Preaching in a Different Key

Preaching the Gospel According to Paul

Frank J. Matera

A decision to preach the Gospel according to Paul on Sundays led this Pauline scholar and author to realize that this required preaching “in a new way, in a different tone, in another key”: one more explicitly theological and conceptual, that applies the saving death and resurrection of Jesus to the concrete particulars of a community’s life.

Some years ago I decided to recycle my old homilies. After all, I had been preaching from the Lectionary, primarily from the Gospels, for more than thirty years, and I had written out and kept most of my homilies. And so, instead of writing new homilies, I began to revise old ones. My homily preparation became easier, and in most instances the homilies were better for the revision. But as time passed, I began to feel uncomfortable about recycling old material. Consequently, I ended the experiment and began to compose new homilies once more.

On one particular Sunday, after preaching what I thought was a rather insightful homily, I decided to compare it with what I had said in earlier years. To my amazement and embarrassment, the homily I had written was essentially the same homily I had given three years earlier! It began with the same example that I thought was so original. It developed the same theological theme that I thought

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was so insightful. And it made the same hermeneutical leap from text to life that I thought was so exciting. I immediately realized that having preached for more than thirty years, I had fallen into a pattern when preaching from the Gospels. I was focusing on the same themes, using the same examples, applying the text in the same way. It was then that I decided to make myself preach on a regular basis from the Pauline epistles, whether I wanted to or not.

At first I found this to be a more difficult task than I anticipated, even though I had been teaching the Pauline letters for several years. The problem, as I soon discovered, was that the pattern I developed for preaching from the Gospels did not fit the Pauline epistles. Try as I might, I could not pour new wine into old wineskins. I had to preach in a new way, in a different tone, in another key. I had to preach the Gospel according to Paul rather than the Gospel according to Mark, or Matthew, or Luke, or John.

Some months later, when I finally returned to preaching from the Synoptic Gospels, I still found myself preaching in a Pauline key. Phrases and concepts from Paul’s letters now entered my preaching more freely and more often, and I was now interpreting the Gospels in light of Paul’s Gospel—not that there is another Gospel, as Paul reminds us in Galatians. But as I hope to explain, the Gospel can and should be preached in a different key, at least from time to time.

Two Kinds of Preaching

Preaching from Paul reminded me that the Gospels are narratives suited to a particular kind of preaching that is narrative in its mode. For example, on a given Sunday the congregation hears a portion of the Gospel narrative—a parable, a miracle, a controversy story—and in most instances the preacher retells that story in a way that draws out its contemporary significance and spiritual meaning for the congregation. The result is a narrative or story-based preaching that is appropriate to the Gospels and focuses on certain themes such as the kingdom of God, the power and the authority of Christ, the need to imitate the example of Jesus.

But when I turned to Paul I was quickly reminded of what I already knew: that Paul’s writings are not narratives but letters. And because they are letters, they represent a lively conversation between Paul and his converts in which the Apostle addresses problems and questions posed by his congregation. For example, will the dead share in the Lord’s parousia if they die before he comes? Has the parousia already taken place? Can we eat food sold in the marketplace that has been sacrificed to idols? What is the most important spiritual gift? Will there be a resurrection of the dead? With what kind of body will the dead be raised? Must Gentiles be circumcised and do the works of the Mosaic Law to share in the benefits of Israel’s Messiah?
Because Paul's writings are letters, preachers must approach them in a different way than they approach the Gospels. Most importantly, they must pay careful attention to the manner in which Paul applies the Gospel of Christ's saving death and life-giving resurrection to the particular circumstances of his congregations. Then they can and must do something similar for their own parishioners, even when the problems Paul addresses seem foreign and strange to them. For the way in which Paul arrives at his conclusions is as important as the answers he provides.

For example, Paul always begins by reflecting on what he sees as the central event of the Gospel—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—in order to draw out the implications of that event for the life of the Christian community. He does not simply order his converts to avoid immorality. Rather, he reminds them that the event of Christ's saving death and life-giving resurrection has made them members of a sanctified community. Consequently, it would be incongruous for them to engage in any immorality since their bodies now belong to Christ. Put another way, instead of simply telling his converts what to do, Paul reminds them who they have become in Christ so that they will act according to their new status in Christ.

