lord, thanks be to God! Hallelujah! He sends his shining light in the darkness of these troubled times! Yes, we have fallen into the darkness of midnight! This pest is molesting our dear congregation day in and day out with their drums and dances and preaching. This is not the Word of God but the work of the devil. It tears down what our beloved fathers have built up. Oh yes, we are in the valley of darkness through this terrible pestilence! Our hearts are sore. Our eyes are full of tears. We can’t see any more because of horror and indignation.
Thanks be to God that he sends his holy Word to our troubled Ga-Molete. Seven bright stars he holds in his hands. They lead us to the glory of Bethlehem! Seven golden torches he places before us. Seven torches of the wise virgins lighten up the path of the bridegroom into the wedding feast. Wipe your eyes and see the seven candles! Brush out your ears and listen, if you still have a healthy pair of ears. Listen to what the Spirit says to the congregation! Yes, God’s Spirit is speaking to us, the congregation, as he so clearly says in his Word. He will never even speak to these troops of the Devil.

Here is the first bright star, beloved ones, and how clearly does it shine! It says here that the Lord knows our ways of doing things. He knows our old and beloved traditions. But where do these preachers come from? Do we know them? Where have they been when this church was built by our fathers, and it still stands? Where have they been when we built the school? Where have they been when those tombstones outside have been set up?

Have we not been the Church in Ga-Molete from of old? Are our deceased fathers not with us even now? Are their graves not just outside our beloved church? Shall we disappoint them and leave their good old ways? Oh no, we can never do that! The Lord himself says it, and you can read it there in verse 2! God knows our patient endurance, our keeping to the old ways which we have inherited. But those newcomers he doesn’t know! Who knows them? We don’t know them! Nobody knows them.

Beloved, here is the second shining torch to light up our darkness. God says it clearly, and we know that it is true: we have tested the evildoers and found that they are evil. I repeat: they are evil, evil, evil! Here you have got it in the Lord’s very own words: they are evil men! And who can dare to contradict God’s own Word? You must look carefully at what is written there! It doesn’t say that we should test them. No, they have already been tested and found out. The judgement is passed. It is finished! They are out!

And here is the test which we need not even apply, because it is so obvious. They are those who call themselves apostles. Have we ever called ourselves apostles? No, never, I tell you, no member of this our beloved congregation has ever called himself an apostle! So where does this name True Apostles of Zion come from? I tell you straight: it is an invention of the devil to fool us! Here God says it in his own holy Word that they have a real name, which they don’t want to reveal. Their real name is the Nicolaitans. You can hardly pronounce it, so evil it is! Let us not be fooled with wrong names. From now on, we will call them by their real name, so that their real nature is revealed. They are not Apostles of Zion; they are Nicolaitans! We have found them out!

And now we come to the third bright lamp shining for the bridegroom, which is our dear and beloved church: Jehovah says that we are enduring them patiently. Is it not humiliating that God must first draw our attention to this shameful fact? How long will we be patient and endure these sons of Satan? Shall we wait until our whole beloved congregation is dispersed and destroyed? From today, let us start to do something about it. Enough is enough.
From today, our patience and endurance will be over! I charge each and every congregation member to chase these people out of their yard with dogs. Because they are dogs themselves. They are wolves in the guise of sheep! The Lord praises us that we are not the type of people who grow weary in fighting his enemies! Let us not put our Lord’s own words to shame. For his name’s sake, let us take the initiative. Let us take the future into our own hands!

Beloved, the fourth bright morning star shows that the night is almost over. In verse 4, God says it clearly that he is against them, dead against them! Of course, we knew this before. We knew it immediately when they left our congregation! But now God says it himself so that nobody can doubt any more. Confirming our well-founded suspicion, God expressly states that they have abandoned the love they had at first. Did they ever have any love?

No, they just pretended. Was Tom Tshila not our choirmaster? Was Redirile Tau not one of our prayer women? Did the Moremi family not share with us the body and the blood of God himself in front of this our beloved altar? Oh, the Word of God penetrates all secret thoughts of their sinful hearts. God knows what they have done, even better than we do. There is no need for hesitation any more. God himself has revealed it clearly to us: They have left us. They have abandoned their initial love, which is the love of God for our congregation.

And here is the fifth flashlight, showing us the way out of the dilemma caused by these misguided hyenas: God says there is no way other than repentance. Oh yes, they must come and plead for forgiveness, confessing their terrible sin! Let them creep on their knees before us. Let them taste the full cup of church discipline. Let them come to class. But we won’t be fooled by superficial promises! They must prove their change of heart by doing! Otherwise, we will not accept them back.

And if they don’t repent? Oh, woe unto them! You can read the Word of God for yourself in verse 5: their candle will be put out. It will be thrown down and trampled upon. They are beyond redemption. They are doomed already, and the mouth of the Lord God has spoken!

Beloved in the Lord, here is the sixth torch shining even brighter than the others. I have already spoken about it, when I spoke about their real satanic name: the Nicolaitans. And don’t call them apostles anymore! God himself has called them by their real name! God says that he hates this breed of hell. Yes, read for yourself; it is written there: We hate them, and God hates them. Can there be love for those whom God hates? Let our hatred be real and sincere, because we don’t want this type of thing in Ga-Molete anymore!

And here, beloved, is the seventh bright star. Jehovah speaks and all those who have ears to listen, wake up! Jehovah says that we must conquer this nuisance and paradise will be ours. Hallelujah! Is there anybody among us who doesn’t want to go to paradise? The Lord told the man on the cross next to him that he would be with him in paradise. Are we less than this man on the cross?

He deserved to be punished, but we do not deserve it. Do we wish to forfeit our birth right? Only the conquerors will win eternal life. If you want to eat from the beautiful tree of life in the Garden of Eden, here is your duty: fight this
plague until they are out of our area, far beyond the boundaries of Ga-Molete for good, and never come back again!

So here are the seven bright lights which our Lord sent to us this morning to guide us out of our darkness. Blessed is the man who has two ears and listens. The words of Jehovah are clear. Blessed is the man who hears and does what he has heard. There is no time for lingering and hesitating any longer. Now the day of action has come. And make no mistake: For him who knows how to do good and doesn’t do it, this is sin!

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Amen!

1. Which type of sermon design did the preacher use?
2. Was the sermon structure clear and easy to follow?
3. Was the introduction challenging and leading straight to the theme?
4. Did the conclusion provide the listeners a ‘package’ to take home?
5. Was the sermon dull and dreary or exciting and activating?
6. Was the language easy for everybody to understand?
7. How did the preacher respond to the assumed needs of the congregation?
8. Did he/she go from the text to the situation or from the situation to the text?
9. Did the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
10. Did the sermon reflect God’s demand or God’s gift?

How would you react to the following critique?

a) ‘The entire scene is an artificial and quite ridiculous construct. Why do you treat your readers with such nonsense?’

b) ‘The sermon creates or reinforces the prejudices that main-line churchgoers harbour against the African Initiated Churches. This is just not acceptable!’

c) ‘The sermon caricatures the power of rhetoric, which can be employed very successfully by gifted preachers. I wish you had provided us with examples of an appropriate use of rhetorical skills.’
J. INTERACTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE SERMONS
The following exercise uses a series of PowerPoint slides. Striking photos prompt discussion at each level of the argument. Short pithy sentences summarise the relevant conclusion of each part. The target of the discussion is indicated in brackets. The meeting begins and ends with a short prayer and a well-known hymn. A handout with the excerpted text and the hymns is distributed.

You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient . . .

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions . . . And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus . . . For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith . . . not by works . . . For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Therefore, remember that . . . at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has dismantled the dividing wall of hostility between us, by setting aside . . . the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace . . . For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

(Eph. 2:1–10 NIV)

**Slide 1: A heavily fortified medieval castle located on a high mountain**

Where do you think was this castle built? (Europe)  
When was it built? (Middle Ages)  
Why was it built? (Not as a tourist attraction, but in self-defence)
What are the most important structures? (The high wall and heavily guarded gates)
What was their purpose? (To keep those inside safe, and those outside out)
Why must those outside be kept out? (They do not belong; they are dangerous.)

Slide 2: A modern property surrounded by a security fence

In which ways is this house similar to the medieval castle? (Its purpose is to keep those outside out.)
Why must they be kept out? (They do not belong; they are dangerous.)
Why do they not belong? (They belong to a different culture, social class, race.)
Why are they dangerous? (They threaten the life, the property, the identity, the privacy, the status of the owners.)

Slides 3-5 (in rapid succession): A football team, a graduation ceremony, voters at an election

What is similar to the castle? (Entry is conditional / belonging is conditional)
Are there conditions that certain people cannot fulfil, no matter how hard they try? (Blacks cannot become white; women cannot become men; elderly cannot become youths)
Is there such a barrier in the Bible? (The distinction between Israelites and ‘the nations’, Jews and pagans)

Slide 6: A depiction of the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments and the Star of David

What are the walls of the fortress in this case?
(Israel was the chosen people of God. Read Deut. 7: 1–6.)
(The Israelites who did not keep the Law of Moses were cursed. Read Deut. 30: 15–20a.)

Slide 7: Résumé of the argument thus far: Social groups of all kinds surround themselves with walls meant to keep those inside in and those outside out. These walls are explicit or implicit conditions of acceptance and belonging.

Slide 8: The depiction of a wall being demolished

Why did Jesus clash with the religious authorities of his time? (He pulled down the walls of the fortress.)
Let us find examples!
(He accepted outcasts into his fellowship: tax collectors, prostitutes)
(He helped non-Jews: Canaanite woman, Roman officer)
(He forgave sinners)
(He drove out the merchants from the temple)
Why was all that so outrageous?
(Transgressed the ritual law: healing on the Sabbath, cleansing of the temple)
(Transgressed the moral law: forgiveness of sinners)
(Transgressed the purity law: helping the unclean)
How did he threaten his opponents?
(the privilege of being the chosen people of God = the Jews in general)
(the privilege of being righteous in terms of the law = the Pharisees)
(the privilege of the Levitic priesthood = the temple administration)
(the privilege of the prosperous, e.g. the rich young man)

**Slide 9: Résumé of the second part:** The message of Jesus was, and still is, revolutionary: the barriers between God and humans and between humans and other humans are broken down.

Paul discovered the implications (*short input by the teacher*):

a)  The **law** (any kind of law) no longer separates us from God and from each other.

   It is reduced to an expression of love, and as a bulwark against threats to life.

b)  **Sin** no longer separates us from God and from each other—it is suffered, forgiven and overcome in God’s fellowship.

c)  All humans have **equal access to God** → all humans are equal before God.

d)  All humans have **equal access to each other** → all humans are equal before each other.

**Slide 10:** Depiction of a tranquil lake between high mountains

For contrast, first show the slide depicting the fortress again!

What is the difference between the fortress and the lake?
(the fortress is built on the highest point of the mountain; the lake lies at the lowest point in the valley)
(the fortress is based on the imposition of power; the lake is based on the pull of gravity—God’s suffering love)
(the fortress denies access to the unwelcome; the lake receives streams of all kinds from all sides: clear spring water and muddy river water; the mud settles down in the lake and the water becomes clear)

How does our congregation/church reflect this new insight?
(the exclusion of Christians from other denominations)
(the intolerance against people with other convictions)
(the hesitation of established adults to accommodate the energies and needs of the youth)
(the practical dominance of males over females)
(the unwillingness to accept people from other social strata, especially the very poor and stranded)
(the awkwardness with the presence of other races or cultures)

Prayer
Hymn: The Church’s one foundation 1-3
Blessing

**Note:** The Letter to the Ephesians draws out the cosmic implications of the Jesus revolution. This can be dealt with in a second session as follows:

**Space** no longer separates us from God: God is not remote but present, especially among the suffering! The universe is pulled together under one head.

**Time** no longer separates us from God:
Christ is already enthroned above all powers—Ephesians 1.
We are already dead; we are already made alive in Christ—Ephesians 2.
We are already enthroned with him in heaven.

John makes that clear: The Last Judgement happens when we accept or reject Christ.

Today, natural science allows us to go further: God’s suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable characterises the cosmic process as a whole: entropy provides the energy for evolution; the sun makes life on earth possible by burning out; life depends on the death of other life; freedom depends on structures; new insight renders old insight obsolete. See Nürnberger 2013: 193–195; 201–206.

*Does the message of the exercise correspond with the message of the text?*  
*Does the message respond to the needs of the participants?*  
*Is the exercise structured in a way that it can easily be remembered?*  
*Does it use language that everybody understands?*  
*Does the introduction capture the imagination of the participants and lead straight to the topic?*  
*Does the conclusion provide the participants with a ‘package’ to take home?*  
*Does the message reflect God’s demand or God’s gift of grace?*  
*Can the whole exercise be accommodated within an hour?*  
*Does it require special leadership gifts?*
How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘Whatever Paul may say, no social group can function without conditions of entry and criteria of belonging, whether a political party, a street gang, a tennis club, or a Christian congregation!’

b) ‘The exercise requires considerable pedagogical gifts and training which a normal preacher may not necessarily have.’

c) ‘The exercise demands an extraordinary amount of theological preparation and PowerPoint creativity. It takes far more time and concentration than a parish pastor can afford!’
CHAPTER 35

Domination or empowerment
(1 Kings 21)

A shared sermon

In most main-line churches, preachers prepare their sermons in the solitude of their studies, without exposure to the vagaries of life experienced by their parishioners, without their cooperation, and without their feedback. Does this fit into our current participatory culture? Do you think that it is theologically appropriate? Do you think it is wise? If not, what alternative would you offer?

