



# Fifteen Commandments for Preaching

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**G**ÖSTA BERLING, THE CLERGYMAN IN SELMA LAGERLÖF'S *THE STORY OF GÖSTA Berling*, has just mounted the pulpit to preach a sermon. His parishioners have complained about his behavior; the bishop has come to hear their complaints and probably defrock the young pastor for conduct unbecoming to his office. As he is about to begin his sermon, a thought strikes him:

The thought was that this was the last time he would stand in the pulpit and make known the glory of God.

For the last time—that held him. He forgot the whisky and the bishop. He thought he must use the chance and speak up on the glory of God.

The floor of the church with all his listeners seemed to sink down, deep down, and the roof was lifted off, so that he saw far into the sky. He stood alone, completely alone in the pulpit; his spirit rose to the heavens opening above him; his voice became strong and powerful, and he made known the glory of God.

He felt inspiration. He left what he had written; thoughts came over him like flocks of tame doves. He felt as if he were not the one who spoke, but he recognized also that this was the best earth had to give, and that no one could reach more depth and majesty than he who was standing there making known the glory of God.

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*“Did Jesus need to suffer and die on the cross for this sermon to be preached?”  
This is the central issue for Christian preaching.*

As long as the fire of inspiration burned, he spoke, but when it died out, and the roof closed down over the church again, and the floor rose from far below, then he bowed his head and wept, for he knew that the best hour of his life was for him now over.<sup>1</sup>

Or, to quote The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," about the old woman he has just shot, "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."<sup>2</sup>

After many a dreary sermon filled with theological clichés mixed with generous handfuls of personal narratives, delivered with little urgency or passion, I find myself muttering a version of The Misfit's analysis: Could of been a good sermon if someone had held a gun to the preacher's head. Which, being interpreted means, preaching is best when it is facing life and death issues and believes that the gospel of Jesus Christ has eternal consequence. Preaching, to be worth anything, has to address ultimates.

The Apostle Paul was troubled that his congregation could fall for a preacher who did not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He warned the Galatians that even an angel from heaven who preached anything other than the gospel of Jesus Christ was accursed. On occasion I have idly wondered what would happen if, having heard a faithless sermon, I stood up in the congregation and shouted, in the spirit of Paul, "This is not the gospel of Jesus Christ!" Would my fellow sufferers cluck against me for making a scene, or would they applaud? The odds would probably be what they were at Paul's preaching at Mars Hill in Athens—one third would believe, another third would scoff, and another would come back to hear the argument later. Furthermore, God does have the confounding power to use any speech, even that which is apostate, to bring people to faith. A friend of Flannery O'Connor, for example, finally converted because the preaching and worship were so uniformly awful he figured Christianity must be true if it had lasted nearly two thousand years despite such poor ambassadors.

Complaining about preaching and preachers has been a cottage industry among Protestants, especially, with roast preacher a frequent entrée at many a pious family's Sunday dinner. It is not my intention to add a piquant sauce to the entrée, but to give my beginning students in homiletics some wry commandments which will steer them away from some of the major ditches of today's homiletical fashions. Because fashions dominate a period, a particular style of preaching may

<sup>1</sup>Selma Lagerlöf, *The Saga of Gösta Berling*, trans. Robert Bly (New York: The New American Library, 1962). Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940) was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1909). *Gösta Berlings Saga* is a novel about life in her region in Sweden in the 1820s. Her most famous work is *Jerusalem*, which Bille August made into the film by the same name in 1996. It won the Oscar for best foreign film of that year. Another highly regarded work is *The Lowenskold Ring*, about life in the time of Charles XII. Her stories of the travels of Nils taught generations of Swedish children about Sweden. She has also written a number of stories called *Christ Legends*, and *Anti-Christ Legends*, from her travels in the Holy Land. Her diaries and memories of her life in Morbäcka, her home in Värmland, Sweden, are charming pictures of rural life in Sweden in the early part of the century.

<sup>2</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in *Three by Flannery O'Connor* (New York: The New American Library, 1960) 143.

be thought to be the problem—the enlightenment sermon recommending better farming techniques because Jesus was born in a stable, or the historical-critical method in our previous generation, or today, the narrative sermon. Any style or kind of preaching can be done terribly. There may be times, however, in which preaching seems uniformly wretched, such as the rationalism of the early nineteenth century which caused the Danish N. F. S. Grundtvig to preach in his first sermon that the word of God had departed from Denmark. (It did not win him universal acclaim—or immediate approval for ordination from his candidacy committee!) It may also be that preaching is so different from what it was when I was a child, that my generation, and those before me, don't recognize it as preaching but more as scattered comments about trivial things before communion, where, our liturgical practices seem to indicate, the real stuff is.