Preaching the Gospel according to Paul, then, is different from preaching the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. On the one hand, it requires a more explicitly theological approach that is modeled after Paul's own preaching, whereby the Apostle applies the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection to the particular circumstances of the Christian life. Such an approach necessarily deals with questions of sin and salvation, reconciliation and redemption, the destiny of the individual and yes, the future of the world. On the other hand, preaching from Paul is eminently pastoral, provided that the preacher is guided by Paul's singular question: What does the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection require in this particular instance if the church is to remain faithful to its election? What must the Christian do in this particular instance in order to witness to the Gospel of Christ? What does it mean in this particular instance to live the Gospel of Christ's saving death and life-giving resurrection?

Preaching the Gospel according to Paul, then, is preaching in a different key: a key that is more explicitly theological and conceptual than narrative, a key that gives tonality to the great issues of the Christian faith. In the remainder of this
essay, I will consider four of these issues and offer some suggestions as to how they can inform our preaching today, even when we are not preaching from a Pauline text. The issues are (1) the human condition apart from Christ; (2) the new situation inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection; (3) the shape of the Christian life under the guidance of the Spirit; (4) the hope of the Christian life in light of Christ’s resurrection.

The Human Condition Apart from Christ

Paul believes in the goodness of God’s creation (1 Cor 10:25-26), but he has no illusions about the human condition apart from the power of God’s grace. He is firmly convinced that there is something awry in the world. Something has gone wrong. In light of what God has done in Christ, Paul has come to the firm conviction that all have sinned. All have gone astray. Therefore, all are in need of redemption. Put another way, Paul believes that apart from Christ humanity finds itself in a predicament of its own making from which it cannot extricate itself. Apart from Christ, humanity is under the domination of a power and force that frustrates every human attempt to do God’s will, even by those to whom the law of God has been revealed. Paul calls this power “Sin.”

In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul describes the human predicament apart from Christ. He begins with a description of the Gentile world, and he notes that even though the Gentiles knew something of the glory of God from the created world, they preferred to worship the creature rather than the Creator. This refusal to acknowledge God as God—idolatry—is at the root of all other sins. It is the original sin.

Turning to the Jewish world, Paul notes that even though the Jewish people had the advantage of the Mosaic Law, which allowed them to know God’s will, and even though they possessed the sign of circumcision, which identified them as the people of the covenant, they were no better off. And so, toward the end of chapter three, Paul concludes with this dismal assessment:

There is no one who is righteous,
not even one;
there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.
All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;
there is no one who shows kindness,
there is not even one (Rom 3:10-12).

Later, in chapter five, Paul provides a further analysis of the human condition, contrasting the disobedience of the first human being, Adam, with the obedience
of the new human being, the Christ. Paul affirms that Adam’s transgression introduced the powers of Sin and Death into the world so that one transgression brought many to death. In effect, Adam’s transgression inaugurated a history of sin and death that succeeding generations affirmed and ratified by their transgressions. Consequently, humanity finds itself under the domination of Sin and Death which Paul presents as powers and forces that ultimately frustrate the ability of humanity to do God’s will, even when it knows God’s will.

It is not that humanity does not know what God requires. Paul is quite insistent that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (7:12). But apart from the power of God’s Spirit, human beings belong to the realm of what is mortal and corruptible, what Paul calls the realm of the flesh. And so, speaking in the voice of unredeemed humanity, he says, “I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom 7:14-15). According to Paul’s analysis of the human condition, humanity is in a predicament of its own making from which it cannot escape. It is enslaved to the powers of Sin and Death that Adam introduced into the world by disobeying God. Humanity, apart from Christ, finds itself in the situation that later theology would call “original sin.” Put another way, human beings cannot save, justify, or acquit themselves before God. They cannot reconcile themselves to God.

