



JOEL R. BEEKE

REFORMED  
PREACHING

*Proclaiming God's Word  
from the Heart of the Preacher  
to the Heart of His People*

Foreword by

SINCLAIR FERGUSON

“Heart to heart: this is the preaching that ‘cuts us to the quick’ and applies the balm of Gilead. And it is marvelously modeled in this book. Having appreciated every sermon I’ve heard from Joel Beeke, I am sure that you will discern a refreshing connection between doctrine, experience, and life in his writing.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; Host, *White Horse Inn*; author, *Core Christianity*

“*Reformed Preaching* is unique for its emphasis on learning to preach experientially from the Reformers and their theological successors through the centuries. Joel Beeke convincingly shows that Reformed preaching is doctrinally sound, profoundly personal, and effectively practical. Far from being a contemporary model, this work presents the preaching of the Reformation, which encompasses head, heart, and hands, as the enduring way to proclaim Scripture. This is a very foundational understanding of the Reformation impact on the history of the church.”

**John MacArthur**, Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California; President, The Master’s University and Seminary

“Faithful preaching is intimately bound up with the heartbeat of faithful Christian living. The proof of this is seen throughout the history of the church. Wills, affections, lives, churches, and entire communities have been transformed when the proclamation of God’s Word has reached beyond the mind to the heart. This was true during the Protestant Reformation, was repeated under the influence of the Puritans, and has been witnessed during times of revival. Joel Beeke mines the theology and practice of the great preacher-pastor-theologians of the past in a way that is guaranteed to bless and equip those who carry the baton for the generation they serve in the present and beyond.”

**Mark G. Johnston**, Minister, Bethel Presbyterian Church, Cardiff, United Kingdom

“The ethos of this soul-satisfying book on preaching is not ‘fast forward to the new and fanciful’ but ‘turn your affections back to the solid theological foundations of the past.’ Too much modern-day preaching aims to attract the undiscerning hearer with exciting and flossy novelties. But godly church members hunger and thirst not for shallow novelty, but for real, solid, biblical preaching and genuine food for the soul. The author’s message is to open up the excellencies of the model preachers of the past—from Luther and Calvin to the great Puritans and right down to the beloved Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who died in 1981. Here is a book ideally suited to the reader who longs for solid preaching in the pulpit for his soul. For this reason, this is also an ideal book to place in the hands of the serious student for the ministry.”

**Maurice Roberts**, Former Editor, *The Banner of Truth* magazine; author, *The Thought of God* and *The Mysteries of God*

“A preacher who does not practice what he preaches is a hypocrite; a preacher who does not preach what he himself has practiced is a mere theorist. A good preacher gives to others the overflow of what he himself has taken in from God’s Word. Effective preaching is from heart to heart, as suggested by the subtitle of Joel Beeke’s *Reformed Preaching*. Preaching is more than simply a verbal book report; it is a God-ordained means of bringing God’s truth to bear on the hearts and in the experience of the hearers. Beeke effectively underscores this powerful function of preaching both with models from past preachers and clear instructions for modern preachers. Beeke’s passion for experiential preaching is obvious, exposing his heart to ours.”

**Michael P. V. Barrett**, Vice President for Academic Affairs,  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Complete in Him*  
and *Love Divine and Unfailing*

“Reformed preaching is simply ordinary preaching. Sermons that are faithful in their exposition and application to the hearers, rich in gospel content, Christ-centered in focus, and earnestly evangelistic in their calls to sinners to repent and entrust themselves to Jesus Christ—this is Reformed preaching. It is not long sermons and heavy preaching. It is the pulpit’s pastoral and reviving ministry to the body of Christ, most frequently on the Lord’s Day, generally to the assembly of the faithful, but mighty in addressing the world. It is delivering compassionate and heart-warming sermons, sometimes profoundly solemn sermons. It is, most of all, interesting, gripping preaching and life-changing pulpit fare; and once it has been heard, nothing else will ever satisfy an awakened soul that hungers for the living God. It is the believer’s weekly feast. How does one preach like that? Read this book for starters. You will be enlightened and motivated, and you will especially become prayerful, longing for the spread of this kind of ministry throughout the whole world.”