The following sermon is meant to demonstrate that we can be more creative and cooperative in the proclamation of the Word of God than we usually dare to be. It involves three laypersons in the actual preaching of the sermon.

King Ahab said to Naboth, ‘Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace.’ But Naboth replied, ‘The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.’

So Ahab went home, sullen and angry. He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, ‘Why are you so sullen? Why won’t you eat?’ He replied: ‘Naboth said, “I will not give you my vineyard.”’ Jezebel his wife said, ‘Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I’ll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.’ So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth’s city with him.

In those letters she wrote: ‘Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them bring charges that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.’ So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth’s city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, ‘Get up and take
possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead.’

When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth’s vineyard. The prophet Elijah said to Ahab: ‘This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours! And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.’ (1 Kgs. 21, NIV in excerpts)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Democracy or dictatorship! Equal rights for all or privileges for the few! Freedom or subservience! These are fundamental political alternatives. What would be the choice of God?

According to ancient Israelite convictions, the land of Palestine belonged to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Each clan was allotted a portion of this land, determined by lot. It was the economic basis of the family and the symbol of full citizenship. The king had been appointed by Yahweh to protect the nation from outward aggression, settle internal disputes, and uphold justice.

King Ahab wanted to purchase Naboth’s land or exchange it for an even better piece. However, true to Israelite conventions, Naboth refused the deal. Ahab was frustrated, not only because he could not get the land, but because his subject did not respect his wishes and he could do nothing about it; the law of Israel was on Naboth’s side.

The queen, a Phoenician princess, was disturbed by Ahab’s depression. Because of her Canaanite background, she did not feel constrained by the law of Yahweh. According to her understanding of the relation between God and the king, Ahab had unlimited divine authority over his subjects. Naboth was not entitled to deny the king his right to obedience!

She called for a fast to involve God in the process. She summoned the elders for a court case. They played by the queen’s principles. Naboth was found guilty and executed. The land was confiscated by the crown. Ahab got the land. Naboth’s clan lost its head and its birth right. Everything was seemingly done within the confines of the law of the time.

But this was not the law of Yahweh, the God of justice! Yahweh’s demand for justice claims universal validity. You cannot hide behind other gods, each with their own principles. The prophet Elijah pronounced Yahweh’s judgement over Ahab: just as the clan of Naboth was destroyed, so the royal dynasty would be destroyed.

The God of unlimited authority against the God of impeccable justice—in what kind of God do we believe? Which God do we serve in our practical lives? Let us listen to three examples.
First speaker: I am the CEO of a medium enterprise.

We manufacture specialised steel products such as window and door frames. The firm was established by my grandfather some sixty-seven years ago. I took over from my father. Currently we employ thirty-three people. The three oldest have already worked for my father. They know more about the procedures than I do. I can trust them to run the factory when I go on business trips or on holiday. We call them elders.

The younger workers too have begun to identify with the enterprise. I assume that they all have gifts that want to be developed. I encourage them to take their own initiatives and learn from their own mistakes. They are given work that corresponds with their capacities. When the business flourishes, they get a share of the proceeds. You can hardly imagine how efficient and reliable my workers have become over the last couple of years!

When the financial situation gets tough, I share my concerns with them. When dishonesty or irresponsibility occurs, I call the three elders in and ask them to deal with the issue. I avoid retrenchments at all costs because they each have a family to feed. As the owner of the firm, I have the authority to hire and fire, but my philosophy is that we are in this together. Once we had no choice but to let a worker go who did not fit the job required, but I still feel bad about it.

Preacher: Let us keep a minute of silence. Does this enterprise reflect the Israelite or the Canaanite approach to authority?

(One minute of silence)

Now let us listen to the next example.

Second speaker: I am in charge of the oncology unit at our local hospital.

I was trained as a medical doctor and specialised in oncology; that is, in the diagnosis and treatment of various kinds of cancer. One of our duties as specialists is to keep abreast of ongoing research on cancer and the latest treatment options across the world.

So I think that I know what I am doing when confronted with a case. I could simply do my diagnosis, prescribe the appropriate treatment, and move on to the next bed. However, cancer patients are not machines; they are human beings. They have their own interpretations of what happens to them. They have their own anxieties to deal with. They are groping for solutions. They have loved ones who want to know and help if possible.

When I am at the bed of a cancer patient, I become very humble. I could be lying there in pain and fear. Her body is not my body, but her body. It is not I who has to face the desperate situation, but she. If there are alternative ways forward, it is not I who has to take decisions, but she. Moreover, in many cases, the treatment is more successful when the patient has the will to recover and cooperates with the medical staff.
So I draw her into the diagnosis and the procedures as best as I can. If she is still able to do so, I encourage her to inform herself on the Internet. I allow her to ask questions. Often, I cannot fully explain, but at least the patient should feel that I take her seriously.

Yes, it takes more time. When the ward is full, I sometimes work into the night. It would be easier simply to do my thing, to go on with my job and my private life. But I am here to serve, not to please myself.

**Preacher:** Let us again keep a minute of silence. Does the praxis of this medical doctor reflect the Israelite or the Canaanite approach to authority?

(One minute of silence)

Now let us listen to the third example.

**Third speaker:** I am a high school teacher.

My subject is English literature. I have done my master’s dissertation on a drama of William Shakespeare. I thoroughly enjoy interpreting these wonderful works of a literary genius. When reading a drama, my mind immediately gets going, and I can offer two or three possible interpretations from various angles straight away.

So when teaching drama, I have all the enthusiasm, the confidence, and the competence I need to enlighten these young beginners. I could simply dictate my own findings to the students, expect them to learn them by heart, and require them to reproduce them in the examination. I am sure that they would gain high marks for doing so.

But to impose my knowledge on these malleable minds is not part of my job description as I understand it. My job is to develop the skills of the students that are necessary to interpret texts critically and creatively. It is they who must learn to think, to listen, to assess, to judge, to form an opinion, to formulate a finding. And it is my job to facilitate the process.

This is not only important for English literature, but also for the responsible assessment of newspaper reports, sitcoms on television, the promises of political leaders, and even for the endless stream of junk information with which they are bombarded twenty-four hours a day on their cell phones. It is hard to wean them from this crazy addiction, but I try to convince them that it is not worth the money they spend on it.

So my first step is to let them read a text and formulate their own observations. Then we have a class discussion. The various interpretations are jotted down on a whiteboard and evaluated. Then I expose them to two or three interpretations by renowned scholars. Finally, I require them to write a brief essay in which they argue out their own position. It is only then that I provide them with my assessment of their endeavours and suggest improvements.
Preacher: Again, let us keep a minute of silence. Does this procedure reflect the Israelite or the Canaanite approach to authority?

(One minute of silence)

Now allow me to speak of my position as a preacher.

I have been trained as a theologian. It took the better part of seven years. I have been ordained by our bishop as a minister of our church. I have been inducted into the office of the minister of this congregation. My task is to preach and teach the Word of God. I prepare myself carefully when I have to preach and lead the worship service.

When I get onto the pulpit, I could simply say, ‘Thus says the Lord!’ just as the prophets in the Old Testament did. I could expect you to listen, keep quiet, and humbly go home. I could argue that you should trust me and accept that what you have heard was the truth of God. An ordained minister should know, after all, what the truth of God is! How dare you question my sermon or want to add to it!

Now let me ask you: would the practice I have just sketched be a reflection of the Israelite or the Canaanite approach to authority? Just be honest and speak up!

(The preacher waits a few moments for responses from the congregation).

This is how we preachers have run the church over centuries, while the world outside has changed from despotic to democratic leadership, from patriarchal family structures to equality of dignity, from the privilege of some to the human rights of all. The church was left behind. Many believers have left the church because they no longer feel at home in an atmosphere that belongs to the Middle Ages.

The Reformers insisted that the Word of God is entrusted to the community of believers. Pastors only act on behalf of the congregation. To do that appropriately, they are trained. To do it legitimately, they are ordained. But all members are equally responsible for the Word of God. They have to listen critically and point out instances where they think the preacher has gone astray. If there is no preacher, they have to jump into the breach.

It is you who are responsible for your faith. It is your faith that must be nourished. It is your enthusiasm that must be rekindled. It is you who have to apply the message to your particular circumstances. It is your gifts that must be developed and utilised. It is your witness that counts when outsiders stray through our church doors. It is your faith that must prove its worth in the secular world out there.

I have studied theology, but I do not have the truth in my pockets. You have gone through life with your Bible, your hymn book, and our liturgy. You have tried to make sense of your faith and come to your conclusions. You have gained
your experiences in ordinary life. You are facing predicaments and afflictions in the secular world of which I have no clue.

We cannot afford to let all these gifts of God go to waste. I cannot proclaim the Word of God without you. We are in this together. Let us talk. Let us cooperate; let us explore ways of bringing out the insights that remain hidden.

This sermon was only a humble beginning. I want us to put together a worship team at least once a month, each with members from different walks of life. Please think of volunteering to serve on such a team.

1. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
2. Does the sermon reflect God’s grace, or the demand of involvement and sacrifice?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (a shared sermon in this case) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Do the three cases reflect actual possibilities, or are they overly idealistic?
13. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
14. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
15. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

How would you respond to the following critique?

1. ‘You must be dreaming! This approach cannot be applied in practice. Just try to find the right laypersons! Just ask them to find the time for the preparation within their busy schedules! Just ask them to apply the message of the text to their work situation without feeling embarrassed and becoming apologetic!’

2. ‘As so often, you mix up the spiritual and the political spheres of life. Christians are free to work and serve and be content in any social situation and in any political system. God gave kings to Israel, not a democratically elected parliament. A benevolent and responsible dictator may be preferable over the chaotic pursuit of whims, desires, and interests that plagues our democracy today.’

3. ‘Preachers do not realise just how tough life can become out there. Most people are overburdened. Many are clueless and hopeless; some are brutalised and traumatised. In their free time, they want to forget all that and enjoy
themselves. Those who still bother to come to church expect to find peace and comfort there, rather than new challenges and demands. My advice is, Leave economics, politics, and education to those who are professionally involved in these pursuits. These issues do not belong on the pulpit!’
CHAPTER 36

Enduring the past, facing the future
(Rom. 8: 31b–39)

A panel sermon

The biblical text is provided on a handout or displayed on the screen. Four panellists are seated in the front, facing the congregation. To give the audience a chance to appropriate what has been said, short times of quiet reflection (one minute each) intersperse the various inputs.

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8: 31b–39, NRSV)

Francis

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, here we are again—at the end of another year! It is astonishing how quickly it passed. Time is running like water from a tap, or rather like a river in flood, and we have no way of making it pause a little, or slow down. But we can slow down our own pace of life once in a while and reflect on the way we have come and the way we want to proceed. There is no better time to do that than New Year’s Eve.

Reflection on our past and our future is not a popular pastime. There are many people tonight who would rather not think about what happened in the past or worry about what may happen in the future. Many try to drown festering
memories and pestering anxieties in a flurry of extravagance: eating, drinking, dancing, revelling, laughing, and making as much noise as possible.

(one-minute silent reflection)

Our team tonight does not want to suggest that it is wrong to celebrate New Year’s Eve. Life is hard and short. If there is an opportunity to be happy, we should grab it and do so with a good conscience. However, we suggest that we will experience true joy only when we have faced, profoundly and honestly, the issues that lie on our hearts. Let us bring them before God, rather than engaging in artificial fun. Lerato, what is your mood tonight?

**Lerato**

My overwhelming emotion is that of gratitude. I am a social worker. In my job, I often visit the informal settlements around Pretoria. You cannot imagine the level of misery and hopelessness I encounter there! People without jobs, proper accommodation, water, sanitation, health care—and worst of all, without status and dignity in society.

They are crammed in tiny, hot, and leaking hovels; there is no privacy, no beauty, no space for them to breathe. Loudspeakers are blaring. School leavers do not know what to do with their youthful energies. They crave the good life they see on their screens. They are frustrated and angry because life is passing them by; they turn to drugs, sex, and violence.

And then I look at my own life: I am healthy. I have had a decent education. I have a satisfying profession, a good income, a nice house, a car, a responsible family, a medical scheme.

I think of the victims of devastating fires, tornados, and landslides in various parts of the world. I visualise the plight of the refugees in the Arab states and Central Africa that have lost everything and do not know where to go. How grateful we can be that our country is still relatively peaceful and prosperous!

When I woke up this morning, I spontaneously began to sing the praises of God! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I encourage you to thank God for every little success, for each little sign of love, for every little beauty on your way through the past year, for your wonderful body. When you thank God for all his blessings, you will have no time left to complain!

(one-minute silent reflection)

**Karel**

Lerato, I envy you. I would so much like to rejoice with you. But when I look back over the year, and more so over my life as a whole, I cannot overcome a sense of frustration and failure. I started off with the best of intentions, but they drained away like raindrops in desert sand.
I have failed in so many respects; I have disappointed so many people, especially my immediate family. I have not loved as I should have loved. Sometimes I really hate myself for making such a mess of my human relationships.

I missed some wonderful professional opportunities. I became the victim of fraud and criminality twice during the year. I could not impress my superiors sufficiently to gain a promotion. My teenage kids go their own way and show no respect. If I were given another chance, I would try to do things differently. As it is, I am rather depressed. Please bear with me!