Proclamation addresses the congregation with urgent language—direct discourse—which intends to make an immediate difference in hearers' lives. Narrative preaching at its best can do this—as can any genre of preaching—but at its worst, it can trivialize the gospel with its platitudinous vapidness. Robert Maynard Hutchins, the president of the University of Chicago, is reported to have quit going to church at Rockefeller Chapel on Sunday mornings when Charles Gilkey, the dean of the chapel, began a sermon, “Yesterday I was on the golf course and as I teed off I was reminded that we must follow through in life.” From that moment, Hutchins reported that he “acquired a weekend hideaway and never reappeared in the chapel of the University of Chicago.” This kind of triviality is not unique to narrative preaching, but it seems a common complaint today.

“Her name was Jill...” “His name was George...” “Today we begin our Lenten journey.” We inwardly groan because we have an idea where the sermon is headed. The first short story that began “It was a dark and stormy night” was probably not so bad, but after the ten-thousandth time we lose interest because we suspect that the imagination of the writer is probably not sailing in uncharted territory. As I was listening to the nine-thousandth such sermon, I thought it might be possible to set up a list of do's and don'ts—fifteen commandments—that would head off some of these disasters, or at least lift their levels so they wouldn't always end up in the ditch.

#### FIFTEEN COMMANDMENTS FOR PREACHING

(The following are tips on preaching gathered from a variety of people around the church who have some sense of what does and does not work in sermons.)

1. **Did Jesus need to suffer and die for this sermon to be preached?** If not, don't waste your time—or ours—with it. It's probably just clean mental health for religious people.
2. **Never speak of yourself in the tub, shower, or in bed.** It's hard enough for parishioners to follow a sermon without imagining the preacher in the altogether.

3. **Never start your sermon with “When I was asked to preach....”** Drawing attention to your effort preparing the sermon will create too much interest in whether or not it was worth your time—or theirs.
4. **Never start a sermon with an I.** It’s God’s word you’re proclaiming, not your own. A way to check how you’re doing is to count the number of times you say, “I.” Remember there is someone sitting out there doing just that.
5. **Never say, “It’s hard to find any gospel in this text.”** It will make you seem like an athlete of the text if you happened to find some, giving the impression that you are going to do something really hard, for which you, not God, should be praised. God wasn’t clear, is the implication, although you are.
6. **Never begin, “Her name was Jill” or “The water rippled brightly as we stepped into the lake.”** It’s the homiletical equivalent of “It was a dark and stormy night.” If you can tell stories well enough to keep a congregation interested for 10 minutes, you’re in the wrong business.
7. **Never tell a bathroom or bedroom joke in the pulpit,** especially on Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday. It is always inappropriate, but on these days it really wrecks concentration.
8. **Never preach on love after you have had an argument with your congregation, or even one person in it.** Even if you think you were in the right, it sounds like special pleading and usually burdens the conscience of your opponent. Any group will have its disagreements. Disagreements are not sins that you have been given the keys to bind and release. Most sermons on love turn out to have the sub-text, “You haven’t been very nice to me.” Your work is to relieve the burdened conscience with the forgiveness of sins. Burdening the consciences of your people so you can come out in the right is an abuse of your office.
9. **Never start a sermon with “And now we begin our Lenten journey.”** The gospel is not a mood piece set into the more important liturgical year. You are preaching the word, not the season.
10. **Never preach an Easter sermon dressed up like an Easter bunny.** Or use any secular holiday trimmings for a high holy day. A long time ago, Christians thought these symbols were pagan, or at least inappropriate for church.
11. **Remember the bon mot: “Other people’s love is disgusting.”** You may think you are the most interesting person in the world, but how interesting you are to others tends to diminish, usually, the further away you are from their blood line, unless you are a movie star or a royal.
12. **Always assume someone is listening to you for dear life.** They may be dying, or helping someone who is. Don’t assume all the hurting people have stayed home and those sitting before you have come to be told they need to do more for others. They may, in fact, have come to be strengthened for the work they are already doing and don’t know how they can manage.
13. **Always remember no one hears a thing you say after the noon whistle blows.**
14. **Always assume that someone out there is counting to 100 five times to make the time pass more quickly.**
15. **Always mention the name of Jesus at least once.** Assume when you preach that there is a life and death struggle going on in the heart of someone in your audience who needs Jesus Christ.

DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE ON THE CROSS FOR THIS SERMON  
TO BE PREACHED? (Rule 1)

MENTION THE NAME OF JESUS AT LEAST ONCE (Rule 15)

The first and last rules are the most important. Asking whether Jesus Christ had to suffer and die on the cross for this sermon to be preached is the central issue for Christian preaching. If the sermon does not proclaim clearly that salvation comes through Christ alone, if it gives people the idea that they can, on their own, achieve salvation, then Christ's death and resurrection are not necessary to the sermon. If Christ be not raised from the dead, Paul says, our preaching is in vain. By our Lord's command, in scripture and church confession and tradition, Jesus Christ must be at the center of our preaching, not just as example, but also as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The iconography of the reformation—which sought to reform preaching by its reform of theology—shows this clearly. Most images of Luther preaching show him pointing to Christ on the cross. Preaching was the activity Jesus had called us to, Luther wrote, and we should work at it so we can proclaim the good news to all people. "Inasmuch as the office of preaching the gospel is the greatest of all and certainly apostolic, it becomes the foundation for all other functions."<sup>3</sup> Preaching the crucified and risen Christ is central. One can see this theology portrayed visually in the Marienkirche in Wittenberg, where Cranach's altar painting of the three sacraments rests upon a portrait of Luther preaching. Luther is in the pulpit pointing to Christ on the cross as



<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, "Concerning the Ministry," *Luther's Works*, vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) 36.

Katie and the family listen. Jesus Christ and him crucified (as the apostle Paul has it in 1 Cor 2:2) must be at the center of all Christian preaching or everything is in vain.

When people first hear this rule, they gasp, as though it is a terrible thing to say, something shocking, unseemly. It is. If we forget the scandal at the heart of our faith, and that it is indeed scandalous, we might just as well be giving motivational speeches. The Son of God died a terrible death on a cross so that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life. The purpose of preaching is to make that moment back in Palestine—the crucifixion—matter to the people listening to the sermon. It is not to give wholesome instructions (although such may result from a sermon), or to entertain (although great preaching can be exciting), or to indulge the preacher’s need for self-expression (although such expressions may be very moving and interesting). What is the word of God for me today? the listener has come to find out. Give me something from beyond my own world, not your struggles to find the word for today, but the *word*.

The Lutheran Confessions provide the parameters for our preaching—the gospel is not only the story of Jesus Christ, but also the liberating power of that word spoken when law and gospel are clearly proclaimed. Jesus Christ must be both host and guest, both subject and object of the sermon.

#### JESUS CHRIST AS THE SUBJECT OF THE SERMON

Both grammatically and rhetorically, Jesus Christ is the one about whom we speak. He is the one we come to meet on Sunday morning in every expression of the word: from the spoken to the sung, from the audible to the visible. It is he whom the preacher is bound to introduce to us again and again. “Tell us about your Jesus!” is the simple request of those who have come to hear for the first time. It is the call of the preacher to answer the cry, with speech that introduces him to the crowds. Who is he? Where does he come from? What does the Old Testament have to say about him? The New Testament? The church? Our day and age? What does he have to do with us today?

These are the questions postmodern people unfamiliar with scripture have about Jesus Christ. A good pastor wants to introduce people to their living Lord. Al Quie, the former congressman and governor of Minnesota, has said that he loves to study scripture because in it he learns to know Jesus, his Lord and Savior. Listening to him speak about his excitement at learning more about his Lord is contagious and exciting. After such a conversation, I have wondered why a preacher would choose to tell stories about anyone but Jesus during the sermon. Jesus should be the subject of our speech in the pulpit. The young child listening to the preacher talk about squirrels, certain that *Jesus* is the right answer to the preacher’s question, “What has a long bushy tail and carries nuts in its mouth?” really does have it right. While listening to an endless tale from the pulpit about the preacher’s journey the week before, my 11-year-old nephew turned to me with genuine puzzlement and

asked: “Is this going anywhere?” In theological language, how is the sermon driving Christ? Christ is the required subject of our pulpit speech.

Preaching should convey the Samaritan woman’s excitement: “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did!” A young colleague of mine remarked recently that she had been grieved to discover that there were those preparing for professional ministry who did not seem to have a burning desire to introduce us to Jesus. It shocked her. Without the burning desire to make disciples, she wondered, why would anyone take the trouble to become a pastor? It’s not an easy life, she concluded. Why would you think of it for a moment, if you were not passionate about Jesus?

