

Hit Men and Midwives:

Christian Witness at Work and at Worship

Robert Kolb

Well, it has finally come to this: even a liturgical institute has to discuss evangelism. Almost certainly some people will look at the combination of liturgy and witness and observe from one point of view or another how this sort of thing could never have happened a generation ago.

Two Inevitabilities

Such a point of view, of course, is ill-considered. For we might label worship and witness the two "inevitabilities" of Christian living: they are both aspects of the life of discipleship about which believers have no choice. And they are closely interrelated. As Paul Muench has recently written, "when the church was most active in outreach, worship was at its best. When mission lagged, worship stagnated."¹ We may determine to some extent the forms and the quality of our worship and of our witness, but all Christians are always involved in both. We cannot help but worship the object(s) of our ultimate trust, and we cannot help but witness to that in whom or which we place our ultimate trust. God and worship, God and witness--these two pairs are like love and marriage, or at least horse and carriage (except in the case of the former pairs you really cannot have one without the other).

The word "god" means, as Luther stated,

that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust

1. Paul E. Muench, "Worship and Outreach," *Evangelism* 1, 2 (February 1987): 11.

and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. . . . These two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God" (*Large Catechism*, The First Commandment, 1-3).

Trust is no small matter in human living. Every moment of our lives, every move we make, is based upon trust in the tires and motors of our automobiles, in the purity of our food, in the structures of the roofs and ceilings under which we sit. But much more than that, the larger framework of our lives rests on trust, in someone or something to give our lives what they need for existence and sustenance. What we need can be summarized in three interrelated concepts: identity, security, and meaning. All three of these come first of all from outside our beings. And they come from those who first give us contact with the world outside and beyond us. They come from those who teach us to trust. The emphasis which Erik Erikson has placed on the vital place of trust in the foundation of the human personality reflects this aspect of the Biblical definition of our humanity.²

In the way in which God has designed human life, we receive a sense of identity, a sense of security, a sense of meaning, from many sources. God has designed human life to be lived out in four situations: home, occupation, society (both in its formal political relationships and in its informal neighborly relationships), and congregation (some organized form of expressing ourselves in relationship to ultimate values). In each of these God offers us some penultimate sense of identity, security, and meaning through other people. They are the people whom he has called to exercise responsibilities in our behalf and thus to reflect his love, care, and concern. They include our spouses and fellow employees and friends. Similarly, our reputations and accomplishments, our fortunes and our fun, are designed only to offer a limited kind of identity, security, and meaning within

2. See the discussion of Erickson's stages of human development and their implications for conveying the faith in Thomas A. Droege, *Faith Passages and Patterns* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 33ff.

the larger context of life taken as a whole. In contrast we also live on the basis of one or more sources of ultimate identity, security, and meaning; whoever or whatever that is/those are is/are our God(s): that or the one in whom we place our trust because he offers all, or ultimate, good, because he offers refuge in every, or the ultimate, time of need. Whenever we take someone or something designed by God to be a secondary source of identity, security, and meaning for us and make that person or thing a god, we have imprisoned ourselves to that idol's inability to be of ultimate meaning and worth to us, and we have imprisoned the idol into the frustration of being unable to fulfill our demands. Idolatry tears apart the warp and woof of life as God made it to be.

Whoever, or whatever, it is that undergirds all of life--family, job, community, congregation--stands in a special kind of relationship with us. Whether our god is God or some creature of his hand, twisted and exalted to take his place, that object of trust will be worshipped in our daily lives. When we create gods for ourselves, when we choose created objects and demand that they give us that ultimate sense of identity, security, and meaning, they in turn make demands on us. By definition gods demand homage and honor. Their demands shape our lives and call us to dance to their tunes, according to their harmonies. The forms may differ, but the allegiance and the adherence to their calls reflect and affirm the depth of our trust and the intensity of the relationship from our point of view. Believers cannot help but worship. They may do it well or may do it poorly. But when someone or something says, "You depend on me for your very life," we respond perhaps with rejection but very likely with worship.

Likewise believers witness. Our acquaintances may not know who or what is god for us upon first meeting, but conversation does not usually go too far before whatever means most to us exhibits itself in some way or other. Americans have trained themselves to be very private about religion, but objects of trust break through the veneer of proper civil privacy in all sorts of subtle ways as they shape life and thus give witness to their presence.

We may witness well or poorly to what means most to us, but witness we will. And when our acquaintances discover, for instance, that Jesus is the one whom we claim as God, they will fairly quickly form some impression of how seriously Jesus demands to be taken as an object of trust.

Therefore, it seems to me that the association of worship and witness is natural. These two inevitabilities in Christian existence ought not be separated. For witness is the creation of worshipers, and worship is the goal of witness. Evangelism is the integration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of those who have been trusting something he made rather than the Maker himself.

Evangelism is also the beginning of the integration of these new believers into the body of Christ and into the public worship which is the center of its life. This Gospelizing process restructures life at its core, at its trust, its faith. It brings people to fear, love, and trust in Yahweh above all things. It produces worship and worshipping; it produces worshipers. Worship in turn produces witness. Worshipping witnesses; worshipers witness. Worship and witness are two sides of the same circle.

