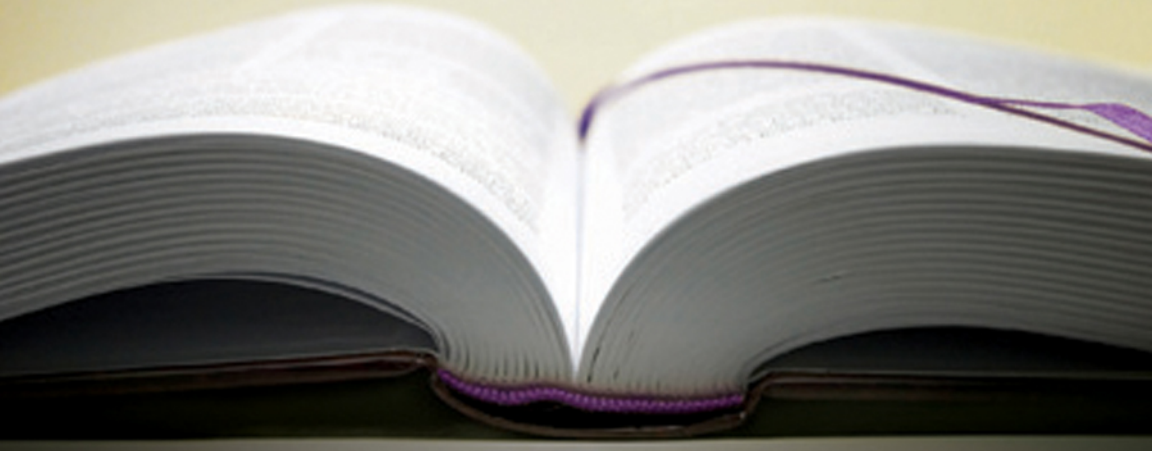
THE MOODY HANDBOOK OF PREACHING



GENERAL EDITOR

JOHN KOESSLER

Sixteen

FELLING THE DEVIL

by
Rosalie de Rosset

In the movie *Walk the Line*, which recounts the career of music legend Johnny Cash, a key interchange occurs between Johnny and studio manager Sam Phillips. Longing to break into country music, Johnny buys an audition and, with his small band, sings a shaky rendition of the gospel song, "I Was There When It Happened." Within a minute, Phillips, obviously irritated, demands that he stop.

"I don't do gospel," Phillips says. "This stuff doesn't sell. People want something honest, something felt."

Johnny, hurt and angry, snaps back, "You listen to me sing for a minute and tell me it won't work?"

The manager looks Johnny in the eye and says, "Do you *believe* it? I've heard that song sung exactly that way five hundred times. If you got hit by a truck and you only had time to sing one song before you died, what would it be?"

Taken aback, Johnny pauses, looks down at his guitar, then proceeds to sing, hesitantly at first, then powerfully, a riveting rendition of

"Folsom Prison Blues," a song that later mesmerized prison audiences.

That manager was right in saying that unless Johnny Cash's singing could do things to the people listening, it was just the *same old-same old*. Unless he could be more than a peddler of a tired sentiment, he might as well quit.

The same could be said for preachers who hope to break into the lives of their congregations. The language we use to tell our stories, to teach and preach our faith, the content of the illustrations we select have the ability to dull or enliven the listener.

Why Stories?

Imagine for a moment the Old Testament without narrative or the New Testament without the Gospels (including the parables) or the book of Acts. The largeness of those stories commands our attention; their characters from Abraham to Habakkuk, from the Twelve Disciples to Paul, are replete with complex dilemmas, foolish sins, and good questions, and engage our senses and souls as well as our reason. And, of course, the incarnated Christ—acting among the people, healing them, teaching them, seeking to make them see through analogy and metaphor, suffering their disregard, and dying and rising from the dead—is the center of our faith.

Each biblical narrative is classic, an illustration of God's sovereignty and merciful work in history.

Great literature, then and now, enables us to see the connectedness of life. We cannot always rise above present circumstances to see the completeness of our story. The better the story, meaning the more skilled the language and the more complex the characters, the more vision we receive. Fiction, as narrative, incarnates theology into the stuff of humanity.

Of all people on earth, Christians have the most reason to value the arts and imagination and to use these rich resources as a means of grace, a way to compel people into the kingdom and to obedience, wooing them with a kind of holy seduction instead of hitting them with a propositional hammer. Illustration well used never upstages the teaching of Scripture; instead, it brings its message home concretely and eloquently, gripping the heart and enlarging the understanding.

