

## Preface

CONCERN FOR THE VIGOR of the Christian faith was an important factor in selecting the contents of this book: essays, addresses, and sermons given during the last decades of the previous century. The persistent question was, Is what was said in the past worth saying again, now to a new and wider audience? That question led to another: “Worth” for whom? It turned out that the readers envisioned now are probably like the hearers envisioned then.

None of these pieces was presented to audiences of mostly academics; they were given to hearers who were not specialists in biblical scholarship. Many audiences, however, included theological faculty and students, while pastors and lay folk constituted others. The sermons were addressed to various congregations.

These pieces are not a cross-section of my work; nor do they mount an argument or advocate a specific idea. The selection does, however, represent an important aspect of my vocation as a professor of New Testament: the commitment to teach also beyond the academic classroom. So the person who probably knows best whether these works from the past are worth publishing now is the reader who also ponders seriously the import of Christian faith in today’s maelstrom. The stubborn endurance of the theological issues seething beneath manifest uncertainties and conflicts, then and now, gives these diverse pieces a measure of consistency; it also suggests the book’s structure and title.

More important, if the word spoken then is worth reading now, it is because Scripture’s capacity to unmask human foibles, as well as to promise an alternative, also persists. Gathered into these pages, then, are various attempts to say a perceptive, pertinent word into one circumstance after another during momentous decades (1959–1992) when occasionally one could also glimpse something new but ill-formed aborning. While

I owe the reader neither confession nor apology for what was said, and not said, a brief comment about the stance and tone of these selections is appropriate.

Running through these speeches and sermons are four convictions, usually left unstated. (1) As the church's canon, the Bible has a dual role: it not only funds Christian thought and morals, but it also judges their inadequate and distorting forms, however well-intended or "meaningful." (2) Since faith is not reducible to belief (or believing) because it is essentially trust (or trusting), what we trust most deeply expresses our real, operative religion. (3) That being the case, our culture, too, can be read as a religious text, depicting who we are because of what we trust; on the other hand, Scripture discloses what rightly trusting the Trustworthy One enables us to be and do. (4) Between hearing the Word in Scripture and re-saying it lies the task of understanding both texts theologically, for without such understanding—not to be confused with explanation—our own words readily become mere chatter.

So, then, as a teaching student of the New Testament, I sought to illumine and address current issues as a theological exegete, without repeating what was being said already (even if I often agreed with it), and also without simply being different by being "difficult." My contribution, if any, would be to say the often unsaid, the commonly neglected, the theologically disturbing, in order to address factors and forces beneath the surface symptoms (seldom explaining what I was trying to do). Instead of exposing other people's sins, I would try to elicit selfcriticism, remembering that the gospel repeatedly brought hope into our kind of world.

The manuscripts, written as scripts for the ear, have an oral style that is retained in pages meant to be read. The style is often lean (purged of unnecessary words) so that the hearer can follow the argument more easily, and generally free of the then current "in" words, lest using them impede serious thought. In retrospect, I doubt whether even impassioned delivery would have made it easier to comprehend the theologically dense passages. In any case, apart from minor editorial changes and occasional deletions, these texts remain as given. The occasions for which they were prepared, often important for understanding better what was said at the time, are noted in the Introductions to each cluster of speeches. That I would now say some things differently, or not at all, should need no explanation. These discourses are still what they attempted to be then—echoes of the Word.