**Geoffrey Thomas**, Former Pastor, Alfred Place Baptist Church,  
Aberystwyth, Wales

“*Reformed Preaching* is grand, sweeping, and engaging. It is at once substantive theology, a church-historical survey, and a book of practical divinity on experiential, Reformed preaching. No one has written anything quite like it. Subtitled *Proclaiming God’s Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People*, Beeke’s book breathes the air of its theme. This book is excellent in every way; it is all doctrine and all application. *Reformed Preaching* challenges the church with the indispensable necessity of preaching that is biblical, doctrinal, and experiential, preaching that leads God’s people to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8). While Beeke addresses ministers and hearers of the preached Word alike, as a gospel preacher, I found myself worshipping the triune God on every page and humbled in the dust with gratitude for the privilege of proclaiming God’s truth. This is a book to be read over and over again. I pray that this volume will be widely and extensively read. I pray as well that *Reformed Preaching* may be a spark to revive the old Reformed commitment to experiential preaching in a new day.”

**David B. McWilliams**, Senior Minister, Covenant Presbyterian Church,  
Lakeland, Florida

“It is said that ‘a sermon is as good as a sermon does.’ Joel Beeke’s book will greatly help God’s servants minister the Word to this end: to the head, heart, and life. Here he scripturally defines Reformed and experimental preaching, surveys its foremost exponents from church history, and searchingly persuades us of the need for this kind of preaching today. Reading this, no preacher can fail to be challenged—but also encouraged and helped—to preach this way more than ever before. With the Lord’s blessing, this book will do untold good for ministers and churches everywhere. This is a much-needed and unique volume. I wholeheartedly commend it to ministerial students as required reading, and to all of us who proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

**John Thackway**, Pastor, Holywell Evangelical Church, North Wales;  
Editor, *Bible League Quarterly*

“As an able teacher and exemplary model of the best in pulpit ministry, Joel Beeke has much to say about the subject of preaching. In this book, we sit at his feet and learn what real biblical exposition is from this gifted expositor. If there was ever a season when the church needed to read this book, the time is now.”

**Steven J. Lawson**, President, OnePassion Ministries

“True Christian experience is always the experience that God and his Word are true. That truth is preeminently proclaimed through Spirit-anointed preaching. *Reformed Preaching* shows why preaching is a key of God’s kingdom. This helpful survey of the history of a few dozen of the Reformed church’s great preachers, from Ulrich Zwingli to Martyn Lloyd-Jones, illustrates how experiential preaching is used by the Holy Spirit to cause needy sinners to experience the vital truth of the gospel.”

**Henk van den Belt**, Special Chair in Reformed Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

“It has been one of the great privileges of my life to teach homiletics alongside Joel Beeke at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary for the past ten years. I’ve not only witnessed his expertise and passion for the subject, but I’ve also seen and felt the ministry-transforming effects of this upon my own preaching, as well as upon hundreds of students from all over the world. It’s a joyful answer to prayer to see his lectures now in print for the benefit of thousands more preachers of the gospel.”

**David Murray**, Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Jesus on Every Page*; *Reset*; and *Exploring the Bible*

“I have yet to come across a preaching resource so helpful, poignant, biblical, and even devotional as Joel Beeke’s *Reformed Preaching*. The breadth and depth of historical weight and confessional integrity make this book a superb volume for any pastor, teacher, or layperson. I will certainly be using this in both my preaching classes and pulpit preparation!”

**Brian Cosby**, Senior Pastor, Wayside Presbyterian Church, Signal Mountain, Tennessee; Visiting Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta

“I am very pleased to endorse this book by Joel Beeke because it is an invaluable contribution to Reformed preaching. While some in the Reformed community tend to associate experiential preaching with pietism and mysticism, Beeke shows that generations of Spirit-anointed Reformed preachers have employed the biblical experiential method. Beeke’s book represents the culmination of what has been on the author’s mind for many years, namely, to come to a clear biblical understanding of what the gospel is and by whom, to whom, and especially *how* it is to be preached. This latest homiletical contribution by Beeke deserves to be read by all seminary professors, theological students, pastors, and all who are hungry for the true Bread of Life. ‘The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live forever’ (Ps. 22:26).”

