

Introduction



Putting Creativity into Perspective

This book offers four suggestions for added creativity in preaching: (1) a fuller understanding of what literally happened to Jesus on the cross; (2) a greater awareness and use of Biblical metaphors and images of the Gospel; (3) the occasional use of what I call "Gospel-handles"; (4) the periodic use of new approaches and formats in the writing of sermons.

Getting the Most out of This Book

You will derive the most benefit from these suggestions, particularly the third and fourth ones, if you keep in mind two things. First, these suggestions are intended to be supplementary rather than substitutionary, to build on rather than replace what you have already learned from courses in writing and in homiletics. Second, these suggestions will effect creativity in sermons only if they are employed by sanctified preachers, people in whom the Holy Spirit through the Gospel is busy working "both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Permit me to discuss each of these factors more fully below.

First, the suggestions for creative preaching offered in this book presuppose mastery of the basics of English composition and homiletics. While it is my hope that even a beginning seminary student can benefit from this book, he will do so only if he simultaneously continues to practice all that he has learned in the past about grammar, punctuation, word choice, and word arrangement; and only if he learns the basics of homiletics. It is a truism of writing that only those who are at home with the rules can occasionally go beyond the rules or even break them legitimately and effectively. There can be no extraordinary creativity in our preaching

unless we are, first of all, capable of ordinary creativity. As a matter of fact, if a preacher studies his Biblical text thoroughly, determines carefully what it says, and then says what it says in a direct, clear, coherent manner, he will often get credit not only for thoroughness, care, directness, clarity, and coherence but for creativity as well. It is obviously not the purpose of this book to review the basics of English composition and homiletics, but neither is it the purpose of this book to minimize them. Creativity attempted by one who has not learned how to write or by one who neglects his homiletical homework nearly always falls flat or strikes the listener as mere sensationalism. Without the basics, creativity too easily becomes tasteless.

Second, and even more emphatically, the suggestions for creative preaching offered in this book presuppose steady, continuous growth in the preacher's sanctification. To begin with, sanctification generates creativity in the preacher. There is a surprising correlation in the art of preaching between sanctification and creativity, the former being, to a larger degree than most of us are aware, a prerequisite for the latter. It does not follow from this, of course, that the absence of creativity in a preacher signals the absence of sanctification. Such a conclusion would be a classic instance of false obversion or the misuse of opposites, a procedure that in this instance could be tragic as well as illogical. But it does follow that if the preacher is a highly sanctified person, he is more likely to be creative as well.

Creativity will come more easily to him for several reasons. First, faith and virtue are themselves creative processes: they are the unique manufacture of God the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. His work in the human body, His temple, removes the scales from the preacher's eyes; he no longer sees through a glass so darkly as he did before. The insights the Holy Spirit provides, the preacher is able to transmit to others. He understands sin better, for one thing. He sees the corruption in the hearts of his audience more clearly because, thanks to the Holy Spirit, he sees his own corruption more clearly. Effective Law preaching is always intensely personal. This is not to say that the preacher's discussion of sin from the pulpit should be overtly subjective, the "I've done it too, folks; I've been there and back" approach that can so easily become patronizing and condescending, or a kind of exhibitionism—bragging rather than confessing. But it does mean that the preacher's pulpit talk about sin is always honest, always from the perspective of keen awareness of his own specific shortcomings. Given that kind of personal approach, it is legitimate to describe effective Law preaching as a form of confession and the listener's receptivity toward it as a variety of absolution for the speaker. That is, recognizing the accuracy and insightfulness of the preacher's diagnosis of sin, the listeners will give him their rapt attention. They will regard his diagnosis of sin as realistic, on target, rather than stereotyped and predictable. They will marvel at how much their pastor knows about them and may even be tempted to quip,

"Has he been eavesdropping?" They may say of him (to a lesser degree, of course, and for a different reason) what the woman at the well said of Christ: "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did" (John 4:29).

Even more important than the improvement in the speaker's Law preaching is the improvement in his Gospel preaching that results from the Holy Spirit's activity through the Word upon the character of the speaker. Growing in sanctification, the preacher will present the Gospel more insightfully and provocatively. His preaching will reflect not merely the mastery of one or two safe, traditional formulas acquired during his seminary training but rather the vast and imaginative variety of Gospel formulas that the Scriptures themselves provide.

More specifically, growth in sanctification will have a bearing on the preacher's Sunday-to-Sunday sermon preparation and delivery. To be sure, it will result in increased conscientiousness about these activities. But what I primarily have in mind is the fact that creative preaching is often a byproduct of passion for one's subject and compassion for one's audience. An effective preacher is one who is excited about his material and who is eager to communicate that material to his listeners. I sometimes quip to my students: "Seek ye first your subject and your audience, and creativity will be added unto you." We preach to people, not to bewilder or impress them, but to help and serve them. Hence what follows? We do a thorough study of the text so that we—and our listeners—know what we are talking about. We arrange our materials logically so that people can easily follow them. We labor to choose words wisely and to arrange them rhythmically so that people will enjoy listening to them. We are humble, getting our self out of the way as much as possible. We are courteous and fair, thinking like the listener, looking at things from his point of view, seeing them his way—in short, letting that mind be in us which is also in our listener. The pulpit is no place for show-offs, novices, upstarts, sensationalists, status-mongers. It is an arena for the best in good manners, for the ultimate in courtesy, selflessness, and humility. Without such virtues, preacher creativity easily degenerates into mere pomp and bombast.

