



Faithful Speaking to a Reconciled World

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We Christians have reason to speak faithfully to the world. At the heart of all our utterance is God's own speaking to the world in the cross and resurrection of his beloved Son. Thus we have this to say:

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19).

The awesome, daring, magnificent truth which prompts us to speak and keeps us speaking faithfully is this: God has put his power into a word that can be spoken. He has given that word to his church for the world. The world is his through the cross of his Son. The world is to know that.

Such a truth sets the theme for this issue of *Word & World* and calls our attention to how faithful speaking in the church is faring in our word-weary, word hungry world which St. Paul declares to be the world reconciled to God. To take the proclamation of 2 Corinthians 5:19 seriously, and to pause and meditate upon it carefully, is to be penitent over any and all *glibness* that stands in the way of faithful speaking in and beyond the church today. Those of us who are preachers are more subject to this malady than we realize as we stay at the task of preaching year in and year out. When “Christ-centered preaching” degenerates into dutiful mentioning of Christ somewhere in the middle of the sermon that is otherwise dominated by anecdotal entertainment or carelessly thrown-together pulpit chatter, the good news the world really needs to hear of God's reconciling deed is mightily hampered. Then the people of God, gathered in the congregation to receive bread, receive straw and stone instead. Early in my pastoral ministry I received a lesson on the problem of glibness that underscores the point. I was calling on a parishioner in his hospital room and was halfway through some chatty, irrelevant words to the man when he stopped me in the middle of a sentence. He grasped me firmly by the arm and said: “Young man, please get down on your knees beside my bed and *in one sentence* of prayer

beg God for mercy to get me through this day.” It was a moment I have not forgotten, one which has helped me realize that to be entrusted with the message of Christ's reconciling the world is never a warrant for glibness. Our preaching needs constant cleansing of all triteness, cliches, and charming glibness that may make the preacher the darling of the community but which fail at the crucial point—to connect people with the power of God by which he has reconciled the world to himself.

Faithful speaking to a reconciled world has the ring of *soundness*. The vocation of preaching puts proclaimer and hearer side by side amidst all the varied circumstances of good and bad moments of life. Such connections provide the setting for the Word to do its work. We know in our spirit when the gospel is spoken from soul to soul, when “deep calls to deep” as Psalm 42 puts it. The speaking of the reconciling mercy of God is embedded in the works of love, care, sacrifice, admonition, encouragement, and hope. Then it is anything but glib. Then the soundness of speaking is inseparable from the soundness of doing the truth, and both preacher and hearer are pointed beyond themselves to God who has reconciled the world. I cherish the memory of such soundness of faithful speaking of a husband to his wife not long ago. She was in the final stages of an inch-by-inch relinquishing of life to a malignant cancer. She and her husband knew she was dying. He took some time out to write her a letter. The words to his wife centered around the question of what could be the worst thing that could happen to her. He mentioned these things—the loss of their children, the loss of their home and livelihood, the loss of their marriage, the onset of a fatal disease. As grievous as any of these would be, he said, none is the worst thing that could happen to her. The worst thing is to be separated from the love of Christ. But that worst thing was not happening and would not happen, for she had been baptized into Christ and was being held to God by the covenant of his grace. All the terrifying forces of malignancy could not and did not break through that covenant. That letter is a piece of faithful speaking that has all the soundness of the power whereby the world has been reconciled to God. It stands as a sterling witness that is anything but glib. Amidst circumstances which threaten to render words so weak, the Word prevails and holds a life to God that is otherwise stripped of all dignity and wholesomeness of physical health. Her death came some weeks later, but not as her defeat. And now I see this widower putting the shattered pieces of his life together, living on in the trust that his world now so different is still the world which Christ Jesus has reconciled. Across the world, day after day, such testimonies arise. We read their witness and do not lose heart, for they echo the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:19.

Jargon belittles faithful speaking. It is another form of glibness, often parading under the guise of theological maturity. I have respect for my theologian friends who are clearheaded enough to realize that when theological expression trades on abstraction and strange talk it is no longer faithful speaking but has become jargon. It is wearisome to struggle through needlessly abstruse writing or speaking that is offered as a prideful show of arrogance to the 19 or so people who will ever read or remember it more than a day. Faithful speaking that results from hard, clear thinking about the truth that God has reconciled the world, while the world is still in the shape it is, must not be confused with

jargon. But there is too much irritating, embarrassing evidence around which points to the neglect of biblical proclamation in the interests of embracing the current language and thought world of the behavioral disciplines, the philosophy of semantics, and political ideology. Theological discourse becomes jargon when it no longer bears witness to God’s deed of reconciling the world but instead exalts *this* school of thought over *that* one. The majority of humans struggling along in life do not and should not care about such in-house shorthand. Jargon flourishes when theological communities producing it talk only or mainly to each other. When that suffocating isolation is joined with a smugness about the church and world beyond the

