

**"It is a joy to recommend this excellent book."**

**—DAVID S. DOCKERY**

LET THE EARTH  
HEAR HIS  
VOICE

Strategies for Overcoming  
Bottlenecks in Preaching  
God's Word

GREG R. SCHARF

“I think highly of this book! Three of its strengths are biblical/theological grounding, practical exercises, and a lack of posturing. Greg Scharf takes his craft very seriously, but not himself. He models humility, zeal, and wisdom as he pastors pastors in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*.”

—**Jeffrey Arthurs**, Professor of Preaching and Communication, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Recognizing that the weekly work of sermon preparation and delivery is often challenging and even daunting, Greg Scharf draws on his years of experience in both the pulpit and the classroom to provide thoughtful and helpful instruction for students—young preachers and seasoned ministers alike. In this well-designed volume, readers are invited to envision fresh ways to develop and improve their faithful and effective proclamation of God’s Word to God’s people. By adeptly and ably addressing the major bottlenecks that so often divert preachers from their calling, Scharf offers much wisdom and ample encouragement for those who will put into practice the insightful guidance found in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*. It is a joy to recommend this excellent book.”

—**David S. Dockery**, President, Trinity International University

“Greg Scharf has written a marvelously wise book. It is both full of biblical and theological counsel for pastors themselves and laden with practical counsel on development and presentation of excellent messages. This book will instruct the beginner and refresh the seasoned pastor.”

—**Daniel M. Doriani**, Vice President of Strategic Academic Initiatives and Professor of Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Perhaps the greatest challenge to contemporary preaching is not the ever-changing nature of our audience, people’s listening ability, or even our method of delivery. Perhaps the largest hurdle to effective Word-based ministries lies closer to home: the preacher himself. In this insightful and deeply challenging book, Greg Scharf tackles head-on overlooked ‘bottle-necks’ that often stifle our proclamation ministries. With years of theological reflection and pastoral experience under his belt, Scharf offers penetrating clarity on common problems that hinder our preparation and ultimately minimize the sermon’s effectiveness. More than identifying problems, however, Scharf offers wise and accessible ways forward in thinking through sermon development. Whether you are a seasoned pastor or one entering

the ministry, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* offers judicious insight that will richly aid your homiletic endeavors and in the end be to the benefit of those who hear you speak.”

—**Malcolm Gill**, Lecturer in Homiletics, Greek and New Testament, Sydney Missionary and Bible College, Sydney, Australia

“Too often, works in ‘practical theology’ are long on the ‘practical’ and short on the ‘theology,’ or vice versa. Greg Scharf’s *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* holds the practical and the theological together, grounding coaching in the concrete tasks of preaching (exegesis, structure, illustration, application, delivery) in a rich biblical theology of preaching as the Word of God. Scharf deftly diagnoses ‘bottlenecks’ that obstruct the free flow of God’s Word through preachers, and he offers specific prescriptions to remedy and remove those blockages. Both preachers-in-the-making and seasoned shepherds who want people to hear God’s voice through their sermons will benefit from digesting this book slowly and thoughtfully, in frank self-examination and much prayer.”

—**Dennis E. Johnson**, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Many books on preaching are merely speech texts dressed up for church. Greg Scharf has given us something different. Instead of taking us over the same overworn territory, he has written a homiletics text that manages to be both theological and practical. Scharf is a preacher and a skilled teacher of preachers, so he knows the pitfalls. He writes with the theological sensitivity that you would expect from someone who has been mentored by John Stott. When Greg Scharf speaks on this subject, preachers need to listen.”

—**John Koessler**, Chair and Professor of Pastoral Studies, Department of Pastoral Studies, Moody Bible Institute

“In a richly biblical and insightful volume, Greg Scharf uncorks the bottle, polishes the glass, and celebrates good preaching! With a wealth of practical wisdom and warmth of spiritual application, he clears away those things that can hinder the effectiveness of preaching and provides immensely helpful advice for everyone who teaches God’s Word. A hugely welcome book.”

—**Jonathan Lamb**, IFES Vice President; formerly Director, Langham Preaching; CEO and minister-at-large, Keswick Ministries

“The hope of Africa, and indeed of the whole world, is to hear the voice of God in all its clarity. There is no more urgent need than this. Yet according to the Bible, God’s voice is already captured in the Scriptures and is released in a unique way when preachers do a good job in their sermon preparation and delivery. The author of *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* holds us by the hand and takes us step by step in the process of sermon preparation and delivery, helping us to deal honestly and humbly with the ‘bottlenecks’ that hinder the gushing forth of God’s Word upon his people. If you are asking, ‘Why is my preaching not having the effect that God’s Word ought to have on its hearers?’ I urge you to read this book with a torchlight on your own heart. There may yet be hope!”

—**Conrad Mbewe**, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church; Chancellor, the African Christian University, Lusaka, Zambia

“The strong contributions of *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* begin with the high biblical view of preaching presented by Dr. Scharf. Then we are helped by the identification of potential ‘bottlenecks’ to the practice of this understanding of faithful biblical preaching. Dr. Scharf then ‘delivers the goods’ by both pastorally and professionally detailing ‘strategies’ to help us to be the kind of preachers through whom the Word of God is heard today. We are indebted to Dr. Scharf for providing a tremendous amount of homiletical help that is framed by a passion for God’s voice to be heard. The book beautifully blends theological foundations and practical advice concerning biblical preaching, and the volume is laced with numerous biblical references. It is hard for me to think of any conscientious preacher who could not benefit from reading and studying *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, especially in the light of the breadth of issues addressed in this helpful resource.”

—**David L. Olford**, Stephen Olford Chair of Preaching, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee

“Robustly biblical and refreshingly practical, this book is a must-read for all who preach God’s Word. Starting from the conviction that when God’s Word is faithfully spoken, God’s voice is truly heard, Greg Scharf sets out what we need to know, believe, and do in order to be the kind of preachers through whom the earth will hear his voice. If the core conviction of this book were more widely believed and its clear strategies were more consistently practiced, preachers, preaching, congregations, and churches would be transformed.”

—**Colin S. Smith**, Senior Pastor, The Orchard Evangelical Free Church; President, Unlocking the Bible

“Greg Scharf writes with the wisdom and balance of years of pastoring and teaching. Preachers will be awed by the holy and powerful work that God has called them to do, and will find specific and realistic guidance for doing it well. This is an insightful and helpful book.”

—**Donald R. Sunukjian**, Professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership, Homiletics Chair, Department of Christian Ministry and Leadership, Talbot School of Theology

“‘Why is my preaching not powerful?’ is a question that all preachers ask from time to time. In this book, Greg Scharf both asks *and answers* this question. Having defined preaching as ‘God speaking through people to people,’ Scharf then focuses on the obstacles, or bottlenecks, that restrict the flow of God’s Word in this speaking ministry, leaving it ineffective. While such a framing of the issue sounds negative, the outcome is positive, realistic, and enabling. This is because Scharf—part sage, part seer here—works away to stabilize the reader’s faltering convictions, and then to soak them in biblical insight, before tackling each obstacle head- on and strategizing on a way forward that is marked by practical ideas and simple exercises. Moreover, the gentle and humble manner that Scharf has exhibited to his readers in the past continues to be present here. As this book works its way into the lives of preachers around the world, maybe there will be a second question on which to reflect, with gratitude: ‘Why is my preaching now powerful?’”

—**Paul Windsor**, Program Director, Langham Preaching; Lecturer in Homiletics, South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, Bangalore, India

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I dedicate this volume to my wife, Ruth,  
an astonishingly sacrificial, willing, consistent,  
and faithful servant of our Lord,  
and to our three sons,  
who support (and sometimes undertake)  
the ministry of the Word of God.



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# FOREWORD

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Bryan Chapell

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Within the pages of this book this powerful claim is made: “God actually speaks through people who speak in his name.” The claim has significant historic precedent. According to the Second Helvetic Confession of the Swiss Reformers, “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” But how can this claim be true? In contemporary settings we hear neither the thunder from Sinai nor the voice that intoned the Sermon on the Mount. Isn’t it incredibly arrogant for preachers today to contend that any sermon of theirs is God’s Word?

The humble answer lies in discerning the source of any message that seeks to present the truths of a biblical text. Paul reminded his readers that “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Human authors “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” echoes Peter (2 Peter 1:21). Thus, when the Word was given to God’s people by divinely authorized prophet or apostle, God’s people “accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13).

Human instruments that now seek to interpret and proclaim this inspired Word to God’s people can certainly err. But the frailties and faults of preachers do not change the essential nature of the treasure they steward. To the extent that their preaching is true to Scripture, God’s Word yet echoes in the church.

The way that preaching makes God’s Word present in the church is more than a physical consequence of his once-communicated words now being said in a contemporary language and received by contemporary ears—or even processed logically by contemporary minds. The words that God

once imparted by his Spirit to human authors are “not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Cor. 2:13).

The Spirit of God communicates the preached truth of God’s Word to the spirit of today’s hearers, granting them spiritual understanding and convincing them of the need for spiritual change. Working by and with the Word in our hearts, the Holy Spirit grants conviction of sin as well as convincing hearers of God’s grace in Christ. Without this work of the Spirit, those with merely physical ears do not hear the Word of God at a heart level. Even if they process the logic of Scripture, they do not receive its authority over, or answers for, their lives.

The Holy Spirit performs the convicting and convincing work of God’s Word in fulfillment of the ministry that Christ prophesied would occur in his physical absence. Jesus told his apostles, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). But this guidance is not of the Holy Spirit’s own origination. Jesus said, “Whatever he [i.e., the Spirit] hears he will speak” (v. 13). What is the content of the Spirit’s speaking? Jesus answers, “He will take what is mine and declare it to you” (v. 14).

The Spirit’s work also makes the words of Jesus a present reality to his people through ministering to our hearts the inscripturated Word declared to his inspired messengers. By these declarations of Christ, the Spirit communicates to us the truths of God. But we should also remember that these *declarations* of Christ’s truth communicated by the Holy Spirit include *descriptions* of Christ’s person. The truth of who Jesus is, as well as what he says, is the means by which the Spirit communicates to us what we must know about God.

The Bible tells us that Jesus “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3); we are given “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6); and “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). By making God known to us through his person, Christ is our incarnate Word. He is the message of God as well as the messenger of God. This is a key reason that the apostle John refers to Jesus as “the Word” (John 1:1).

The blessing of Christ serving as God’s Word to us *and* communicating his words to us by the ministry of the Holy Spirit coalesces in key scriptural passages. The apostle Peter writes, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). James similarly writes that God “brought us forth [lit., birthed us] by the word of truth” (James 1:18). Both verses

attribute spiritual life to the work of God's Word. Trying to solve whether such new birth is a consequence of the work of the inscripturated Word or the incarnate Word would be futile for the purpose of the biblical writers. Both understand that the Word *about* Jesus and the Word that *is* Jesus function together (or, perhaps better said, as one) to effect spiritual life.