Although Christ’s story begins in scripture, it can never be told completely, because, according to the Gospel of John, not all the books written in the world can ever contain the stories of Christ’s work in the lives of people. For this reason, pastors learn to read Christ’s work in the local congregation. The Christian testimony meeting, or the small group, has served as a way to continue to tell of Christ’s mighty works. This is the reason we tell the story of Jill or George. How did Christ work in their lives to bring life out of death? Christian witness and testimony relate how Christ has worked in our lives. Those of us who have heard Christian testimonies know they can quickly lose their focus on Christ and wallow in their own story. This is, however, no reason to suppress the story. Introductions that tell more about the introducer than the introducee are always irritating. How much greater the irritation if pastors, called to introduce Jesus, point only to themselves! Pastors who think people come to church because of their personalities are making a crucial mistake. For this reason sermons which begin with the pastor’s heroic struggle “to find the gospel in this text” tend to lead in the wrong direction.

When the testimony becomes art for art’s sake—a tale which gives glory to the preacher, or storyteller—Christ takes second place. Bathroom stories, the doings of the pastor’s family, or inappropriate jokes can upset the hearers of the sermon. They detract from the glory of the Lord. Having to think of the pastor in the shower or Santa and his reindeer flying through the heavens trivializes the angels singing in the heavens to the glory of the Lord.

#### JESUS AS THE OBJECT OF THE SERMON

The question that is most important to the preacher of Law and Gospel, however, is not merely who this Jesus is, but what he has to do with those sitting in the audience. Jesus has promised that when people gather in his name, he will be there. With our theology of the word, we know that the name has power beyond our powers of persuasion. Our job is not only to talk about Christ, but to proclaim him. As Jack Nicholson’s character in *As Good as It Gets* says to his acquaintance after a conflict, “I’m drowning, and you’re describing the water to me.” Or, in preaching terms: Give me Jesus! This is what happens when we preach sermons that talk about salvation but do not save. One old preacher in my mother’s congregation

would always shout at the end of the sermon, “What if you should die on the way home? Where would you go?” He terrified the consciences of his people for years, because, as one of his faithful parishioners told me, he never told them how to find out where they were going and how to change their ultimate destinations. The next pastor relieved the troubled consciences of many when he proclaimed that faith in Jesus was all that was necessary to assure arriving in the right place.

The reactions against preaching hell-fire and damnation, however, have not brought an end to sermons which terrify the conscience. Trivializing the work of Christ by talking only of penultimate issues can terrorize those who know death is near and who need a word they can trust. The elderly people in my acquaintance describe the real panic they feel when they hear sermons that do not take cognizance of their near end. They do not want to meet their maker with silly or sentimental stories about their preacher’s kids or canoes rippling on the summer lake. It would be like jokingly giving an ambulance driver the wrong directions because it ultimately doesn’t matter where the dying person dies. A kind of baptismal theology has given some preachers the idea that faith is about sleeping in the faith from birth to death rather than about daily dying and rising in Christ’s death and resurrection—becoming a Christian daily. Being part of that transaction is exciting and gives the real preachers among us their eagerness to preach. This is what Luther meant when he wrote that the work of a preacher is to make people sinners and then point them to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Brought to such conviction of their need by the work of the Holy Spirit, hearers come to believe that the living Christ is there among them, ready to forgive their sins and save them, again and again.

There will be many a good self-actualized citizen expecting good accommodations turned away from the celestial mansions because he or she did not trust in the grace of Jesus Christ alone. Will my preaching have steered people in the wrong way? Do I have blood on my own hands? August Herman Francke, founder of Halle University, in an essay on preaching, suggested it was vital for preachers to be clear on what salvation was so that the faithful would not be made terrified, nor those outside the faith be left to think they were okay because they were either good citizens or virtuous pagans with vaguely Christian lifestyles.<sup>4</sup> If it is true—as Search Institute discovered—that over 50% of Lutherans think they will be saved by their works, there has been a lot of bad preaching and teaching going on. Those of us in leadership should be terrified to think of the eternal consequences of our poor preaching and teaching.