Worship expresses the life of God's people; it is witness which brings people to life as God's people. For Christian witness is a matter of death and life. Christians are called by God to witness to his word of condemnation which delivers to the sinner "the final (literally) *coup de grace*," as Gerhard Forde observes;³ we are God's hit men, called to bring idolaters into death. Christians are also called by God to witness to his word of forgiveness and regeneration which delivers the sinner from the womb as a newly reborn child of God; we are God's midwives. Not all believers are as apt at one task as the other; not all believers have equal opportunities to perform one task or the other. That is why evangelism

3. Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith--A Matter of Life and Death* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 34.
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is a congregational task, first and foremost, not primarily an individual task. That is why evangelistic efforts must be organized in tagteam fashion, to meet effectively the needs of a variety of hearers. Nonetheless, the witness of the Word of the Lord does take place through us as individually we let people know what we have seen and heard. For the Word of God in our mouths and our lives functions both to kill and to make alive, and worship prepares us for both tasks.

Making the Hits

Sinners have to die. There is no cure for sin but death. Idolaters cannot exist in the Kingdom of God. Therefore, God sent his Son to be born under that law which condemns all idolatry. He chose to join us in death, so that we sinners might be joined to his death, in his tomb, the only womb out of which people may be reborn to true life again. To understand how we bring the sinners we encounter, the sinners we like and love, into death, we need to understand something about sin, about what it is that has rendered life unright, out of joint, disharmonious, off the mark.

If our humanity is first and foremost our trust of whoever or whatever gives us our ultimate sense of identity, security, and meaning, then our humanity dies when our trust is falsely placed, when we look for ultimate good and ultimate refuge to an object which is incapable of giving it. For trust is inseparable from its object; it is not a self-sustaining activity. And so we die when we put our faith in anything or anyone which gets life from God rather than in him who alone gives life. Trust anchors our humanity; false trust, or doubt, destroys it.

"Has God really said?" Trust shrank and withered and walked away. Eve and then Adam with her had defied and denied their Creator. Doubt replaced trust, and the fundamental stabilizing factor of human life had been perverted. And yet these creatures needed some kind of god, something to redefine their identity and offer security and provide meaning. They desired to be like God, indeed, for they had to find one somewhere. Most of us crave for divinity only occasionally, when we are

desperate. And in those moments of desperation we fashion again for ourselves new gods out of someone or something God has made. But the burden of divinity was far more attractive in prospect than in practice: Adam and Eve found it so, and so do we.

Desire to be like God has its charms, but it also breeds a dread deepdown. That dread makes people defensive. Their defensiveness exhibits itself in division from those with whom God has placed us in relationship. It all goes back to "that woman whom you gave me." Divided from God, we cannot help but loose and lose the ties with which he bound us together when he noticed that the essence of our humanity, according to his design, made it not good for us to be alone. That defensiveness cultivates and compels disobedience against God's design and plan for life.

It should be noted that disobedience is really no more than going deaf, become hard of hearing. The Hebrews used the same word for "hear" and "obey"; the Greek word for obedience is a compound of the word for hearing. Because our doubt has blocked our ears regarding God's design for human living, we disobey in mistaken efforts to defend our lives and give them security since we cannot, or will not, count on God to be our God anymore. Our humanity was created cruciform, with eyes and ears uplifted to the Word of the Lord and hands outstretched in mutual support within the circle of humankind. Our humanity has become all wadded up in a little ball, eyes and ears curved in upon the self, dukes outstretched to strike against all that we dread. The only circle we come to know is that of the wagons drawn up defensively, a circle which may include myself alone, or perhaps my kind (my race, my labor union, my fellow investors, my family), but which does not include all my brothers and sisters in the family God created to be his.

Defensiveness, division, and disobedience give reason for despair and ultimately lead to death and damnation. Death comes, however, in several forms. It comes when our temporal demise confirms our decision to doubt our God and thus opens up for us dying without end. But it also comes in the form of baptismal death, in which our death is shared with Christ and his with us. And in that

death we die to death, and death dies to us. This is our aim as hit-men of our heavenly Father: to bring sinners into this form of death.

We begin that process by casing the joint where the hit is to be made. We must resist the temptation to blunder in with blunderbuss, firing wildly and scaring our hearers into greater defensiveness. The law of God which kills can also curb, and as God's witnessing hit men we must not use it as a club to beat our hearers bloody; that only makes them mad (literally) as hell (literally). We must use the law as a sharp arrow, which pierces the heart, with a little note attached, "You're dead." The corpse may want to argue, and there may often be some purpose to our arguing with him or her. But our ultimate purpose is not to deafen our hearers by shouting condemnation at them; they are already deaf. Our ultimate purpose is simply to let them know that they are dead because their idols will not serve, because they doubt the Word of the Lord.