This biblical perspective of the coalescence of the purposes and identity of the inscripturated Word and the incarnate Word has profound impact on our understanding of preaching. First, we should understand that the Spirit intends to use the truth of the inscripturated Word to convict and convince for spiritual transformation. For this reason, to produce spiritual fruit, we are obligated to discern as accurately as possible and proclaim as clearly as possible what God's Word says.

Second, we should understand that this discernment and proclamation are not merely matters of human intellect and eloquence. The Spirit who applies the words of Christ to the hearts of the listeners works beyond the capacities of human endeavor in the hearts of God's people. In fact, because the Spirit is revealing and applying the words of Christ, our Savior's voice is present to the hearts of believers through the proclamation of his truth.

John Calvin said this in words of almost shocking clarity: "God has chosen so to anoint the lips and tongues of his servants that, when they speak, the voice of Jesus yet resounds in them" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.5). Martin Luther had a similar perspective when he identified the church (i.e., Christ's body) as God's "mouth-house" through the proclamation of his Word.

Christ is not only the heavenly audience of our sermons, but also the ultimate preacher; he speaks to the hearts of his people by the truths preached from his Word. Thus, Paul writes with deep meaning about such ministry, "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). In physical experience, *we* are speaking; in spiritual reality, God is making *his* appeal.

By virtue of the words of the incarnate Word made present by the truth of the inscripturated Word touching the hearts of believers, Christ ministers to his people. When our preaching is true to his Word, we do not merely speak *about* Jesus to his people; we speak *as Jesus speaks* to his people. By his Word, he speaks his truth to the hearts of his people by his Spirit.

The responsibilities made apparent by these dynamics are precious and immense. Paul indicates as much when he writes to Timothy, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word"



(2 Tim. 4:1-2). Because we preach the “Word” (i.e., the truth about Christ and the presence of Christ), we have a holy charge witnessed by the Godhead.

Additionally, because we steward God’s truth and Christ’s presence as we preach, we are urged *both* to present ourselves as ones approved by God *and* rightly to handle the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). The sacredness of the “Word” we handle as we preach requires us to consider whether we ourselves, as well as the content of our message, honor the sacred voice we steward.

We honor that voice as we place no obstacles of content or character before the people who receive Christ’s Word through us (2 Cor. 6:3). Content is safeguarded through study of the Word *and* through care for the means of its effective communication. Character is communicated by concern to honor the Word (in life and speech) *and* by compassion for God’s people.

Helping us identify major bottlenecks that may restrict the flow of God’s Word to his people through preaching is the noble and compassionate goal of this book. May its readers take its content to heart that they may be effective stewards of the voice of Christ in this generation. He who perpetually grants his people his voice is honored by those who faithfully “preach the Word” today.

# PREFACE

It is easy to find fault with preaching. I can find fault in my own preaching as easily as in the preaching of others. I am not alone. Famous books have pondered what is wrong with preaching.<sup>1</sup> To adequately address our shortcomings, we who preach must go back to the basics. We must first learn to think biblically about preaching before we can pursue the practice of preaching. Once we have a solid biblical definition of preaching, the steps to preaching well become clearer. Many homiletics textbooks or popular books on preaching seem to get to praxis too quickly; yet anyone who desires to preach well will profit by first affirming a sound theology of preaching. Only then will we be able to place into perspective those tasks that all good preachers must pursue, neither minimizing them nor letting them assume too much importance.

I sincerely hope that my students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School will benefit from this attempted wedding of theology and methodology that has grown out of my teaching the introductory homiletics course *Theology and Methodology of Biblical Preaching*. Since I am writing primarily for them, as I did some years ago when I wrote *Prepared to Preach*,<sup>2</sup> a good

1. Mike Graves begins with a reminder that Harry Emerson Fosdick asked, “What’s the Matter with Preaching?” in an essay published in 1928 (*What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004]). Richard Lischer lists four results of preaching’s exclusion from theology: a lack of substance, a lack of coherence, a loss of authority, and irrelevance (*A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*, rev. ed. [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001], 1–4). Later (57) he notes: “It is as difficult to find ministers who are against biblical preaching as it is to find biblical preaching. Everyone’s for it, yet there is little agreement on the interpretation and authority of Scripture among those who profess to preach it, and by most contemporary assessments of the state of the art, biblical preaching (by which I mean more than preaching with an open Bible on the pulpit) is in deep trouble.” See also T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009).

2. Greg R. Scharf, *Prepared to Preach: God’s Work and Ours in Proclaiming His Word* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2005). Material that appeared first in that book has been incorporated here and is gratefully used by permission of Christian Focus.

deal of what I say here reaffirms what I wrote there but clarifies it, takes it further, and documents it in recent homiletical literature. I also pray that more seasoned pastors who have begun to face the weaknesses in their preaching will benefit from the analyses and strategies found in this book. Pastors and elders might find this a helpful book to read together to improve the preaching of all, especially given the requirement of 1 Timothy 3:2 that overseers be able to teach. Seasoned preachers who serve as excellent models for the next generation of preachers might also find it helpful to digest this material in order to be more intentional about mentoring their protégés.

The arrangement of this book is intentional, and I hope you will read it in the order you find here. In the Introduction, I endorse a defensible but neglected definition of biblical preaching, asking what the implications would be if we took it seriously. Next, I offer a biblical and theological rationale for the proposed definition of preaching. I then explore eight bottlenecks that restrict the flow of God's Word to God's people, devoting one chapter to each. In each chapter we will explore how the bottleneck highlights specific weaknesses in preaching that require self-examination. I also offer specific strategies for opening up each bottleneck along with exercises designed to increase both insight and skill in doing so.

Instead of trying to write a "how-to" book that offers some methods, I have tried to put a solid theological and biblical foundation under the strategies I offer so that both those who normally reject practical books as too frothy and those who read *only* such books will benefit. The former will see, I hope, that praxis need not be shallow pragmatism; the latter, that "tips on preaching" are not enough in the end. The contribution I aim to make is to provide thoughtful, clear, sequential guidance that helps preachers discover and address key shortcomings in their preaching.

A few notes on style: I am writing this book in first and second person to avoid the illusion that I, as the author, am detached from these deliberations; I am not. I care deeply about what you who read these words do with these ideas. I want to address you directly. I quote Bible passages from the English Standard Version, and when I italicize words in those texts, it is always for emphasis. I sometimes include phrases of the Greek text in a footnote when, if I were reading this book, I would check my Greek New Testament to see if the original warrants the assertion made. This provision is designed to make it easier for you to do so. I use the expressions "text," "preaching portion," "passage," and "pericope" interchangeably to refer to that part of the Bible being expounded. I often refer to those who first received the Word of God as *hearers* instead of *readers* because this

is the way they most commonly received it from prophets, apostles, and apostolic delegates.

I have tried to write succinctly and will consign to footnotes those matters that either document the source of the idea, so far as I can recall it, or point you to better and deeper discussions of the issues.<sup>3</sup> I am writing for preachers and preachers-in-training, not my professional colleagues in the classical disciplines or homiletics, but I hope that, should the latter read this book, it will ring true for them. These colleagues have written some wonderfully helpful books for preachers. I have listed just a few in footnotes and the bibliography so that you can know where to start as you dig more deeply into the subjects surveyed here. Those who know me personally will readily detect the influence of the late John Stott, my teacher, mentor, and friend, and of Bryan Chapell, whose *Christ-Centered Preaching* has also gotten into my bloodstream.<sup>4</sup> Several classic or recent books<sup>5</sup> are so helpful that one may justifiably wonder if yet another textbook on preaching adds anything worthwhile. You will have to judge whether this volume has done so. I can only tell you what has compelled me to attempt this project: the painful awareness that even among those who are deeply committed to the gospel, to the Bible, and to preaching, there are many who do not know how to get from a biblical text to a sermon in a way that maximizes faithfulness and achieves powerful and genuine transformation.

3. In this stylistic decision, my teacher Robert Coleman, who would later be a colleague, provided the inspiration and example in his classic *Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1963).

4. This is a required text for Trinity homiletics students and is cross-indexed below.

5. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); Darrell Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God's Transformation of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon: A Practical and Theological Guide for Bible Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson, eds., *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching in Honor of R. Kent Hughes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); J. Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching: Creating Sermons That Go Beyond the Superficial* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009); Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned Matthews, *Text-Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010); Daniel L. Akin, Bill Curtis, and Stephen Rummage, *Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011); Douglas D. Webster, *Text Messaging: A Conversation on Preaching* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2010); Michael P. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); Jason C. Meyer, *A Biblical Theology of Preaching* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to all those from whom I have learned; I hope they will not be offended but rather affirmed if I offer unattributed some ideas of theirs that are now so deeply imbedded in my own thinking that I imagine they originated with me.<sup>1</sup> My graduate assistant, Madison Pierce, has helped repeatedly with research, editing, and documentation, and in many other ways. Kristen Brown helped with editing and offered valuable correctives, as did William Hong. My friends and colleagues Bryan Chapell, Adamson Co, Malcolm Gill, Pieter Kwant, Kenneth Langley, Steve Mathewson, and Paul Windsor have kindly read earlier versions and made useful suggestions, many of which I have heeded. Jonathan Menn, with his lawyer's eye and missional perspective, was exceptionally helpful in this regard. Jeremy Mann kindly compiled the cross-reference to *Christ-Centered Preaching*. My wife, Ruth, has once again offered generous, helpful, and cheerful support in countless ways. The Regents, Senate, and administration of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School freed me for a semester from classroom teaching and other leadership responsibilities to write what I have been teaching in class. My friends at Langham Preaching, students at TEDS, and eager learners in other parts of the world have asked questions and offered comments and suggestions on the material that have helped me spot gaps and mistakes and make things clearer.

I thank the living God who through his only Son, our Lord Jesus, gave me new life by the power of the Holy Spirit and called me to a ministry of the Word. My prayer is that he will be glorified when preachers and those

1. When I edited and abridged John Stott's classic book on preaching, *Between Two Worlds* (see John R. W. Stott with Greg Scharf, *The Challenge of Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015]), for Majority World readers, I was amazed at how many ideas that I thought were mine came from Stott. Having taught from the books of Bryan Chapell for more than a decade, I have also internalized many ideas from him.

who support, encourage, and train them use these materials or some thought or practice in them to equip saints for the work of ministry—specifically the ministry of the Word.