(one-minute silent reflection)

Francis

Karel, I have gone through dark patches in my life, and I really sympathise with you. I am sure there are many here tonight who have similar feelings. For me, the most depressing fact is that we cannot go back into the past and put things right that have gone wrong. There they sit in history like monuments of our failure and our selfishness, and no power on earth can make them undone. More than that, they continue to have consequences that cannot be stopped.

I missed that critically important meeting. I said those hurtful words to my wife. I went through that red robot, and people got hurt. Not only we, but our fellow humans, our families, our communities, and our society suffer the consequences of what we have done or failed to do. It feels like being called to the Last Judgement: what kind of impact have you made on God’s world as it moves on through history?

(one-minute silent reflection)

Lerato

Perhaps it is time to reflect on what Paul had to say in our text. We believe in Christ! We believe in a God of redeeming love! We believe in a God who meets us where we are: in our failures, our frustrations, our lack of love! We believe in a God who accepts us although we are not acceptable! We believe in a God who forgives and bears the consequences of our failures. We believe in a God who opens the future for us!

Look what happened to Jesus! He was the most promising, most gifted, most self-effacing person one can think of. His love and commitment to those who suffered want and rejection was so remarkable that his followers believed him to be the promised Messiah.

Yet he was betrayed by one of his disciples, denied by another, and abandoned by the rest. He was accused of heresy and condemned to death by the leaders of his community. He was tortured and executed by the Roman authorities. We could think that his ministry was a complete failure. And yet
look how God transformed this catastrophe! Today millions of people all over the world derive comfort and reassurance from the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the same way, God can also transform our little catastrophes. It is true that the past cannot be undone, but it can be forgiven. And God wants to forgive. He is willing to bear the consequences. They no longer separate us from God. If they do not separate us from God, we can breathe again.

When personal mishaps, or circumstances at work, or fateful developments in society throw spanners in our works, God is with us and for us and not against us. Having suffered, we will perhaps be more humble and more loving when dealing with others, knowing that they too are loved by God.

A psychiatrist once told me, ‘Leave your failures where they belong: in the past!’ Don’t drag them into the present where they do not belong. Don’t let them mess up your future. Don’t let them take away the joy of your life! We can do that because we know that God forgives and bears us as we are!

(one-minute silent reflection)

Francis

Lerato, you mentioned the future just now. The future does not lie behind us but before us. At midnight, we enter a new year. The last year will recede deeper and deeper into the past, but the future is upon us like a river in flood. We must face it, but we cannot control it. This makes me anxious!

What course will my teenagers take? What will happen to my job now that we have entered a recession? Will my feeble body withstand the stress? I am getting older. Soon, I will become dependent. How will I endure the agonies of protracted and hopeless pain?

What will happen to our country: will it sink ever deeper into poverty, corruption, violence, and criminality? Will the drought continue for another year? Will the economy flounder? And what about the international scene: the escalation of violent conflict, the deluge of refugees, unpredictable leaders in charge of nuclear weapons, the growing world population, the callousness of the profit motive, the greed and selfishness of the consumer culture, the destruction of the natural world—where will it all end?

(one-minute silent reflection)

Lerato

Francis, God did not promise us a life without trouble, hardship, pain, and death. Jeremiah suffered. Jesus suffered. Paul suffered. Countless believers suffered throughout the millennia. And in all this suffering it is God who suffers, because it is God’s world that goes through these agonies.

What God has promised is his presence and his love in whatever predicaments we may have to go through. We are not alone: God is with us and
for us, not against us. And because God is the ultimate authority, that makes all the difference!

Moreover, God invites us to participate in his patient endurance and his creative transformation of a suffering world. God encourages us not to run away from difficulties, dangers, and predicaments but tackle them courageously with the motivation and the determination that God's love provides.

Let us not think of our personal predicaments; let us think of God's world! Nothing is needed more in today's world than the Spirit of Christ. He went right into the fire, faced rejection, pain, and death as God's instrument of transformation! Whatever we will face in the coming year, let us go forward in faith and make a difference!

(one-minute silent reflection)

Francis

It occurred to me that the text of tonight is found at the end of Paul's attempts to make sense of God's mysterious ways of dealing with Israel, his people. His conclusion is not a cry of defeat and resignation, as one could expect, but a jubilant song of confidence and hope. Lerato has opened the future for us. Let us grasp the hand of God, our loving Father, and venture into the flooded river. Let us take her words to heart as we move into the New Year!

(one-minute silent reflection)

The closing prayer lays the concerns mentioned before God and prays for the strength and the courage to face them.

St Peter's, Pretoria, New Year's Eve 2015

1. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
2. Does the sermon reflect God's chastising demand or God's reassuring grace?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a 'parcel' to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (in this case a panel sermon) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?
15. What is your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘It is quite obvious that this conversation was preconceived by the preacher. The panellists merely enacted their prescribed roles. A true panel discussion, in contrast, remains open-ended. The panellists react spontaneously to the points made by their fellow panellists.’

b) ‘The roles are distributed unequally: Karel appears only once with his despondent frame of mind, while Lerato appears three times with her super-confidence. Is that deliberate? Francis is obviously the master of ceremonies, but he has little to contribute.’

c) ‘Anxiety has an important psychological function, namely, to prepare us for unpredictable eventualities. Similarly, frustration is the signal of our subconscious that the current state of affairs is not satisfactory and must be overcome. Such signals must not be downplayed but transformed into energy and determination.’
CHAPTER 37

Making peace (1 Pet. 2: 9–10)

An enacted sermon

This sermon was held in Kratzenstein (Masealama) in the Limpopo Province of South Africa on 12 January 1969 within the framework of a vacation course of the Part-Time Ministries Course of the (then) Evangelical Lutheran Church, Transvaal Region. The students were mature men working in secular professions who were to become ordained ministers on a part-time basis. The service was part of the training of the students, but it was conducted as the Sunday service of the local congregation. Not to lose the local atmosphere, I retain some of the Sotho terms used in this account of the event. The liturgical parts are omitted.

The Aim

The traditional type of service does not seem to respond adequately to the needs of our African congregations. The liturgy is seldom understood, especially by the children. It is taken as a sort of holy procedure that must be followed and that works in a magical way, even if not understood.

The traditional sermon originated in Europe in feudal times. It is based on authoritarian assumptions. It is a purely intellectual exercise. Few people are used to listen to somebody carrying on for 20–30 minutes. Most people switch off as the sermon drags on. To retain their attention, preachers try to impress.

The aim was to work out something new, to develop governing principles with the students, and to demonstrate how it could work in a normal parish.

Assumptions

1. Research. We are not serving traditions but living people in the name of the living Christ. We should try to understand the actual needs of our people and use our imagination to respond to these needs in the name and authority of Christ.

2. Teamwork. We depend on diversification of duties and the specialization of skills in all spheres of life. The idea that a single man should run the parish is obsolete. The congregations of Paul already had a high degree of diversified functions (1 Cor. 12–14).

The liturgy and the sermon were drawn up by a team of students led by the lecturer. Three students acted as ministers who did the liturgy, seven members (speakers) spread among the congregation did the prayer parts, and the lecturer
acted as the preacher. Some youths were asked to act as triggers to initiate communal action.

3. Planning and preparation. Preachers often do not prepare themselves adequately. Because this service did not follow the known pattern, it had to be worked out in detail and practised by the team before the event. It was an example of how hard work can achieve something of value.

4. Simplicity. At least 60 per cent of the attendants of a Sunday service are children. Adults too do not always follow what is going on but follow the established pattern slavishly. A service should explain itself: Therefore, the different stages, such as praise, confession of sins, absolution, creed, readings were introduced by short announcements or invitations.

For example, a lay speaker would say, ‘We have come to hear the Word of our God.’ Minister: ‘Listen to what Peter says in his first letter!’ Then he reads the passage from the Bible. Another speaker says, ‘We have heard the Word, but we do not understand!’ Minister: ‘The teacher (Moruti) will explain!’ Then the sermon follows.

5. Participation of the congregation. A human body degenerates physiologically if left without exercise. The more people actively participate, the livelier the congregation will be. The aim was to draw everybody who came to the service into the action. It was simply not possible for anybody to fall asleep because everybody was involved!

6. A holistic approach. We tried to depart from the traditional ‘speech’ type of sermon and make use of all human means of communication: song, rhythm, gestures, action, etc. The entire abstract thought underlying the sermon was translated into symbolic actions.

7. Practical arrangements: The preacher (P) did not wear a gown but a suit to be able to move about freely in the church, while the ministers wore gowns. The preacher carried a crucifix on a long stick, nothing else. Before the service began, the following little song was practised with the congregation:

Lerato ke maatla
a a tšwago go Modimo;
Lerato ke maatla
a a tsenago go wena
a go somiše, a go šomise
go fihla go ba bangwe

Love is a power
that flows out from God;
Love is a power
that flows into you
to use you, to use you
to reach others.

Overview of the sermon

1. Ethnic divisions in society
   a) biological heritage
   b) tradition handed down through the generations
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c) as a result, some people are prioritised, others are marginalised.
d) sin is handed down through the generations.
e) between different nations, the heritage and the traditions differ greatly.
f) while there is relative peace within a group, there is tension between the groups.
g) this is the result of sin: each group pursues its own interests.

2. The people of God

a) God’s means of saving people from socially entrenched sin is the power of love manifest in the cross of Christ.
b) men and women are called out of their ethnic groups (ditshaba) and their collective selfishness to God.
c) the ‘people of God’ is held together not by biological heritage or tradition but by the love of God.
d) the love of God is passed on from one to the other.
e) there are no privileges among the people of God; all are of equal rank.

3. The mission of the people of God

a) Those called out are sent back into their ethnic groups (ditshaba) to make known the love of God to them and to draw them to God.
b) They form a big brotherhood across the ethnic groups to which they belong.
c) They make peace by overcoming the spirit of hatred within their ethnic groups against other people by the spirit of love.

After the first part of the normal liturgy, the text is read by one of the ministers:

(You believers) are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2: 9–10, NIV)

1. Ethnic divisions in society

While moving freely along the aisle, the preacher asks whether it is true that there are no ethnic groups (ditshaba) among the people who do not believe in Christ. A few members shake their heads. He asks them to enumerate some ethnic groups. A number of South African ethnic groups are mentioned: Basotho, Amazulu, Matswetla, Maburu (Boers or white Afrikaner), English, German, Jews.
Then he quickly divides the whole congregation into these *ditshaba*. This evokes a lot of laughter because some cannot imagine being identified as Zulus or Boers (Maburu). Everything depends on very quick and firm action by the preacher. He calls upon the different groups to stand alternatively until all know who is who.

Preacher: ‘Now let us see how an ethnic group (*setshaba*) functions!’ He picks out the Amazulu and asks them to stand. While remaining in their position, they all turn with their faces towards the aisle and their backs to the wall. Each one puts his/her hands on the shoulders of the one in front. This symbol is explained by the preacher as follows:

a) What binds a people together is, first, the biological sequence of generations. The grandfather hands down life to the father, who hands it to the son, who hands it to the grandson. The same happens on the mother’s side.

b) Secondly, a people is bound together by common traditions (*mekgwa*). These traditions too are handed down along the male and female lineages from generation to generation. We owe our culture to the long chain of ancestors (*badimo*).

c) Every family, clan, and ethnic group has its own traditions, and these traditions differ from each other.

Very quickly the preacher asks the Afrikaner (Maburu), who were seated across the aisle opposite the Zulu, to stand and arrange themselves in the same way as the first. Now he explains the following:

a) This ethnic group too has its biological heritage and affinity.

b) This group also has its traditions handed down through the generations.

c) Within the same group, the people are more or less equal, but the appearance and the cultural traditions differ greatly between the two groups.

d) Moreover, the interests of the two groups clash: the Maburu have power and wealth, while the Amazulu are oppressed and marginalised. They aspire to gain power and wealth.

e) As a result, there is mutual understanding and love within each group, but between the two peoples, conflicts arise.

To the great amusement of the whole congregation, the preacher asks the two groups to stage an imaginary fight by throwing their fists into the air in the direction of the other group. To make this drama virulent, youths had been tasked to initiate the symbolic fight.

The preacher concludes the first part of the sermon by summing up: This is the condition of the world as we all know it. There is a lot of injustice, tension, conflict, and hatred. This condition is the result of sin. Every group tries to pursue its own interests at the expense of other groups.

The text calls it darkness. It says that the people in this condition are outside the grace of God. They do not recognise that God is the Creator of all the groups. God wants them all to work together for the common good. They are not what
the people of God ought to be in God’s eyes. Therefore, the text says that they are not a true people (*setshaba*).

2. Formation of the people of God

The preacher goes back to the altar while the congregation sings *Lerato ke maatla*. There he turns and says that the altar symbolises the sphere of God: the burning candles, the cross, the communion vessels, etc. He says that God did not remain alone in his holiness but found a way to free his world from the sin that had just been described.

With a few straightforward questions, he entices the congregation to say what God had done: he sent his Son into the world to proclaim and enact God’s redeeming love, to die for the sins of the people, bring the people back to God, and reconcile them with each other.