We case the joint by assessing the specific symptoms of doubt in a particular hearer's life. We do so best when we keep a few basic categories in mind. Sinners display as much variety as sin does, as human creatures do. Nonetheless, we can do some preliminary classification which will aid our analysis and guide our presentation of the Word of the Lord. Sinners come in two basic brands: There are those who are relatively secure with their false objects of trust; for them their life under idols is going quite well. On the other hand, there are those who are relatively insecure with their idols, for whom life is not going at all well enough to keep them at peace. They are beginning to despair of old gods and are listening frantically for the approach of a new god. The former need to hear the law which condemns their false faith and which points out the flaws in that faith. The latter need to hear the Word of life, the Gospel, as it offers an alternative, the only genuine alternative, to their idols. The secure present one kind of challenge to our witness, the despairing another.

Another set of categories is also helpful in analyzing the sinners to whom God sends us with His Word. Evil assaults us in all sorts of ways as we live out our daily

lives. Some evils assault us from outside. In our arrogance, when we feel secure, we believe that we or our system of establishing identity, security, and meaning for ourselves can combat those evils effectively, or at least sufficiently, because we or our objects of trust are powerful, or powerful enough. When we lose confidence in ourselves and our own systems, we feel powerlessness. That sinking feeling indicates a sinking trust, and a sinking trust means a sinking life. We fear and hate what threatens us; we fear and hate our own impotence.

Some evils assault us from within. In our arrogance we justify ourselves; we assert the rightness of our own unrighteousness. When we begin to be uncertain about that rightness, we feel guilty or ashamed. Whatever we trust, we can no longer trust ourselves; we cannot believe in us any longer. We fear and hate something within us; we fear and hate ourselves.

Within these broad categories of evils we may sort out a number of more specific categories. I have developed a set of seven, but you may find more or less which are helpful to your people in the situation of your congregation.

There are, for instance, those evils outside ourselves which disrupt our lives and threaten our existence with natural forces, such as flood and fire. There are those which assault us in human form: the mugger and burglar, the economic system which takes our job or our savings. As witnesses of God's Word we notice how such forces cause the secure sinner to rage against any good object in sight and to reassert identity and a sense of security by taking revenge, usually displaced, upon the threatening world. Only when a sense of impotence is induced, only when the rage no longer can produce adequately compensating feelings for loss to wind and weather or to banker or boss, can the Christian begin to refocus the hearer's life on Christ.

Some evils seem to be the kinds of things we ought to control or at least that you ought to control and eliminate but which cannot be controlled even though they

seem to spring from within us. The bondage which assaults me from inside with its power is more insidious than the assailant from without. I can deny or boast my way through bouts with alcoholism or kleptomania or some other compulsion only so long. Then I hate whatever force it is that is mine but not under my control. I hate the life it imposes upon me, and I hate me for submitting. From the delight of drink or drug to the despair they finally breed, I am always on edge because I am not in control. But only when my bondage becomes suffocating can I hear a message above the clank of my chains.

The ultimate evil from outside our control is, of course, death. Death invokes a bravado from some of its victims; the secure sinner spits in death's eye with a refusal to admit that "it could really happen to me." Death smiles and tickles the nervous system again, and the still secure sinner begins the flight to the quacks, hoping against hope that this next one will heal and save. The despairing sinner shrinks in immobilizing terror in the face of death's awful truth. Only when the terror has done the quacks and the bravado to death can the dying sinner hear the Word of life in Christ.

Short of physical death but just as ultimately deadly, short of bondage yet just as restricting, is the death of meaning for life. Hans Kung has called "lack of orientation, absence of norms, meaninglessness, futility, and consequently the repression of morality and religious feeling" the "typical neurosis" of our age.⁴ Meaninglessness induces a certain kind of carefree attitude as life, craving for meaning at one more level, each baser than the last, cares ever less because it cannot bear to try to care more anymore. Getting gusto any way it will come does not, however, stave off the end of going around once, and so despair sets in, opening an ear to hear a word of meaning from the Author of all meaning, the Giver of life worth living.

4. Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 322.

Another category of evil which tears lives apart in our world is alienation. It destroys living by ripping us out of the proper context for human life designed not to be lived alone but in community, at home, on the job, in the community, in the congregation. Like meaninglessness, alienation may spring from forces beyond our control or from our own inability or failure to be a communal person or from the defensiveness we wish we could avoid displaying in ways which we know would drive us away, too, if we were the other person. The secure sinner may dismiss the broken relationship with an assertion of independence and a mocking of interdependence or may place blame on the other partner of the broken relationship: parent or child, employer or employee, husband or wife, friend or associate. The despairing sinner assumes the blame, properly or improperly, or no longer cares who was to blame because loneliness hurts so bad that blame is irrelevant. That hurting presages death, and that death opens the way to the birth of the only relationship which will end the most critical estrangement, the estrangement of us and our trust from our God and his Word, the leading symptom of which is the estrangement of us from ourselves.