# INTRODUCTION

Suppose that J. I. Packer, an influential twentieth-century British theologian, is right when he writes:

Christian preaching is the event of *God himself* bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction through the words of a spokesperson.<sup>1</sup>

What, then? If God himself speaks, if his voice is heard when a preacher lets the Bible dictate the content, tone, and aim of the sermon, its down-to-earth implications, and how it points to Christ, what impact does this have

1. J. I. Packer, "Some Perspectives on Preaching," in *Preaching the Living Word: Addresses from the Evangelical Ministry Assembly*, ed. David Jackman (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1999), 28. This is not an isolated example. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 249, writes, "A sermon changes words about God into words from God. It takes what we have heard of, read of God and God's ways, and turns them into a personal proclamation of good news." Philip Ryken, *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century*, new ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 48–49, writes, "Expository preaching is not so much a method as it is a mind-set . . . . An expositor knows that he is not the master of the Word, but its servant. He has no other ambition than to preach what the Scriptures actually teach. His aim is to be faithful to God's Word so that his people can hear God's voice. He himself is only God's mouthpiece, speaking God's message into the ears of God's people, and thus into their minds and hearts. To that end he carefully works his way through the Scriptures, reading, explaining, and applying them to his congregation." John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 208, writes, "To preach is to open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and God's people obey Him." John Calvin evidently held this view also: "In one of his first Protestant writings, Calvin summarized his central religious purpose with this concise statement: 'I demand only this, that faithful people be allowed to hear their God speaking and to learn from his teaching.'" See Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 305. Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Primer for Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 14, writes, "We have said what preaching is or is meant to be: it is God speaking through us who preach."



on our preaching? Packer says that his definition is not only theological, prophetic, and incarnational, but also *critical*, “for it obliges us to test pulpit utterances and to say of any that was not Bible-based, Christ-related and life-impacting, that, whatever else it was, it was not preaching in the full and proper meaning of that word.”<sup>2</sup> We could cite dozens of other common, valuable, and largely true definitions of preaching. Instead, I want to follow Packer’s logic and assert that in good Christian preaching God is speaking. Doing so will help those of us who preach do a better job of the primary and defining task of our calling.

## Implications

Several liberating convictions flow from the assertion that God actually speaks through people who speak in his name. We are now free from fretting about things that should not concern us and free to get on with what should occupy us when we preach.

- Preachers can preach with authority because they speak on behalf of God. Their authority comes from the One in whose name they speak.
- Power in preaching need not—indeed, must not—be sought in techniques, skills, or abilities, as important as these are when in their proper place. Power comes from God, his Word, and his Spirit.
- If preaching is God speaking through a spokesman, then those who are duly assigned that role can speak with confidence, the daunting nature of the task notwithstanding, and those *not* given this assignment are free to pursue the tasks that *have* been given to them.
- Success in preaching is defined by the extent to which the message gets through to the intended listeners in a form they can recognize as a word from God himself.
- God himself is vitally interested in the success of his spokesmen because he wants his voice to be heard. Moreover, he has a stake in helping preachers understand where responsibility for apparent failure lies.
- Preachers are essentially and finally accountable to God, for whom they speak.

2. Packer, “Some Perspectives on Preaching,” 28 (emphasis added).

- Preachers who understand that God intends to speak through them see themselves as simultaneously servants of the church, to whom they speak, and servants of the Word of God, of which they are stewards.
- When preachers give voice to the Word of God, the traditional distinctions among types of sermons are eclipsed by what they have in common.
- The ministry of the Holy Spirit is not peripheral to the preaching task but integral.
- Prayer for preaching now assumes its proper place, and the content of such prayers changes to reflect the anticipation that God will speak through those who preach.

The hard work required of preachers does not evaporate simply because it is God who speaks when preachers preach; rather, homiletical tasks are now focused and clarified. Preachers are free to stop concerning themselves with some things and can now make every effort to address others. For instance:

- A preacher who speaks *for* God will first have to listen *to* God.
- A preacher whose task is to *explain* to listeners what God is saying so that they can believe and obey it must first *understand* what God is saying and why he is saying it.
- Preachers who become convinced that God speaks *clearly* will make every effort to do the same.
- Preachers who grasp that God's Word not only declares truth but also placards or displays it will work hard so that the proportion of assertions and images in their messages reflect the mix of those elements in the texts they expound.
- Knowing that they stand between God and people, preachers will seek to minimize distraction and distortion when people listen to them and look at them and to maximize reflection of the very nature of God into which they are being transformed.
- Preachers with this view of preaching will recognize that inevitably the message is visible as well as audible. They will know that who they are *outside the pulpit* either reinforces or detracts from the message *from the pulpit*.

When the message from God gets through to people with minimal distortion, listeners and congregations will be transformed not by the

preacher but by the Holy Spirit, who uses the Word both to beget new life and to nourish it. When that happens, God's character will be displayed and he will be glorified. People will look at the church and honor God for taking his twisted image-bearers and refashioning them individually and corporately into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

I have listed these practical advantages partly to motivate you to undertake the work ahead, but also because practicalities that have no root in truth are ultimately worse than useless. They betray us because they offer flimsy solutions to durable problems. They lure us into thinking that a technique or even a conviction alone will make all the difference. Reforming our *practices* will make some difference, to be sure, but seldom will this *alone* make a lasting difference. Transforming our *thinking* is even more important, as Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 make plain. In the end, however, we need more than better practices and right convictions; God himself must undertake to speak through us. Only when this happens will preaching live up to his expectations.

What follows is a rationale for biblical preaching along the lines of Packer's definition. His essay expounds his definition, and I do not intend to repeat him. I do, however, find it a useful starting place because too few of us view ourselves and our preaching in this light, and that failure accounts for a number of the deficiencies we see in the pulpit. The rationale I offer aims to make a case for this understanding of biblical preaching and along the way to answer some objections that naturally arise when we think of preaching as God speaking through chosen spokesmen.

# PREACHING AS GOD SPEAKING THROUGH PEOPLE: A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

## My Assumptions

I assume a conservative evangelical view of Scripture, as is so well articulated by others.<sup>1</sup> I do not know any other meaningful place to start. If the canon as we have it is not the measuring rod of truth, then we have no fixed point outside our cultural and personal limitations from which to evaluate *any* idea or practice. The hermeneutic that I employ rests on the assumption that all passages of Scripture, including those I cite, can be read and understood by the diligent use of ordinary means, such as examining the grammar and syntax, as well as the vocabulary and idioms, of the original texts to understand what they meant to the original hearers of them.<sup>2</sup> The illumination of the Holy Spirit, like any light on a page, merely helps the

1. J. I. Packer, "Appendix I: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978)," in *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 134–49; D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1992), 49–68.

2. See John H. Leith, ed., "The Westminster Confession of Faith," in *Creeeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), chap. 1, sec. VII. Excellent texts on biblical hermeneutics are also available. Some of these are highly technical, but others do not assume much prior knowledge. Depending upon the learner's prior knowledge, I recommend: Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010); William Wade Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004); Gordon Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). Ian Paul and David Wenham, eds., *Preaching the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013) offers specific introductory and hermeneutical, as well as homiletical, guidance for various NT genres and subgenres.

reader see what is there; it does not create meanings beyond what the author put there by using the words of the text. A corollary of this hermeneutic is that if I misread a text of Scripture, others who have read it properly and have therefore discerned its intended meaning are in a position to correct my misreading in ways that commend themselves to me.

Admittedly, some texts have built-in ambiguity and others seem not yet to be clear to anyone. This does not deter me from operating on the Reformed assumption of the perspicuity of Scripture. Assuming that a text is clear, I keep looking at it until I can see what it is saying because it is saying something that I (and those to whom I preach) need to hear, believe, and obey. This hermeneutic, therefore, reinforces a posture of humility, not only before God, its ultimate and infallible author, but also within the church and before the people to whom I preach. They also have a responsibility to read the Scriptures and, like Priscilla and Aquila in their ministry to Apollos, to show me “the way of God more accurately” if they discern that my understanding is limited (Acts 18:24–28).

I rely not only on contemporary fellow Christians both within and beyond my own culture but also on gifted teachers of any era, including those whose insights are available to me only through books or electronic resources. I do not want to be guilty of chronological or geographical snobbery. On the other hand, I do not want to neglect recent discoveries or insights that can shed further light on the text of Scripture. The value of reading a range of writers and commentators, including those from other cultures, is that by so doing I may see and unmask my own biases instead of unwittingly following them to questionable conclusions. Some contemporary scholars and writers, aware of the complexities in biblical literature, have postulated various forms of criticism, which function as lenses through which they claim to see with greater clarity what the text is saying or doing. These include form, rhetorical, and narrative criticisms, as well as socio-rhetorical readings, among others. I hope that my awareness of these concepts and disciplines will alert me to things in the text of Scripture that otherwise I would not have seen. To that extent, they serve a useful function. On the other hand, to the degree that these criticisms function as a sieve, filtering out things that the scholar reckons the text *could not say*—in those cases where it seems plainly to say those things the scholar wishes to filter out—to that extent, I hope I have the discernment to reject their proposed readings. In other words, I want the text of Scripture itself to challenge and correct my presuppositions. In addition, I do not want another ancient or contemporary writer to add his or her presuppositions to the layers of possible distortion. Philosophically, I am not among radical perspectivalists

who locate meaning in the mind of the reader. The meaning resides in the words of the text to which I seek to be in submission.

For all these reasons, I expect that my grasp of what God is saying and doing in Scripture and through preaching will grow as the words of the Bible, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and the insights of Christian teachers and fellow students of Scripture bring additional facets of the truth to my attention. A theology of preaching, like so many other attempts to formulate the biblical data into a pattern of healthy doctrine, is somewhat self-propagating. Once one sees a basic insight, all sorts of texts then appear in a new light in ways that reinforce the concept, strengthening or perhaps qualifying it. This has happened to me as I have read Scripture with this subject in mind; I anticipate something comparable in your case.

There are also some specific convictions that are not at the level of operating assumptions as such, but that nevertheless are worth saying here so that when I list the following affirmations, they will not raise the red flags they otherwise would. One of these is that I do not equate the Old Testament prophetic office, the apostleship (including that of Paul), and the New Testament role of pastor-teacher. Old Testament prophets could say of their oracles “thus says the Lord” because they received direct verbal revelation from God that they then spoke to the people. The apostles bore eyewitness testimony to the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, as well as his resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:22). Paul did so only secondarily and indirectly as one untimely born (1 Cor. 15:8; see also Gal. 1:11–17). In the subapostolic New Testament era, preachers claim neither the sort of inspiration the Old Testament prophets had nor the authority of an eyewitness on a par with the apostles, and therefore, their words from God for the good of the church are to be tested by apostolic doctrine already received (1 Cor. 14:36–40; 1 Thess. 5:20–21). This does not mean that such words lack authority (Titus 2:15), only that the authority derives not from the fact that those words come *immediately* from God—but for they do not—but from the fact that they come from God through the writings of the prophets and the apostles (Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20). What prophets, apostles, and pastor-teachers<sup>3</sup> have in common is that they speak for God, in his name, and on his behalf. The affirmations below stress this common element and are not meant to gloss over these important distinctions.

3. I use this hyphenated title for those in the pastoral role to reflect the absence of τοὺς before the word *teacher*, unlike the other three leadership roles, in Ephesians 4:11 (Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφήτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους). As we will see, all overseers are to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2), though not all who have teaching gifts are overseers.

Below I articulate a rationale for biblical preaching in terms of assertions followed by clarification, discussion, and textual evidence. When needed, I discuss the texts to show that the passages in question do indeed say what I claim, or that what I claim can be justifiably inferred from a fair reading of them. These affirmations are sequential in that they build on readily demonstrated observations and move toward less commonly noticed ones. They focus the discussion in that they begin with affirmations about God and move toward assertions about preaching.

In some cases I will include historical or contemporary examples, instances where others interpret the texts in question as I do and where these interpretations have shaped the way people think about preaching. In doing so, I do not mean to imply that these historical readings of Scripture in themselves make my reading of them more valid—that must be assessed from the text of Scripture itself—only that they demonstrate that I am not the only one to understand these passages as I do.