Now he takes the long cross into his hands and says that this is the symbol of the love of God going out into the world in Christ to save the people. On the rhythm of the song, the preacher goes through the aisle, pointing with the cross at a variety of different persons as he passes, who stand up and follow him back to the altar as he returns from the back of the church. They are chosen from each group and number about twenty or thirty.

In front of the altar, they form a circle and hold each other’s hands. The preacher explains the symbolism:

a) These people come from all sorts of ethnic groups. They are called out by Christ to form the people of God (verse 9a). They are here in the sphere of God next to the altar.

b) What keeps them together is not biological heritage or cultural tradition, as in the case of the other *ditshaba*, but the love of God. The preacher steps into the circle and lets the first and the last of the chain hold the cross. The love of God (the cross!) comes from God and is passed from human being to human being.

c) Those who are called by God are all equal: whether old or young, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, Zulu or Indian. Each one is accepted by Christ just as he/she is. Each one is accepted by all the others. Each one serves the other with his/her gifts. Nobody is above the other.

At this stage, it should have become clear to everybody in the congregation what constitutes the people of God and by which principle it lives in contrast to the natural ethnic groups.

3. The mission of the people of God

The preacher goes on to say that these people are not called out of the *ditshaba* into the presence of God to enjoy themselves there but to bring the love by which they live to the others as well (verse 9b). While the congregation sings *Lerato ke maatla*, the preacher goes with the cross through the church. Those at the altar follow him and fall back into their different groups as they pass.
The preacher stays at the back of the church and asks where the people of God have gone to. It is no more visible. You can’t tell where it is, because it is mixed with the ethnic groups. Does it no longer exist? Oh yes, it exists! He lets those who ‘belong to the people of God’ stand. All can now see the scattered members among the different ethnic groups.

Why are they in those groups? They must bring the love of God to the other members of the groups! Each one is asked to catch hold of the hands of the two people sitting next to him/her. Holding hands is now a symbol of the love passing from one to the other. Then the preacher moves back towards the altar on the rhythm of *Lerato ke maatla* while the people of God bring their ‘victims’ with them towards the altar as they follow the preacher.

At the altar, they again form a circle, which is now thrice as big as the former one. Again, they are sent out on the rhythm of *Lerato ke maatla*, marching behind the preacher with the cross. Again, they merge with the groups and cannot be seen. Again, they are called to stand. Again, they are asked to catch hold of the hands of their two neighbours while remaining within their groups.

A big circle is formed in this way, encompassing the whole church hall and passing through all the ethnic groups. The preacher explains that the Christians scattered among the people are bound to each other by God’s love despite of the hatred between the ethnic groups.

More than that, they are sent to make peace.

Again, the preacher asks the two initial groups (Amazulu and Maburu) to symbolise heavy fighting by thrusting their fists into the air in the direction of the respective other group. Now he calls on the members of the ‘people of God’ to catch hold of the fighting hands. It is a symbol of love that overcomes the spirit of hatred. Again, he marches to the front, to the rhythm of *Lerato ke maatla*, leading a whole train of people, as every Christian caught hold of another two hands and brings the people concerned to the front. Now all members of the congregation are involved.

At this stage, the closing liturgy and the sermon flow together into one stream. The three ministers are standing in front of the altar, while the whole congregation is concentrated around the altar. A speaker says, ‘God, we have brought to you only a few. The majority is still outside!’ The minister responds, ‘Bring them to God in prayer!’

Now four speakers invite the congregation to take part in intercessions: (a) for the believers in Christ in the whole world, that they be strengthened to live by his love and to bring it to the others; (b) for those who are still outside the people of God; (c) for those who are responsible for the world (politicians, rulers, administrators, teachers, parents); (d) for those who cannot experience the love of God because they are suffering.

After each prayer, the congregation responds by singing the liturgical ‘Lord have mercy on us!’ (*Morena, o re šokelwe*).

A minister quotes the words of Isaiah: ‘The Lord says: Whom will I send?’ A speaker responds, ‘Here we are, send us!’ Another minister quotes the words

Then the first minister pronounces the Aaronic blessing.

With the preacher carrying the cross in front, the people now move out of the church on the rhythm of Lerato ke maatla, dancing in a procession. At the door, the he suddenly turns around and asks, ‘Where are we going?’ A speaker: ‘To the others! To do what?’ Another speaker: ‘To bring them God’s love!’

The preacher marches to the bell tower. He climbs onto the socket of the tower and asks the last two questions again. After being answered by the crowd, he says, ‘Let’s go!’ (A re yeng!) There is consternation on the faces: they are afraid that he would now lead them to the homesteads around the church to start with practical mission work. But he laughs and invites them to go home.

Evaluation after the service

Some elderly people did not realise that this was meant to be the Sunday worship service and asked when the service would start. However, in general the exercise was accepted by the congregation and the students most favourably. As soon as the congregation had discovered what it was all about, they caught fire and cooperated enthusiastically, especially enticed by the rhythm of the song. Frequent repetition and the combination of liturgy and sermon at the end forged the message into a great appeal to go out as the people of God and bring the love of God to the others.

1. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
2. Does the sermon reflect God’s chastising demand or God’s reassuring grace?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a ‘parcel’ to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (in this case an enacted sermon) appropriate?
8. Does the preacher use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?
15. Was the contextualisation appropriate, misleading, or overdone?
16. Could such an exercise be done in an urban middle-class congregation?
How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘The Kairos document distinguished between state theology (the religious legitimization of oppression and exploitation), church theology (calling for reconciliation without justice), and prophetic theology (calling for active resistance, aiming at the overthrow of an illegitimate regime). This sermon is a typical example of church theology! That a white privileged theologian imposed this message on a black rural congregation at the height of apartheid is particularly sinister.’

b) This is massive overkill! It takes too much preparation; it presupposes that the congregation is open for experimentation. It demands a level of creativity that few preachers can afford. It is impractical in the context of any normal parish ministry. It can be attempted, at best, during a retreat for the youth.’

c) ‘This is nothing but a gimmick. Or the attempt to be funny! Proclaiming the Word of God should be taken more seriously! I find myself siding with the elderly people who waited for the real service to begin.’
CHAPTER 38

The conquest of death? (1 Pet. 1: 3–9)

A collage

This sermon was performed by students at a theological seminary in South Africa in the early 1970s. It was the time when the Black Consciousness movement took black students by storm across South Africa. Marxist social analysis became a primary preoccupation in intellectual circles worldwide. It made sense to many educated blacks.

The challenges of black theology and liberation theology to conventional theology caused uncertainty and conflict in the student body and the staff. The aim of the sermon was to articulate the theological and ideological alternatives underlying the conflict and highlighting the incongruity of the gospel in the current situation.

Persons: A preacher (minister of religion), an old man (African traditionalist), a young man (student activist), a modern businessman (secular pragmatist). The discussion was not read from a draft but performed as a virulent and messy sort of engagement between the different positions, with lots of body language.

After the first part of the liturgy, the four actors go forward and stand in a semicircle in front of the altar. The preacher reads 1 Peter 1: 3–9.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1: 3–9, NIV)
Old Man: What are these Christians talking about?
Businessman: They are afraid of death!
Young Man: What is death? We defy death! We will speak up! We will fight! We will die! We shall be free!
Businessman: Don’t get excited, sonny! These Christians are afraid of death! So they dream about a life after death!
Young Man: Doping our people! Promising them a paradise in heaven! But we will be free in this world, in our lifetime, here and now! We will fight for our freedom! We will die for our freedom—
Businessman: And enjoy your freedom in the grave, while the worms are eating you!
Preacher: Christ has risen! There is no freedom if it is not also a freedom from sin and a freedom from death!
Young Man: Pious talk! Preach to the oppressors about their sin, not to the oppressed!
Old Man: What do you mean, ‘He has risen’? We will go to our ancestors. We will be respected. Here are my cattle. Here are my children—seven of them—and my grandchildren, eleven up to now! They will honour us with their offerings. We will bless them when they behave. When they don’t behave—nothing!
Businessman: Poor old man—a victim of his superstitions! He does not realise that he will be rotting in the grave like all of us, and soon too, if I do not misjudge his age.
Young Man: We don’t need your blessings, Father! Let us fight and be free! Long live freedom!
Businessman: Shame, angry young man!
Young Man: You mock me? You are one of the exploiters! You are one of the collaborators! Death to the oppressors! Death to the exploiters! Death to the collaborators!
Businessman: Death to everybody! Death will come soon enough, sonny, even without your assistance!
Preacher: Death will come soon enough, but what then?
Young Man: I don’t care about a heaven that does not exist! I care about my people who are enslaved. I care about my country that has been stolen. The masses will rise. That is the only resurrection I know. The masses will rise and destroy the status quo—
Business Man: And build another status quo and be oppressed again!
Old Man: What are all these words, my son? We don’t know them. You have not heard them from your fathers. Come back to the ways of your fathers!
Preacher: You look back, old man. Your fathers have died. Look forward! Christ has risen. Look into the future. Into real life. God offers you to be born again.
Old Man: Born again? What do you mean?
Businessman: Just another one of these pious old phrases, old chum!
Preacher: God offers you a new beginning: you can become a new creature, a child of God!

Old Man: Start afresh? As a child? That will be the day! Imagine starting afresh like a child! As an old man! Be a child again! Without cattle! Without wives! Without children! Without status! Foolish! Imagine an old man wanting to be a child again. He must be crazy!

Businessman: Wouldn’t be so bad, old chap! Just think of it! It would be fun to be a young man again! With a healthy, strong body to throw around. With lots of pretty girls to play with. With decades of lifetime ahead to build up your business. Thinking of it, I wouldn’t mind, Pastor!

Preacher: You want to start all over again in your old sinful ways. Did you not mess up your life this time round? And you want to repeat all that?

Businessman: Oh, I would not repeat all my foolish mistakes! Like this young chap trying to change the world and running your head against the wall until it bleeds! Instead of making the most of life! But I suppose you must grow old to understand how the world works!

Preacher: At least he dreams about justice, while you dream about sex and money!

Businessman: Oh, never mind, he also dreams about money—and power, lots of power—otherwise he would not kick up such a fuss! And sex, of course, which he does not even have to dream about. He just takes it anyway, whenever and wherever opportunities present themselves!

Young Man: You defend the status quo. Otherwise, you would not talk like that. You don’t want to change! You belong to the past! But we shall build the future. Everything will be different.

Preacher: The future belongs to Christ! He will renew your heart! Christ will rebuild the world. Without Christ, your visions of the future are doomed, because you cannot overcome sin and death. Not even your own sin. But Christ can!

Young Man: What is sin? You don’t know what sin is! We know what sin is: the sins of the oppressors! We suffer under them every day and all day long. We will stop their oppression once and for all. Who is Christ?

Businessman: Christ was another one of those foolish young men like you, my son. He wanted to change the world, and he died for his dreams. The security police just finished him off, and in a cruel way too, you know! That was not very clever!

Preacher: Christ is alive. And he is ready to share his new life with us!

Old Man: Who is Christ? Where is he? How old is he? How many children does he have? Where are his cattle?

Businessman: He died at the age of thirty. He was not married. He had no cattle.

Old Man: A youngster? Not married? No children? No cattle? Forget about him! We would not even allow him to sit in the Council of Elders.

Preacher: Yes, in his time, the Council of Elders condemned him to death! But he lives and gives new life to all who believe in him.
Young Man: Why should we believe in him? Did he just die, or did he die for freedom?
Businessman: I suppose he died for freedom, but it did not work out that way.
Young Man: Are you sure he died for freedom?
Businessman: Well, at least that was the official reason for his execution.
Young Man: If that were the case, he would be one of our heroes!
Businessman: I imagine that he could have become a hero if he had lived. But he was killed when he was hardly thirty years of age. Shame—what a waste!
Preacher: He never wanted to be a hero! He did not want power. He wanted to serve. He wanted to save.
Businessman: Poor fellow! Another misguided idealist who wasted his life! But it is over anyway. A few hours of suffering, then it was all over. And it happened centuries ago. Why do we still bother to talk about him? Let us enjoy life as long as it lasts!
Preacher: And what then?
Young Man: That is irrelevant. Death is of no consequence for us. We shall overcome!
Preacher: You will not overcome anything at all when you are dead. Death cancels out your visions. Death gulps up your anger. But Christ is alive! It is he who will overcome. Join him in his struggle!
Young Man: He had his time. Now it’s our time. We honour those who have lost their lives in the struggle. If he died for freedom, he was one of us. But now it is for us to give our lives for the struggle. We will overcome!
Businessman: What exactly will you overcome? Will your leaders, if they are successful (God forbid!), be less selfish than those that rule us now? Do you think there is no discrimination and oppression and corruption in those miserable countries that suffered a revolution?
Young Man: Your words betray your false consciousness. You can’t even contemplate an alternative to the status quo!
Businessman: Overcome what, my son? Do you think the world is going to change just because you want it to change? Do you think that your leaders do not pursue their own interests first and foremost, as we all do? Don’t you think that the masses want to have money and power too?
Preacher: You cannot overcome death! You cannot overcome the sin that leads to death! Praise be to God, Christ is alive to overcome sin and death through the mercy of God.
Young Man: I have no time for pious nonsense! My situation is that I am oppressed and that I shall be free. Your big boss in heaven can keep his mercy. We expect no mercy. We demand our rights.
Businessman: Mercy—another one of those stupid ideas! There is no mercy! I begged for mercy when I was bankrupt. Yes, friends, there can be tough times for those of us who do the work and take the risks. I cried for mercy to my creditors and found none.
Preacher: I am speaking of God’s mercy, not the mercy of creditors!
Businessman: Where is God when we need him? I have learnt my lesson. I have used my brain and my two hands and my elbows, and that helped. Now I have a healthy bank account. Mercy! Even the idea of mercy is wrong. It makes people weak and lazy and foolish. When my creditors beg for mercy, I just send them packing! For me it is ‘Pay up or else!’