That estrangement can arise from our sense of shame which comes from the realization that we are not in control of life to the extent we wish we were and know we should be if everything were to go well for us. Secure sinners can dismiss doing the evil which they did not want to do and failing to do the good they had promised themselves they would, with carefully honed skills of forgetting or overlooking, or finely tuned, self-deprecating yet self-excusing bravado. But we finally get disgusted with a self which fails to do what we know we should want to do. Red faces do burn like hell because our embarrassing weakness, our failure to be the perfect people we want to be, sears our insides with shame. A life conscious of such weakness will become conscious of the death that follows and of the need to hear of the promise which overcomes every weakness and failure.

Most Western Christians have generally thought of evil's assault in terms of disobedience to specific laws of God. The defiance of God which flares in doing things

which hurt others as we defend ourselves, or not doing other things because we need to defend ourselves and still hurting others thereby, is serious. It disrupts human community and the harmony which God wants each of his human creatures to experience and enjoy. Indifference to criticism, from others or from conscience, may keep guilt at arm's length for a long time, especially in a culture which has programmed its people to dismiss guilt. But guilt disguises itself easily. We want to take responsibility for ourselves and our activities. When we lie to ourselves about responsibility badly exercised, we are listening to a fool. And, particularly that close to home, we do not suffer fools gladly. So the foolishness is heightened, and it twists our innards, whether we recognize it as guilt or not. Yet we cannot admit that our guilt is guilt, for the guilty have to die. Even we fools know that. Dying fools, however, are ready to listen to the foolishness of God.

I do not wish to suggest that this list of seven forms in which evil assaults the human creature in our cultural corner of this sinful world is an exhaustive or authoritative list.⁵ I use it only to provoke you to your own forms of analysis which permit you to case the joints which God gives you to case so that you can make the hit effectively.

It is important to note that these categories for initial analysis are useful for determining where Christian conversation begins with an unbeliever at a given time. Human life under sin is far more complicated than seems to be the case when we have seven neat boxes presented to us. No sinner ever lives in just one category. We may analyze our hearer with the aid of one of these categories and hear a brokenness in the sinner's voice, and so proceed to applying the Gospel only to discover that the idolatry and/or the crisis has other dimensions, where brokenness has not set in, or which provide other

5. For a fuller treatment of this set of categories see my *Speaking the Gospel Today, A Theology for Evangelism* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1984) 83-97.

dodges and excuses to keep the Gospel and God at arm's length.

These tools of analysis are useful for beginning the conversation. Ultimately, the conversion of the new believer reaches far deeper than the external symptoms which occupy the sinful consciousness and which are more easily offered for examination to the Christian conversation partner. Ultimately, witness to God's Word convinces that the problem goes deeper than external disquiet or deprivation, deeper than internal shame or guilt over disobedience and division. Ultimately, the honest sinner comes to the conviction that doubt of God's Word, denial of his Lordship, defiance of him, has destroyed true life. But that conviction may take some time to grow. As it does, the Christian witness continues to bring the sinner to recognize the utter impotence of old gods, the utter hopelessness of old idolatries, the utter necessity of finding a new source, a true source of ultimate identity, security and meaning.

Good hit men have a number of characteristics. Foremost is patience. The hit and run approach is not for God's hit men. They are in this for the long haul. They have the patience which my Aunt Peggy displayed, not with us kids, but with my Uncle Pete, as she waited what must have been for a woman of her piety and faith fourteen excruciating long and painful years, before God brought him to faith in Jesus Christ. Some sinners may die at the rustle of a leaf, if the pressures of the law in their circumstances have prepared them for our rustle. Others may have known subconsciously that they were dead for some time and are only waiting and longing to consent to their own demise until someone comes along to offer them a safety net into which the corpse of their old way of life can fall. But others may want to hang onto their gods for dear life. We have to wait long and patiently for crisis (the Greek word for judgment) to instill despair and doubt over old gods. Sometimes we can provoke that despair; sometimes we have to wait for it to arise. It will always be painful when it comes, for we love our sources of identity, security, and meaning, and hate to see them leaving and failing us. But it is necessary for the idols to die for the sinner's sake.

God's hit men have another characteristic which mafi-osi may lack. They proceed to execute their task with meekness and gentleness. They share freely with their targets their own vulnerability, their own weaknesses and failures, their own impotence and guilt. God's hit men are not out to protect their own honor or reputation. Nor do we need feel compelled to defend the honor of God against a common enemy, the sinner. We recognize instead that the sinner, we, and God share a common enemy, sin and death, and that we come to make a hit so that new birth can take place. We do not need to be immobilized by the fear that we might not know how properly to defend God's honor; we do not need to be all that concerned with the honor of God since he was not. I should defend the honor of a God who was so little concerned with his own honor that he set himself up to be spat upon, betrayed by his own people, executed by an occupying power? Our God was concerned, to the point of dying for them, about the targets of our message, those who still live in doubt, defiance, and denial of him. Those people must be our concern, too, as we seek to bring them into death, so that they may come to life.