Paul comes to this conclusion about the human condition on the basis of what God has done in Christ, reasoning in this fashion: if there was nothing wrong with the human condition, then why did God send his Son into the world? The fact that “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4), shows that humanity was in a predicament from which only God could free it. To put it in Paul’s words, “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (Gal 2:21). For Paul, God’s act of salvation in Christ is the light that reveals the darkness of the human predicament. In that light, Paul looks back at his former righteousness under the Law and proclaims, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ” (Phil 3:7). In other words, it is in light of what God has done in Christ that Paul understands his former life and the human predicament.

Paul’s analysis of the human condition plays a central role in the Gospel he proclaims, and in the Gospel we should preach. He is firmly convinced that Christ “gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4). In Ephesians he (or another writing in his name) writes:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, . . . were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:11-13).
In Colossians, Paul proclaims that God “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13). He reminds his audience that once they were “estranged and hostile in mind” toward God, “doing evil deeds,” but now they have been reconciled to God (Col 1:21-22). In a word, Paul views the human condition apart from Christ in terms of sin and alienation. Apart from Christ, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Apart from Christ, humanity lives in a realm of darkness of which it is not even aware (Eph 5:8). Apart from Christ, humanity is destined for judgment and wrath (Rom 1:18; 2:5; 1 Thess 1:10).

If contemporary preachers are to proclaim the Gospel according to Paul, they must make a similar analysis of the human condition for their own day, first for themselves and then for their congregations. If contemporary preachers do not understand the power Sin and Death exert upon their own lives and the lives of their congregations, they will not be able to preach the Gospel according to Paul. If contemporary preachers do not believe that humanity, apart from Christ, is in radical need of God’s saving grace, they will not be able to preach the Gospel according to Paul. If contemporary preachers cannot see that there is something amiss in the world apart from Christ, they will not be able to preach the Gospel according to Paul.

Preaching the Gospel according to Paul means beginning with, and analyzing, the human condition in light of what God has done in Christ. In light of the Gospel, the preacher must then ask: What is the situation of humanity when it stands apart from the grace of God? How do the powers of Sin and Death exert their control over humanity today? What must the congregation know about its own situation so that it will not fall back into the realm of the old Adam, the realm of Sin and Death, the realm of the flesh? In a word, one who preaches the Gospel according to Paul must be a shrewd interpreter of the human condition.

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God’s New Creation in Christ

Since Paul’s analysis of the human situation is intimately related to his understanding of what God has done in Christ, it is important to be clear about what God accomplished in Christ. What is new about the human condition now
that Christ has appeared? What has changed? Paul employs a number of concepts to explain the significance of the Christ event. For example, he speaks of justification, salvation, reconciliation, expiation, redemption, freedom, sanctification, transformation, a new creation, and glorification. I will limit myself to justification, reconciliation, and salvation.

**Justification**

By justification Paul means that God acquits us so that we now stand in the correct and proper covenant relationship to God. A legal term, the verb “to justify” means to declare that the defendant in a court of law is innocent of the crime of which he has been accused. The defendant is justified because the judge proclaims that the defendant stands in the correct relationship to the law. When transferred to the realm of our covenant relationship with God, the concept of justification means that God acquits or justifies us, declaring that we are innocent and that we now stand in the proper covenant relationship to God.

But what is the basis for this justification? Why do we now stand in the correct and proper relationship to God? Paul’s answer can be summarized in this way. Since we are incapable of justifying or acquitting ourselves before God, God has freely and graciously acquitted us through the saving death and the life-giving resurrection of his Son. Our response to this gracious act of justification, says Paul, is “the obedience of faith.” Rather than assert ourselves before God, we are to entrust ourselves to God through faith in Christ. This faith is an act of obedience, a total surrender of our lives to God.

Paul affirms that all is grace. Therefore, we are justified on the basis of trusting faith in Christ rather than on the basis of doing the legal prescriptions of the Law. And so he writes in Galatians,

> We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law (Gal 2:16).

**Reconciliation**

When God justifies or acquits us, God reconciles us to Godself. That is to say, we are now at peace with God because God has reestablished the covenant relationship we ruptured. God, of course, does not need to be reconciled to us since God always remains faithful to God’s covenant promises. Rather, it is we who need to be reconciled to God. Humanity, however, cannot reconcile itself to God. It cannot decide that it will repair the covenant relationship it has ruptured. This is why God freely and graciously does what we cannot do. God graciously reconciles us to Godself.