## The Rationale

1. **The living God speaks.**<sup>4</sup> The Bible often reports that God “said” something.<sup>5</sup> To reveal himself, he does not limit himself to verbal communication. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). Creation itself provides a sufficiently plain display that all can know God’s eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:19–20). Nevertheless, in addition to the visible general revelation that all can see, God speaks. Sometimes, even though he isn’t saying anything about himself directly, his speech still reveals something of who he is. For instance, he spoke into existence heaven and earth and everything in them (Gen. 1:3–26; Ps. 33:6). That is powerful speech that reveals the power of the speaker. Other times, his speech is directly and clearly self-

4. Stephen H. Webb explores this truth and its entailments imaginatively. Although arguably he draws from (and speaks to) thinkers with different operating assumptions than many of my readers, I appreciate, among many other valuable insights, his foundational assertion that “we were created not only to listen to God but also to speak on God’s behalf.” See *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 15. Those who want to delve into this subject from a more philosophical perspective may be helped by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), covers much of this ground in a way that emphasizes the relationship between God’s speaking and acting.

5. Logos Bible Software records 204 occasions in the ESV of the phrase “God said/says,” “Jesus said/says,” or the “Spirit said/says.”

revelatory: He speaks to tell us things about himself. For example, he says of himself that he does not change (Mal. 3:6), that he is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5), that he is holy (Lev. 19:2), and that he speaks righteousness (Isa. 45:19). What he says is as good as done (Ezek. 37:14). He tells us that he is the only God (Isa. 45:21). He tells us what he loves and what he hates (Isa. 61:8). He speaks about the fallen human condition (Jer. 17:9) and offers the only remedy for it (Isa. 45:22). He predicts events that only he can know ahead of time (Isa. 42:9). Significantly, he always speaks truth because he cannot lie (Ps. 119:151; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

- 2. God speaks to people in words that they can understand.** Repeatedly, the Bible says that the Lord spoke *to* someone, whether Moses, Joshua, David, Gad, or someone else. There were certainly times when people did not *like* what God said to them and so suppressed it or resisted it, but it was not inherently incomprehensible.<sup>6</sup> God can communicate with any of his creatures,<sup>7</sup> but he speaks *in words* to people made in his image and likeness. Even the fall of humanity (Gen. 3) and subsequent self-glorifying rebellions (e.g., Gen. 11) do not render communication between God and people impossible. True, not everyone has ears to hear (Mark 4), but the hindrance is not at the level of comprehending the words God “stoops” to use.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes God speaks from heaven.<sup>9</sup> On other occasions, he appears on earth to speak (Gen. 18:1). God can, and sometimes

6. Romans 1 describes people who suppressed the truth. Jeremiah 12:17 warns of the dangers to any nation of not listening to God. John 3:20 speaks of those who hate the light and do not come to it. In Deuteronomy 5 we read of those who did not want to hear directly from God. John 12:28–29 describes the Father’s voice from heaven that some misinterpreted as thunder or an angel speaking. King Ahab did not want to hear from Micaiah because the prophet’s words from the Lord were consistently unfavorable to the king (1 Kings 22:8). Dieter Werner Kemmler argues in detail for the intelligibility of Paul’s preaching. See *Faith and Human Reason: A Study of Paul’s Method of Preaching as Illustrated by 1–2 Thessalonians and Acts 17, 2–4* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1975). Some may be helped on this subject by Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, updated and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

7. See also Job 37:6, 15; 38:34; 39:27.

8. John 7:17 implies that unwillingness to obey limits the ability to know. Colossians 1:9–14 also links knowledge to conversion and subsequent obedience. Psalm 119:100 makes the same point. John 3:18–21 underscores the ethical dimension of the same truth. Similarly, Augustine notes, “For how, indeed would [Christ] be ready to be spent for their souls if he disdained to stoop to their ears? For this reason, then, he became a little child in the midst of us, like a nurse cherishing her children.” Augustine, *The First Catechetical Instruction*, trans. Joseph P. Christopher, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman, 1946), 37.

9. Nehemiah 9:13 describes the revelation at Sinai as God speaking from heaven.



does, speak through angels or messengers (Gen. 16:9–11). Once, he spoke through a donkey (Num. 22:28–30). If need be, he could speak through rocks (Luke 19:40). God distinguishes himself from those who claim to represent the dead in that he, the *living* God, unlike the mediums and necromancers, does not “chirp and mutter” (Isa. 8:19). He speaks clearly so that people may hear and heed (Jer. 10:1; Luke 8:21).

3. **God speaks through people to people.** Here it will be worthwhile to survey the range of those who spoke (or failed to speak) on God’s behalf, including prophets (and false prophets), priests, the Lord Jesus, the apostles, and those who followed them. The emphasis will be on what all these speakers of God’s Word have in common.

### The Prophets

**Moses.** When God called prophets, he commissioned them to speak on his behalf. For example, God spoke through Moses, the prototypical prophet (Deut. 18:15). Deuteronomy 5:1–5 reveals some foundational truths about the prophetic role. Moses spoke to Israel that the people might hear and obey (v. 1). He was able to do so because the Lord first spoke to him face-to-face (v. 4). His task was to stand between God and God’s people to declare to them the Word of the Lord (v. 5a). Moses then restates the Ten Commandments and describes what happened on the mountain (5:6–23). The people, having heard the voice of God *directly*, were afraid and did not want another narrow escape from death. They told Moses, “Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it” (v. 27). This is excellent instruction from listeners to anyone who speaks on God’s behalf. Better still is God’s own response. He affirms the people’s request: “They are right in all that they have spoken” (v. 28). Significantly, verse 29 expresses some realism about whether they are able actually to keep God’s Word. Verse 31 describes what God wants Moses to do. Moses is to receive the whole law to teach it for the purpose of obedience. All the people, including Moses, are to be careful to do as commanded (vv. 32–33). That is, not only is Moses to obey the command linked to his role as a prophet—to wait until God has told him what to teach and then teach it to the people—but he is also to obey the instructions he receives, as are all those he teaches.

**Samuel.** Notice the example of Samuel. He prayed, “Speak, LORD, for your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:10). That was foundational to his ministry of speaking for God. In 1 Samuel 3:19–4:1, we learn more about Old Testament prophecy. God reveals himself by his own word to Samuel, and God preserves Samuel’s words so that they come to all Israel and none of them falls to the ground. I suggest that God is jealous for Samuel’s words and eager for them to succeed because they represent and reflect—they are—God’s own words. It is a wonderful thing for those who speak on God’s behalf to be zealous for the Word of the Lord; it is another thing altogether for the living God himself to be zealous for *our* words. I suggest that the latter happens only when our words so closely restate God’s words that he himself is eager for our words to succeed, for in doing so his Word gets through to his people.

**Isaiah.** In Isaiah 6:8–9a, God asks for someone to go on his behalf, in his place, in his stead. Isaiah, having confessed his sin and been purified, hears the call and offers to obey. God instructs him not merely to go but also to speak and gives him the words to say (vv. 9b–10). The message he was to speak on God’s behalf made it plain to Isaiah that his ministry would not be well received. Isaiah asks how long the judicial hardening evoked by God’s speech would last, and God answers (vv. 11–13). This prophetic example is instructive because it builds into our discussion the reality that despite the power of God’s Word and the apparent accuracy of its transmission, the outcome, though known to God and under his sovereignty, is not necessarily what the spokesman might prefer.

**Jeremiah.** Jeremiah’s example is also instructive. Jeremiah 1:4–19 describes his call to a challenging ministry of forty years just before the exile. God’s words are central to that call. Jeremiah protests that because of his youthfulness he does not know how to speak (v. 6a). God rejects that excuse and lays down a general rule: “whatever I command you, you shall speak” (v. 6; see also v. 17). But his provision goes beyond that. He touches Jeremiah’s mouth and declares that by doing so he has symbolically put his words there (v. 9) and by that means has given him a position *above* the nations and kingdoms (v. 10). Better still, God affirms that he is watching over his Word to perform it (v. 12). Jeremiah’s words will not be empty threats. When God declares judgments against the nations (v. 16), it is Jeremiah who speaks with all the

authority of decrees of God. When Jeremiah goes forth with God's Word, God gives him the backbone to do so and adds a promise that those who oppose him will not prevail because God himself is with him (vv. 17–19).

**False Prophets.** Jeremiah 23:16–40 supplies a negative example of prophecy that reinforces the fundamental reality behind the proper exercise of this role. The false prophets described here failed to listen to God. They claimed that God had spoken to them when he had not. Instead, they spoke from their own minds and despised the Word of the Lord. They stubbornly followed their own hearts (vv. 16–17). They did not stand in the council of the Lord to see and to hear his Word. They did not pay attention and listen. They prophesied lies—the deceit of their own hearts (vv. 18–21). They based their prophecies on dreams and shared these with one another as sermonic material to compensate for the lack of authentic revelations. They stole God's words from one another (v. 30), led people astray (vv. 23–27, 32), and perverted the words of the living God (v. 36). God responds with wrath (v. 19), distancing himself from these false prophets (v. 21), and setting himself against them (vv. 30–31).

What is the consequence? The false prophets do not profit God's people at all (v. 32). God promises to cast them from his presence and bring upon them “everlasting reproach and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten” (vv. 39–40).

What is the alternative? God himself tells them: “But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds” (v. 22).

This succinct promise captures the fundamental prerequisite of those who speak in God's name—to wait on him for his Word. It also affirms the power of that Word even when mediated through God's flawed spokesmen. It accomplishes the purpose for which God speaks it. The warning of this text should not be taken lightly, depicting as it does the earliest known example of sermonic plagiarism. When preachers look elsewhere for sermonic material and pass it off as the fruit of their own study, this not only is wrong in itself, but often is also a symptom of a deeper spiritual malaise.<sup>10</sup>

10. See Scott M. Gibson, *Should We Use Someone Else's Sermon? Preaching in a Cut-and-Paste World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), on plagiarism in preaching.

What could be worse than having the God for whom we speak setting himself resolutely against us (vv. 30–31)? What could be more tragic than having those who should speak a word guaranteed to bring repentance actually speaking a word that leads their hearers further away from God? What could be more painful to a preacher than to realize that when he could have been wielding the hammer of God and kindling the fire of God, he was only recklessly spreading lies, the deceits of his own heart that made people forget God? What could be more devastating than realizing that when one could have been serving the ripest, most nourishing wheat, he has been dishing out only straw? The remedy for all these horrors is worth embracing wholeheartedly: stand in the council of God.