Preacher: The way you speak shows how much you need the mercy of God!

Businessman: You make me angry! All three of you are nothing but parasites. You just prey on the wealth that others have created. What would you eat if we would not do the dirty work? You don’t share our battle to survive. You have no idea how merciless life can be!

Preacher: I spoke of the mercy of God, not the mercy of life!

Young Man: No mercy for those who have grown fat at the expense of the poor! You are a tycoon! You show no mercy when people are starving. You won’t receive mercy when they rise up against you! The whole class of oppressors and exploiters will be liquidated! And you will be one of the first. Take my word for it!

Preacher: The way you speak shows how much you need the mercy of God!

Old Man: Mercy for these youngsters? Let them learn to respect their elders! They want to throw their weight around even before they have grown up! They discard the ways we know. They will learn their lessons the hard way. Our fathers will send them bad luck until they come to their senses. You cannot play with our fathers!

Preacher: Those who refuse to be merciful, Father, will be refused mercy! Remember that you are on the brink of death. You are going to face eternal judgement. The mercy of God is the only hope you have!

Young Man: Hope, hope, hope! I hate the word in the mouth of a preacher! Too long have you been fooling us with your fairy tales. While we were hoping, others were taking. We no longer buy that! The time for hope is over. The time for action has come.

Businessman: Shame, poor excited fellow! I suppose life has treated you rather harshly. No wonder your emotions run high! But never mind, death will calm you down all right. You will be very quiet down there, six feet underground. If you think of it, death is quite a relief for these poor devils!

Preacher: Death is no relief without a hope that conquers death!

Old Man: Hope for what? I do not need hope. Here are my children! They will respect me when I am going to my fathers!

Preacher: Before God, you will stand alone, a miserable sinner, without your children and without your cattle. Don’t rely on what you cannot take with you when you die!

Businessman: Don’t rely on hope at all! Damn it—while you are healthy and strong, you always hope for better days to come. You work like hell and look forward to the time when you can relax and enjoy. And then at last, when the business is showing a profit, when the shares yield dividends, you go down to the worms. Disgusting!
Young Man: There, you see how he has gained from the status quo! There, you see how he has exploited the masses! He has become fat and rich at our expense. This is going to come to an end now!

Old Man: Ouch, there it is again—again this terrible pain in the stomach! I must get that goat for the diviner. Imagine being cursed in your old age! I will get the culprit, and he will be sorry! I will get him!

Preacher: Calm down, old man, leave the diviner alone! The curse of sin is worse than the pain in your stomach. Christ can take away your sin. Christ is with you in your pain—just accept him!

Businessman: You have had your time, old boy! But I still want to live! Give me ten more years. Yes, just give me ten more years to enjoy! The swimming pool and the Mercedes and the trip to the Far East. Then I will be satisfied! Then the worms can have me. Damn it all!

Preacher: You are a man without hope! You have no future.

Businessman: What hope? Just imagine: heart attack, post-mortem, the best coffin in town, a procession to the grave, hypocritical speeches: A great man, a successful man, a respected man! All nonsense! A stinking corpse, they should say. At least that would be the truth.

Preacher: Death does not have the last word, God has!

Businessman: The survivors have the last word. They throw a party for you, your last party! Everybody is invited while you are already six feet underground. Then, after eating their fill, they will gossip about the latest scandals, discuss the stock exchange or the cricket score. Then they go home and do their thing, as if nothing has happened. That is the future, your real future! Disgusting, I tell you, disgusting!

Preacher: An imperishable inheritance waits for you, if you let yourself in for it, my friend!

Businessman: Wishful thinking! Give me ten more years, and I know what I will do with them. Then come what may. We all go the same way. You too, Pastor!

Preacher: Yes, you are right. We are all heading for death. But the risen Christ will go with us into that hour. He will pull us through death into life. Listen again to what is written here:

The preacher reads 1 Peter 1: 3–9 again. The speakers take their seats; a time of silence follows, after which the service is concluded in the conventional way.

1. What is the message of the sermon?
2. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
3. Is the message of the sermon theologically sound?
4. Does the sermon reflect God's demand or God's grace?
5. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
6. Can you characterise the three points of view on the meaning of death that are represented by the old man, the businessman, and the young man?
7. Does the preacher respond appropriately and convincingly to these three positions?
8. Would it have been desirable to offer an interpretation of the role play afterwards? Or a discussion with the listeners on what death and resurrection mean for Christians?

9. Does the preacher stray into areas that he/she does not fully understand?

10. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?

11. Did the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?

12. Did the sermon provide a ‘package’ to take home?

13. Is the sermon design (a collage in this case) appropriate?

14. Is the structure lucid enough to be remembered?

15. Is the language simple and clear?

16. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?

17. Is the sermon too long or too short?

18. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?

19. Are some passages redundant?

20. Is something important lacking?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘The presentations of the three points of view are ridiculous. Those who hold such convictions can only be offended and turn away from the Christian church in disgust.’

b) ‘The sermon can only reinforce prejudices in the congregation against stereotypes such as the heathen, the businessmen, the modern youth.’

c) ‘Why do Christians continue with the ancient irrational assumption that the dead will rise into a new life, while we know that it cannot happen and has never happened?’
In Part III, I demonstrate the process of training preachers with two examples. The first originated in a rural African parish, the other in a class of students of theology. Both follow the steps I have described in this book but at very different levels. They mark the two extremes, as it were, of what is possible under vastly differing circumstances.

Set aside time and follow the basic steps a couple of times, even if in a rudimentary way, so that they settle in the back of your mind. Once they have become second nature, they will enhance your preparations quite considerably. After hours and years of determined practice, the fingers of a pianist fly over the keys like swallows in the air. The same is true of an experienced preacher.
CHAPTER 39

Fetching water from the fountain

On-the-job training in an African rural parish

What do you think?

Can a Christian congregation survive without preaching?

Can it survive if the preaching is theologically deficient, even contrary to the content of the Christian message?

Should people who have had no training ever be asked (or allowed) to preach, or should we simply build on the store of knowledge and understanding they gained from Sunday school, confirmation class, reading the Bible, and listening to sermons over extended periods of time?

In a situation where there are ten or twelve congregations and preaching places for one ordained minister, should the minister act as a travelling agent dispensing sacraments, visiting each congregation and preaching place once every two or three months, or should he/she rather use his/her expertise to train lay preachers?

My first parish was situated in a remote rural area in South Africa. Life in the villages followed traditional patterns. In some areas, the soil was still tilled with wooden hoes. Homesteads consisted of a number of huts built with clay, decorated with wet manure, and roofed with grass. Firewood was collected wherever it could be found. Water was carried to the homesteads from a fountain by women and young girls in buckets on their heads. Most of the men were in town as migrant workers, coming home only for Christmas, if at all.

The local black minister, whose work I shared, had to care for twelve congregations and preaching places spread over a large area. Regular transport did not exist. Our missionary predecessor had served almost three times that number, but he had a car. My black colleague was a teacher during the week. He travelled great distances by bicycle on dusty roads in great heat. He visited each community once every three months to celebrate the sacraments, bless marriages, and conduct similar rituals reserved for the ordained pastor.

As a result, elders, teachers, or leaders of the prayer women’s league conducted most of the services. But they had no training and no official status in the church, which is important in a traditionalist society. As a result, the communities were ailing. Realising that I had to do something about the situation, I asked each community to appoint two or three trusted representatives and enrolled them in a training programme. Because there were only a few men left, most of these preachers were women.
Every Sunday, I called together the preachers of three of the communities to discuss the text and its relevance before the commencement of the service. One of them would preach. The sermon and the service would be discussed by the group after the service. In this way, continuous on-the-job training began to operate.

Using imagery from their daily lives, I based the programme on the parable of a woman bringing water from the fountain to the homestead. In this parable, the water represents the Word of God, the woman carrying the water represents the Holy Spirit, the bucket represents the preacher, the spring represents the Bible.

The woman must go the fountain = the preacher must read the biblical text. The bucket must be cleaned out first with the water found there = the Word of God has to speak to the preacher first. The water must be carried all the way from the fountain to the homestead = the preacher has to interpret the message so that it will speak to the situation in the village. The water must be allocated to its various uses = the preacher must address the spiritual needs of various kinds of people: the elderly, the youth, the women whose husbands are away, and the few men left, who experienced the congregation as a women’s affair.

**Steps taken in the discussion:**

1. We began with a short explanation of the metaphor. Christ said God’s love is like living water (John 4: 10; 7: 37–38). The image is that of a flowing spring, as opposed to a rotting puddle. Without water, life is impossible; without the love of God, we would not even exist. Water is used to nourish our bodies; God’s love is meant to sustain our spiritual life.

   Water is used to clean our bodies; the Word of God must clean out our hearts. Without the love of God, our lives can go astray, and we would not even notice. The Word of God is meant to overcome our sinful lives and give us a share in the new life of Christ. Finally, water must be shared. Whoever receives the love of God will want to let it flow on to others.

   Lesson: *The Word of God is the gift of God’s love in Christ and God’s expectation that we share God’s love with others.*

2. Say a woman goes to the fountain to fetch water for the homestead. The water flows from the fountain into a basin. She must draw the water from the basin; she must carry it to the homestead, and she must distribute it among its different uses. The water symbolises the Word of God; the basin that holds the water symbolises the Bible. As preachers, we dig deep into the biblical texts to find its message, try to understand what it says to us, and convey it to our communities.

   Lesson: *Our task as preachers is to retrieve the Word of God from the ancient texts of the Bible, translate it into our own situation, and proclaim it among our people.*


3. The woman carries the water. We may think that the preacher carries the Word of God. But the actual conveyer of the Word of God is God’s Spirit. Just as the woman uses a bucket to carry the water, the Spirit of God uses human preachers to convey God’s Word. Where God’s Spirit does not motivate and activate us, our preaching will remain empty words.

Christ said, ‘Without the Father, I can do nothing’ (John 5: 19, 30). He also said, ‘Without me, you can do nothing’ (cf. John 15:1–11)! Like Christ, Christians depend on God’s Spirit; otherwise, they could not believe, let alone speak in the name of God (cf. Phil. 2: 12–13).

Lesson: The Word of God is God’s Word, not our own words; we preachers are empty containers in which the Spirit of God carries God’s gift of love and God’s expectation of love to our people.

4. You do not find clean water all over the countryside. It comes from high up in the mountain and emerges at the fountain. Only this water is fresh, clean, and safe. So that it does go to waste, it flows into a basin. The basin is not water; it just holds the water.

The basin stands for the Bible. That is where we find the water of the Word of God. But the basin is made of bricks whose only function is to hold the water. In the same way, the Bible consists of ancient documents that hold the message of Christ.

Like the bricks in the basin, there are lots of words in the Bible that do not truly reflect the Word of God. We get the true Word of God from Jesus. Jesus preached and enacted God’s redeeming love. While the religious leaders of his time insisted on the demanding and condemning law of God, Jesus proclaimed and enacted God’s forgiveness and grace.

When he was condemned and executed for doing so, God confirmed the truth of what Jesus had said about God’s love and raised him to the position of the Messiah; that is, God’s mouthpiece and representative on earth.

Lesson: The Word of God is like the water that originated high up in the mountain, emerged at this fountain, and was collected in the basin. The Bible is like such a basin. It is here that the Word of God is accessible for all people that are thirsty for God’s love.

5. When the woman reaches the fountain, she does not fill the bucket straight away. The bucket may have been used to carry mud and manure for plastering the walls or to assemble firewood in the forest. It is not suitable for carrying water as dirty as it is. Taking clean water, she first rinses the bucket thoroughly.

In the same way, the preacher lives in this world and is soiled by it. She may be preoccupied with thoughts about nasty neighbours or sick children; she may desire a new dress or a cell phone. She may be suspicious of what her husband does in the city. She may fear sorcery, drought, or famine. She may want to show off her spiritual strength before the congregation; she may want to affirm her leadership status.
The preacher must bring all these fears, concerns, and motivations before God and confront them with the message of God’s redeeming love. Before she brings it to others, she must first allow the message to do its redeeming and transforming work in her own life.

Her pride must be changed into humility. Her hurting spirit must be healed. Her craving must be changed into gratitude. When she has gained the peace of God, the peace of God will radiate through her to others.

Lesson: Preachers are the first mission field of the Word of God: as they absorb and convey the Word of God, their lives are being transformed.

6. The woman must carry the water all the way from the fountain to the homestead. That can be tiring, but it must be done; otherwise, the water remains at the fountain. The preacher must bring the message from where it originated long ago and far away to where we are now. This is a demanding task because the convictions, conditions, and situations for which the biblical texts were written differ from ours today. We must find out what God’s love means for us today and in our situation.

Depending on the educational level of the participants, I would mention a few examples of biblical injunctions or practices that Christians can no longer follow today: We do not believe that women are a possession of their husbands that can be acquired or disposed of at will; that the inhabitants of the land can be driven out to make way for new settlers; that sons disobedient to the fathers must be stoned to death; that we can ask God to destroy our enemies.