**Cornelis (Neil) Pronk**, Emeritus Pastor, Free Reformed Churches of North America

“If ‘Reformed experiential preaching’ sounds dull or dry, or just difficult, then you ought to read this book. As a true instructor, writing with real warmth and insight, Joel Beeke opens up enduring principles, spans the centuries to survey practitioners and identify patterns, and then earnestly urges us to the lively practice of such preaching. He carries us from the lecture room to the training ground and then sends us out into the field, humbled and yet hopeful, to preach from our hearts to the hearts of others.”

**Jeremy Walker**, Pastor, Maidenbower Baptist Church, Crawley, United Kingdom; author, *Life in Christ*; *Anchored in Grace*; and *A Face Like a Flint*

“Having known Joel Beeke for nearly fifty years, both as a personal friend and as a fellow minister of the gospel, I can unhesitatingly affirm that Reformed preaching has been, and continues to be, the passion of his ministry. Frequently I have had the privilege of hearing him preach from his heart to the hearts of his audience, preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ to poor, needy, and guilty sinners in need of precisely such a Savior. I am therefore delighted that in *Reformed Preaching* he is passing on to the next generation of preachers what it means to preach Christ scripturally, doctrinally, and experientially, and how to effectively aim such preaching at the hearts of those who hear them—doing so in complete dependence upon the Spirit of Christ for explication and application. May many younger (and older!) ministers of the gospel benefit richly from the ripe fruit of Beeke’s lifelong commitment to experiential preaching.”

**Bartel Elshout**, Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Hull, Iowa; translator, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* and *The Christian’s Only Comfort in Life and Death*

“In this latest book, Joel Beeke warmly welcomes us into his pulpit, his study, and even the place of his private prayers. To accept his invitation is to discover what it means for a sermon to offer both light and heat, and to learn how to preach the gospel as food for the hungry rather than as dessert for the deserving. In *Reformed Preaching*, Beeke introduces favorite figures from church history to form a composite picture of the experiential expositor. Even experienced expositors will find much to learn in this book from both the author and his friends.”

**Chad Van Dixhoorn**, Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

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the Heart of the Preacher  
to the Heart of His People*

Joel R. Beeke

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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*Reformed Preaching: Proclaiming God's Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People*

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For  
Paul Smalley  
authentic friend, prayer partner,  
faithful and able teacher's assistant—you  
are appreciated far more than you know.



In preaching there is intended a communion of souls,  
and a communication of somewhat from ours [as preachers]  
unto theirs [as God's people].

*Richard Baxter*

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# Foreword

Sinclair B. Ferguson

Almost fifty years ago I took a yearlong course at university that consisted entirely of studying the great works in the Christian theological tradition, such as Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Athanasius's *De Incarnatione*, Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, and so on through the centuries. The exam paper consisted of a series of lengthy quotations with this simple instruction: "Comment." Three of us were in the class with the professor, a well-known theologian. But because of my degree program, unlike my fellow students' exam papers, the quotations on my copy were left in the original languages. Exposition required translation. All this was a little daunting! But during that year I had discovered the study method John Calvin had employed as a young man: before he went to sleep he rehearsed in his mind everything he had learned that day, and did not get out of bed the next morning until he had gone over it again (it sounds simple, but try it!). I may know more now, but I suspect that was the last time I felt "in command" of my knowledge.

This long-forgotten memory unexpectedly came back to me just as I finished reading *Reformed Preaching*, for one of its most impressive features is that its author, Joel Beeke, really knows what he knows and is eager to share that knowledge. Moreover, whether or not he has pursued Calvin's study method, he has, in many respects, imitated Calvin's model of ministry. He shares Calvin's remarkable facility to mark, recall, and use the fruit of his prodigious reading. But also like the Genevan Reformer, he is simultaneously pastor of a large congregation, professor

at (indeed, founder and president of) a theological seminary, churchman, scholar, prolific author, visionary, and driving force in a variety of Christian enterprises; at home, a loving and grateful husband, father, and brother; and at large, an important and loved member of an informal but real international network of brethren who share his vision.