classroom or library, the situation arises that ought never to arise again. We live in the century when German theological discourse, particularly German Lutheran theology, went its own arrogant way of isolation from the land overtaken by the swastika. We live in a generation in which academic theology has been mesmerized by accommodation to contemporary thought. Thus when I read sentences that refer to “the Christic vision of the socio-technic, cybernetic integration into the ontological *Da-sein-ness* of pantechnicism” I give up. What is needed for such overblown rhetoric are those wry one-liners at the bottom of occasional pages in *New Yorker* magazine which poke holes in ridiculous jargonese that is gleaned from all over. The main point, however, is not that jargon needs to be replaced with clarity. Rather it is that jargon needs to be replaced by faithful speaking to the world still unaware that it is reconciled to God.

Faithful theological speaking is *preachable*. If it is offered in partnership with the church to the world it will always bear the stamp of proclamation. My own contact with the preachable character of theology came in my earliest years of seminary at Concordia, St. Louis, in the classroom of Richard Caemmerer. The basic themes of the faith, many of them communicated in the monosyllables life, light, love, sin, death, world, hope, and faith came through in classroom lectures that were proclamation at its best. It is a good thing when theological speech makes one want to love God more dearly and serve his world more faithfully. At the time, few of us realized the hard work of disciplined thought that went into those lectures. Nor did we dream that such sound biblical witness heard in that seminary in the late 1940s would produce a generation that would be denounced three decades later as “unfit for the church of God.” Caemmerer was part of an inter-Lutheran group of theologians who kept in personal contact in annual retreats of several days together. Seminary professors, synodical officers, and parish clergy took the time and made the effort to think hard and speak faithfully of the Word and world through the post-World War II years. They helped each other keep their minds tethered to the Word and their speaking faithful. Whatever alignments the coming Lutheran merger will bring about, it will be useful as it fosters such a churchly setting for the doing of theology. The temptation to precocious jargon does not fare very well when theology is never far from pulpit and altar and the daily life of God’s people in this world that is his own. Preachable theology is borne of the passion to be understood.

Faithful speaking to a reconciled world moves beyond *moralizing*. Our calling is to hand on the mercy of God for the world; its heartbeat is the forgiveness of sins as the power for newness of life. How strong the temptation is to short

circuit that central message when addressing the ailments of our time came home to me when listening to a recent speech by Rev. Jerry Falwell at a meeting of business people in Chicago. With clarity of outline and fervency of his personal convictions as a Christian, Mr. Falwell attacked the areas of immorality he is deeply concerned about in America today. He sees the serious decay of marriage and family as bedrock institutions. He warns of the long-range damage of pornography. He decries the softening of our national will to maintain military superiority over Soviet Communism. In his view, God has been thrown out of our public schools where prayer needs to be restored. Abortion statistics are a public disgrace and an abomination in the sight of God. The coddling of criminals must cease through a court system with a stiffened spine. The State of Israel must survive as an eschatological sign, and it is the duty of America as a specially

destined nation to see to that, as well as to remain true to our unique calling under God as a country which he has chosen to lead the world. Each of these points is without question an area of urgent moral concern, and Jerry Falwell must not be put down for speaking up publicly on these matters. How can anyone be critical of a fellow Christian's call for moral passion in the face of our self-serving as a people? Nor does it make sense to dismiss Falwell's agenda because it is selective; no one can claim to confront all the problems on all fronts with all the moral energy each requires all the time.

We do well to listen and learn from each other, and I learned from Falwell the day I heard him. But what I missed was the 2 Corinthians 5:19 basis which gives our moral passion its lasting strength and its true direction. Brother Falwell (I use the adjective fraternally) described the necessity of mounting a major Christian political crusade as the duty of winning the world for Christ. Our choices for legislators who support the Moral Majority agenda and our clout in electing them to office will be decisive in turning the tide for America in this critical hour. But that whole line of thought does not begin or end where the reconciling mercy of God places us. Winning the world for Christ is wrongheaded because God *has* reconciled the world to himself. It is Christ's atoning work at his cross and by his resurrection that is decisive, and all dreams about Christian political crusades do not supplant the turning point of human history which has already occurred. Such ventures give us one more melancholy episode of a moral/political strategy by earnest Christians that does not proceed on the conviction that God is always ahead of us in his world. He does not bid us win the world for him; he has already accomplished that deed in his own way of sacrificial love. Our speaking faithfully to the reconciled world rests upon his mercy for the world and must never lose sight of the truth that his mercy has begun with us.