Enter the Midwife

The term is "new birth," not "let's make a deal." The people are called the reborn children of God, not his newly associated partners or clients. We who witness are not consultants, nor middlemen, nor facilitators. We are midwives. It mystifies me why in our culture the very people who will go to court to defend God's nature as a Creator who could do it all in six days turn around and go to church to deny that he recreates dead sinners into living children (those who believe that a human decision is the critical point in conversion). There were all sorts of commercial metaphors available to our Lord had he wanted to say that we enter the Kingdom of God as people who accept a gift or pick up a free prize or conclude a contract of mutual even if unequal obligations. "Unless one is born anew," the man said, "he cannot see the Kingdom of God." "Unless you turn and become like tiny infants, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," our God specifies. There does not seem to be any reason for lack of clarity here. Your parents did not call you to the kitchen table to discuss whether

you would give your consent to be born, to accept the gift of life. They gave it to you whether you liked it or not. Your responsibility in the matter of your birth is not even negligible.

Incidentally, the same can be said about your midwife. Midwives may be able to foul up a birth, but they bear no responsibility for the fact that a new child has life. There is no synergism of convert or of converter in God's plan.

Nonetheless, because our God works with his human creatures as creatures, with his human children as children, we are neither puppets or automatons on the one hand, nor self-sufficient and autonomous adults on the other as we are born again. We are his children. We think, we feel, we will as children. We are psychologically functioning beings, when he approaches through his Word. The Gospel is the tool which he places in the hands of us midwives. He calls on us to use it well.

Our diagnosis of the symptoms of our hearers in their sinful state will help us choose which form of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will best serve to bring this particular sinner to new life. For each form of the disease of sin has its own antidote; each corpse of a sinner has specific concerns which the Gospel comes to meet. If sinners can be divided into two categories, those who see they are dead because of the threat from without and those who see they are dead because of the threat from within, then we can also begin to refine and sharpen our use of the Gospel with two corresponding categories. These the church has supplied in its two atonement motifs, which picture Christ respectively as victor and as victim and vicar.⁶

The Gospel of Jesus' resurrection victory frees the impotent from the fear of those forces beyond their

6. Ibid., pp. 105-147. I have also found very helpful in categorizing Gospel formulations Ralph W. Quere, *Evangelical Witness, The Message, Medium, Mission, and Method of Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 44-66.

control, even if those forces still seem to be potent today. The Gospel of Easter resets our priorities so that we can see that his risen hands have and hold the whole world, even those parts of it which continue to make our lives miserable. For Easter morning dawns a clear day, and all of a sudden our hearers can see forever, because they can hear a voice coming all the way from heaven through the empty tomb.

The Gospel of Jesus' suffering and death liberates the guilty from the fear of those forces within their control, even if those forces continue to tempt and lead astray. For the sacrifice of Good Friday has consumed our guilt, washed it away into the cesspool of Christ's tomb, the one place in the universe where God cannot see nor smell. The death of Christ is the death of death, even the death the guilty know they deserve and must die.

The Gospel of Jesus is so rich, and we so often restrict it and make it seem so thin and slim. Already the prophets, such as Micah and Hosea and Zephaniah, to say nothing of Isaiah, knew how to compound the metaphors and expand the pronouncement of God's faithfulness and love. Examples abound. Zephaniah closes with the pronouncement that the fears of God's people no longer need debilitate them, for God has taken away the judgments against us and cast out our enemies. Yahweh is in our midst as a warrior who gives victory, rejoicing and renewal to his people. The celebration of the presence of God is bred by his promise to remove disaster, to deal with oppressors, to save the lame and gather the outcast, to transform shame into praise, and to bring us home (Zeph. 3:14-20). Micah piles up the expressions of Yahweh's good news at the end of his book: God pardons and passes over transgression; he puts away his anger and delights in steadfast love; he has compassion and treads iniquities under foot; he casts out sins into the depths of the sea and faithfully delivers upon his promise to love us steadfastly (Micah 7:18-20; cf. Hos 14). In the life and death and resurrection of our Lord many more expressions and metaphors arise with which we can make clear God's love in Jesus Christ.

For those who live in dread of forces greater than themselves, God's cosmic, graveshattering, earthshaking

victory proclaims a new age born out of the womb of Jesus' tomb, even if it is still abirthing in our lives. For those who live in bondage Jesus breaks chains and opens prison doors. To those who stand in terror of death Jesus promises that life in him is not just "just going around once" but is rather going on forever. For the meaningless existence Jesus comes with the assurance that human life was worth his incarnation and death, and that life is worth living because God calls us to serve him by providing for the needs and fulfilling the humanity of those whom he has placed around us. For the estranged, alienated, and lonely Jesus comes to reconcile, to restore the most important of all human relationships, that with God, and thereby offer hope and power for the restoration of other human relationships as well. For those ashamed of their performance in life Jesus comes to assure that he accepts us as we are and transforms us into beloved children of our heavenly Father. For the guilty he comes to forgive and acquit. The Gospel is Jesus of Nazareth, the second person of the holy Trinity; many are the ways in which we can describe and pronounce his forgiving love as we function as his midwives.

