The use of abstract terms in preaching, unless they are specified in terms of the particulars covered by them, is not communication, but "metacommunication." It is the language we use when we do not know precisely what it is we are talking about.

Abstractions in Preaching

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JONATHAN SWIFT'S famous traveller, Captain Gulliver, came in the course of his many journeys, to the flying island of Laputa, where he encountered a colony of inhabitants so taken up with intense speculations that they could neither speak nor listen without being aroused from their ruminations by a touch on the lips, if they were to speak, or a touch on the ear, if they were to listen. For this purpose of arousing them to communicate, the more affluent Laputans always kept in constant attendance a domestic servant, called a "flapper," whose business it was, when two or more persons were in company, to tap gently the mouth of him who was to speak and the right ear of him (or them) to whom the speaker spoke. The flappers carried long sticks with balloons or bladders fastened on the end to assist them in their work of goading the processes of communication.

The usefulness of such an arrangement to preachers has not been overlooked, for one can still see in the Old North Church in Boston the long sticks which were used by the deacons to prod awake those who found the hearing of the word tedious. Going to sleep in church is an addiction with a long history. Eutychus, that sleepy youth of Troas, "sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer" until the poor boy fell from the third story window "and was taken up dead." He is probably the only person on record whose fatal defenestration was produced by a sermon.

Falling asleep during preaching is the symptom of failure in communication, for which the preacher as well as the listener may be responsible. When the meanings begin to blur, the listener's attention fades and, like a driver overcome by the monotony of the road, he gives up. Irrelevance, or the failure to convey significant meaning, is a prime factor; and the analysis of this factor leads out in several directions, some of them oratorical, some homiletical, some psychological. Perhaps the most interesting (and the least investigated) is an analysis of the interdependence of homiletical and psychological factors as they bear on the process of communication. The "science" of

homiletics, traditionally wedded (quite lawfully) to theology, rhetoric, and oratory would be greatly advanced by taking psychology as a fourth spouse; and a sober research on the subject of the psychoneurotic coefficients in homiletical productions, despite the wretched title and the morbid subject, might redound to the glory of God by bridging some of the chasms not presently traversed by theology, rhetoric, and oratory. One small aspect of this research would surely cover the problem of the specific meanings of the general concepts used by the preacher in his preaching and particularly the inability of either the preacher or the listener to identify the specific meanings associated with general concepts, that is to say, the problem of abstraction.

ABSTRACT language is the language of general terms or concepts divorced from the specific or particular experiences from which the concepts were originally derived or with which they are presently connected. The fallacy of abstraction in preaching is the fault of using a terminology for which the preacher does not, or the listener cannot, supply the particular meanings or specific references.

Paul Tillich is fond of saying to his students, "You must first save words before you can save souls." Much of the contemporary irrelevance of the pulpit stems from the preacher's inability to "save" the key words of the Christian religion. What would a content analysis of the spoken words of the sermon, any sermon, reveal? How much of the "Word" gets into the words? To what extent does the word spoken mean the same for him who speaks and those who listen? And to what extent does the speaker know the meaning of the words he speaks? Can he give an operational translation of his general terms?

Students usually exhibit exasperation, frustration, and bewilderment on being asked to certify the value of the concepts of the sermon—God, sin, love, salvation, commitment, etc., by pointing to the specific experiences associated with the term. Halford Luccock used to remind preachers of the necessity to "discocoon" themselves, the necessity to unwind the terminological envelope so as to reveal the living experience which has been wrapped up in the term. He used to say that the preacher's function is to turn the ear into an eye so that what is heard may be seen. "Shut up, and point!" is a brusque command, but the preacher should be prepared to obey it.

The command, however, meets with murmuring protest or downright rebellion. "How can anybody give an operational translation of a term like God? And why does anyone need to, anyway? Everybody knows what 'God' means!" So, the term is treated as if it were too sacred to have any specific meanings, and in the place of any informative communications on the subject we get patriotically pious declamations replete with genuflections before the term itself, as if it had magical powers in its own right to put to flight the armies of the aliens by the mere utterance of the word. For example, the preacher will tell us that the subject of his sermon is "The Christian Life" (the most general subject the preacher could conceive), and that his proposition is that we should all choose "Christ's way," which is "the way of giving oneself up to God." Defining "Christ's way" as "the way of giving ourselves up to God" is, of course, to define one abstraction in terms of another without really defining either; it is the art of dodging definition, so to

speak. The sermon then comes to its full-blowing climax with a peroration which promises that if we give our lives to God we shall be living in "total perspective" and we shall be *en rapport* with the "fundamental purposes of the universe." What does it all mean? Or do we say with Gilbert and Sullivan:

> The meaning doesn't matter
> If it's only idle chatter
> Of a transcendental kind.