#### PREACHING CREATES FAITH

Bad preaching threatens my faith. My students look astonished when I say that I need to hear the word so that my faith will be renewed and sustained. Why

<sup>4</sup>August Hermann Francke, “A Letter to a Friend concerning the Most Useful Way of Preaching,” *The Pietists: Selected Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality 37, ed. Peter C. Erb (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1983) 118.



should a seminary professor need her faith renewed? Didn't I get it in my genetic code? Or, once for all, in my baptism? Without good preaching, which carefully diagnoses my sin, I get to thinking I'm pretty good and deserve God's grace. Wouldn't anybody want to die for me? I'm doing so much good work for the kingdom, I should be safe. The faith, first given to me in baptism, needs daily renewal—by the word that convicts and saves me. Georg Sverdrup, founder of the Lutheran Free Church, wrote that the congregation is purified only by the right preaching of God's word.<sup>5</sup> Preaching creates free and living Christians working in free and living congregations. Bad preaching, or poor use of the scriptures, will not prune the unfaithfulness in my life.

When preachers see no need to close the deal, or preach for a verdict, preaching will decline into religious remarks. There is always someone sitting in the congregation who has fallen away and needs to be awakened. Baptism is a sturdy ship, Luther wrote, and will never go down, but there are those on the ship who have fallen asleep and can plunge into perdition. Preachers need to pray that the Holy Spirit will use their words to awaken those who have fallen asleep—those whom the devil has long since left alone for more productive work elsewhere. The dramatic conflict between good and evil, Christ and Satan, comes only when the devil feels threatened by Christ. When there is no glory of God, no sense that death is waiting to pounce, no urgency, the life of faith becomes trivialized. Dressing up in a Santa Claus outfit or an Easter bunny suit trivializes and blasphemes what God has done for us in Christ; it deludes the soul of the sinner who may actually have come to hear a saving word.

#### THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Pastors take an oath to uphold the faith when they are ordained. There can be no room for experimentation in the pulpit that isn't an attempt to introduce the congregation to Jesus Christ. Most pastors are conscientious about their attempts to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. The besetting sin of those of us in professional ministry, however, is not apostasy, but that we have routinized the gospel. We have an amazing story to tell. Jesus Christ is the glory of the Lord. How little have I been stopped in the last 40 years, as I have myself preached or sat in church and listened to sermons on love or justice or baptism, by the glory of the Lord. When I read the best sermons of the previous generations, I am struck by how much more deeply I am made to wonder about God's work and glory than I am in my daily life of listening to sermons. Even the dry-as-dust, long tracts of some of the polemicists of the Lutheran past seem to be packed down and running over with the glory of the Lord. One feels the appropriate awe and sense of praise that comes as they tell about our Lord and his mighty works. (This is admittedly unfair. When we read the

<sup>5</sup>See the *Fundamental Principles of the Lutheran Free Church*, no. 4: "It is therefore the sacred obligation of the congregation to purify itself through the quickening preaching of the Word, by earnest admonition and exhortation, and by expelling the openly sinful and perverse."

15 or 20 sermons that survive the twentieth century, we'll probably get a bit more glory because they will be the best.)

Sverdrup published many sermons in the missionary magazine (*Gaseren—The Malagasy*) that he edited for some years along with his other burdens of teaching and administrating Augsburg Seminary.<sup>6</sup> When I read them today they seem as fresh as they were 100 years ago because they tell me about God's work in this world. At the request of one of my colleagues, I have preached them to several of her classes. With no personal references or illustrations in them, they do their work. I was surprised to see my listeners (seminary students) moved to tears. They listened to the direct discourse about the state of their souls with great interest. They felt the gravity of the speech and were moved.

Direct discourse is a rare commodity these days, but some sitting out in the congregation came to church because they needed to be refreshed by the word. Sometimes we preach and talk as though refreshment is the last thing preaching is—that counseling, or social action, or anything else but preaching gives life. Preaching, however, is where we address the most people most of the time. This is why we must be so deadly serious about the work of preaching.