The same is true for the biblical world view. We know that the earth does not rest on stable pillars, that the sky is not a canopy to keep primeval waters up there from flooding the earth, and that the woman was not created only after all the animals. We know that tuberculosis is caused by a bug, rather than by demonic powers. Without translation from obsolete to modern world views, the message forfeits its credibility.

Lesson: In biblical times, the Word of God was God’s response to the needs, predicaments, and sins of the people of God at that time. It must now be preached in such a way that it responds to the needs, predicaments, and sins of the people of God today.

7. Coming home, the woman will distribute the water judiciously to its various uses: to quench thirst, to make sorghum beer, to cook porridge, to clean the pots, to wash the baby. Having been renewed by the Word of God, the preacher channels the Word of God into the various situations of her listeners.

There are men and women. There are toddlers and teenagers. There are parents and elderly. Some have attended school; others cannot read and write. Some have a stable income; others are unemployed. Some are healthy and strong, others sick and frail. Listeners each have their own life history, with good and bad memories, preoccupations and resentments, convictions and experiences.

The preacher must not hurt but heal. She must not make unreasonable demands but open up the way forward. She must not offer quick fixes but build
up the powers of patience and determination to go through the rough places of life.

Lesson: *The Word of God must address the needs of the listeners in their concrete situations.*

8. The water brought home by the woman is used to serve the whole family, rather than only her personal needs. When the Word of God reaches the heart of the listeners, it creates faith, love, and hope. It liberates and motivates. It reconciles, builds healthy relationships and cooperative attitudes. It transforms the community. It leads to a new commitment to stand for justice, peace, and responsibility.

Lesson: *The preached Word of God must renew the community of believers so that they can live and enact the Word of God.*

**Applying the parable**

The process I embarked upon may seem to be too demanding, and indeed, it was. But conducted with patience, humour, lots of examples and involving the participants in a lively discussion, it can work. After discussing the parable in detail, I would apply it again and again to concrete texts, leading to concrete sermons.

In some cases, this is relatively easy, for instance, in the case of the parable of the prodigal son. In other cases, the process is challenging, for instance the relation between flesh and Spirit in Romans 8. One would think that such training should only be undertaken by professional theologians.

But in many situations, there are just not enough trained theologians around. The Word of God must nevertheless be preached. People must be appointed to do it. They must muddle through as best they can. In fact, even trained theologians muddle through most of the time! The Holy Spirit can and does use inadequate instruments.

The assumption of this approach is that under such conditions, the main task of the trained and ordained minister is to enrich and empower the lay preachers in the parish, rather than become a travelling agent in sacraments.

The approach can be varied endlessly according to local circumstances. I trained three young helper evangelists at the same time that I trained the local preachers—giving them lessons at home and sending them out to preach in various communities over the weekends. The programme can also be augmented and deepened with lay preachers’ correspondence courses.

*What did you find helpful or problematic in this example?*

*Which alternatives or additional thoughts would you propose?*

*How would you react to the following critique?*
a) ‘You should never indulge in the use of African cultural practices as metaphors because they tend to be ill-informed, paternalistic, and humiliating in the mouth of a Westerner.’

b) ‘The biblical Word cannot be translated as it stands: the problems the biblical people were faced with are no longer our problems: whether menstruation causes ritual impurity, whether pagans can become members of the people of God, whether people caught in adultery should be stoned to death, etc. Conversely, we have problems they could never have dreamt of: the deployment of nuclear weapons, technology displacing labour, gender justice for women and homosexuals, and so on.’

c) ‘It is not true that the Word of God is nothing but God’s response to human needs. The Word of God is the revelation of God’s eternal lordship, sanctity, majesty, and glory to sinful, vulnerable, and mortal human beings.’
CHAPTER 40

Going to a foreign country

Training at graduate level

What do you think?

In chapter 8, we discussed various ways of reading the Bible. If confronted with a text, would you want to know the historical background (behind-the-text reading), or allow the text to speak into the current situation as it is (in-front-of-the-text reading)?

Once you understood what the message of the text is, do you think you should subject this message to theological scrutiny or take it as the final authority?

Do you think that the message of the text must be reformulated so as to speak to our contemporaries in their own vastly different situations?

Do you expect trained and ordained preachers to have mastered this kind of translation, or do they depend as much on the Holy Spirit as a lay preacher would?

A. Elaborate preparation

This second example of how preachers can be trained was conducted in 1996 with a group of students of theology in the context of a course at the University of Natal (now UKZN) in Pietermaritzburg. It had three objectives: (a) to demonstrate, by way of example, what a full preparation of a sermon could entail; (b) to show that a historical penetration of the text and a careful translation of its message into contemporary contexts and patterns of thought can produce a wealth of insight; (c) to experiment with the possibilities of collaborative preaching.

We had a whole semester at our disposal. So we could afford to go into detail. I here share the whole procedure we followed. Obviously, I do not expect preachers in the field to have the expertise, time, and energy needed for such elaborate preparations. What can be done with a class of students of theology is hardly attainable in the average parish situation.

However, it can indeed be followed in a refresher course. It can also act as something like a benchmark. A benchmark is not a law that must be fulfilled. It is meant, rather, to encourage preachers to reach higher. Under parish circumstances, preparations will have to be more pedestrian. But, as the adage goes, aim for the stars and you may reach the moon!
The service was conducted successively in a white suburb and a black township. In both cases, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

The text

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in uproar, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.’ The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ they became angry and said to him, ‘Do you hear what these are saying?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself’?’

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’ Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also
tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Matt. 21: 1–18, 23–27, NRSV)

Step 1: Exegesis—the message retrieved

a) The state of the tradition

The tradition of the entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple is one package. Its present form belongs to a time after the Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem, but its historical authenticity is highly credible. All four gospels carry the tradition and attach great (though varying) significance to it. Each gospel author gives it his own interpretation.

Mark may be the original, but Matthew added important local facets, such as the hostility of the citizens of Jerusalem against Jesus and the Galilean pilgrims. John is furthest and most detached from the historical original. He shifts the story from the end to the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, where it hardly belongs in historical terms. To understand the significance of the story we have to put it into a long-term historical perspective. Here is a plausible reconstruction:

b) The historical, religious, and social context of the narrative

The king, the city, and the sanctuary in pre-exilic times

In the ancient Near East nomads moved from semi-deserts into cultivated lands in search for food and water. Settled agriculturalists protected themselves and their stored grain against raids by building fortified cities and instituting a central command: the king. Rural areas were attached to cities to form kingdoms; kingdoms developed into empires.

Kings were regarded as representatives and plenipotentiaries of the deity. The deity channelled his/her blessings to the natural world, the society, and the community through the king. To disobey the king was to disobey God. Religion was used for the ideological legitimation of authoritarian rule. This strategy can be found in many ancient cultures.

The idea gained ground in Israel when David took over the Canaanite city of Jerusalem and made it his capital. The kingship was a pagan institution that needed Israelite religious legitimation. Psalm 2 is a good example: The king is declared Son of God; that is, the representative of God on earth.

The tradition persisted throughout biblical history. The prophets did not question the tradition but promised a ‘true king’ to replace corrupt and
idolatrous Israelite kings and pagan emperors. That was the origin of messianic expectations. Our story is firmly embedded in this set of assumptions.

Jerusalem too was a Canaanite city that needed Israelite religious legitimation. David transferred the Ark of the Covenant and the Israelite priesthood to Jerusalem. Solomon built the temple on Mt Zion. Court theologians affirmed and idealised the narrative of Davidic rule.

However, there was enduring resistance from Northern tribes on behalf of their older sanctuaries. With the split of the Solomonic empire, the Northern Kingdom got its own capital (Samaria) and established its own sanctuaries (Bethel and Dan). After the demise of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians, the David-Jerusalem-Zion tradition became dominant.

The time of the great empires

When one pagan empire after another oppressed the Israelites (the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Hellenists, and Romans) the Jews eagerly awaited a restoration of the Israelite kingdom ruled by a Son of David in Jerusalem, the city of David. Indeed, the city would soon (or eventually) become the world capital in the place of Nineveh, Babylon, or Rome. All nations would acknowledge Yahweh as God and bring tribute to the divinely appointed ruler.

During the time of the Persian Empire, a religious satrapy (semi-autonomous dependency) emerged under the leadership of a Jewish high priest. The city and temple were reconstructed and became the spiritual centre of the Jews scattered all over the empire and beyond. With the decline of the Hellenistic empires, Judaea regained its independence and the high priests turned into kings.

Herod was the most prominent Jewish king of the time, but the kingdom became dependent on the Roman Empire. At the request of the Pharisees and the priestly elite, the Romans put an end to the kingship in Jerusalem because of the corruption of Archelaus, the son of Herod. The synedrion (a representative body led by the high priest) was put in charge of internal affairs.

This was a semi-autonomous government, accountable to Rome, thus a form of indirect rule. The Jewish population became restless during the time. The Romans expected Jewish leaders to maintain the law and order among the Jews. To do so, their authority had to be legitimate in terms of Jewish religious traditions. The leaders (priests, Pharisees, and scribes) appealed to the Torah, the Mosaic Law.

But messianic traditions combined with apocalyptic visions undermined the status quo and had to be controlled. Subversive expectations concentrated on the coming Messiah, the future of Jerusalem, and the role of the temple as the location of the name of Yahweh. Jerusalem possessed paramount status over the provinces of Judea and Galilee, while the population of Samaria was mixed.
c) Why the action of Jesus was subversive

Jesus did not question the status of the city, the temple, or the role of the messianic king but redefined their meaning. Drawing on prophetic traditions, he proclaimed and enacted the God of Israel as a God of unconditional, redeeming love rather than a God demanding slavish adherence to a moral law, ritual purity, and sacrifices to appease an irate deity.

According to the gospels, he claimed to so in the authority of the messianic representative of God. Was he entitled to do that? For priests, scribes, and Pharisees, it was blatant heresy to question the absolute validity of God’s law, and it was abhorrent blasphemy to do so in the authority of the messianic representative of God. In their eyes, he was a dangerous imposter who, given his popularity, could destabilise a precarious socio-political situation.

For the established citizens of Jerusalem it was pure presumptuousness. Nazareth in northern Galilee was a remote and insignificant place: ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1: 46). According to Matthew, they were enraged by the action of Jesus (cf. Matt. 21: 10, 15, 23). The Jewish leaders could easily mobilise them against Jesus and his movement.

The Romans were not interested in the religious quarrels within Judaism, and because Jesus and his followers were unarmed, the Romans had no reason to bother. That is why Pilate was so reluctant to sentence Jesus to death. However, he feared the upsurge in emotions caused by the events and succumbed to the demands of the Jewish leaders.

The class discussion focused on (a) the dominance of the centre over the periphery (the capital over the provinces); (b) the conflict between messianic, legal, and cultic traditions; (c) the power of entrenched elites over against innovative movements.

d) The temple and its market

To underpin the legitimacy of Jerusalem as capital of the empire, David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Solomon built the temple on Mount Zion. Josiah centralised dispersed religious places and brought the entire priesthood from the countryside to the capital.

After the exile, royalty had disappeared, and the priesthood was in charge. It badly needed status, authority, and income. These were gained by means of an elaborate ritual and sacrificial system attributed to Moses. Arguing that for God only the best was good enough, sacrificial animals had to be spotless.

Sacrifices ostensibly demanded by God functioned as taxes benefiting the ruling elite. A network of commercial enterprises seems to have developed around the sacrificial system, which facilitated and serviced the latter. Moving into the city in a jubilant procession, being hailed as the expected Messiah, and upsetting the temple market, Jesus questioned this set of entrenched assumptions.
e) Summary: The actors in the narrative and their motivations

On the one hand, we have the authority of the established elites: (a) the priestly aristocracy and the elders, (b) the moral elite of the Pharisees, (c) the intellectual elite of the scribes, (d) the wounded pride of the citizens of the city, (e) the commercial interests of the market vendors, and (f) a touchy Roman imperial administration.

As depicted in the gospels, the system over which they presided was politically, socially, economically, and religiously oppressive. One had to satisfy God with performing elaborate rituals, keeping a harsh moral law, paying heavy taxes (sacrifices), and obeying elites, who in turn tried to satisfy the Roman overlords.

On the other hand, an upstart rabbi (= teacher) from Galilee, a remote province, had proclaimed the God of Israel as a God of redeeming love and, together with a crowd of enthusiastic followers from Galilee, enacted the entry of the Messiah into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple as promised by the prophets. Confrontation was inevitable, and the outcome was predictable.

The position of the elites was firmly entrenched in social institutions and popular assumptions, while the Jesus movement challenged the status quo. Jesus represented an Israelite-Jewish tradition which was (a) anti-sacrificial and (b) anti-elitist. God does not desire sacrifices but righteousness (especially towards the weak and vulnerable). Righteousness was not attained through coercion but through a new spirit. Shepherds (rulers) are not supposed to pasture themselves but the flock. Leaders are supposed to be humble before God.

At its roots, the conflict was over the question who the God of Israel is: a God of the humble and weak or a God of the honoured and powerful, a God of law and order or a God of redeeming love, a God of mercy or a God of moral and ritual perfection.

f) The character of the text

The text is a narrative. Its place in the gospel story marks the peak of the conflict between the ruling Jewish elites and Jesus. Everything moves up to this point, after which the catastrophic descent follows.