Religion begins, not in praising God but in identifying Him. Suppose the name "God" were taken away. Could we identify the evidences of God without using the name? Can we explain what God means to a person who has never heard the word? The inability to do this is a crippling handicap especially in these days, for when we attempt to communicate with this present age on the matter of the fundamental concepts of the faith we talk to strangers. The commonality of life and value which characterized simpler cultures cannot be presupposed today. The homogeneity of feudal or agricultural society has been atomized by the pressures of a secularized, technological age with the result that the task of identification and de-coding of abstract religious concepts weighs more heavily upon the preacher today. He must take lessons from the poets; they are persistently concerned to know the specific value of words and they are conscientious students of the art of transforming experiences into images and translating images into experiences. A poet handling the concept of God would not proceed as the preacher did; he would make it his aim to point, and to identify—as William Herbert Carruth did:

> A picket frozen on duty,
> A mother starved for her brood,
> Socrates drinking the hemlock,
> And Jesus on the rood;
> And millions who, humble and nameless,
> The straight, hard pathway plod,—
> Some call it Consecration,
> And others call it God.[1]

Poets translate their abstract concepts into specific imagery; preachers, say the critics, do not translate. "The trouble with preaching," said one, "is that in the pulpit there are too many metaphysicians who don't know how to tangibilitate!" Herbert Farmer put the point more academically when he said that "abstractness in some ways is the greatest curse of all our preaching," not because abstractions are bad but because "God comes at people, not through abstractions at all, but through persons and through the concrete situations of day to day personal life."[2]

IT IS necessary now to become more specifically acquainted with abstractions, their formation and their functions. Before anyone starts a movement to rid communication of all abstractions it would be well to note that abstractions play an indispensable role in the life of thought. The "language" of mathematics is abstract. Algebraic language, as has been said, is "what you use when you do not know what it is you are talking about," but it is not to be supposed that this is universally evil. Susanne K. Langer affirms that abstraction is the keynote of rationality:

> The power of understanding symbols, i.e. of regarding everything about a sense-datum as irrelevant except a certain *form* that it embodies, is the most characteristic mental trait of mankind. It issues in an unconscious, spontaneous process of abstraction, which goes on all the time in the human mind . . . Ab-

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1. From "Each in His Own Tongue," in the book of the same title. N.Y., G. P. Putnam's Sons.
2. *The Servant of the Word,* p. 99.

stractive seeing is the foundation of our rationality.[8]

Abstract language is thus a language of concepts, and a concept is a class term, like dog or man or religion, covering an indeterminate number of specific instances and an even larger number of particular characteristics which are deliberately forgotten or overlooked in the interest of a common form or essence. Rabbits are identified by a common form: Fur-bearing quadrupeds with long ears and short tails. Cats are likewise identified by a common form: Fur-bearing quadrupeds with short ears and long tails. The concepts of rabbit and cat may now be compared and contrasted: "A rabbit is not a cat, but a rabbit is like a cat," etc. In others words, our concepts assist us in thinking about our experiences or the objects which make up our world and they do so by ignoring the rich, even chaotic, detail of raw experience itself and concentrating upon "essential" elements. This intellectualizing of experience and the rational categorizing of it are unavoidable and necessary, but one can hardly refrain from mourning the loss of the rich particularity of the individual instance. The concept cat has none of the warm-blooded vitality which characterizes the playful feline who is somebody's pet, a real cat. The conceptualizing of life is a step in the direction of reducing life to what William James called "an unearthly ballet of bloodless categories," the triumph, and the nemesis, of rationalism. So, we may say that this process of "abstractification," this process of making abstractions by forgetting particularities, may be tolerated only if one does not forget that he has forgotten.

The preacher at least must not forget. He must be ready on demand to produce the empirical content of his abstractions; he must avoid the pitfall of treating his concepts as if they were things in themselves. "Concepts without percepts," said Immanuel Kant, "are bare, and percepts without concepts are blind."

The language of religion will make it difficult for the preacher to fulfill this duty because once religious experience is conceptualized and given a name, the temptation is to regard the name as a noun which stands for an object, having a power in its own right. We talk about sin, for example, as if it were a substance; we take the concept of sin as if it were a thing in itself, a possession which a man "has" as he might have leprosy. In reality there is no such thing as sin-in-general; there are only persons sinning—and they always sin in particular. The "nouns" of religious discourse are all of this kind. Commitment, consecration, faith, forgiveness, hope, love, mercy, self-denial, etc. are *in reality* not nouns at all; they are adjectives describing the quality of certain activities or attitudes; they are nominal in form but descriptive in function. The problem is always that of discovering the operational content, or the adjectival reference, of the abstract noun.