The task of speaking the Gospel in our day is larger and more complex than we sometimes think. For the conveying of the Gospel is more than conveying information --although the God of the Scripture certainly does speak sense. He does speak propositionally. But his words are not the mere words of Greek philosophy, Platonic posters pointing toward some heavenly reality. They are words with power, the power of God for the salvation of sinners. But these words do need to be understood: no easy task in our world. I do not merely mean that we must get away from theological jargon in witnessing to the Gospel among unbelievers. I mean that the basic words of God's vocabulary are not always clear in our world.

We can work with people who do not understand guilt and have transmuted guilt feelings into other forms of ulcer-breeding anxiety. But it is very difficult to begin to pronounce the Gospel on those who do not understand the two words most fundamental for dealing with our humanity: love and trust. Some years ago a preseminary student brought a young freshman into my office because

at a party the night before she had confessed to him that she did not understand the Trinity. Our conversation quickly uncovered that she did not understand the word God. She did not, she could not, believe in him. The reason became clear fairly quickly. She did not know how to trust because she did not perceive that she had ever been loved. Everyone who was supposed to have loved her had, from her point of view at least, systematically betrayed her: her parents who had cast her off on her grandparents; her boy friends and her girl friends who had used her and abused her. The whole world had taught her only to fear, to be suspicious, to reject and deny kindness and friendship. She had not been taught to be loved, or to be lovable, and so she had not learned how to love or how to trust. And so she knew not what to make of this word "God." The evangelistic task with such a person begins with long, patient, often tried and often tiresome loving in the face of repeated rejections and flight. Only when believers have patience and stamina for the long haul of vocabulary building of the most basic sort can we hope to be the midwives for people like this. We must recognize that no single believer can do such a task alone. Now more than ever before, such people demand that Christian outreach be a congregational task.

Increasingly, that is the kind of person we will encounter in this post-Christian era of ours. The wreckage of the American way of life is being washed up on the beach of the church, and with both land and church in crisis we need to work hard on new ways of living out our discipleship and of practicing the fashioning of disciples in our land. We encounter people with wide ranging backgrounds who have tried any number of systems for establishing identity, security and meaning before they have found someone who will talk about Jesus and talk his Gospel into their lives. They have learned the vocabulary of other repair shops which have failed and taken them into bankruptcy, to their old cults, their old counselors, their old creeds, their old comrades.

To such as these we must now be prepared to give reason for the hope which lies within us. Such reason is seldom logic or at least merely logic. But it is an argument or a plausible appeal which embraces the heart

of life with the promise of new life in Jesus. Few people are downright irrational; many people have a different system for making sense of their worlds, however, than mine. Such sense is made, of course, on more than just a mental level. As Christ's witness we must be ready to find our way inside our hearer's pattern of establishing both mental and emotional order and "sense" in the world to the greatest extent possible. That will then make us ready to address the symptomatic fears and terrors, disappointments and hurts, with various expressions of the Gospel. We must be ready to go beneath the symptoms to confront the root sin, their doubt, and the root emptiness, their lack of faith in Yahweh, in Jesus of Nazareth. We must be prepared to restore with his word of life--with him, with this Person, with this promise. And we must be prepared to be there as the promise takes hold, as the person elicits faith, and as the new way of life which flows from the promise and the person take shape.

There are many ways to tell the promise and pronounce the forgiveness that gives new life. The most common model in North American evangelism today seems to be one in which the climax of Christian witness comes when the believer poses the question to the hearer, "Do you then accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and commit your life to him?" That drum roll brings the spotlight's focus to the hearer, who is compelled to come into action at that point, we hope, with a resounding, "Yes!" The deal has been clinched.

Indeed, people do come to trust in Jesus Christ when they are subjected to this way of doing things. The Holy Spirit does not turn his back and stomp out of the living room when this model is followed. But he must shake his head in bewilderment at midwives who try to have the baby give birth to itself.

I suggest another model for the climax of Christian witness. It is the model which the church has used, sometimes more effectively, sometimes less successfully, for centuries as it has given witness to believers who have recognized their need to die again as sinners and be raised with Christ anew in faith. It is the model of confession and absolution.

Christian witness in its first stage is working when our hearers indicate that life can no longer be held together by the old gods, the old systems of belief. That is the most the sinner can do: the corpse can do no more than admit its inability to control or master or transform anything. The response which God has just been itching to make to the sinner can now be made. God does control every evil, even the evil of death, through his resurrection. God does master all life, for he is its Creator. God does transform sinners into saints, for he has died and risen to deal death a deathblow and to restore life.

Therefore, I suggest that the climax to our witness comes when we say to the repenting hearer, "God's power and goodness envelops your life through the blood and life of Christ," or "God loves you and has reconciled you to himself," or "Meaning for life ultimately comes alone from the God whose love for you caused him to invest his own life in our lives," or "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." God is indeed in charge as he transports the sinner from unrighteousness into righteousness, but with this kind of approach it is clear that he is in charge, that he is the recreator of life. The climax of Christian witness comes when the absolving power of God's love in Jesus Christ is pronounced (not discussed or described, as must have taken place earlier) and promised to the dying sinner, pronounced upon the corpse.