The delimitation of the passage: Matthew 21: 1–13 is the primary unit, but texts preceding and following the passage add important facets to the story: Who is the greatest in the kingdom? Can the rich inherit the kingdom? Only servants are entitled to rule.

Of particular significance is the text immediately preceding the passage: two blind men discerned that he was the Son of David (Messiah); the crowd wants to silence them, but Jesus has compassion. Matthew 21: 14 picks up this issue again.

Matthew 21: 15ff picks up the motif of the children. Matthew 21: 23–27 is a crucial part of the story, because the clash between Jesus and the Jewish elites was over authority, occasioned by the drastic action of Jesus.
The sequence of the story: (a) the donkey as symbol of messianic humility, (b) the jubilation of the Galilean pilgrims, (c) the indignation of the city dwellers, (d) the cleansing of the temple, (e) the question of authority.

g) A few remarks on detail

The donkey reflects an ancient prophetic tradition: The prince of peace does not ride on a horse, but on a donkey. Horses were not only symbols of power but also part of ancient weaponry, especially when drawing chariots. Jesus is not only humble but also unarmed. The implication is that he does not have to impose his authority. He is not a tyrant.

Moreover, the donkey does not even belong to him. Jesus is not part of the wealthy elite. He does not requisition the donkey for himself, as other rulers would have done, but restores it to its rightful owner. He is not an exploiter.

The donkey had never been used before. The probable interpretation is that the unused animal was a sign of purity (note the parallel of virginity). Another interpretation: it had not been broken in and could be expected to be wild and stubborn, yet the ‘mild Messiah’ mastered it easily.

By the way, the quotation from Zechariah 9: 9 referring to a donkey and a colt is a parallelismus membrorum, a Hebrew style that states the same meaning in two ways with different words. Strangely enough, Matthew did not recognise that. As the original in Mark 11: 1–7 shows, Jesus did not use two animals, but only one.

Children could not act as witnesses at the time. The implication is that the truth matters, rather than the status of the witnesses. But what is the truth? This question demands an existential decision. Jesus does not reply to the question on whose authority he acted. His opponents have to face the question of truth and sort it out for themselves. In view of his lack of status, power, and wealth, Jesus could easily have been ignored if it had not been for the fact that his behaviour reflected messianic traditions and that his followers had picked them up. He represented an alternative interpretation of the God of Israel which challenged the interpretation of the Jewish leaders at its roots. Moreover, the highly provocative act of ridding the temple of the economic support base of the sacrificial system challenged the authority of the Jewish leaders very directly.

The fact that Jesus and his followers were unarmed had another implication. The Romans did not interfere with purely religious quarrels among the Jews. That is why Pilate was not interested in the whole affair. The Romans crucified only fugitive slaves and political rebels. The Jewish leaders had to convince Pilate that his humble and unarmed procession was more subversive than meets the eye. In this, they were right: the legitimacy of the entire system was questioned.

The two actions of upsetting the traders and healing the blind and the lame complement each other: the prophetic tradition said that God does not want sacrifices but righteousness (here defined as protection of the weak and
vulnerable), e.g. Isaiah 1: 10–17; Jeremiah 7: 22; Ezekiel 20: 25ff; Hosea 6: 6; Proverbs 15: 8; 21: 3; Psalm 40: 6ff (cf. Isa. 58).

h) The core message of the passage

Jesus enacts the Old Testament tradition that interprets the God of Israel as a God of redeeming grace and humble service. By doing so, he challenges the legitimacy of the current authorities, who interpret this God as a God who demands absolute obedience and legitimates oppressive and exploitative power structures.

Implied messages:

The biblical God is involved in actual human life processes; God’s presence can be described in terms of acts and events in space, time, and power relations: Where? When? Through whom?

There is a clash between two Old Testament interpretations of God. This clash calls for a decision concerning authority: who truly represents God’s intentions?

Step 2: Bringing the message home

a) Hermeneutical considerations (transfer of the message into the contemporary situation)

The circumstances of the story have changed drastically.

We no longer have a central place of worship (the temple) where God or his name or his glory is believed to be present. Wherever Christians meet around the Word of God, Christ is present in the Spirit. So the target of the message today is the gathered community, the institutionalised church and its social environment.

We no longer have kings in political leadership roles; we have democratically elected presidents and prime ministers. These are not associated with religious functions. They derive their legitimacy not from God but from a democratic mandate.

Royal families are not associated with power but with squandering public money for the extravagant display of status. Chiefs and traditional leaders still play important roles in black rural areas, but they are not associated with a messianic prince of peace sent by God.

We no longer have high priests who play a role which combines religious and political functions. We have a few theologians in political positions, but they act in their secular capacities.

But we do have church leaders (ministers, deans, bishops, presidents, synods, councils, etc.) who wield decision-making power within the church. They would correspond with the high priest and the synedrion as the internal
leadership of a social group within society. Can an ordained minister or bishop apply the critique of Jesus to him/herself and his/her colleagues?

We no longer have *horses or donkeys* as status symbols, but luxury cars, SUVs, Kombis, and bicycles. When I was privileged to attend a meeting in Tanzania addressed by former president Julius Nyerere, he arrived in a small Japanese family car.

Power: The horse is no longer part of the *weaponry*, and the donkey is no longer used as the means of *transport*. Today we would contrast an armoured car with a delivery van. We no longer cry *hosanna* but *viva*. We no longer spread *clothes* on the road to honour the arrival of a VIP, but red carpets. Enthusiastic crowds would not cut off *branches*, but *toy-toy*.12

Exploitation of *accepted religious assumptions* for political and financial gain is still with us. Think of business-savvy TV evangelists, the theological justification of apartheid, financial dishonesty, and corruption within our churches, politicians who use evangelical or African-initiated mass churches to bolster their image during elections, or the heavy utilisation of sentimentality for boosting profit margins during the Christmas season.

The organised church and its entrenched leadership are still hostile to anyone who *challenges the system*, especially if the challenger has no official status or authority to do so. Preachers too tend to counter challenges to their position with anger and self-assertion.

b) Dialogue with other convictions

*Islam*: In our story, Jesus is depicted as the messianic prince of peace. According to Islam, Jesus was just a prophet who was superseded by Mohammed. Mohammed used military force to convert a pagan society. Muslims would also be a better parallel to Pharisees, who uphold the law, rather than Jesus, who enacted God’s redeeming grace.

In African *traditionalism*, the social system is firmly rooted in a patriarchal society based on ancestral lineage and heritage. There is no place for a messianic leader who undermines the social system and its values and norms.

In *capitalist liberalism*, the consensus is that traders fulfil an important function for society; that private profit leads to the growth of the economy which is, ultimately, also good for the poor; that religious and ethical scruples concerning the use of money are misplaced, counterproductive, and powerless; that the human being is inherently selfish, and that this selfishness is good for the society because it leads to initiative, self-exertion, and competitiveness.

*Marxists* would have no sympathy with a prince of peace who would be foolish enough to march into the capital unarmed, to believe that entrenched elites will repent, to allow himself to be caught and executed. The revolution is conducted through military clout and social organisation under the leadership of a disciplined and dictatorial party elite.

12 An enthusiastic African dance used to stir up the emotions of demonstrating crowds.
The natural tendency of settled middle classes and elites is still to despise (and fear) impoverished people coming from the margins of society. This is evident in the attitude towards rural people who come to town and construct shacks near established homes.

Personal reflections: everybody for him/herself. Where do I fit into the story? Where does the social group or class to which I belong fit into the story?

**Step 3: Theological clarifications**

**a) Christology**

The *person of Christ* (the doctrine of a divine nature and a human nature in one person): In this text, the *human* aspect is in the foreground, although our liturgical praxis tends to use this occasion to celebrate Christ as the divine king. The *divine* aspect is implied in the two issues on which the conflict centres: (a) Is God a God of a strict law or of redeeming grace? (b) Does Jesus have divine authority?

The *work of Christ*: Is Jesus acting as a priest, a prophet, or a king? In this case, Jesus acts neither as a priest nor as a prophet, but as the messianic king.

What does *redemption* mean: forgiveness of sins or liberation of the oppressed? The expectations of the Galilean followers are clearly focused on the latter. Yet he comes in the form of an unarmed, seemingly illegitimate imposter, not in power and glory.

*Cross and resurrection*: This story is not part of the glorification of Jesus, but part of his suffering. Cleaning the temple and healing the blind and the lame, Jesus implicitly rejects human sacrifices to God and enacts God’s redemptive sacrifice to human beings.

**b) Soteriology (doctrine of salvation)**

*Law and grace*: The high priest, the Pharisees, and scribes represent various aspects of the Mosaic Law, which must be fulfilled to become acceptable to God; Jesus represents God’s redeeming grace.

God’s *mastery and benevolence*: In this story, the benevolence of God is enacted by Jesus, but there is no trace of his mastery, except perhaps in his healing ministry. Here, Jesus claims the authority of the God of grace.

Luther’s distinction between *the hidden and the revealed God* is helpful here: where God’s power manifests itself, God’s love is hidden; where his love manifests itself (in the cross), his power is hidden. Where there is no show of divine power, God’s benevolence becomes problematic. Is God really a God of grace if he allows his messenger to become a victim of entrenched assumptions and institutions?

*The church and the Spirit*: In this passage, the church does not yet exist. There are disciples and an enthusiastic crowd of followers, but they
misunderstand Jesus and leave him in the lurch soon after. The *Spirit* seems to be confined to Jesus.

c) Eschatology

Jesus enacts the hope of messianic prophesy. Doing so, he gets into conflict with another kind of eschatology, namely keeping the law to escape the last judgement. As a result, he appears to have failed in his mission.

The Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead confirms the claim that Jesus had the messianic authority to interpret and enact the unconditional love of God, a claim that was rejected by the Jewish leaders of his time.

There is no proof that this is the case; we can only believe, confess, and hope that Christ is indeed the Lord and allow him to determine our lives.

d) A reformulation of the message after these reflections

The claim of Jesus that our God is a God of redeeming grace, and his challenge to those who represent a God who demands fulfilment of a moral and sacrificial law, is enacted in extreme human powerlessness and vulnerability, rather than in a manifestation of divine power and authority.

**Step 4: Assessment of the target congregation**

The congregation is white, middle class, well educated, and elderly on average. Some younger couples have children. There are a few professors and lecturers, businessmen, farmers, public servants, professionals, and a prominent politician belonging to the National Party. Men and women are equally represented. Underrepresented or absent groups are the youth, students, workers, unemployed, blacks, union leaders, other cultural groups, people with alternative political commitments.

Most families are relatively intact. There are many pensioners and wives staying at home. The culture and language of the mother congregation is colonial German; the English speakers have married into the German community. There are two parallel services: one English, the other German. Overall, the congregation is conservative and very dedicated to their faith and their community.

Their hidden interests: they want to maintain their community, their culture, their middle-class status and comfort, their common faith. They represent a small privileged minority that feels threatened by the larger social processes going on at present in the country. The tendency is, therefore, to keep to itself.

Why do they come to church? They expect spiritual nourishment, comfort, and fellowship. While they may be open for a mild thrashing, they do not expect to be challenged or disturbed severely, especially not in political and economic terms.
The leadership is sound. The pastor is neither authoritarian nor legalistic. He cultivates the cooperation of as many members as possible. The council of elders is responsible and dedicated. The bishop and the higher church structures are not authoritarian or self-seeking, but democratic and service oriented.

Yet the congregation belongs to the establishment. In this sense, it may be similar to the ancient Jewish establishment. As dedicated Christians, the congregants identify with Jesus. But if Jesus would suddenly appear in a subversive way, they would probably be alarmed, if they would recognise him at all.

The story of Palm Sunday has been domesticated and depoliticised in the church. How can one bring this to their attention without antagonising them unnecessarily?

What will disturb them? What will appeal to them?

Disturbing factors are public demonstrations and toy-toying, a challenge to the market economy, faith healing, the unsolicited claim to leadership. They will not easily detect that the claim of Jesus was problematic at the time and is still problematic today.

Our reorganisation of the liturgy and the sermon will not disturb them too much because they are used to some flexibility.

They will appreciate the presence and initiative of the student community, though they may be somewhat wary of what the students will come up with. There is a latent suspicion that the critical kind of training offered at the School of Theology may not be above board.

It is important, therefore, to introduce ourselves and to explain what we want to do. Because they know the preacher and some of the students well, this may not be a great problem.

Step 5: Sermon design

The type of sermon design: The text is a dramatic story; this must be utilised. The historical distance between the text and the congregation can be bridged through indicating parallels between those times and our times.

We are a number of potential readers and actors, so the preacher does not have to tell the story himself. Because we want to highlight various historical and contemporary scenes, we utilise a series of miniature role plays.

There is a need for very short interpretations and applications of the different enactments by the preacher.

There is a need for silent reflection so that the unsuspected turns in the story can sink in. The sermon may evoke strong emotions, so there should be chance for feedback or sharing.
Steps to be followed

1. There are two readers: one reads the biblical passage; the other reads a fictitious report of an aggressive demonstration in the city ostensibly taken from the local newspaper. No introduction is necessary because the newspaper report will galvanise the attention.

2. The preacher gives a short explanation of the historical distance between the text and our times, saying that we have domesticated a highly dramatic event characterised by the interaction between politics, economics, and religion.