Concepts like Being, God, Man, Fatherhood, Sovereignty, Depravity, Salvation, and the like, are the currency of philosophy, the coinage of the intellect in the commerce of thinking about religion. These coins are worthless unless their precise value can be known, and the proper work of the intellect is not only the formation of these concepts but the accurate critical evaluation, refinement, and definition of the concept. No man can expect to preach effectively without considerable toil and

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[8] Susanne K. Langer. *Philosophy in a New Key*. N.Y.: Penguin Books, p. 58.

training in the refinement of the basic concepts of the faith, but such workshop training is not preaching but rather training for preaching. The distinctive work of the preacher is to translate the concepts of religion into living realities so that the word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

Failure to translate produces distortions or interruptions in communication, interruptions of the same kind as would be created in monetary exchanges if the precise value of coinage or collateral were to be concealed.

One does not have to resort to polysyllabic "brain busters" in order to commit the fallacy of abstraction. The imprecision and thickening fog associated with the simple word "love" proves that. "Love" has become "a worn and smudged word," as Aldous Huxley suggests, because the users of the term do not know, or do not tell, what in particular they mean by it. Again, the problem is no translation.

WHY is there such reluctance or inability to translate abstract terms? The answer to this question will be suggested, in part at least, by a consideration of the depth psychology of the communicating process, first from the point of view of the manner in which concepts are formed and, secondly, from the point of view of the manner in which concepts are used. In both the formation and the use of abstract concepts, psychological and para-logical factors play an important part. First, let us note this in the manner in which concepts take shape in the mind.

A concept, we have said is an abstraction which is formed by ignoring all but the common or "essential" elements in a number of particular instances. But what are the "essential" elements which make up, for example, the concept of love? And what determines their selection? Does love mean "giving up"—as it might mean to one who says, "Love the Russians"? Or does it mean "laying down one's life for one's friends"—as it might mean to one who wanted to fight the Russians? It is not (fortunately) the purpose of this paper to answer these vexatious questions, but only to press forward the point that *whatever* one regards as the essential content of this (or any) term will depend in large measure upon the particular bent of one's own processes of abstractification.

It has been clearly shown by Ernest G. Schachtel's analysis of "primary autocentricity" in perception that the perceiver's own feeling of need, fear, purpose, exercise a decisive influence on how objects will be perceived, and, conversely, on what aspects of the object will *not* be perceived at all. Objects are perceived from the perspective of how they serve the needs of the perceiver and how they can be used by him for some purpose, or how they must be avoided by him to prevent pain or discomfort.[4] In other words, our concept of anything is strongly conditioned by our own needs and may even be distorted by them. If my needs are dictated by unconscious forces or repressed wishes, this conditioning will affect or determine the form of my perceptions. If I harbor an intensified need for aggression, based upon a repressed hostility, this will color all concepts whose elements fall within or touch upon this para-logical field. In the case of my concept of the loving God, the concept of love will include the notion of the destruction of the enemies of God as an act of love. The following excerpt from a sermon will illustrate the point:

4. Ernest G. Schachtel. *Metamorphosis*. New York, Basic Books, 1959, pp. 167 ff.

> O Lord of the Tempest and the Thunder! O Lord of Righteousness and wrath! We pray that Thou wilt make a sign unto us! Strike down this sinner, as Thou didst Thine enemies of old, in the days of the Pharaohs! . . . Let him feel the terror of Thy sword! For all eternity, let his soul writhe in anguish and damnation![5]

These words from the fictional preacher, the Reverend Mr. Brown, show an unmistakable preference for paranoid imagery, and one may suppose that his concept of God was dictated by the pressures of the preacher's own psychological situation.

Carl Jung argued that "every religion is a spontaneous expression of a certain predominant psychological condition," and that the creeds are "codified and dogmatized forms of original religious experiences."[6] Our religious concepts are the tools by means of which we think about our religious experiences and the coins we use in the communication of our thoughts. But these coins are minted in the laboratories of our own needs and these needs may be normal, neurotic, or psychotic. If we suppose that the preacher communicating is an unloving personality, then we may infer that the specific values associated with his concept of love will be counterfeit to the same degree to which his predominant psychological condition is abnormal or neurotic.[7] If his conditioning has been that of an unloving environment he will not have had those experiences of loving care and concern which form the essential core of the term as it is used in the Gospels. His attitude will be like that of the love-deprived, juvenile son of an alcoholic father, who said to his teacher, "If God is like my father, then to Hell with God!" The point is that our general concepts are always formed out of the materials of our own experiences; what we see or do not see in a term is conditioned by our own needs and this means that in the formation of our concepts omissions or distortions may occur of which we ourselves are unaware. In the act of communication, terms are not translated or they are falsely translated because in the womb of our own experience the term was malformed. Such a consideration gives added weight to Carl Patton's observation that the making of a sermon in the last analysis is the making of a man.