The Role of Imagination

C. S. Lewis believed that when humans are converted, their memories, fantasies, imaginations, and dreams are the last to be entirely healed. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape tells Wormwood to think of human beings as a series of concentric circles—will as the innermost, next the intellect, and finally the imagination, all of which must be won for Satan or for God. "For me," Lewis proposed, "reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth but its condition."[1] Warren Wiersbe, well-known preacher and author, describes the balance this way: "Right brain religion generates a lot of heat and left-brain religion generates a lot of light. . . . Preaching that involves the imagination as well as the mind and the emotions will encourage balanced spiritual growth."[2]

In other words, a healthy and complex imagination is essential to understanding how one truth relates to another and how both of them relate to life. Alan Jones, writer and theologian, explains what happens without it:

> For many the Christian story no longer bears the mystery. It seems to trivialize it. The Christian way of looking at, interpreting, understanding the world has lost its power, its fragrance. It has become sterile, dead, lost behind a mountain of custom, habit, and convention. We have the outlines of the story, but there are precious few living characters in its half-forgotten and emaciated plot.[3]

American society seems to have early forsaken the poetic and embraced the pragmatic. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, this step "dried up" the American imagination. He points out that Jonathan Edwards was "the last Protestant theologian before the twentieth century to have in his control the entire imaginative resources of the Christian tradition. Edwards' use of imagery was unparalleled."[4]

In the thirty-six years I have been teaching and speaking, the single most important thing I can do by God's grace is to somehow, in Lewis's words, "water the deserts of parched imaginations," to find a way to help

the listener come alive in his or her soul discovering that Christianity walks hand in hand with the richest kind of imagination.[5]

The mental, spiritual, and emotional awakening Lewis speaks of can and has often come through the vehicle of classic novels, which are inseparable from my growth in faith and understanding, and which underpin the best of everything I do.

When I was a little girl living on the mission field in Peru, reading was my primary source of entertainment. My mother read energetically to us from *King Arthur and His Knights*, *Robin Hood and His Merry Men, Pilgrim's Progress*, teaching me, and my siblings, to love classics. Our early lives were saturated with great literature—a reality that undergirds my Christian faith, my respect for language and good writing, and for any success I have had as a professor and speaker.

With themes that transcend time and place, with elegant and poetic language and complex characters, the classics marked my life and choices in specific ways; they heightened my imagination, filled me with longing for ideas and things bigger than myself, and ultimately, along with Scripture, gave my theology and Christian experience backbone.

The best writers, teachers—and preachers—may be those familiar with the greatest texts, texts that illuminate the breadth of human experience and its consequences, which engage spirit, mind, and heart, whose language becomes theirs, whose themes provoke reflection. Great literature challenges shallow, clichéd ideas, something that is true of the biblical narratives as well.

Whatever Happened to Literature?

But such preaching is not mainstream. One has to ask why more preachers do not both talk about the importance of great texts in their congregation's lives and model those choices in their use of illustrations. Could it be that the same people who so reverence Scripture are careless in the choice of what they read, watch, and do in their leisure? After all, as T. S. Eliot argues in his essay "Religion and Literature," very little affects one's mind and spirit more than what one does at leisure. Sermons—and congregations—would be well served by illustrations that include not just personal stories and popular culture elements like film

clips and the omnipresent sports story but also the force of great novels and plays and the texts of great poems.

The difference between popular literature and classic literature is, after all, the difference between the ephemeral and the eternal, the difference between a light bulb and the sun, or as Garrison Keillor says in the introduction to his collection of favorite poems called *Good Poems*, "writing that makes people stop chewing their toasted muffins and turn up the radio and listen and later zip into the website and get the dope on the poet or author" even fifty years after its initial release.[6] We need to be witnesses who make people stop chewing their toasted muffins and turn up the radio and listen and later zip into the Bible to get the dope on God.

"A great novel is a kind of conversion experience," wrote the great children's writer Katherine Patterson. And novelist Walker Percy described the prophetic novelist (and certainly preachers as well) as not only a wounded soldier but also as the sacrificial canary that coal miners "used to take down the shaft to test the air. When the canary gets unhappy, utters plaintive cries and collapses, it may be time for the miners to surface and think things over."