He then challenges the listeners: would we recognise Jesus if he came today? Most believers at the time did not. In fact, he does come today, but maybe not where and how we think he does. How can we discern that it is Jesus?

3. Two actors represent the geographical front lines in Jesus’ time: the Galilean pilgrims of Jesus and the established citizens of Jerusalem.

4. The preacher gives a short explanation: truth does not necessarily come from the establishment. Jesus comes from the remote periphery but claims the seat of power. The image of Mandela comes to mind: a man born in an insignificant village in the Transkei who languished in prison because he stood for democracy and social justice. Or the image of Luther, an insignificant monk from the German platteland who challenged the mighty Roman See.

5. Two actors represent the religious front lines: a person who was healed by Jesus al-though he was believed to be suffering because he was guilty, and the synedrion, composed of people who keep the moral law meticulously and uphold the sacrificial system.

6. The preacher offers a short explanation: the messianic vision confronts legal-sacrificial assumptions. He challenges the congregation: what kind of God do we believe in?

7. Two actors represent two types of political leadership today: one serves the community, the other serves his/her own interests. A short period of silent reflection follows.

8. Two actors represent business leaders: one trying to make as much profit as possible and being self-righteous about it, the other trying to make the enterprise a common venture with the workers. A brief period of silence follows.

9. Two actors represent church leadership: one emphasising the ordination of the minister, the consecration of the bishop, and demanding obedience, the other one trying to be a facilitator. A brief period of silence follows.

10. The preacher states that leadership is only legitimate if it is an expression of the truth, and the truth is only the truth if it is a witness to the redemptive love of God.

11. Instead of a conclusion, a short time for silent meditation follows.

12. Then 10–15 minutes are provided for contributions or questions from the congregation. It is introduced by the preacher as follows: Preachers have no monopoly of the Holy Spirit; the congregation participates in finding the truth. Controversy is welcome; it helps us to clarify the issues involved.
Step 6: Service design

A detailed design of the order of the service followed, which is here omitted. The students were assigned various parts of the liturgy, the readings, and the prayers. The preacher pronounced the blessing. The student choir sang a chorus leading the congregation out of the church in a joyful procession.

What is your first impression of the procedure demonstrated above?
Does it make sense to go into such detail?
Does the historical approach to the text alienate us from the biblical message, or does it lead us into greater depths of insight?
Are the theological clarifications significant for the sermon?
Does the procedure manifest a prejudice against some members of the congregation?
Is it legitimate to interpret the biblical narrative in contemporary socio-political terms?
Is the depiction of such an elaborate procedure meaningful for a preacher who cannot afford the time and expertise of a university professor and his class of students?
Does the employment of a number of actors yield the rich tapestry of the message or does it dissipate the listeners’ concentration on the message?

B. The Outcome

(A collaborative sermon on Matt. 21: 1–18, 23–27)

Preacher: Grace be to you from God, our Father, and from Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Let us pray: Lord, we have come together to listen to your Word and to enjoy your fellowship. Be among us. Speak to us. Cleanse us, build us. Strengthen us. Amen

First Reader: (Matt. 21: 1–18, 23–27 as above under A)

Second Reader: Natal Witness report. A student had written up a fictitious report on a demonstration of shack dwellers in Pietermaritzburg, led by a Charismatic leader with the name of Joshua. They clamour for their rights, burn tyres, enter the building of the provincial parliament, upset a meeting there, tear down microphones, etc. The police is called in and disperses the crowd. Joshua manages to go into hiding. [Short silence]

Preacher: We have heard two stories. We are so used to the first story that we no longer realise how hair-raising it was when it happened. It was much more dramatic than the story of the Natal Witness. Here somebody comes to take over
control of the capital and the temple at the helm of a dancing and shouting crowd, and he has no authority to do so.

There were established authorities in Jerusalem at the time. There was a council of elders under the chairmanship of the high priest. This council had to run the internal affairs of the Jewish community on behalf of the Roman imperial authorities. They were entitled to raise taxes. They had to preside over the sacrifices at the temple; they had authorised traders to provide the animals necessary for the sacrifices. It was a well-established order backed up by Jewish law. The religious system and the political system were one solid unit.

And now somebody comes and challenges all that with a highly provocative demonstration. Let us be honest: if we had lived in Jerusalem at the time when this happened, how would we have reacted? Would we not have been as furious as the citizens of Jerusalem? Would we not have taken sides with the forces of law and order against the forces of chaos and destruction? [Silence]

First actor: I am a merchant in the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the city of the temple, the city of God, the city of King David, the capital of the coming Kingdom of God. There was this crazy fellow from Galilee this morning. He was marching into the city with an unruly bunch of people causing havoc in the temple. Typical of the rabble from the countryside!

They claimed that he was the king of Israel. Stupid! As if anything good can come from Galilee. I don’t even know where Nazareth is—probably a village somewhere up north. Thank God that the authorities were alert enough and squashed this lunatic movement before the Romans got their hands into the matter.

Second actor: I am one of the pilgrims from Galilee who came to the festival in Jerusalem. We do that every year. But every year, we leave Jerusalem penniless. I am just a poor peasant. The people of Jerusalem are getting rich by exploiting the pilgrims. And then they despise them for being poor.

The priests are getting fat from all the meat we must provide for the sacrifices. The local traders have a monopoly on the sale of animals. They push up the prices sky high. It is just not fair. Today we taught them a lesson. Jesus is a wonderful leader. He gave us the authority and the courage to chase them all out of the temple. I felt so good about that. At last, justice was seen to be done. But now they have arrested Jesus, and we don’t know what is going to happen.

Preacher: Dear congregation, two people, two interpretations of the event. Who is right? Does the truth always rest with the establishment? Does it always come from the educated? From the middle class? From the wealthy? From the city dwellers? From those in power?

Recently, a man who had grown up in a little village in the Transkei, who was believed to be a terrorist, who had spent most of his adult life in prison, became not only the president of South Africa, but one of the most respected political leaders in the world.
Let us consider how our Lutheran church came into being. There was that unknown monk in a remote town who dared to challenge the authority of the mighty church in Rome. Was he right, or was the pope right when he excommunicated him? Our God loves to use the lowly, the weak, the despised.

[Silence]

Third actor: I am a member of the Council of Elders in Jerusalem. These people from Galilee must be nuts. Here somebody comes marching into the city in the way that the future king of the Jews was supposed to come! Here a mob of shabby pilgrims from nowhere shout hosanna and take the law into their own hands. They go straight to the temple and chase out the traders. And some of the youth is irresponsible enough to join them!

No responsible government can allow that! These people simply don’t know the law. They are sinners, but they don’t want to give the prescribed sacrifices necessary to be reconciled with God. They also think that any old animal is good enough for God. They think they can dump their rubbish on the altar. For good reason, we have made certain that only first-class animals are brought into the temple. One cannot play with God. He demands obedience and he demands our best.

Fourth actor: I am one of the men whom Jesus healed in the temple this morning. It has been incredible how this man picks up people in need, how he restores the health and the dignity of those of us who are suffering—the outcasts, the lepers, the blind. Before he came, we were beggars. Now we are going back to work again. People will begin to respect us again.

That man has wonderful words about God, strong words, comforting words, words that give us hope and self-confidence, words we had never heard before. For the first time, I understood that God was not a cruel dictator up there, making harsh demands, waiting to pounce upon us poor sinners, pulling the last cent out of our pockets, but a loving Father who wanted to be with us and help us.

Even the women and children among us felt loved and accepted. We were so excited. We were convinced that now everything would turn to the better. We even wondered whether he was not the promised Messiah.

Preacher: Two people—both believe in God. Both appeal to ancient traditions. Both are sincere. But they do not seem to believe in the same God. The first believes in a God who makes moral demands. You must fulfil the law of Moses or be damned. He believes in a God who wants sacrifices. The sacrifices must be flawless. A God who takes our best and leaves us with the offal.

The other believes in a God who comes to redeem, a God who does not demand sacrifices from us but who sacrifices himself to us in Christ. He wants us to live and flourish. What kind of God do we believe in—a God who takes, or a God who gives? [Silence] Now let us see what this could mean for us today.
Fifth actor: I am a political leader. Ordinary people can be quite a foolish lot. They need to be disciplined. Otherwise, they don’t know their limits. Give them too much leeway, and there will be chaos rather than order, discipline, and progress.

I was placed in authority. To have authority, I have to use my authority. I must build up my power. I need modern weapons and a loyal army. I must stay aloof. I must show them that I belong to a different class. I must not get too close to them. They must know who is in charge. Otherwise, they will not respect me.

As the leader of the people, I am entitled to a lifestyle which is proper for leaders. I also expect the people to show their gratitude for all the good things that I am doing for them. They must show that they appreciate my work and respect my position with some small personal gifts and payments.

Sixth actor: I am a political leader. I was chosen by the people to represent them and pursue their interests. As their representative, I am accountable to them. I consult with them to find out what their needs are. I am particularly concerned about the weak and vulnerable in society. I am working hard to improve their lot.

I maintain a modest lifestyle, because I must be part of the people, especially while we are in the present precarious economic situation. I never accept bribes because that would undermine my integrity. They must see that I have come to serve, not to oppress and exploit. [Short silence]

Seventh actor: I am a businessman. I have a lot of workers. I tell you the truth: if you do not kick these buggers in the pants, they will not work. They are quite irresponsible. But I take no nonsense. If somebody does not want to pull his weight or thinks he can be funny, he is simply discharged. It is as simple as that.

Eighth actor: I am a businessman. I believe in cooperation. I consult with my workers. I share with them the financial situation in which we find ourselves at present. In better times, they get a share in the profits.

They begin to understand that if the enterprise flourishes, we all benefit. I never dismiss people if I can help it but find some new jobs for them. We begin to trust each other. It is amazing how responsible and cheerful they have become within a short period of time. [Short silence]

Ninth actor: I am a priest. I have been set apart by the church in the name of God. I have been ordained into the sacred ministry by the bishop, a successor of the holy apostles. Ordinary Christians cannot be expected to know the truth. It is I who must interpret the Word of God for them. I have been trained for that.

I cannot allow anybody else to wear the gown and get onto the pulpit. He would only mislead the people. I must chair all the meetings. Otherwise, things will go wrong. The sheep have to follow the shepherd. The shepherd cannot follow the sheep.

Tenth actor: I am a minister. I believe that the Holy Spirit is given to the whole congregation. The Word of God is entrusted to the people of God. My task is to bring out the gifts of the Spirit that are dormant in the community. I try to
encourage them, empower them, give them the expertise to be mature Christians in the world.

They must be able to decide for themselves what it means to live a responsible life before God. I am using my training to train others. I invite them to share the work with me. My great ideal is that if God takes me away suddenly, the congregation will continue to flourish because there are so many others who can step into the breach. [Short silence]

Preacher: We have heard of two kinds of leadership in politics, in business, and in the church. We could have added the school, the university, the hospital, the family. What kind of leadership do we believe in?

The message of today is clear: Wherever it may be, leadership is only legitimate if it serves, if the leaders liberate, empower, and build up those entrusted to their care. Leaders who dominate, oppress, exploit, demand honour, make people suffer are not supposed to be leaders.

Jesus had no official authority; it was the council of elders who possessed institutional authority. Jesus challenged this authority, not to remove them from their office, not because he wanted to be great and grand, but because he wanted to liberate the people from an oppressive and selfish kind of leadership. He was a leader who wanted to serve. Therefore, his leadership was legitimate. [Silence]

Preacher: Dear sisters and brothers, our little group too does not want to impose our understanding of the Word of God on you. You are mature Christians who have gone through life with Christ. You know the scriptures. You have been promised the Holy Spirit.

Our task of proclaiming the Word of God is also your task. Please share with us some of your own thoughts, your insights, and your questions. You are free to critique what we have been doing; we do not believe that we are infallible. [10–15 minutes of discussions]

Preacher: Lord, we thank you for the gift of leadership. We pray that whenever you entrust other people to our care, we may use our authority to serve and not to oppress; to seek their well-being, not our own benefit; to be patient and not discourage them.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, preserve our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

1. Does the message of the sermon reflect the message of the text?
2. Does the sermon reflect God’s demand or God’s gift of grace?
3. Does the sermon respond to concrete concerns of the congregation?
4. Does the introduction capture the imagination of the listeners?
5. Does the conclusion provide listeners with a 'parcel' to take home?
6. Is the sermon structured in such a way that it can easily be remembered?
7. Is the sermon design (in this case a shared sermon) appropriate?
8. Do the speakers use language that the average member will understand?
9. Are the sentences short and pithy or long and complex?
10. Is the sermon too long or too short?
11. Is the sermon overloaded or too lightweight?
12. Do the preachers stray into areas that they do not fully understand?
13. Are some passages redundant? Is something lacking?
14. Which groups may be enriched or hurt or bored?
15. Is a cooperative approach of some kind practically feasible in the average parish setting?

How would you respond to the following critique?

a) ‘The biblical story calls us to glorify Jesus Christ, our eternal King and personal Saviour. You turned it into a political statement with subversive undertones. This is sacrilege!’

b) ‘I thought you wanted to provide us with tools for the practical ministry! If this kind of sermon cannot be pulled off in a normal parish situation, why do you include it in this book?’

c) ‘The appearance of so many actors and opinions in the service confuses me. In the end, I do not know what I am supposed to believe. I can concentrate much better if there is one message proclaimed only by one person, the ordained pastor.’

SDG
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