Such a conviction does not lessen our moral fervor, but it redeems us from moralizing. It opens our vision so much wider to the biblical truth that God has his servants outside the church. It helps us appreciate Luther's alleged comment that in matters of public rule he would rather live under a smart Turk than a dumb Christian. It spares us the blight of drawing up lists of those to vote in or vote out on the basis of how they line up according to our narrowed measuring stick. It gives us wisdom as well as zeal, and in faithful speaking to a reconciled world the former is as needed as the latter. I write this with opposition to Mr.

Falwell's ways of diagnosing and remedying national problems, but with much sympathy for the deeper problem of finding it difficult to think and act toward the world on the basis of its being reconciled to the Father. I stumble on that one, too. Every day we must pray for the Holy Spirit's pressing this point home to our heads and hearts: this impossible, vexing, outrageous, violent world is nevertheless the world God holds in his hand. There is no wasteland of human degradation or heartache where his judgment and mercy has not penetrated. It is to this world that he has turned with the fulness of his reconciling grace; it is this world that he has loved, does love, and will never cease loving. We live and struggle and pray, we rejoice and relish and enjoy, here and now in the conviction that what we see now as piecemeal and fragmentary witness to the reconciled world will at the last Day turn out to be true for the whole family of humankind. Our faithful speaking to the reconciled world takes on the groaning and the travail of the world as it becomes, finally, what God has already made it to be. But that speaking must never take on the tone of moralizing at the expense of the word of mercy.

It is a magnificent thing to experience the witness of a Christian who is doing his faithful speaking in the public arena of his calling, and doing it with wisdom as well as zeal. Another speaker heard recently in Chicago comes to mind, the senator from Oregon, Mark Hatfield. His subject was the problem of nuclear arms proliferation. It is noteworthy how he began. He asked his audience to accept his convictions on the subject which he offered with the understanding that other wise and well-intentioned people see the subject differently. Everyone wants to reduce nuclear arms; the question is how to devise the most prudent direction overall and the wisest first steps to take in that direction now. Having said that, however, he went on to define the root problem as he saw it: the matter of our real security as human beings. If we as individuals or as a nation base our security upon our nuclear warheads, we are idolaters. What is true for our nation holds true for every nation, including the U.S.S.R. Hatfield opposes the proliferation of nuclear armament for reasons he traced to the roots of his Christian faith. Security is only secure when the anchor of life is fixed in him who so loved the world that he gave his beloved Son. Hatfield did not say that all the world will be united any day now in the bonds of mutual trust and goodwill that will turn the earth into paradise. He knows the presence of sinister forces of evil which still bedevil us. But with eyes wide open to that dark side of human nature, he is not blinded to the danger of gauging security on more nuclear muscle. Possessing and adding to the stockpile of such vast killing power is the sheerest folly, because human beings still hold out against God, as the biblical prophets say so clearly. Security grounded in nuclear arms is false security. The whole idea divides people, at home and among the family of nations.

The only security which Christians count on is the security found in the suffering love which God bears for the whole world. Hatfield advocates a policy which begins with a nuclear freeze, and from that beginning point must proceed to back the superpowers away from the brink of mutual annihilation. Whatever else may be true about the trickery and cunning of our adversaries in the dangerous game of nuclear arms build-up, Hatfield believes that affairs do not

get beyond the hand of God. Which God? At that point—would you believe it!—Senator Hatfield quoted the 2 Corinthians 5:19 passage in testimony to the God who makes himself known to the world by reconciling it through his Son. Such faithful speaking is a very exciting and inspiring thing. Hearing it moves one to go away from such public sermons with a greater will and a deepened freedom to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God through this reconciled world of his.

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That is not our way of doing things, but then his way of reconciling the world to himself in the first place is not our idea, either.

Speaking faithfully to the reconciled world is the calling given every generation of Christ's people. Glibness gets in the way because it never gets close to the depths of either human need or the solution. Jargon and moralizing are equally in the way because they focus the speaker at the expense of the content of faith. Faithful speaking to the reconciled world brings with it the soundness of all the living connections between speaker and hearer. It needs and welcomes the formal theological task because that task is carried out with a faithful eye toward that which is to be proclaimed in the church to the world. When the faithful speaking does take place in the world, as indeed it does every day in the lives of God's people who live in and for

the world, it is marvelous and heartening to behold because it moves toward the reconciled world from the starting point of sin forgiven. To keep on in such faithful speaking is why we are here and why we have life and breath for another day in this remarkable world that is reconciled by God to himself through the mercy of his Son and our Lord Jesus Christ.