THE SECOND aspect of the problem of abstraction from the point of view of depth psychology is the manner in which concepts are used. The motivation to abstractionism in communication is mostly a concealed motivation. The exasperation which students feel when they are invited to "shut up and point" is not a rational impatience at being interrupted; it is more like a despair born of helplessness. They do not know what experiences are being synthesized by their abstract concepts and they are not aware of the experiences which are being called out in the listener by these concepts because both are truly hidden; both are unconscious. Our verbal communications are like the ripples which move on the surface of the stream; they are related to deeper unseen, non-verbal undercurrents of an emotional kind which travel beneath the surface. Modern dynamic or depth psychology has

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5. Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee. *Inherit the Wind.*

6. Carl Jung. *Psychology and Religion.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938, p. 108 & p. 6.

7. Cf. Bonaro Overstreet, "The Unloving Personality and the Religion of Love." *Pastoral Psychology,* Vol. 4 (1953), No. 34, pp. 14-20.

long been familiar with communication at two levels, the levels of the conscious and the unconscious, the former being more public and rational, the latter being more private and emotional. The levels are not really separable any more than the surface of a stream is separable from the sub-surface. Unconscious factors are probably present in all our communications.

To apply the insights of depth psychology to homiletical productions is to complicate the study of communication infinitely, but to fail to do this is to miss the central issues altogether, for in the hearing of the Word the central issue is the problem of meaning.[8] The defenders of religion are likely to hold that religion is one of those deep indefinable experiences, like love and happiness, which poetry can perhaps catch but which logical analysis can never take captive. Peter Marshall cautioned against those who want everything explained, and indeed one must acknowledge that there is an infinite sea of mystery surrounding our little islands of knowledge even after we have ventured as far as we can; but the unknown should be a challenge to exploration, not a barrier to it.

Abstractions are the theological "drift-words" of the sermon. When words become detached from the experiences which originally gave them birth and meaning they are like a derelict ship, crippled and adrift, a plaything of the tides. These words are chosen, not because they identify specific objects or experiences but because they call out responses which are not consciously identified either by the user or the hearer. They are "shibboleths" or catchwords used, not for imparting information, but for identifying members of the party, as the Gileadites used the word "shibboleth" at the Jordan fords (*Judges* 12). Abstractions serve admirably as the instruments of both revelation and concealment: they convey no public information, but they do create a fellowship of feeling. They are emotional call-words which circulate without certified content, not because they have no content but because the content is unspeakable. The abstractions are the symbols of "unspeakable" things. The user does not know what it is he is talking about.

John Wisdom pointed out, in his often-quoted essay on "Gods,"[9] that the line between using a name because of how we feel and because of what we have noticed isn't sharp. In other words, the distinction between facts and feelings is a distinction hard to make, because feelings are facts. Therefore, abstract terms, in the form of nouns which ostensibly point to objects or events, may in reality point to feelings, their true focus being not outward but inward. When the specific content is not, or cannot be supplied, the supposition is that the abstraction is being used as a private-line call word to foster unconscious private communication between persons who share the same private worlds.

Students of psychopathology are familiar with the manner in which schizophrenics use language both to communicate and to conceal. The highly symbolic and stilted manner in which words are venerated, the use of speech to confound the critical faculties, the "autistic" and "circumstantial" character of the meanings are symptomatic of the fact that the schizophrenic uses

[8] Cf. Antony G. N. Flew & A. MacIntyre. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology.* London: S.C.M. Press, 1955. Ch. 3: "Can Religion be Discussed?"

[9] John Wisdom. *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis.* Philosophical Library, 1953.

language, not as an instrument of public communication, but as a means of personal and private defense—usually as a means of counteracting his feelings of insecurity among other people.[10] Schizophrenics major in abstractions; they become fascinated with all sorts of esoteric cults, fads, and mystical systems of thought; they manifest an eager curiosity about complex religious and philosophical problems.[11] Their terms are intensely significant to them, but they hardly convey meaning to an outsider.