Not only does Spirit-manufactured sanctification in the preacher generate creativity, but it also makes that creativity more palatable to his audience. Even the pagan Quintilian conceded that a persuasive orator is a *good* man skilled in speaking (emphasis added). The Bible says it so simply: "speaking the truth in *love*" (Eph. 4:15, emphasis added). No technically creative sermon can cover a multitude of the preacher's sins—and I refer not merely to those sins of the flesh for which a pastor may be defrocked (e.g., fornication, theft, drunkenness) but also to sins of the disposition (arrogance, uncharitableness, poor sportsmanship, snobbishness, dictatorialness). Thank God (and I mean the phrase theologically, not conventionally), He, through Jesus, forgives and covers preacher deficien-

cies and shortcomings (else who of us could stand?), but it doesn't follow from this grace that we are to make a career of our deficiencies and shortcomings. The preacher has to be accepted before his creativity will be accepted. He is his own best creative technique. His sermon style cannot rise above the level of his life-style. Before God can work *through* a man, He must work *in* a man. God is Persons (three of them, in fact); He sent His Son as a Person, the God-Man, to effect our salvation; and He still sends persons (preachers) to get to persons (people). This is why good character is so crucial to the preaching task. While it is true that no one can believe *for* another, it is also true, usually, that no one can believe *without* another; that is, God normally gets to people through people.

Ultimately, the correlation between preacher creativity and preacher character has its roots in the concept of the Word. The Word is both a Person and a message (Jesus and the Biblical Gospel); the Word is the God who speaks and it is what God speaks. This is still God's *modus operandi*, His way of working: message through a man. Preachers are transformers for God's power unto salvation. That is why the transformer needs to be in the peak of condition, in good running order. God's method is not exclusion (God without man); nor is it co-operation (God plus man); rather, it is transformation (God through man). We pastors offer ourselves as ordinary bread and wine "in, with, and under" which God is truly present. Hence, we must never divorce the message from the person or, more specifically, creativity from sanctification. We must not put asunder what God has joined together.

What is Creativity?

Admittedly, the concept of creativity, the whole, is greater than the sum of the words used to define it. To begin with an informal definition, creativity is probably initiated when the writer says, "I have an idea," and rushes for pencil and notebook before that idea escapes him. And creativity has undoubtedly occurred whenever the listener responds with such expressions as "Very interesting!" "Where did you ever get that idea?" "I never heard it put that way before!" "I wish I had thought of that first!" To define it more formally, creativity consists of profound insights stated winsomely. Professor Hayakawa has defined creativity as "the verbalization of a cerebral itch."¹ I like that description because it not only defines creativity—it exemplifies it. Creativity means giving attractive expression to provocative thoughts, making original statements about original ideas—or, more often in the preacher's case, according original expression to familiar ideas, familiar because they are from the Scriptures. Creativity occurs when the preacher puts theological truths into non-theological language, timeless verities into timely words, changeless Biblical substance into changing contemporary forms. To invert the Biblical metaphor, the preacher puts the old wine of the Gospel into new wineskins. He tells the old, old story, but

always in new, new language. Normally we associate creativity with such words as "new," "fresh," "original," "imaginative," "insightful," "provocative," and "breathtaking," adjectives that appropriately describe creative preaching so long as that preaching is simultaneously responsible, loyal to the Scriptures.

One caution: as preachers we create the medium but not the message. The Gospel is God's gift to us; in our preaching we neither add to it nor subtract from it. The Gospel is God's gift, wholly His gift, nothing but His gift. But we do create the package in which God's gift comes to people. We wrap it attractively and tie a ribbon around it so as to whet the viewer's curiosity, to entice him to open the package wondering, "What's in it for me?" What's in it for him is, of course, entirely the gift of God. The magic is in the Word, the Word of God, which alone is God's power to salvation. Yet in His wisdom God has chosen to convey that magic through words. Creative preaching simply harnesses the magic of the Word to the magic of words; it couples the unique and exclusive power of the Gospel to the dynamite of carefully selected words and to the harmonious rhythms of skillfully arranged words. Creative pulpit language has been compared to a lens: it brings to focus the light and heat of God's Word. The power and energy are all God's, but the lens brings that power and energy to bear on specific people.

How Does One Acquire Creativity?

To whom does creativity come? I have already indicated that it is more likely to come to that preacher experiencing steady growth in sanctification, to one, more specifically, whose primary concern is his subject matter and his audience. There seems to be a paradox here: Seek creativity directly and it is likely to elude you; seek other things first—mastery of material and service to people—and creativity is thrown in for good measure. The speaker is "surprised by creativity."

Creativity is more likely to come to that preacher who knows his Bible well, because such knowledge enables him to see relationships between widely scattered Biblical truths. This aspect of creativity will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four when I take up the subject of multiple text sermons. For the present let me point out that juxtaposing two or more isolated Bible passages often produces surprisingly creative results. Wedding one Biblical concept to another frequently gives birth to a new and, to sustain the marriage metaphor, legitimate family of Biblical ideas. Once again the preacher, who is always a systematician as well, is joining together in a sermon what God hath put asunder in the Scriptures. Obviously, to perform such creative marriages requires familiarity with God's Word.

Creativity comes not only to the preacher who recognizes relationships between widely scattered portions of the Bible, but also to the

From *Preaching the Creative Gospel* by Francis C. Rossow © 1983 Concordia Publishing House. Used by permission under license number 10:10-3. To order this publication (#12-2856POD), please contact Concordia Publishing House at 800-325-3040 or visit them on the web at www.cph.org.