Of course, the Holy Spirit creates the response of accepting Jesus Christ as lord and Savior in the person to whom new birth is being given. Of course, psychologically this new believer commits his or her life to Jesus. But the psychological experience is really only a smaller part, a restricted point of view, within the larger theological reality of God's unconditional and mysterious recreating action. It is very satisfying to feel the thrill of accepting Jesus and committing oneself to him. It is infinitely more thrilling and comforting and edifying to be assured of God's accepting me and of his committing himself to me. When this message is given, the focus of that new life in reality is directed toward God and his forgiving, life restoring action. There is no good reason to suggest to the new convert

that the focus is on his or her acceptance and commitment by "knocking on doors."

Christian conversation begins in all sorts of places. Sometimes it begins in a living room or on a porch where strangers meet simply because one of them wanted to come to witness to the other. There are lots of lonely people in our land, who are ready to reach out for any offer of a new system of identity, security, and meaning that comes their way. Believers need to be searching for that in byways as well as highways. If indeed only twenty, or fifteen, or even ten percent of converts come to hear the Gospel and trust in Jesus through "cold turkey" calls, the need of that relatively small percentage ought to compel us to step up our efforts to find those hurting people.

But Christian conversation most often begins at work, at the gym, at school, in the backyard, over coffee, wherever God's people are. We witness where we work--and wherever else God puts us. I did not say we should witness there; as I stated earlier, we do witness there. Our colleagues on the job, our neighbors, our friends, our family all are continually receiving lots of impressions about what we value most and what drives our lives in ultimate terms. The people who know us also know what gives us our ultimate sense of identity, security and meaning.

We witness wherever our relationships design and dictate human contact. Effective witness is possible in general (the Holy Spirit is always making exceptions when he has to) in proportion to the trust levels which previous relationships have already established. For when we venture into testifying either to God's condemnation of idolatry or any of its symptoms, or when we attempt to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to bear on the very center of people's lives, we are taking their lives into our hands. Desperation can give permission to strangers to do that, but for the most part such permission is granted only the basis of a familiarity which has created trust.

Wherever the conversation begins, its aim is to recast the life of the hearer by turning that hearer to Jesus,

to a new object of ultimate trust. The impact of coming to faith in Jesus changes all sorts of things in human life. One thing it changes is a person's context. Christians live in another community than do unbelievers. They may continue to share all sorts of communities with old associates, but the center of their lives takes place within a new community, the community of the reborn. And the life of that community centers in communal worship.

Communal Worship

Therefore, as soon as possible potential converts and new converts should begin the process of integrating into their lives the congregation's central confrontation with the Word of God and its central response to that Word. For the worship service supplies, or should supply, a number of those elements which sinners need and which the Gospel brings.

Communication depends on more than words; it always rests within certain symbols and rituals. The unbeliever finds Christian words and symbols unintelligible at first because at least part of the conceptual framework within which they are cast are foreign to those outside the faith. Part of growing into the community of God's people is to learn the language and the ritual of this new group. Coming to trust in Yahweh means coming to accept a new view of the world, sometimes a view with fundamentally different presuppositions than the old worldview. If the Gospel is to be more than a veneer painted over the old conceptual framework, it will have to shake that framework to its foundations. Nonetheless, much of human culture is based upon human reason which perceives accurately God's basic shape for life. Therefore, the words which we use to express the Gospel should be intelligible to those whom we address and should not alienate people from their culture but only from its anti-Biblical elements. The same is true of the ritual and liturgical forms in which the worship of the community is placed.

One of the advantages of the common worship service is that it repeats for the new convert the basic confession and framework of the faith. Variety may be the spice of life, but routine is its sustenance. Increasingly, as

new converts have less and less familiarity with traditional Christian forms and values the very repetition of liturgical form becomes not only a reaffirmation and reinforcement of those basic values but also a source of comfort for the new believer seeking to become acclimated to the new home, the church. Some insist, of course, that repetition can breed monotony, but I think not. I have eaten peanut butter nearly every day for forty years, and I still do not find it monotonous. I like it. It does for me what I want it to do. Failure of function breeds monotony. Meaninglessness breeds monotony. Believers can tell what is monotonous for themselves, and if some religious, liturgical forms become meaningless and monotonous for us, they will be for those new people in the pew next to us, too, we can be fairly sure. But if our enthusiasm and our sensitivity convey the meaning we perceive in these forms, they will quickly become the old bedroom slippers and robe, the agents of comfort and establishers of peace and well-being, for our new neighbors in the pew as well.

Thus, the worship forms of the community must be closely enough related to the culture in which we are witnessing as to be relatively easily learnable and integrable into the life of the new convert. At the same time those forms cannot be so simple and transparent that they convey no sense of the mystery which they represent. Nor should they be so easily mastered that there is no sense given the new believer that there is growing yet to do. That sense of excitement which comes when people are not overwhelmed but tantalized by the promise of new experiences, of a new way of life, is vital for the process of setting in place deeply sunk foundations for discipleship. Furthermore, the forms of our worship must express faithfully Biblical values and the Biblical message, which will always be foolishness to Greeks of all nationalities. Yet we must be certain that the Lord, and not the forms, are the foolish stumbling block over which unbelievers must trip if they are to have the wisdom of God pondered into their heads.