ANALYTIC studies of communication in schizophrenia and in clinical preaching would probably converge on one point: the more abstract the terminology of the communication, the more private the meaning. It would not be correct to say that abstract terms communicate no meanings; the point is that they are often used to insinuate restricted and specialized meanings of a personal and paralogical kind. They invite sympathetic responsive vibrations in the listener of a kind similar to those in the speaker when the listener is tuned to vibrate on the same frequency as the speaker. This probably explains why some preachers can preach effectively before some groups and in certain areas but not in others. They are *en rapport* with the unconscious, nonverbal needs of those who give them a favorable hearing. Their communications may be like the visions of Ezekiel or the ecstacies of St. Teresa, who talked noetically about "the intellectual vision of the Trinity in the Seventh Habitation," but there will always be those who "understand"—and those who can't.

Here, for example, is a sermon on "Obedience." Its proposition is that perfect obedience to the Holy will of God is the essence of the Christian life. The sermon tells us that we must obey, as the faithful Mohammedan obeys—with his face in the dirt. Obedience is surrender to the will of one who has the right to command—as a good soldier obeys his commander: "Not theirs to reason why . . ." The sermon tells us *that* we must obey; it does not tell us *what* we must obey. That is to say, the key concept, obedience, is left abstract.

It might be supposed that this sermon does not communicate, and to most of the listeners it did not. But to some it communicated very well. And what did it communicate? It successfully set forth the attitude of absolute surrender and insinuated the master-slave relation as the characteristically Christian relation. Now, this is peculiar doctrine in the light of the fact that Jesus expressly repudiated it: "No longer do I call you servants (slaves), for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends . . ." (*John* 15:15). The Word of the Gospel did not come through the words of this sermon, but the unconscious needs (and problems) of the preacher did. Compulsive surrender and compulsive dependence are the structuralized forms of masochistic impulses. Uncritical dependence upon a structure of law or authority (conformity) is symptomatic of self-alienation, the mark of the "other-directed" person. The evils of this orientation we can readily see in the mass-mindedness of totalitarian states or in the depravity of the master-slave relation, but we do not so readily see it in its abstract and disguised form in the sermon.

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10. Cf. J. S. Kasanin. *Language and Thought in Schizophrenia.* University of California Press, 1955.

11. Cf. Kenneth M. Colby. *A Primer for Psychotherapists.* New York: Ronald Press, 1951, p. 145.

Psychological analysis then will help to reveal the hidden meaning behind homiletical abstractions, and it will help us to understand how a sermon which defines nothing in particular may nevertheless communicate meanings of which both the preacher and the listener are unaware. Abstractions so used are best understood as a mating call which will be received by others whose emotional needs and patterns are congruent with those communicated. In the sermon above, the religion of self-alienation or the religion of structuralized helplessness comes in under the protection of the umbrella term, obedience, which is left abstract because the undefined aspect of the term relates to private meanings of which the user is unaware —and which he would probably repudiate if they were called to his attention. When religion is used in support of what Tillich calls "pathological self-reduction" it usually happens that abstractionism is the tool of this morbid operation. This is natural, for abstract language is the language we use when we do not know precisely what it is we are talking about.

The use of abstract terms in this manner is properly referred to, not as communication, but as "metacommunication," to borrow a term from Gregory Bateson.[12] Communicative statements about a subject are to be distinguished from metacommunicative statements about one's own position. Metacommunication refers to the relationship between the persons who are communicating and it depends upon "the qualities and degrees of their mutual awareness of each other's perception."[13] The cues and clues in metacommunication are carried on the stream of verbal communication in the expressive movements of the speaker, the inflection of the voice, and the bodily behavior, all of which (in metacommunication) are unconscious. Accompanying these clues are the verbal forms, the abstract concepts which are the rationalized or intellectualized forms of unconscious needs and feelings. The abstractions are the servants of the hidden agenda.

COMMUNICATION through the use of general or abstract terms is a natural and useful habit of the mind so long as general concepts can be specified in terms of the particulars covered by them, but a common fallacy in preaching is to neglect such specification with the result that communication is interrupted or distorted. The difficulty in overcoming abstraction is seen both in the genesis and in the use of abstractions, matters on which depth psychology sheds light by showing how our personal needs influence our perceptions, thus privatizing our concepts, and by showing how we use concepts to communicate our needs, thus privatizing our communications.

Historically, the Church has always struggled to deliver the Gospel from the abuses of privatized communications. For this reason glossolalia was judged to be no instrument of edification in the early Church. "In the church," said the Apostle, "I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." The invitation to avoid abstractionism is a renewal of the Apostle's injunction to give up speaking in unknown tongues.

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12. Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson. *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. W. W. Norton, 1951. See esp. Ch. 7: "Information and Codification."

13. *Ibid.*, 209-10.