Paul explains this theology of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians when he writes:
So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconcileing the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:17-21).

The final phrase—“he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”—points to the divine interchange God has effected in Christ. The phrase does not mean that Christ became a sinner or that Christ was sinful. Rather, it is Paul’s way of saying that Christ stood in our place so that we might stand in Christ’s place before God. Whereas formerly we were at enmity with God, we now stand before God with a righteousness and holiness that comes from God.

The present situation of the Christian, then, can be summarized in this way. We are already justified, we are already reconciled to God, not on the basis of anything we have done but solely on the basis of what God has done for us in Christ. Because we have already been reconciled and justified to God, we now belong to God’s new creation in Christ. We live in the sphere of Christ, the New Human Being, the New Adam, the one who lived in perfect obedience to God. And so Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). Because Christians have been baptized into Christ, they are part of this new humanity that Christ inaugurated by his obedient death on the cross. Consequently, whereas the old humanity found itself incapable of carrying out God’s will, because it was under the domination of Sin and Death, the new humanity fulfills the just requirement of God’s law, not by its own power, but by the power of God’s Spirit.

**Salvation**

According to Paul, the present situation of believers assures them that they will be saved. And so he writes in Romans:

Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Rom 5:9-10)

In these verses Paul makes an important distinction between justification and reconciliation on the one hand, and salvation on the other. We are already justified and reconciled, but we are not yet saved. However, because we are already justified and reconciled, we can be confident that we will be saved. Christians then
live between what has already occurred and what has not yet happened: they are already justified but not yet saved; already reconciled but not yet saved. The fullness of salvation then is a future reality that will only be accomplished at the parousia and the general resurrection of the dead.

I have already said that those who preach the Gospel according to Paul need to understand the human condition apart from Christ. Now I must add another element. Those who preach the Gospel according to Paul must have a profound appreciation of God's grace in their lives and in the life of the world. They must proclaim that they do not and cannot justify and reconcile themselves before God. They must communicate that they are incapable of saving and redeeming themselves by what they do, be it their good works, their career, or their life's accomplishments. To preach the Gospel according to Paul is to have a profound sense that all is grace, and apart from God's grace there is only Sin and Death. To preach the Gospel according to Paul is to summon people to faith and reliance upon God, and upon God alone.

This Gospel clashes with many of the values of contemporary society, which judges people on the basis of what they do and accomplish in their life. For example, society deems that the most successful person is the most productive person. It judges people on the basis of what they do rather than on the basis of who they are. Now Paul could have produced a rather impressive curriculum vitae. After all, he established Christian congregations in a good part of the Mediterranean world. But his call and conversion on the Damascus road taught him that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, . . . what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27). Consequently, he affirms that Christ is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption (1 Cor 1:30). To preach the Gospel according to Paul then is to proclaim that we are justified by God's grace through trusting faith in Jesus Christ, that God has reconciled us to himself, thereby assuring us of future salvation.

The Shape of the Christian Life

Just as Paul's analysis of the human situation apart from Christ is closely related to his understanding of what God has done in Christ, so his proclamation of this Good News is intimately associated with his understanding of the moral life. The shape of the Christian life is determined by what God has done for us in Christ. Because we are a new creation in Christ, we can and must live in a way that corresponds with our status as a sanctified people who have been elected by, justified by, and reconciled to God.

Unfortunately Paul's teaching on justification by faith has often been distorted and misunderstood, as if the Apostle were unconcerned about the moral life. But this is hardly the case. Although Paul affirms that no one will be justi-
fied in God’s sight by doing the deeds prescribed by the Law (Rom 3:20), he is quite insistent that those who have been justified and reconciled must live a morally good life. For example, in Romans, after explaining what he means by justification by faith, Paul begins his moral exhortation in this way:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:1-2).

In a similar vein, after defending his Law-free Gospel to the Galatians, he exhorts them:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another (Gal 5:13).

In both instances Paul expects those who have been justified to live a life that corresponds to their new status. What then is the relationship between Paul’s moral exhortation on the one hand, and his insistence that a person is justified by faith, rather than by doing the works of the Law, on the other?

