

Dead Passivity

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Most readers will remember (some with just a trace of nostalgia) his or her early struggles to learn the difference between the active and the passive voice in English grammar, and how it finally dawned that in the active voice, the subject performs an act; in the passive voice, the subject is acted upon. Thus, "I love" is active, and "I am loved" is passive.

A good example of this distinction is to be found at the nearest mortuary. There the undertaker is active and the dead are passive. One acts while the others receive the action.

Now what is normal in a mortuary may be, and in this instance is, altogether abnormal in a church. Yet we have somehow gotten ourselves into a state where almost all church religion is passive. A limited number of professionals act, and the mass of religious people are content to receive the action. The minister, like the undertaker, performs his professional service while the members of the congregation relax and passively "enjoy" the service.

One reason for this condition is the failure of the clergy to grasp the true purpose of preaching. There is a feeling that the work of the preacher is to instruct merely, whereas the real work of the preacher is to instruct with an end to securing moral action from the hearers. As long as there has been no moral response to the instruction, the hearers are passive merely and might as well be dead. Indeed, in one sense they are dead already.