Along with my mother and other teachers, Warren Wiersbe—under whose ministry I sat for ten years at Moody Church—deepened my love of literature. He taught a seminary course I took, The History of Preaching. His wide knowledge, both in fiction and nonfiction saturated his sermons and teaching over and over. Wiersbe suspects that "the people in our churches suffer from starved imaginations." He wrote, "It takes more than a dictionary and a grammar to grasp the message of *King Lear* and it takes more than Robertson's *Shorter Greek Grammar* to see the meaning in the images given to us by John in the Book of Revelation."[7]

The Power of Literature on a Life

Literature exerted its power over me once again at a time when I was feeling the kind of spiritual lethargy that comes from overexposure to endlessly repeated concepts. At Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the winter of 1979, I took my first theology course: Sin and Salvation.

Having started just six months earlier, I was progressing slowly, taking a course a quarter since I was also teaching full-time.

That course changed my life. Or, should I say, God, through that teacher's vision, changed my life. I read seven or eight classic theology volumes twice. I missed only one class despite traveling long distances during a hard winter. What I remember most, however, is not a theological outline. I could not rehearse today exactly what Berkouwer or Warfield say, although I cannot see those volumes on my shelf without feeling a warm rush of affection. What I do remember is the aura, the atmosphere, the fragrance, as it were, of the class, an aura I can recall instantly. What I also remember is the longing the material and lectures filled me with, a longing that many have spoken of—the longing for God—not to be confused with nostalgia (as Lewis notes) or romantic feelings or intellectual stimulation alone, but a longing that makes the demands for Christian living not only worthwhile but *necessary*.

What that professor did was to make sin concrete, to fit it into my personal history. He made sin real and grace a living thing. For the first time in my life I knew who I was, past and present. He did this by taking theological tenets and fleshing them out in ways that applied to me and to my culture, often through the venue of classic fiction.

In an early discussion of sin, he reminded us of the Gollum scene from *The Lord of the Rings*. Gollum finds the ring—an instrument of terrifying power symbolizing perverseness, arrogance, and the flesh. The ring's power infects him; he is tormented by the promises of the flesh and his own emptiness. The ring offers what it never delivers—it is only seductive and destructive. And Gollum is slimy and secretive, speaking in distortions, conniving, wanting to devour whatever comes in his path.

Sin is so much more, said my professor, than the absence of God—it is active hostility to God—deeply, intensely personal evil that distorts us. I could see myself as Gollum, not just as a person who had made mistakes, but as someone who had personally offended God, who in the midst of sin was slimy and corrupt. I could see my temptations as that ring, allurements that offered what they could not deliver, which gave one the feeling of temporary empowerment only to disappoint later. I remained shaken a long time, ready to understand grace in a new way, as more than a word easily spoken or an abstraction discussed repetitively

in a Christian book. I could also understand anew the power of redemption that, in Martin Luther's magnificent poetry, says:

> And though this world with devils filled,
> Should threaten to undo us,
> We will not fear, for God has willed
> His truth to triumph through us.
> The Prince of Darkness grim—
> We tremble not for him;
> His rage we can endure, For lo! his doom is sure.
> One little word shall fell him.
>
> "A MIGHTY FORTRESS"

The imaginative approach with which this professor taught, his use of literature along with theology to illustrate the old, old story (Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) was like a hand grenade thrown into my heart, explosively invading the numbness, even the coldness that comes from too much unillustrated, unintegrated, or droned-on propositional information, from too much cliché, happy talk, and predictability. I have never been the same. That professor was the fragrance, the aroma of Christ in my life, pungent, moving, and compelling.

THE SMELL OF THE ALMIGHTY

Consider 2 Corinthians 2:14–17, in which Paul, who also models the use of imagination in teaching, uses the powerful language of the senses to express his point. He conjures up the splendor of a Roman triumphal procession in which the victorious general has led his captives as a public spectacle before the crowd of onlookers. We, who were God's enemies, have been overcome and taken captive by God and are displayed to the world every day and everywhere. As redeemed sinners, we are on exhibition as trophies of divine grace. We are an aromatic perfume to God.

If Christ is in our testimony, in our lives, in our language, we will exude this aroma. To the unsaved we will be, Paul writes, the smell of

death, bringing them to see their choice between life and death. To the saved we are the smell of life—a living invitation to the dulled and lethargic Christian, persuading that Jesus makes a difference. Metaphorically, Paul calls us to have the power of smell: pungent, seductive, refreshing, mysterious, expensive, a power unable to be boxed or controlled once it is released. Is it any wonder that verse 16 asks, "And who is equal to such a task?"

That is my concern today. We too seldom prove equal to the task. Never has our world been so glutted with sermons, CD's, books, seminars, courses, conferences, educational options, and Christian talk of all kinds, much of it from skilled speakers. And never in recent history have there been so many dulled, lethargic, bored customers, resulting, of course, in disobedient customers: Christians whose experience with faith has produced no longing in them and who, therefore, find the answer to their longings in sin.

