

Word perfect: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Paul can be downright annoying.

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

I laughed out loud when I first heard Martin Luther's explanation of how the Reformation happened: "While I have been sleeping, or drinking Wittenberg beer with my friend Philip and with Amsdorf, it is the Word that has done great things. . . . I have done nothing, I have let the Word act. It is all powerful, it takes hearts prisoner." When I was sitting there in Intro to Church History sessions, preaching and reforming sounded heady, or easy. And now flying under the radar of the teetotaling family in which I was reared, I drank with my friends Philip and Tom, and I anticipated how powerful the word would be in my ministry. I was even poised to answer cleverly the pastoral question, "Can Methodists drink?" The answer, of course, is "Some can, some can't."

As it turns out, whether I sleep much or little, and whether beer is involved or not, I am repeatedly puzzled over how the words I offer up in the pulpit might become *the* word. Seems like some can, some can't. Paul congratulated the early Christians for "accepting" his word, "not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God." Is this metamorphosis of my words to God's word up to the listener? My sermon's chances are ruined when they get stuck in critique mode, or when they leap to agree or disagree instead of letting the words do the word's work in them. But what is my role? How can my words have a chance to be heard as God's word?

Professors taught us to start by reading the text slowly, and in Hebrew or Greek if possible. But do we spot the word in a *hitpa'el* verb? Or in a modifying participle? Is the word revealed in the commentaries? Or are they nothing but jackhammers that dig up something under the pavement? Do I close my eyes and pray, hoping that when they open, the word will be there?

Maybe the secret to the words becoming the word isn't the words, but the silences between the words. Winston Churchill prepared his speeches carefully, including pauses and fumbings. Are my pauses and fumbings the open spaces where the

Spirit can breeze in gently and take hearts captive? Frederick Buechner suggested that preaching is “putting a sort of frame of words around the silence that is truth because truth . . . can at best be only pointed to.”

But how do we point? Where we miss out on the words becoming the word, I suspect, is when we speak sweetly: “He’s in a better place.” “Just trust God and all will be well.” “Jesus is the answer to every question.” “The family that prays together stays together.” We forget that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”—down here, not in sugarcoated pretending, but in the ache, the hollowness, the loneliness. The closer we can get with our words to the reality of mundane life down here, the closer then we will be to the word of God.

The word isn’t the antidote to life in its raw agony. The word showed itself in that flayed nakedness, in the brutally honest admission that we are flawed, mortal, wounded, downright crazy. If our words are nothing but kitsch, mere pleasantries, we miss the shadows, the ugliness—and didn’t Luther teach us that God is hidden not in the glorious, shiny glitz, but in the darkness?

Maybe we all need more sleep, or more beer. Paul can be downright annoying when he blatantly brags about “how holy, righteous and blameless was our behavior.” What minister hasn’t wanted to holler when church folk jab him with dumb remarks about cussing or drinking? But have we unwittingly earned their affectionate derision? If our words are always sunny or vapidly positive, aren’t we distancing ourselves not just from the people of God but from Jesus himself? Jesus was worldly, accused of gluttony, drunkenness and hanging around with the wrong crowd.

Maybe for our words to become the word, we need to get a life, to sit around with Philip or Tom, maybe drink a little—or whatever else might immerse us in the world so that we might be able to build a frame of words around the silence people crave where God can whisper the word. John Chrysostom said, “Let us astound them by our way of life.” He did not say, “Let us bore them with our way of life.” A piously smug life, or a tentative, hesitant, bland life, can sneak into the sermon. So can a robust life that has thought deeply about the incarnation and God’s presence in the world.

Maybe we find the words out there, in the marketplace, a coffee shop, a stadium, where people aren’t dressed for church and can speak their own true words (if we’ll

listen) about the flesh, their fears, the blessing and curse of family, the craziness, not to mention dreams, fantasies, habits and memories. The sermon, then, will dance along that elusive intersection between the truth of God, the startling news of God's ravishing presence, and the real life in which God was clothed, the mundane places where either we meet God or we don't. This kind of talk might become that frame through which together we peer into the darkness and listen carefully to the silence.