For Paul there is an intimate relationship between who we are and what we do. If we belong to the old humanity of Adam, the realm of the flesh, then we will inevitably do the works of the flesh. But if we have been incorporated into the new humanity inaugurated by Christ—the realm of the Spirit—then we will be led and guided by the Spirit, and the Spirit will produce its singular fruit in us. Notice I did not say that we will produce the fruit of the Spirit. Rather the Spirit will produce its singular fruit within us, which Paul describes as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

In other words, the morally good life is a gift of God’s grace and an act of worship. Those who have been justified and reconciled to God are no longer condemned to being conformed to this age because they are no longer under the rule of Sin. Because they have been transformed by Christ, they can discern God’s will and do what is pleasing to God through the power of the Spirit at work in their lives.

This is why Paul tells the Thessalonians that God’s will for them is their holiness (1 Thess 4:3). This is why he exhorts the Philippians to be blameless and innocent in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:15). This is why he begins his moral exhortation in Colossians, “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). This is why he says to the Ephesians, “Be imitators of God, as
beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2). For Paul the morally good life is a vocation that flows from the new creation God has effected in Christ. The justified fulfill what the Law requires, not through their own power, but through the power of God's Spirit at work in them.

An essential aspect of preaching is to exhort people to live a morally good life. There is a difference, however, between a moral exhortation rooted in the Gospel of justification by faith and a moral exhortation that is merely moralism. Moralism tells people what to do. It presents them with rules and laws and little else. Moral exhortation rooted in the Gospel first reminds believers of their status and dignity in Christ. Only then does it summon them to become what they are in Christ.

To preach the Gospel according to Paul is to remind people of the power of the Spirit already at work in their lives. To preach the Gospel according to Paul is to trust in the presence of the Spirit and summon people to live in accordance with the new humanity established in Christ. To preach the Gospel according to Paul is to root the moral life in Christ's redemptive work. This is a different kind of preaching than most congregations hear today, but it is central to Paul's Gospel. For if there is no relationship between the moral life and Christ's work of salvation, there is no reason to preach the Gospel of Christ's saving death and resurrection.

The Hope of the Christian Life

Thus far, I have spoken of the past (the human situation apart from Christ and Christ's redemptive work) and of the present (how the Christian ought to live in light of Christ's redemptive work). It is now time to say something about the future: the hope of the Christian life, the destiny of the Christian, the future of the world.

Paul has a great deal to say about the future, not in the sense of predicting what will happen but in the sense of providing believers with something to hope for and trust in: God's final victory over Sin and Death. Paul is firmly convinced of something that we proclaim every time we celebrate the Eucharist: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. Although most of us readily believe in the first two parts of this acclamation (Christ has died, Christ is risen), I suspect we are not so sure about the third part: Christ will come again. After all, if Christ has not come after two thousand years, how can we continue to hope that he will come again?

Paul could never think in this way. For him there is an intimate connection between the resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection of the dead that will occur at the end of the ages, at the Lord's parousia (his second coming). Con-
sequently, Paul argues in this way. Since one human being has been raised from the dead, the Christ, then the general resurrection of the dead has already begun. And if the general resurrection of the dead has begun, then Christians are already living in the new age. Consequently, the parousia can occur at any moment.

Put another way, the resurrection of Christ was not an isolated event that only affected Christ. It was the beginning of the general resurrection of the dead that will be completed when Christ returns at the end of the ages. Understood in this way, Christ’s resurrection has inaugurated the new age, the final age, the age in which God will effect his final victory over Sin and Death through Christ.

From one point of view, Paul was mistaken. The parousia did not occur in his lifetime as he hoped. But even though he was mistaken, Paul was not wrong. What he says about the relationship between the resurrection of Christ, the parousia, and the general resurrection of the dead remains true. The resurrection of Christ signaled the beginning of the end, the inauguration of the new age. What Paul says about the parousia and the general resurrection of the dead, then, is a profound act of faith and hope that God’s work of salvation is not finished. To be sure, the decisive victory was won on the cross. To be sure, our sins were forgiven by Christ’s death. To be sure, we have been reconciled and justified in Christ. To be sure, we are a new creation in Christ. To be sure, we already experience the gift of the Spirit and the life of the new age. But we are not yet finally saved.