Perhaps one reason obedience seems so absent or thin even in the face of theological or biblical knowledge is that those of us who teach and preach are not fragrant. Our fragrance does not leave an expensive, memorable odor. We are instead accurate, prepared, but odorless leaders. It is not enough to know what we ought to say and teach; we must also say it and teach it, as we ought.

It seems to me that every Christian's (not to mention every teacher's and preacher's) greatest desire must be to avoid being either trivial or boring in their expression of faith to themselves and to others—both Christians and non-Christians. The truth we teach must be so enthralling that it compels listeners to want to make the sacrifices necessary to being a Christian, one who makes a difference in his or her world, one who helps people see God.

The Power of the Word

The Christian's words must fell the devil through the capture of the listener's imagination for Christ who is the creative, enlightening, and powerful Word of God to us. God sent Christ, the Word, to fell the devil. How are we representing that Word, capital W, to fell the devil? As one theologian wrote, the average person on an average day is less inter-

ested in the doctrine of justification than in his torment over the last visit he made to a porn parlor or why he or she cannot get his or her prayers above the ceiling to God.[8]

The consequences of this drought of imagination may be much darker than we realize. Wiersbe suggests that "one of the symptoms of the starved imagination malady may be the success of pornography in our country—both the hardcore kind and the more sophisticated varieties . . . ." "It is possible," he continues, "to be pregnant with evil (Psalm 7:14), and the womb is the imagination impregnated by temptation";[9] a pregnancy, I might add, that leads to stillbirth as Scripture predicts.

In his wise, comic novel *Holy Fool* about a preacher who punches his assistant in the nose, an act which leads to his temporary undoing and subsequent redemption, modern novelist Harold Fickett writes,

> A preacher is the epic poet of his people, for in telling the old, old story, he also tells of present history, besides what has passed and is to come. . . . Our age, don't we know it by now, is an age of poetry—not the good poetry of the bard, but the bad poetry of the caption and accompanying photograph: we deal in images but without any depth of imagination, and so the more readily appealing the picture, the better.[10]

The preacher cannot afford to be a caption writer. In an editorial that addresses this, Mike Yaconelli suggests that the first thing our culture does is to steal the mystery and wonder from life. It takes away "risk, danger, spontaneity, intuition, passion, chance, threat, and peril. We become slaves of predictability, of rules, of policies, of uniformity, and of sameness. We learn to teach, but we're not really teachers." We learn to preach, but we're not really preachers. We have the credentials, the titles, the training, the lectures, and the sermons. "But what is gone," he adds, "is the sense of passion, the pleasure, the joy, the sense of calling."[11] At the root of all this, at least partly, is the loss of the sense of imagination and of good reading habits which when used make our words come alive.

Preaching and teaching the Bible and theology must catch hold of the intellect and the soul in order to manifest itself in the student's or the parishioner's practical reality. Bryan Chapell claims, "widespread

dissatisfaction with preaching has invaded our churches." He goes on to say that the reasons for these complaints appear to be that the preaching is "lost in abstraction and buried in jargon, incapable of forging a clear path for an age in the midst of unprecedented change." He cites Reuel Howe's catalogue of familiar complaints about preaching:

> Sermons often contain too many complex ideas.
> Sermons have too much analysis and too little answer.
> Sermons are too formal and too impersonal.
> Sermons use too much theological jargon.
> Sermons are too propositional, not enough illustrations.
> Too many sermons simply reach a dead end and give no guidance to commitment and action.[12]

Some of the problem comes from the way many preachers (as well as teachers) approach their task. In his excellent book *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination,* Warren Wiersbe addresses what he calls the "wrong thinking" we may fall into, particularly subscribing to the "conduit metaphor." We "envision ourselves as fountains of knowledge and our listeners as empty receptacles ready to receive what we know . . . our words build[ing] an invisible conduit between us and our listeners." We imagine that the information automatically moves from us to them."[13]

This approach to preaching and teaching, Wiersbe contends, is more prevalent than we realize. Anytime we say, "I hope this isn't going over your head," or "I trust this idea is coming across," it implies that we are wedded to the conduit method. It's the conveyor belt idea. You work hard all week, do your exegesis faithfully, apply the rules of hermeneutics and come up with great biblical material that you think your congregation should know. You organize it on what he calls the "homiletical conveyor belt and as soon as the choir finishes its anthem [worship team, its final praise chorus], you throw the switch and start the belt moving. The receptors are supposed to gather it up and make it their own. But it just doesn't work that way."[14]

Faithful Persuasion

Christian theology and teaching is best understood as what author David S. Cunningham calls "persuasive argument."[15] Theologians, teachers, and preachers are involved, not just in the exchange of propositions or even in edifying conversations, but in debates, disputes, and arguments. They are seeking to *persuade* others and themselves of a particular understanding of the Christian faith. The goal of Christian theology is what Cunningham calls "faithful persuasion . . . to speak the word that theology must speak, in ways that are faithful to the God of Jesus Christ and persuasive to the world that God has always loved."[16] Or in Paul's terms: "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others" (2 Cor. 5:11 ESV).