***Malachi's Word to the Priests of the Covenant.*** Levitical priests also sometimes spoke for God, as Malachi 2:1–9 explains.<sup>11</sup> This text supplies another example of failed messengers who needed reminding of how God views the task of speaking for him. At the center of this passage is a description of the ideal, namely, God's covenant with Levi, to which these priests should have been subject (vv. 5–7). According to these verses, what should characterize “the messenger of the LORD of hosts” (v. 7) is the fear of God, walking in peace and uprightness, true instruction, and no mixture of evil. He should guard knowledge, and the people should expect and therefore seek instruction from his mouth because they know the source of his message—the Lord of hosts. This central section of the text is bookended by descriptions of how Malachi's contemporary priests had failed to measure up to God's standard. They did not listen; they did not take it to heart to honor God's name. They turned aside from the way, caused many to stumble by their instruction, corrupted the covenant of Levi, did not keep God's ways themselves, and showed partiality in instruction (vv. 2, 8–9). What is God's response to their failed stewardship of his Word? He threatens to curse their blessings, to rebuke their offspring, and to spread on their faces the dung of their offerings and take them away with it (vv. 2–3). He promises to make them despised and abased. Above all, God will do this to establish his covenant with Levi (vv. 4, 8–9). God's plans will stand, even when those who speak for him fail in their part.

11. Nehemiah 8:9 describes how they collaborated with Ezra in this ministry (see also 2 Chron. 17:7–9; 35:3).

At the heart of any valid theology of preaching is theology proper, the doctrine of God. Without a sufficiently lofty view of God himself, those who speak on his behalf will inevitably begin to treat the messages they have from God for his people as something less important than they actually are. That was the problem with these priests. They did not honor God's name (v. 2) because they failed to walk with him in peace and uprightness (v. 6). Their creeping demotion of God shows itself in their own disregard of his instructions and the indifferent ways they "share" it. Worse, other things take his place as the authority behind the messages they proclaim.

***Haggai's Word to a Governor and the High Priest.*** Haggai 1:1–15 provides a happier example. Haggai spoke the Word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the high priest. It is a hard-hitting message, described twice as coming "by the hand of Haggai" (vv. 1, 3)<sup>12</sup> and twice as the "word of the LORD" (vv. 1, 3). The message is described as what God says or declares (vv. 2, 7, 9, 13). Wonderfully, as verse 12 says, Zerubbabel and Joshua, "with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD." The idea is clearly that the voice of the Lord is intimately identified with the words of Haggai. The people heard and heeded God's voice when Haggai spoke as his messenger. Encouragingly, verses 13–14 describe how receiving the Word as from God opened the way for more words from him and for God's work in the people: "Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD's message, 'I am with you, declares the LORD.' And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God."

### **The Lord Jesus**

My rationale for viewing preaching as God speaking through chosen spokesmen now moves to the New Testament and to the supreme example. It might seem odd, perhaps even irreverent, to include the Lord Jesus himself in this rapid survey of those who spoke or speak for God. I do so not to put the divine Savior on

12. This expression reinforces the concept of the prophet serving as messenger, since a written message was put into someone's hand and taken by that person to the intended recipient. See Proverbs 26:6, for instance.

the level of others who speak on God's behalf, but because the data indicates that, even in his case, the way the Son spoke for the Father exemplifies some features of preaching that are shared with the prophetic role in the Old Testament and the role of those who minister the Word in the New. Both the Father and the Son viewed the Son as speaking on behalf of the Father. Luke 9:35 records what happened at the transfiguration: "And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!'" The implication is clear: the Son speaks on the Father's behalf and with his authority. The Son evidently saw things the same way and acted accordingly. John's Gospel records many instances of the Lord Jesus saying that he does and says only what the Father tells him to do or say. Speaking of himself, Jesus said:

He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent *utters the words of God*, for he gives the Spirit without measure. (John 3:31–34)

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus' claims and asked, "Who are you?" Jesus said, "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him" (John 8:25–26). That Jesus believed the words came to him with authority is plain from John 14:10, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works." Jesus' High Priestly Prayer expresses in retrospect an important part of how the Son viewed his earthly ministry to his followers. He says to the Father, "For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (17:8). John 12:49–50 captures the heart of Jesus' ministry of speaking for the Father: "For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me." If the divine Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, restricts his speaking to what he has been

commanded to say by the Father, should not those who speak in God's name seek to be governed by the same rule?

### **The Seventy-Two**

Someone might object that Jesus is in a category by himself, an assertion with which I immediately agree, as would all other orthodox believers. The question then becomes: does his uniqueness disqualify him as a paradigm for those who speak as God's representatives? To answer that question, one must look at both precepts and examples from New Testament texts that describe how Jesus' first followers or their listeners viewed those who spoke for God. Did they follow Jesus' example? Were they instructed to do so? Here I will note what parts of this pattern continue much the same and what parts are adapted to the postascension realities.

I begin with Luke 10, where Jesus commissions the seventy-two. The instructions he offers there are specific. Verse 16 is especially significant for this inquiry. Jesus says to the seventy-two, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me." Jesus is telling the seventy-two that they are a link in the chain between the Father and those to whom the gospel is addressed.<sup>13</sup> The Father spoke to the Son; the Son spoke to his disciples; the disciples speak for the Son, and therefore also on behalf of the Father. This passage puts that chain in terms of the hearers of the message and states it negatively as well as positively to make the point more unshakably. Whoever hears (i.e., obeys) one of the seventy-two hears Jesus and in hearing Jesus hears, as we have seen, the voice of the Father. On the other hand, whoever rejects one of the seventy-two rejects Jesus, and therefore rejects the One who sent him.

It is highly significant that the group described here is not limited to the Twelve—the apostles. The ministry of speaking on behalf of God extends beyond them to others who also are appointed and commissioned by the Lord. They are not freelance spiritual practitioners but were given a message from Christ and the authority to proclaim it. When the seventy-two returned with joy, the Lord reaffirmed the authority he had given them, rejoiced in the Holy

13. John 13:20 says similarly, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." John 15:20b reinforces the idea and defines it: "If they kept my word, they will also keep yours."

Spirit, and thanked the Father for the revelatory Word concerning himself. The capacity to know the Son, Jesus affirms, is not something the wise and understanding can presume to have but is that which the Father graciously offers to those he chooses (vv. 21–22). This event marks something of a turning point in salvation history. What prophets and kings longed to see and hear, God has now revealed to Christ’s disciples so that they can declare it to others (vv. 23–24).<sup>14</sup>

### Those Who Saw the Risen Jesus

Another record underscores how things will be after the transition from the apostolic era to the present. Luke 24 describes the resurrection of Jesus and two of his postresurrection appearances. Significantly, verse 33 tells us that, upon their return to Jerusalem, the two Emmaus Road disciples<sup>15</sup> to whom Jesus appeared “found the eleven *and those who were with them* gathered together.” There is no indication that “those who were with them” were dismissed from the gathering when the Lord Jesus appeared. He declared that everything written about himself in the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. This would have been “review” for the two Emmaus Road disciples to whom Jesus had already opened the Scriptures (v. 32) and opened their eyes to his identity (v. 31). The risen Lord opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, focusing specifically on his death and resurrection and “that repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (vv. 45–47). Christ then reaffirmed the promise from the Father—the Holy Spirit—and instructed the group to wait in Jerusalem to be clothed with his power from on high (v. 49). I do not think it is too fanciful to say that Luke records what happened here to spell out what any who speak in Christ’s name need in order to do so. We need this threefold “opening”: Scripture opened to us, minds opened to understand it, and eyes opened to see Jesus as its central character and the key to interpreting it. Without the Holy Spirit to illumine the text and the mind and to empower the speech, no Christian proclamation worthy of the name is possible.

14. Many of the “mystery” texts in the Pauline corpus reinforce this idea (Rom. 16:25–27; 1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 3:2–6).

15. The fact that they are not named makes it likely that they were not among the Twelve.



In another Gospel text, Matthew 10:17–20, the Lord Jesus offers instruction to the apostles who would be hauled into court or dragged before kings and governors for Christ’s sake. They are instructed to bear witness to him and not to worry about either how they are to speak or what they are to say, “for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Although this promise should not be claimed as an excuse for failing to study, it reaffirms the underlying dynamic of preaching. All three persons of the Trinity are engaged. The Spirit of the Father gives words to those who bear witness to Christ that he—the Spirit—might speak through them of the Son.

### **Preaching in Acts**

Luke’s second volume tells us what actually happened when the apostles and the others did go out in Christ’s name.<sup>16</sup> As instructed, the Eleven, the women, Mary (Jesus’ mother), and his brothers, along with a group that together numbered about 120, waited in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit came in a dramatic fashion on the day of Pentecost. Sure enough, when Peter preached after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, his message focused on Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. He quoted biblical texts (perhaps some that Jesus mentioned on Resurrection Day evening?) and reasoned from them, powerfully concluding that God himself had made Jesus (whom his listeners had crucified) both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). That day, the Word came to some three thousand listeners as a word from God. The people were cut to the heart and interrupted Peter to ask what they could do. He instructed them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. According to verse 40, he did not stop there. He used many other words to bear witness and exhort them. Luke describes those who responded as “those who received his word” (v. 41). Here again hearers receive a person’s word—Peter’s in this case—spoken without an explicit

16. C. Richard Wells, “The Inspired Preaching of Peter in Acts,” in *Inspired Preaching: A Survey of Preaching Found in the New Testament*, ed. C. Richard Wells and A. Boyd Luter (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 81–82, writes, “If Paul was the first preaching theologian, Luke is the first theologian of preaching.” He summarizes Luke’s theology of preaching in four theses: “1. Preaching creates the church. 2. Preaching establishes and strengthens the church. 3. Preaching interprets the present reality in terms of biblical reality. 4. The gospel is the heart of preaching.”

claim to speak for God, as a word from God himself. From the description of the infant church that follows, it is clear that the Word went to work in these recipients, transforming their hearts and habits (vv. 42–47).

The remaining chapters of Acts could be described as a history of the triumphs of the Word of God. Luke uses a wide variety of words to label the sermons and other instances of proclamation recorded there.<sup>17</sup> Particularly striking is how the speakers themselves describe their own preaching and what happened afterward, as well as how the listeners explain what they heard. In Acts 3:21, Peter says, “God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.” In Acts 4:1–4, Luke says the apostles were “teaching the people and proclaiming *in Jesus* the resurrection from the dead,” and “many of those who had heard the word believed.” After being released by the council, the Christians prayed that the Lord would “grant to [his] servants to continue to *speak [his] word* with all boldness” (v. 29). Their prayer was answered. They viewed what they were doing as speaking God’s Word. Later when the council ordered them to stop teaching and preaching, Luke says, “They . . . charged them not to speak *in the name of Jesus*, and let them go” (5:40). Those who spoke for God defied the order.

The apostles also specified the ministry of the Word as the core responsibility that they were not willing to forgo in order to serve tables. They said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God” (6:2). Describing their calling positively, they said they would “devote [them]selves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (v. 4). The church was pleased, men full of faith and the Holy Spirit were selected and commissioned to the task of serving the tables, “and the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (v. 7).