We are not yet finally saved, because we have not been raised from the dead. We are not yet finally saved, because the powers of Sin and Death have not been destroyed once and for all. We are not yet finally saved because the Lord has not returned. But when Christ comes again, the dead will be raised, and Death will be destroyed. When Christ comes again, he will hand the kingdom over to his Father, and God will be all in all. When Christ comes again, the dead will be raised incorruptible, Death will be swallowed up in victory, and the redeemed will taunt Death, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55).

Compared to Paul’s vision of the end time, the eschatological vision of many contemporary preachers is trite, banal, and anemic. Such preachers speak as if final salvation has already been achieved, as if there is no further need for a final and definitive victory over evil. They rarely speak of the general resurrection of

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the dead, and less often of the Lord’s parousia. They have nothing to say about
the future of the world, and they do not seem to realize that there is a final act of
salvation that has not yet been played out. Such preaching reduces the dramatic
events of the end time to getting into heaven.

Paul’s eschatological vision is broader and richer than entering heaven. In his
magnificent view of the end time, the whole of creation is waiting with eager
longing for the revelation of the children of God (Rom 8:19). Creation groans for
that moment of the general resurrection of the dead when Sin and Death will be
destroyed, and creation will be restored to its original harmony with God.

Paul is a realist. He understands that even though Christ died to rescue us
from the present evil age, the powers of this age are still at work in our lives and
in the life of the world. He understands that Sin
and Death will not be definitively destroyed until
Christ comes again.

Paul’s teaching on the parousia, then, is a way
of affirming that there is a final act in the drama of
salvation that is still to unfold. It is Paul’s
way of proclaiming that the last word and the
final victory belong to God. There is no place
then for pessimism in the Christian life. For if
God is for us, then who can be against us (Rom
8:31)? If the victory belongs to God’s Christ,
then who can overcome us? Paul is supremely
confident that nothing can separate us from
God’s love because the final victory belongs to
God, and we will share in that victory if we
remain in Christ.

To preach the Gospel according to Paul is to
have a vision of God’s future as rich and as
broad as Paul’s understanding of the parousia.
To preach the Gospel according to Paul is to
acknowledge that God’s work of salvation is not
finished. To preach the Gospel according to Paul
is to proclaim that the powers of Sin and Death
will not ultimately triumph no matter how hope-
less the present situation may seem. To preach
the Gospel according to Paul is to take his teach-
ing on the general resurrection of the dead and the parousia seriously. To be
sure, this is not an easy task. Nor is it simply a matter of repeating what Paul
has said. It means interpreting Paul for a new day. It requires delving into the
deepest mystery of what it means to say, “Christ will come again,” in order to
provide the Christian community with a firm basis for its hope.
Conclusion

Throughout this essay I have advocated preaching the Gospel in a different key, preaching the Gospel according to Paul. This is not to say that there is another Gospel different from the Gospel we proclaim when we preach the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And Paul's Gospel surely does not contradict what we find in those Gospels.

For example, what Paul writes about the human condition apart from God is what Jesus says about a world that is no longer obedient to God's rule, a world that no longer submits to the kingdom of God. What Paul writes about justification and reconciliation is what Jesus says in the parable of the Prodigal Son about the Father's lavish foregiveness. When Paul exhorts Christians to live their lives under the guidance of the Spirit, he echoes what Jesus says about living in light of the in-breaking kingdom of God. And what Paul preaches about the parousia and the general resurrection of the dead recalls what Jesus said about the return of the Son of Man at the end of the ages when the kingdom of God will come in glory.

But Paul says all of this in a different key. He provides us with new ways to preach about sin, redemption, the moral life, and the future of the world. He shows us how to apply the Gospel of Christ's saving death and life-giving resurrection to the problems of this world. To preach the Gospel according to Paul we must apply the same Gospel to the events of our day; then we will truly proclaim the Gospel according to Paul.

Note

1 This article is a slightly revised version of the Mertens Homiletical Lecture the author delivered at St. Meinrad School of Theology. Scriptural quotations are taken the New Revised Standard Version.