Faithful persuasion involves close attention to what will both teach and move an audience, not in sentimental or superficial ways, but in ways that will engage their intellects and leave them thinking. We must not, as Craig Dykstra, Christian educator, puts it, "use language simply for its own self-perpetuation" or we will "capture God as the god of the religious cults . . . no longer the God of all life," a kind of "self idolatry."[17] We cannot lobotomize the relationship between God and ourselves and between ourselves and other people by throwing truth at them at its most obvious, clichéd level.

Emily Dickinson, one of the great American poets, has written a poem that addresses the way truth must be presented: indirectly and gently. She understood that truth can dazzle, even blind the listener if not carefully handled.

> Tell the truth but tell it slant—
> Success in circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind—[18]

Religious language, as John Newman, Horace Bushnell, C. S. Lewis, and others have suggested, is at heart the language of poetry and literature and metaphor, a language which in its subtlety contains an evanescence which stirs and surprises, which does not, finally, numb and bore. Language is not, after all, so much the dress of thought as the incarnation of thought. The Word is truth become flesh. Language is the body of the idea, and it is only in the body that we become aware of it.

We tend, however, to dismiss the importance of the body, the dress, by presenting unadorned how-to lists of principles and theological points, admonitions, "sharings," and details of popular culture with little classic touch or respect for language. Or we present theological outlines and terms, the omnipresent word study, unrelated to the life the theology seeks to change. There is no incarnation happening in such presentation. Then we wonder why people don't remember or why we, and they, aren't changed. As poet John Leax puts it in a poem called "The Fire Burns Low," "The living word reduced/to monosyllables,/the gospel cut like hash/for middleclass consumption. . . ."[19]

Such use of language has led to a trivialization of God, what Donald McCullough thinks may be the worst sin of the church at this time in history.[20] And Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard puts it wryly when she writes:

> Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does not one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. . . . For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.[21]

Loving Our Neighbors . . . and Our Audience

In a handout prepared by Brad Baurain, former adjunct literature instructor at Moody Bible Institute, he notes the functions literature fulfills:

> Literature and the imagination may be thought of in terms of the greatest two commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors. If we are to love God with our whole selves—all our minds, hearts, souls and strength—we must do so with the imagination as well. If we designate the imagination as unnecessary, or childish, or for recreation only, we have in effect said to God, "There's a part of human nature that you have created that we are going to set aside." Since we do not want to find ourselves in such a position, it becomes our Christian responsibility to seek ways in which our imaginations can be part of obeying the commandment.[22]

As for loving our neighbors, literature helps us do so with insight and compassion, showing, not telling, the human experience it presents in concrete settings: people choosing, events happening, objects becoming symbols, communities developing. A significant part of loving our neighbors is understanding who they are.

Great preachers, like great writers, must cast a spell. The greatest preaching must cost the preacher something. It is demanding. It respects language, tells old stories in new and dimensional ways. It is lightning and sun. Its vision and ethos linger powerfully in the senses and spirit. It demands the reading of tried and true novels that make the soul stand on tiptoe and stimulate hearers to delight, conviction, and transformation.

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NOTES

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2. Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994), 62.

3. Alan Jones, *Journey Into Christ* (New York: Seabury, 1977), 24.

4. Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 75.

5. Two resources that explain the power of class literature to apply imagination to

the Christian life and ministry are Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination.* New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998; and "On Literature and Ministry," *Theology, News and Notes* (December 1991): 3–23.

6. Garrison Keillor, *Good Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2002), xxvi.

7. Weirsbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination,* 26.

8. Donald McCullough, "What Does Literature Have to Do With Ministry?" *Theology, News and Notes* (December 1991): 3.

9. Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, 69.

10. Harold Fickett, *Holy Fool* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1984), 69, 71.

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18. Emily Dickinson, "Tell the Truth But Tell It Slant," *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 506–07.

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20. McCullough, "What Does Literature Have to Do with Ministry?" 13.

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