Worship is the key place in the communal life of Christians where God's Word comes to bear upon them. That is its first function. God's speaking to us precedes our response; his approach to us enables us to

approach him. God's giving causes our thanksgiving. That fundamental principle of the Biblical faith must become clear to the new participant in our worship services, whether converted or still unconverted. For the sinner who seeks consolation against forces outside or forces inside the thrust of the Gospel's power into the lives of the people of God can come clear in the midst of the communal setting of the worship service in ways in which it cannot come clear in the conversation of two individuals (though the opposite is true as well). The broken sinner can be effectively drenched in the love of God, as expressed in Word and sacrament and the caring and the praising of the community, in the worship service.

Good congregational preaching should not speak to the converted as though they weekly needed to be reconverted. Too much preaching does just that, and too much preaching which does not do that descends into pious moralism rather than bringing the Gospel to Christ's people. But even good preaching to believers gives witness to unbelievers. It shows them God's law and Gospel, as applied to one sort of the human condition. It also gives them a wholesome peek into the life which they are being invited to receive.

It is also important to remember that preaching and every other part of the liturgy reach out not only to active believers and to unbelievers but also to those who believe but have fallen into inactivity in the practice of their faith. That group reminds us both of the subtle distinctions within every worshiping congregation and also of the commonality which binds believers and unbelievers in their need to hear both law and Gospel. But the inactive believer who strays or edges back into the worship service has special needs which the community is called to address, within the service as well as before and after it.

God's Word comes to us not only in spoken and written forms but also in sacramental forms. We shy away from mentioning and using baptism and the Lord's Supper in our outreach, I suppose, because the general atmosphere in our Anglo-American religious ghetto has instilled in us an un-Biblical discomfort with God's joining his Word to

sacramental elements to accomplish his saving purposes. I believe that this is a misreading of the needs and perceptions of the people of our time. We live in a materialistic culture; a material approach from God is not so hard to grasp nor so strange a concept as Anglo-American Christians, steeped in Renaissance platonism for four hundred years, seem to think. That God can come with Word and water to drown, to wash, to nourish and nurture takes no greater leap of the imagination than that he came at all in human flesh to save. That God would want to feed his people with bread-body and with wine-blood is just as plausible as the fact that he wanted to sit down with us in human flesh at all.

Furthermore, God's sacramental approach to us meets us on levels of need which human language apart from the elements do not so directly approach. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper express God's reconciling power which heals and restores not only our relationship with him but also our relationships with one another. The consoling and reorienting power of the sacraments are vital instruments for evangelization, and they ought not be laid aside in the process of Christian witness.

Simply the existence of the community is, of course, in itself a testimony to the love of God and the way in which he works, as well as a reminder that God designed us in such a way that it is not good that we be alone. Contemporary North American individualism misleads Christians too often into giving a strong impression that the Christian faith is an individual matter, but, indeed, the Biblical understanding of humanity does not recognize the existence of an autonomous and individual human creature. We live only in community, in relationship, first with our God and then with other human creatures (as well as other aspects of creation). As Christian witness draws people into a life centered in trust in Jesus of Nazareth, it must draw people into relationships with one another. That community is expressed in communal worship. Thus, participation in the liturgy is witness also. We need to cultivate that understanding among our people, and then help them move from self-consciousness to naturalness in expressing praise and community in the service and before and after it.

Community expresses itself in more than communal worship; it also expresses itself in personal caring for new believers and in efforts to help them flesh out the new faith in Jesus Christ which they have been given. As important as I believe sponsors are still in our day and age for infant newcomers to the faith, I think that it is probably even more important for new adult believers to have sponsors. These sponsors must understand that in some cases the process of beginning to grow in the practice of the faith will mean unlearning old habits and reflexes and learning new ways in which to express humanity in forms possible only to those who have been freed from threat and guilt. That repatterning of the paths of daily action can take a long time; it can involve a lot of aches and pains, for new believer and sponsor alike. But if we really recognize that God made us not to be alone, we cannot expect that sending new converts out into the world alone after they complete the pastor's class is going to do it. Every congregation should also recognize that each new believer should receive a copy of the Scriptures from the congregation (a version, preferably, which he or she does not already own) and a hymnal as well (and I would add a copy of Bo Giertz's *The Hammer of God*, the best exposition of Lutheran piety I know). Having a hymnal at home enables the believer to extend the habits of worship and bring them to deeper depth within the habits of mind and heart which express the trust that gives and drives life.

The cycle of trust and worship so bred in the home and in the congregation has a pervading influence on the life of the believer. Such trust causes us to echo and to repeat that Word of the Lord which comes through and out of our every encounter with the Biblical message and with the world to which God would have us address it. As his Word flows into the actions of our worship in daily life, in both deeds and words of witness, we will be fulfilling God's calling to us to be his hit men and his midwives.