17. Noun phrases: διδασχί (2:42; 5:38; 13:12; 17:19), μαρτύριον (4:33), μάρτυς (22:15), λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (6:2; also occurs as the objects of verbs below), διακονία τοῦ λόγου (6:4); verbs: διδάσκει (1:1; 4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, 42; 11:26; 15:1, 35; 18:11, 25; 21:21, 28; 28:31), διαμαρτύρομαι (2:40; 8:25; 10:42; 18:5; 20:21, 24; 23:11; 28:23), καταγγέλλω (4:2; 13:5, 38; 15:36; 17:3, 13, 23; 26:23), εὐαγγελίζω (5:42; 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18), κηρύσσω (8:5; 9:20; 10:37, 42; 15:21; 19:13; 20:25; 28:31), προκηρύσσω (13:24), φθέγγεσθαι (4:18), λαλέω (4:1, 17, 20, 29, 31; 5:20, 40; 6:10–11, 13; 8:25, 29; 10:44; 11:15, 19–20; 13:42, 46; 14:1, 9, 25; 16:6, 13–14, 32; 18:9, 25; 21:39; 26:26), παρησιάζομαι (9:27–28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26), παρακαλέω (2:40; 11:23; 14:22; 15:32; 20:1–2; see also 13:15), μαρτυρέω (10:43; 23:11), μαρτύρομαι (20:26).

After the stoning of Stephen and the ensuing persecution, all except the apostles were scattered and went about preaching the Word. Philip, described as one example of this, “proclaimed to [the people of Samaria] the Christ” (8:5). In Acts 8:12, he is said to have “preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.” Luke records what happened when word of this got back to Jerusalem, and “the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had *received the word of God*” (v. 14). Luke then uses three parallel expressions that characterize the ministry of proclamation. Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem and “when they had *testified* and *spoken the word of the Lord*, they returned to Jerusalem, *preaching the gospel* to many villages of the Samaritans” (v. 25). These terms are roughly interchangeable.

When Paul was converted, “immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues” (9:20). In Damascus, he confounded the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Christ (v. 22). When it comes to bold proclamation in faith, consider Peter’s one-line message: “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed” (v. 34). Jesus did heal Aeneas, who obeyed Peter’s injunction.

The way in which listeners as well as speakers perceived the preaching strengthens our case for preaching as God himself speaking through people. When it comes to an exemplary *listener*, we need look no further than Cornelius. Suitably prepared by God himself, he says to Peter, “Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (10:33). He not only anticipates that Peter will deliver a message from God, but also sees Peter as a man under orders to deliver it. He wants the whole message (“*all* that you have been commanded”). Clearly, when Peter preaches, Cornelius expects to hear a message from God, no more, and no less. Moreover, he believes God himself is there to oversee Peter’s preaching, to see, presumably, that the message reaches the hearers empowered and unadulterated. Peter does not get too far into the message before the Holy Spirit is poured out on those who hear the Word, and they begin to praise God. There were no objections to a baptismal service. Once again, this event is reported to the Christians in Judea, who summarize that they “heard that the Gentiles also had *received the word of God*” (11:1). When Peter recited these events to convince the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles were on an

equal footing with them, the Jewish Christians glorified God, describing what happened as God's having granted the Gentiles repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18). Therefore, we have one event that could be portrayed in two equally accurate ways as "receiving the word of God" and "being granted repentance that leads to life." The fact that Luke uses both expressions indicates that he and those whose words he records see some connection between the two, perhaps even a cause-and-effect relationship. When received, the Word of God goes to work.

As the message continues to spread despite opposition, Luke describes the march of the Word of God as if it has a life of its own: "But the word of God increased and multiplied" (12:24; see also 13:48–49; 14:1; 19:10, 20). That is what the missionaries proclaimed—"the word of God" (13:5; see also 8:25; 11:16; 13:44, 46; 15:35–36; 16:32; 18:11). That is also what people, including opponents, expected to hear (13:7, 44; 17:13) and what they did in fact hear (19:10).

It is also worth noting that when Paul and his companions addressed the synagogue in Antioch, having described the risen Jesus as the promised Davidic Son of God, they appealed to their fellow Jews, saying, "Through this man [i.e., Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you" (13:38). That is to say, they saw themselves not only as speaking *of* Jesus or *about* Jesus, but also as proclaiming forgiveness of sins *through* Jesus. Of course, this may be saying nothing more than that Paul is proclaiming that forgiveness of sins is available through Jesus, yet the words and word order may imply more, namely, that since the proclamation is "to you," a phrase linked to the proclamation, it is not merely the forgiveness that is "through Jesus," but also the proclamation itself that is through Jesus. If this is a valid reading, then in Paul's thinking, the Lord is not merely the *subject* of their preaching; he is, in some sense, the *instrument* of achieving it as well. We see another example in 1 Thessalonians 4:2. Reflecting back on his preaching at Thessalonica, Paul says, "For you know what instructions we gave you *through the Lord Jesus*."<sup>18</sup> In this text there is no ambiguity concerning what the prepositional phrase modifies. The idea seems to be not that Jesus is the agent of Paul, but that Jesus is the instrument through whom Paul can successfully instruct believers.

18. Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), chap. 6; see also Michael P. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul and Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 174–78, for a helpful discussion of how διὰ Ἰησοῦν in 2 Corinthians 4:5 relates to humility in preaching.

This, of course, presupposes that Jesus is risen from the dead. He can achieve what he wants through preachers only if he is alive.

### **Inspired Commentary on Apostolic Preaching**

When Paul preached in the synagogue in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–4), he reasoned with his hearers from the Scriptures over the course of three Sabbaths. He first explained and proved from the Scriptures that their Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. Then, once he had made his case about the Christ (v. 3b), he declared that the Jesus he proclaimed met the criteria and was indeed the Messiah (v. 3b). Some were persuaded (v. 4); others were jealous, recruited a mob, and started a riot (v. 5), so that Paul and Silas had to be spirited away. This account is significant because it both describes Paul’s methodology—reasoning from the Scriptures, explaining, and proving—and offers a summary of the contents of his sermon—the Jesus that Paul proclaims is the Jewish Messiah whose suffering and resurrection the Old Testament predicts.

More helpful in understanding how the early Christians viewed proclamation is Paul’s commentary on these events in 1 Thessalonians. When he could no longer tolerate the suspense of not knowing how the infant church in Thessalonica was doing, he sent Timothy to find out. When Timothy returned with an encouraging report, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to express his relief, to fill in some gaps in the Thessalonians’ knowledge, and to address some concerns about their behavior. The first chapter of 1 Thessalonians overflows with praise to God that the message as preached evidently came to the people in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction as evidenced by the fruits of faith, hope, and love (1:3–10). Not only that, but such was the reality of the Thessalonians’ transformation that they also became examples to other young churches. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul describes what made this impressive transformation happen: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when *you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*” Here is the inspired commentary on biblical exposition as practiced by Paul in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians heard words from men and accepted them. They did not accept them as words from men, but as the Word of God that they merely heard from men. Paul is

saying that the Thessalonians received the message precisely as they should have done. They accepted the words they heard as what they really were—the “word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

### Can We Expect Similar Results When We Preach?

This lofty view of what happened in Thessalonica raises some important questions, the answers to which will shape our expectations for contemporary preaching. First, was this an isolated statement of what we can expect only when *apostles* preach, or was it meant to be viewed as prototypical, that is, as the norm?<sup>19</sup> This seems to me to be the most striking statement of what Paul believes happens when he preaches Jesus, but it is not the only one.

For instance, in 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul describes his team’s ministry as a ministry of reconciliation through which they are “ambassadors for Christ.” To his contemporaries, this would have meant more than speaking on someone else’s behalf. It would have meant speaking as a plenipotentiary, with the authority of the king for whom the ambassador spoke. The text spells this out in two ways. First, when Paul and his coworkers spoke as Christ’s ambassadors, they believed that God himself was actively making his appeal to listeners through them as they spoke. Second, Paul’s role was not reduced to that of a ventriloquist’s dummy. He actively and responsibly spoke to sinners. He begged people on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God. In 6:1, Paul summarizes how he views his ministry of reconciliation: “Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” Those who speak on behalf of Christ are God’s coworkers when they appeal to people on his behalf. We work *at* preaching, but God works *through* it.

In Romans 15:15–21, Paul describes his preaching ministry as that of a priest. The acceptable offering that Paul is preparing to offer to God is the Gentiles. What makes them acceptable to God

19. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 85–86: “In such a passage as 1 Corinthians 15:7, Paul may be willing to extend the term ‘apostle’ outside the original eleven or twelve plus himself. Nonetheless, it is perhaps best if we understand Paul’s exposition of apostolic proclamation as applying to later preachers and preaching only by extension or analogy. At the very least, we can insist that although both the commissioning of subsequent preachers and the context of their proclamation have changed significantly, the essential Christological content and method of preaching nonetheless remain the same. On these grounds, then, we are justified in seeking foundations and guidelines for preaching ministries of a later day in Paul’s defense of his own apostolic ministry.” See also 197–99.

is the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. In Christ, Paul is proud of this, but makes it plain that his only boast is in what Christ has accomplished *through him* to bring the Gentiles to obedience (vv. 16–18). Christ accomplished this, Paul explains, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, Christ does this when Paul engages in gospel ministry, that is, when he fulfills his ambition to preach (vv. 18–21). God not only speaks through his spokesmen but also sanctifies hearers even through this mediated Word called preaching.

### **Preaching by the Power of Christ**

When it comes time for Paul to offer his final instructions to Timothy along with his last farewell and warnings, he affirms that “the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that *through me* the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it” (2 Tim. 4:17). Once again, Paul summarizes preaching as a message being fully proclaimed *through him*, not merely *by him*. This echoes Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer for “those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20b). Of course, this sort of understanding of preaching requires that God speak on such occasions when the message is proclaimed through the spokesman. Perhaps that is what stands behind Paul’s words when he faces a trial before Agrippa.

In Acts 26:23 Paul claims to be limiting his proclamation to what Moses predicted, namely, “that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, *he would proclaim* light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” In this sentence, “Christ” is the antecedent of “he” in the phrase “he would proclaim.” In other words, Christ is doing the proclaiming. If we take the chronology of this assertion straightforwardly, the time of Christ’s proclamation to the people and the Gentiles is *after* his resurrection. Precisely when the risen Jesus actually spoke in person to this mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles is not obvious from the New Testament (although 1 Peter 3:19 may recount such an occasion). If Paul’s statement before Agrippa complements the clearer statements about God speaking through Paul and others, it is likely that Paul understood Christ to fulfill this prediction whenever he or others speak *in Christ’s name*. On those occasions, Christ is proclaiming light to Jews and Gentiles through someone else.<sup>20</sup>

20. Ephesians 2:17 might refer to the same sort of preaching.

Paul held a robust Christology in which the risen Lord Jesus is actively at work for the good of the church. We know that the ascended Christ speaks to the Father on our behalf, and speaks to the messengers of churches, if Revelation 2–3 may be taken as more than a literary portrayal. This interpretation also makes good sense of Romans 10:17 if we take the final genitive in the Greek to be subjective: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the *word of Christ*” (where “the word of Christ” is the Word that Christ speaks).<sup>21</sup> These readings are certainly not definitive; nevertheless, they fit well with a lofty view of Paul’s confident assertion of what God did when he preached in Thessalonica.