At the end of the novel *Giants in the Earth*, the preacher is addressing the flock of pioneers before him. He is especially burdened by Beret, the young pioneer wife who has lost her mind and needs to hear the gospel, to comprehend the glory of the Lord. He has heard the confession of Per Hansa, her husband, about his failures in the relationship, and he has also understood that Beret's fate is uncertain: Per Hansa has said that he may have to send her away, because she simply cannot manage any longer. As the sermon continues, the preacher feels worse and worse. "Nothing but empty words about holy things," he thinks to himself, in a sweat. Later, "He could have wept aloud in his sore distress; here he stood, an old and tried servant of God—and now he had preached himself through the whole Bible without finding the Glory of the Lord!" As he looks at the women sitting before him, he remembers a story about a pioneer mother who has given everything for her children. He is reluctant to use the story because it is sentimental, "and he had always despised sentimentality in preaching." He sets aside his aversion and tells the story. Suddenly the people are listening to him. Those who would know the glory of the Lord and know the love of a pioneer mother for her children, have an inkling of the glory of the Lord. "So come," he concludes, "to the altar and receive the glory of the Lord who is ready and willing to lighten your burdens, just as a mother cares for her nursing child....Come and behold the Glory of the Lord." Per Hansa and Beret come to the table; what happens in that specific transaction we are not privy to, but we do see that the pastor feels that his sermon has been a miserable failure. "Never before," he thought, as he drives his wagon away from the settlement, "have I failed so miserably in any service."

<sup>6</sup>Sverdrups "Prædiken paa Pinsedag, 1902," *Samlede Verker, V Tilkomme dit Rige: Missionsbetragtninger og Prædikener*, ed. Andreas Helland (Minneapolis: Frikirkens Boghandel Forlag) 324-329.

Later, in a conversation with his neighbor, Hans Olsa, Per Hansa allows as how the pastor's words were appropriate, that no one can fathom the depths of a mother's heart. For him, the words of the pastor communicated an idea that is important and changes his understanding. For Beret, the words have done something else—they have changed her heart. She has heard that her sins are forgiven. She does not refer to the story of the minister as she heals, but the word of the Lord has done its work in her heart.<sup>7</sup>

This is the perplexing joy of the art of preaching. God is always working to bring human beings to the knowledge of salvation. When we think we've done a good job and are congratulating ourselves, later, it often seems that we have glanced off the surface to no effect. If we are cursing ourselves because we've done an awful job, someone will invariably come up to us and say that some off comment, accidental observation, or by-the-way remark, has been life changing.

Preaching is hard work, a craft that needs constant practice and constant prayer. St. Augustine admitted as much in his classic on preaching, *De doctrina Christiana*.<sup>8</sup> No matter how good your homiletical technique is, your character has an overwhelming impact. Those who practice this craft that is so hard to learn know that it is not the same as writing a poem or short story, because it is more than a craft. The craft—the techniques and skills which improve over the life of a craftsperson—can be useless if the character of the preacher has not ripened appropriately. If it has, the preaching of an older preacher can be extraordinary. I remember hearing the preaching of my father but rarely as he got older. The last sermon I heard him preach in English was in a small congregation where he had just begun an interim ministry. I'll never forget it because it was not only his old preaching style, but he had more to say of what really mattered than I had ever heard. One of the members of the congregation remarked that she had never heard preaching like his before. It came from the heart of the gospel as well as his own heart because he had found it necessary to claim every syllable of grace that had been promised. It was gripping. He was a master of his craft, but more important, he knew whereof he spoke.

George Bernard Shaw, one of the great dramatists of the century, finished one of his less famous plays, *Too True to be Good*, with a sermon by a preacher who has lost his faith and knows it, even as he knows that his gift is preaching. It was terribly sad, and oddly upsetting, to walk out of the theater listening to the jazz-age saxophone wailing as the young man preaches nothing.<sup>9</sup> He had a gift, but no faith. The technique was to no avail.

<sup>7</sup>Ole E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, trans. Lincoln Colcord and the author (New York: Harper & Row, 1927) 394-412. The sermon is on pages 391-396.

<sup>8</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 164: "However, the life of the speaker has greater weight in determining whether he is obediently heard than any grandness of eloquence."

<sup>9</sup>George Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw's Plays: Major Barbara, Heartbreak House, Saint Joan, Too True to Be Good* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970).

All these rules, even if followed to the letter, will not guarantee a good or faithful sermon if there is no faith in the beginning. Nor will they make an eloquent preacher out of one who is dry as dust. The mystery of effective preaching is that God can use the feeble words we use to get the word out. This should not cause us to be weary in well doing. Augustine again: Even if God does all the work, and even if you have a gift, this is the most important thing you will ever do, so work at it all the time, work, work, work.<sup>10</sup> Even though God gives the increase, your job is to plant the seeds, in season and out. ⊕

<sup>10</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 141: "If anyone says, however, that if teachers are made learned by the Holy Spirit they do not need to be taught by men what they should say or how they should say it, he should also say that we should not pray because the Lord says, 'For your Father knoweth what is needful for you, before you ask him.'"