



MOCKINGBIRD MINISTRIES

"The revival in religion will be a rhetorical problem -- new persuasive words for defaced or degraded ones."

The great American novelist and playwright Thornton Wilder made this incisive observation in the midst of the Great Depression. His stray diagnosis has taken on undeniable prophetic significance in the intervening years.

Wilder is referring to religious words that have been freighted with negative association, words originally meant to be joyous and inspiring but which have instead become signposts for ways of life that are repressive, confining and guilt-inducing. Doozies like "Evangelical" and "Justification," even "Gospel," not to mention slogans like "Jesus died for my sins"; at best they've been rendered impressively quaint or irrelevant, at worst they have been turned into weapons of exhaustion and judgment. Wilder understood the devastating consequences of such a semantic crisis. With understanding for a defensive modern audience, he applied himself to devising new ways of telling the old story.

Dr. Paul Zahl found more than inspiration in Wilder's ideas; he found a summation, and he found an assignment, the product of which you are holding in your hands. Indeed, as his many books and countless sermons will attest, Dr. Zahl has devoted his life to "translating the religious dimension into gut-level, fresh terms that speak today."

But the task is more than a linguistic one. Language is only important in so far as it effectively communicates the "heart of the matter." Dr. Zahl is after the message; his interest lies in what Christianity has to offer suffering, grieving and lonely people when it comes to the deepest problems of life – the elusiveness of love and the inevitability of death, and the innumerable fears and anxieties they generate. He says, "religion fails people when it doesn't touch the essence of human nature and human healing that is rooted in the New Testament." These five talks represent a handful of his attempts at redressing Wilder's "rhetorical problem."

This is the only such footage that exists of Dr. Zahl "in action," and fortunately, it captures him at his unguarded best: free-associating and self-deprecating, scholarly and warm, provocative, personal, and best of all, uproariously funny. These talks were given in January and February of 2009 at All Saints Episcopal Church in Chevy Chase, MD (which may account for the DC-specific references sprinkled throughout). Between services each Sunday morning, Dr. Zahl held hour-long "Rector's Forums" where he would give a 30-40 minute presentation, followed by Q&A with his audience. These are five of those sessions. His formal theme was *New Persuasive Words for Defaced or Degraded Ones: Mercy, Grace & Hope in an Age of Recession*. The first four chapters of St. Paul's Letter to The Romans were the text, or springboard, from which he was speaking.

Paul Zahl received his *A.B.* from Harvard College in 1972, his *M.Phil.* from the University of Nottingham in 1974, and his *Dr.theol.* from Tuebingen in 1994. He has been ordained in the Episcopal Church since 1975, serving parishes in Manhattan, Westchester County, Charleston (SC), Birmingham (AL), and Chevy Chase (MD); and was Dean/President of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA. Dr. Zahl has written seven books; co-authored two others; and contributed numerous essays, articles, and reviews. He was a member of the International Anglican Theology and Doctrine Commission (IATDC).

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