Was this phenomenon limited to the apostles? We have already considered the relevance of Luke 10:16. To take its trajectory further, we notice how the apostles taught the next generation of preachers. There is some evidence that the apostles taught those who followed them to think of preaching in the same way they did—as speaking for God. Consider the phrase, in 1 Peter 4:11, “whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God.” The context here requires that “whoever speaks” refers to one exercising a speaking gift in the church. An “oracle” in the New Testament era was a place where people went to hear a word from a god. An oracle of God, therefore, would be a place where people could hear a word from the true God. Thus, those who exercise speaking gifts in the church are to use them to speak for God, or more accurately to be a reliable place where God speaks. They are to be trustworthy sources of words from God, so that God will be glorified through Jesus Christ (v. 11c).

From this text we conclude that the idea of speaking in the church so that others might hear a word from God was a conviction not limited to Paul; Peter also held this conviction and applied it to others in the church. Paul’s way of speaking seems to bear this out. When Paul’s letters speak in the first-person plural, as in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (“you received the word of God, which you heard from *us*”), it is a reminder that authorship of the letter includes Silvanus and Timothy, who are listed in the initial greetings, but who were not apostles. Although this use of the first-person plural is sometimes merely a literary device, a sort of “editorial *we*” not

21. See also Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 7, where he discusses the purposeful ambiguity of the genitive in Mark 1:1.



unlike the “royal *we*,” its use in 2:13 includes Paul’s team members, not only as those from whom the letter comes, but also as those whose preaching bore fruit. When Paul wants to speak only of himself, he makes a point of doing so with the phrase “I, Paul.”<sup>22</sup> Paul would be logically consistent to include his coworkers as those who spoke for God when they preached. Whether or not this incidental testimony should be part of our case, the question raised by the clear evidence is one that we must now face.

### **Is Our Preaching Really the Word of God?**

In what sense was the message that the listeners heard *the Word of God* (1 Thess. 2:13)? This question is crucial, and a valid answer to it will protect us from excesses and abuses of the pastoral role that have too often plagued church history. Even in the New Testament era, churches were beset by false teachers who claimed more for their teaching than was warranted. The very same pages that recount the lofty view of preaching that we have documented also tell us that not all who claimed to exercise preaching gifts lived up to the standard.

In 1 Corinthians 14:36–40, for example, we already see that those who aspire to prophesy in church are obliged to recognize that they do not originate the word of God but are merely recipients of it. Apostolic writings are to be recognized as from the Lord. Those who do not recognize them as authoritative and normative are not to be recognized as teachers. Moreover, listeners have a responsibility to exercise discernment and to test the words they hear (1 Thess. 5:20–21). To be clear, Scripture does not *become* truth on the lips of a preacher or in the minds of hearers; it is true because it is the living and abiding Word of God. When preachers faithfully give voice to scriptural truth, their listeners hear a word from God. Preachers do not originate that word, and listeners are not needed to ratify or validate it. Scripture is God-breathed, and God cannot lie. His Word is true.

### **Qualifications for Preachers**

If, as we have seen, some are not worthy teachers, then who *are* the recognized teachers in the church? Titus 1:9 adds to the lifestyle criteria for elders or overseers the qualification that “he must hold

22. Paul does this nine times in his letters: 1 Cor. 16:21; 2 Cor. 10:1; Gal. 5:2; Eph. 3:1; Col. 1:23; 4:18; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philem. 19.

firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Therefore, the criterion for sound teaching is not the *claim* to speak for God, but conformity to the Word already received.<sup>23</sup> Given what we have just surveyed, for preachers merely to aim for orthodoxy—to avoid saying anything that contradicts Scripture—would seem to fall short of what the New Testament expects. Preaching that is merely doctrinally orthodox requires care, discipline, and a good deal of knowledge, but not much faith, once one masters the basic concepts.

The kind of biblical preaching I am advocating requires faith that God himself speaks through us when we speak in Christ’s name. As discussed above, however, that is not the sort of proclamation that frees those of us who preach in the twenty-first century to say “Thus says the Lord” in the sense that Isaiah, Ezekiel, or even the apostle Paul could have said it. How do we thread this needle between, on the one hand, faithless preaching that settles for accurately transmitting God’s words to his people and, on the other hand, presumptuous preaching that equates our own words with infallible, divine revelation? How are we to conceive of preaching so that our practice expects neither too much nor too little authority?

### **Preaching as the Word of God**

Heinrich Bullinger, the Protestant Reformation-era pastor and writer, has helped me answer this. In his Second Helvetic Confession, a prominent heading reads, “The preaching of the word of God is the word of God.” Though probably not part of the original text, these words accurately reflect what Bullinger believed. He held the lofty view of preaching that the New Testament affirms. In his day there were “enthusiasts” who went beyond Scripture and claimed too much for their preaching. For Bullinger, the church must duly authorize preachers; this act served as a check on them. Edward Dowey, who has studied Bullinger extensively, seems to strike the right balance when he affirms that the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God *instrumentally but not normatively*.<sup>24</sup> In

23. First Timothy 3:1–11 reaffirms this.

24. Greg R. Scharf, “Was Bullinger Right about the Preached Word?,” *Trinity Journal* 26, 1 (2005): 3–10; See Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), chap. 4, “Preaching as the Word of God,” for a contemporary Lutheran discussion of this issue. See Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 211–12, for a contrary view.

other words, as a preacher, I can and should expect my listeners to hear God's authoritative, powerful voice creating faith and doing its sanctifying work whenever I preach, to the extent that I am faithfully respeaking God's written Word in ways that reflect its truths, ethics, tone, and aim. But I cannot and should not claim that when I stand to speak from Scripture, all that I say is thereby the current standard by which one may test other affirmations as to whether they come from God. Only Scripture is that standard.

This claim that God speaks through people to people, appropriately qualified, is at the heart of our understanding of preaching. If the case has been adequately made, then the following affirmations serve to further round out this truth and thereby to give shape and definition to preaching. Since some of these assertions flow from texts already considered, the treatment in those cases will be less detailed. The following assertions assume that you now need to understand how preaching derives from Scripture.

4. **God speaks in Scripture of, to, and through his Son, Jesus.** As we saw from Luke 24, every part of the Old Testament speaks *of* Jesus (Luke 24:25, 27, 32, 44–47). The Gospels also record occasions when the Father speaks of the Son to others in the hearing of the Son, with his baptism and the transfiguration being prominent examples of this (see also John 12:28). Moreover, the Father speaks of the Son *through* John the Baptist, who played a pivotal role as the forerunner of the Messiah.<sup>25</sup> The Father also spoke *to* the Son, as well as through him.<sup>26</sup> The New Testament records the historical facts concerning the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and of the outpouring of his Holy Spirit. If, to paraphrase Luke, the Gospels tell us “all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up” (Acts 1:1–2), then the balance of the New Testament records what he went on to do in the presence of the Father in heaven, by his Spirit, and through his people, and what he will do to bring history to a triumphant, God-glorifying finale.<sup>27</sup>

25. See, for example, Luke 3:1–13.

26. John 8 provides representative examples of testimony from the Son that the Father spoke to him: “I declare to the world what I have heard from him” (v. 26b); “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me” (v. 28); “but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God” (v. 40).

27. Revelation 1:1–2 captures how Jesus is central to the whole Bible and integral to our receiving it: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.”

The relevance of this to those of us who preach is that since Jesus is at the center of the Bible, as its subject of revelation and object of worship, its acting speaker in history and in eternity, and its living, interpretive key, then those through whom God speaks should anticipate that the Lord Jesus will be at the center of all he wants to say through us. As Jesus glorifies the Father by word and deed, preachers glorify God when Jesus is central to their lives and preaching (1 Tim. 4:16). Having been taught *in Jesus* (Eph. 4:21), they speak *of Jesus* (2 Cor. 4:5), speak *in the name of Jesus* (Luke 24:47), speak *in Jesus* (2 Cor. 2:17; 12:19), speak *for Jesus* (2 Cor. 5:20), and speak *through Jesus* (1 Thess. 4:2). By their ministry of the Word, they deliver, as it were, a letter *from Christ* “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:2–3). Authentic preachers carry in their bodies the death of Jesus so that his resurrection life might be manifested there, too (2 Cor. 4:10).<sup>28</sup> And of course, in order to minister the Word of God, they make use of their access to the Father *through Jesus* (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:18) to hear from him via the Word so that they might speak for him.

5. **God still speaks through what he has spoken.**<sup>29</sup> In John 10, Jesus distinguishes himself from false shepherds and identifies his true followers by means of an analogy. As his listeners would have known, sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd and follow him; they do not recognize the voices of false shepherds and therefore flee from them. When his listeners did not understand the analogy, Jesus adjusted the word picture slightly to underscore the heart of

28. Steven Smith, *Dying to Preach: Embracing the Cross in the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); André Resner, *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

29. Webb, *The Divine Voice*, 145: “Luther certainly did believe that God once spoke, quite literally, to the prophets and others. But for us today, he argued, the Word is ordinarily mediated by a human voice, whether it is the voice of someone who is reading the Bible out loud or someone preaching the gospel. Such mediation, however, does not keep us from hearing God’s voice in the voice of the reader or preacher.” Likewise, Calvin says, “The highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), sec. 1:78 [1.7.4]. Paul Scott Wilson, *A Concise History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 55, says of Cyprian, “Every time he quotes Scripture in his writings, he indicates that he is quoting. Scripture speaks directly, in the present tense, predicting the precise situations that are happening in his current-day Carthage.” Elizabeth Achtemeier, “The Canon as the Voice of the Living God,” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert Jenson (New York: T&T Clark, 2000), 119, also notes, “The Christian Church is the community that expects to hear God speaking through its Scriptures.”

his role as the Good Shepherd, which was his freely laying down his life for the sheep. This, again, stands in contrast to others, who run away when danger looms. Then, in verse 16, he refers to his other sheep, those not of this fold, whose distinguishing characteristic is that they, too, *hear his voice*. The fold here is evidently Judaism, which means that the other sheep are the Gentiles. The natural question is: how do the Gentiles (and, for that matter, Jews who were not present in person when Jesus spoke) hear the voice of the Good Shepherd that they may listen to it and so prove themselves to be Christ's own sheep, whom he knows? The book of Acts tells us.

Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus when he saw a light from heaven, fell to the ground, and heard a voice addressing him by name: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" When Saul asked who it was who spoke to him, the answer was, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Saul listened to Jesus' voice and obeyed his command "to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." The text tells us that after regaining his sight, being baptized, and eating, "immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues" (Acts 9:1–20). Right away Saul's ministry is described as his preaching "boldly in the name of Jesus" (v. 27) or "preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (v. 28). Luke next describes the preaching of Saul (also called Paul in 13:9) in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch where, as already noted, he reports Paul as saying that "through [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you" (13:38). Jesus' voice is heard when preachers speak for him, in his name, and through him. This is why, when the Gentiles heard the message, it came to them as the Word of the Lord (13:44, 48–49) and as the Word of God (13:46).<sup>30</sup> God was active in both speaker and hearers, as the case of Lydia of Thyatira attests: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). They heard the voice of Jesus through his spokesman, yet recognized it to be the voice of the Lord.

These examples tell us only in general terms where the preachers got the message that their listeners heard as the voice of the Lord. Paul quotes Scripture in the synagogues in Antioch and in Thessalonica, and for eighteen months he taught the Word of God in Corinth (Acts 18:11). He professed to believe "*everything* laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14) and

30. Peter's testimony is similar. See Acts 15:7–9.

claimed “the help that comes from God” as he testified “both to small and great, saying *nothing but* what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass” (Acts 26:22). We may say that, taken together, Paul’s aim was to preach *only* what was scriptural and *all* that was scriptural. Indeed, his daylong exposition under house arrest in Rome, summarized in Acts 28:23–28, testified to the kingdom of God and sought to convince his listeners about Jesus from both the Law and the Prophets. Some were convinced; others disbelieved, just as Jesus had predicted.

Was there something about the Bible itself that led to this expectation that the Lord would speak when his Word was opened? There are sufficient clues that the early followers of Jesus believed this to be the way Scripture functions.<sup>31</sup> For instance, at Pentecost, when Peter stood with the Eleven to preach, he quoted words from Joel with the formula: “But this is what was uttered *through the prophet Joel*” (Acts 2:16). Joel was conveying a message from God. Later, Stephen does not hesitate to summarize part of Genesis with the words, “And God spoke to this effect” (Acts 7:6a).

It is the writer to the Hebrews, however, who most transparently handles Scripture as a written Word through which God speaks to each contemporary audience. He addresses his letter to Hebrew Christians who are tempted to abandon the faith and find refuge in their somewhat protected status as Jews. The writer contends for the superiority of Jesus to all the personages and institutions of Judaism. To argue his case, he quotes Scripture frequently and repeatedly. The way he does so is instructive. In 3:7, he introduces words from Psalm 95:7–11 with the phrase, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit *says*.” Since his quotation begins with the word *today* and then goes on to describe Israel’s hardness of heart in the wilderness, the writer to the Hebrews urges his readers to exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today” (3:13). In other words, the author treats the Old Testament passage he is expounding as something that he expects will address his listeners directly as he speaks it to them. This is not merely an inference from what we see him *doing* with the text. He tells us in 4:12 what he believes to be true of the Word that he is relaying to his listeners, grounding his exhortation in a conviction about the biblical text: “For the

31. B. B. Warfield, “‘It Says:’ ‘Scripture Says:’ ‘God Says,’” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 10, 39 (1899): 472–510.

word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Moreover, this understanding of Scripture as the living and active Word of God is only so because of the nature of the God whose Word it is. Accordingly, the writer proceeds to describe him who speaks: “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (v. 13). The omniscient God speaks a searching word that reveals to the hearer what God already knows.<sup>32</sup> Hebrews 10:15–17 makes explicit the thought that God speaks through his Word. Notice the present tenses. “And the Holy Spirit also *bears witness to us*, for after saying [v. 16 quotes Jer. 31:33], then he *adds* [Jer. 31:34].” Hebrews 12:5–6 is a quote from Proverbs 3:11–12 that the writer introduces by asking, “And have you forgotten the exhortation that *addresses you as sons?*” Hebrews 12:25 cautions readers, “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.” For the writer to the Hebrews, Scripture directly addresses those who hear it because God continues to speak by the Holy Spirit through what he has spoken.

- 6. God’s Word has power to create, regenerate, and sanctify, and it articulates the standard by which all will be judged.** Evangelicals believe this because the Bible states it so clearly. Consider these sample affirmations:

“By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God” (Heb. 11:3).

“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (James 1:18).<sup>33</sup>

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

“The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has

32. The writer to the Hebrews often quotes Scripture, attributing it to God or the Holy Spirit (see Heb. 1:6, 7–8, 13; 3:7; 5:6; 8:5, 8; 10:15–17; 12:5–6; 13:5–6).

33. Ezekiel 37:4 provides a dramatic picture of the same dynamic.

eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:22–24).

“The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day” (John 12:48).<sup>34</sup>

### Can We Expect God to Do These Things through His Word When We Preach?

For our purposes, the question is not whether the Word of God has power to do these things; we agree that it does. What is of greater interest to us in this context is whether God’s Word retains that power *when mediated through people*. The examples already cited from the Law, the Prophets, the Gospels, and Acts would lead us to believe that even when it is mediated, the Word of God does its work and does not return empty, as Isaiah 55:10–11 famously says. That is how God’s Word was usually heard—through human voices. This is not to say that the spoken Word always achieved all these things, as, for example, God’s instructions to Isaiah confirm (Isa. 6). Even then, when the Word did not prompt revival, it did clarify where the people stood and why the nation was to come under judgment.

What about those of us who live and preach after the closing of the canon? Can we expect God’s Word to speak powerfully and to accomplish the purposes for which God sent it? Does the Word of God have the power to transform people? The answer has to be a strong, confident “Yes!” because of the very nature of God’s Word. Since it is not only living but also eternal, it continues to do what God designed it to do. The words of 2 Timothy 3:16–17 have no statute of limitations: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Indeed, this foundational assertion about the nature of Scripture forms the backdrop for Paul’s exhortation to preach the Word (2 Tim. 4:2). As Peter helped the dispersed elect exiles understand their regeneration and what that rebirth called for, he wrote:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for

“All flesh is like grass  
and all its glory like the flower of grass.

34. Romans 2:12–16 universalizes this thought.



The grass withers,  
 and the flower falls,  
 but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:22–25)

God’s Word does not change. Moreover, God himself tells us that his purposes for his Word clearly extend to later generations. Paul reached back into the Old Testament for an example of people who were numbered among God’s people yet were not pleasing to him, people whom God judged. His comment on why that event was an appropriate source of moral instruction for his contemporaries is recorded in 1 Corinthians 10:11: “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” That phrase “the end of the ages” refers to the days between the first and second comings of Christ—our times.<sup>35</sup>

It should not surprise us that the one and only eternal God speaks an eternal Word that is therefore not merely relevant to every generation and every place but powerful and active everywhere and all the time. Indeed, Scripture itself preaches the gospel: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel* beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Gal. 3:8). At the heart of this blessing is the knowledge of God himself: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence” (2 Peter 1:3). Alongside the knowledge of God, believers need the knowledge of self. The Bible functions as a mirror to show us ourselves so that we will look to God for everything we need for life and godliness. In this respect, it is like a liberating law that not only reveals what needs attention, but also gives us the ability to address the problems it reveals (James 1:22–25).

## Why Is My Preaching Not Powerful?

Why, then, does God’s Word not *consistently* do what he designed it to do when we preach it? The rest of this book is dedicated to answering that

35. Dale C. Allison Jr., *The End of the Ages Has Come: Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 1985); R. T. France, “Kingdom of God,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Richard J. Bauckham, “Eschatology,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

question.<sup>36</sup> There are, frankly, bottlenecks that constrict the flow of God's Word from him to those he intends to receive it. We will examine these in some detail in the pages ahead and suggest strategies that open up those bottlenecks to the extent that we as preachers can and should address them.

Having said that, one reason the Word of God fails to get through to listeners in all its truth and power deserves prominent mention because the apostle Paul appears to single it out as being in a category by itself. If we fail to address it, other strategies will make little difference.

Paul explained to his Corinthian readers how they should view him and his fellow church-planters. In 1 Corinthians 4:1–2 he writes, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.” The one absolute requirement of stewards is faithfulness. An owner or master entrusts to a steward something valuable. The steward guards it and dispenses it according to the master's wishes. A faithful steward sees to it that all the treasure entrusted to him gets to its intended recipients in good condition. When we see ourselves as entrusted with the gospel, we will speak not to please men, but God who tests our hearts (1 Thess. 2:4). Faithfulness to God in preaching means accurately relaying to our listeners the content, emphasis, tone, and aim of biblical texts understood in their contexts. Our task is not to embellish the treasure, supplant it, or neglect it. Our task is to convey it without tampering with it in any way.

Faithfulness is multifaceted; there is much more to it than simply capturing the dominant thrust of the passage we are expounding, essential as that is. Faithful servants of God's Word prove themselves to be faithful stewards of it when they:

1. **Trust God.** Those who speak for God are justified to expect him to speak through them when they are faithful servants and stewards of his Word. The preached Word is powerful for the purposes for which God gave it. Those who speak for God need not, and therefore must not, go beyond what is written. Scripture is sufficient (1 Cor. 4:6; 2 Peter 1:3).

36. It should be noted that preaching is not the only ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4 = τῆ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου). Peter Adam helpfully places preaching in the context of some other ministries of the Word in *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 37–56. Often, preaching is blamed for lack of transformation when in fact other ministries of the Word are absent or inadequate. The works of James K. A. Smith in his cultural liturgies series argue persuasively that liturgies are an essential complement to the preaching of the Word.

2. **Speak as those assigned, equipped, and empowered to do so.** God selects, authorizes, equips, deploys, accompanies, and empowers those who speak for him. Those who speak for God look to him for all they need to fulfill their calling and are accountable to him for what they say in his name.
3. **Speak from the Bible in ways that reflect the Bible's composition as a literary collection.** Because all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable, to faithfully preach it *all*, preachers need strategies that are consistent with the nature and purpose of all its parts.
4. **Listen to God before they attempt to speak for God, discerning what he is saying.** Those who speak *for* God must first listen *to* him (Isa. 50:4–11).
5. **Understand those to whom God has called them to speak.** Because God speaks intelligibly through people to people, messages from him must be intelligible to those to whom we speak (1 Cor. 14:1–12).
6. **Respect and reflect the clarity and orderliness of Scripture while discerning the way people hear.** What God says in Scripture is sufficiently clear so that those who speak for him can make it clear to those to whom they speak on God's behalf (Deut. 29:9; 2 Cor. 1:13; Eph. 3:9). Because God adapts his speech to achieve his purposes, we must organize what we say to reflect his mind and his desire to be heard.
7. **Respect and reflect the ways that Scripture communicates in stories, propositions, and images.** Because God speaks in stories and word pictures, as well as propositions, commands, and warnings, faithfulness to his Word requires that we reflect its nature when we respeak it.
8. **Take seriously their role as messengers who also embody the message they proclaim.** Because God's message to humanity is both verbal and incarnate, we cannot neglect how we embody the truth both in the pulpit and outside of it (Col. 1–2).

While there is no easy or automatic formula for success in preaching, I have become convinced that the servant of the Word who humbly attends to these eight facets of faithfulness is significantly more likely to let God's voice be heard than one who does not. Each facet of faithfulness presents its own challenges or, as I describe them, bottlenecks preventing the flow of God's Word to God's people. The remainder of this book will be devoted to opening these bottlenecks to let the Word of God speak.

**Preachers speak for the same God** who once spoke through prophets and apostles. Uniting theological encouragement with practical advice, Greg Scharf gives seminary students, occasional preachers, and seasoned pastors profound tools and insights for preaching faithfully and clearly. He also provides diagnoses, strategies, and exercises for overcoming eight common bottlenecks that can—humanly speaking—hinder a sermon’s faithfulness and fruitfulness.

“If you are asking, ‘Why is my preaching not having the effect that God’s Word ought to have on its hearers?’, I urge you to read this book with a torchlight on your own heart. There may yet be hope!”

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