Joel Beeke is uniquely qualified to write a book on Reformed experiential preaching. Very few have his breadth and depth of experience as a preacher—in terms of the sheer amount of preaching he has done, the decades during which he has expounded God’s Word, the many countries he has visited in order to do so, and the wide variety of conferences he has addressed. Add to this his knowledge of the Puritan divines *as preachers* and the degree to which he has studied their goals, style, and methodology, and then include the fruitfulness of his own ministry (the litmus test, surely), and readers can be reassured that these pages will take them on a wonderful five-hundred-page journey in the company of an experienced guide to some of the most impressive preachers since the days of the Reformation. They will also find on page after page quotations or comments that (if the metaphor may be forgiven!) they can suck for the length of time a Queen Wilhelmina peppermint lasts during a Dutch sermon! For here, seamlessly joined together, are the insights of preaching giants coupled with the wisdom and experience of a contemporary exponent of Reformed experiential preaching. The whole book is an education in itself, and full of stimulation. Readers who are preachers may be well advised not only to read and inwardly digest its contents, but to mark those statements and quotations that particularly strike them—at least until they have marked more than half of the contents! I suspect that many who are called upon to give an occasional lecture on preaching (or for that matter an entire course) will be grateful to the author for providing them with so many apt quotations to epitomize and thrust home a salient point. But they will need to be on their guard lest their hearers mentally note, “Ah, that’s *another* quote from Joel Beeke’s book!”

Even for those of us who have never taught homiletics it is impossible to avoid the students’ question, “Have you any words of wisdom for a beginning preacher?” I usually give the same answer: “*Listen with two heads to preachers*, especially those whose ministry is a help to you. With your own head take in for yourself all that exalts God, humbles sinners, directs you to Christ, enlivens you by the Spirit, thrills you with the truth, redirects your will, and captures your affections. But with the

other head ask the question, ‘What is he doing that humanly speaking makes his preaching so helpful? And what do I need to do, *given my different gifts, personality, and experience*, to build those same principles into my own preaching of God’s Word?’” This is not a recipe for cloning or artificial mimicking in which we lose ourselves and distort God’s gifts to us and in us, but an encouragement to *imitation* in the biblical sense, to recognize the biblical principles that should inform all preaching, to apply them to our own gifts and setting in both geography and history, and to seek, as Paul challengingly urges Timothy, to make sure that our progress is evident to all our hearers (1 Tim. 4:15).

When we make such progress, our congregations will be both *well-instructed* and *well-nourished*. I owe this way of putting things to friends who told me, some time after their minister had been called to another congregation, “Looking back now we realize that over the past years we were *well instructed*, but we feel *poorly nourished*.” Their phrasing struck me as an apt analysis of one pitfall in preaching—exposition that is no more than educational instruction but never reaches the affections. No less an intellectual than Jonathan Edwards wrote by contrast that his goal in preaching was to reach the affections. Thus, he wrote in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*:

I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as I possibly can, provided that they are affected with nothing but the truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with. . . .

Our people don’t so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched; and they stand in the greatest need of that sort of preaching that has the greatest tendency to do this.<sup>1</sup>

This is the chief characteristic of Reformed experiential preaching. One of its inevitable fruits is that it is so all-demanding on our whole being that those who engage in it themselves grow by it—and those they serve sense that they too are being nourished as well as instructed. We need all the help we can get to fulfill the grand apostolic challenge to make progress.

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1. Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 4:387–88.

Visits to other countries help us to see our own nations with fresh eyes. So, for preachers, visits to other places and times in the long history of preaching and preachers help us to reflect on what we ourselves are called to be and to do in our own places and times. *Reformed Preaching* provides just such a refreshing and renewing trip abroad, in literary form, and shows us sights to which we will want to return again as the years pass.

Such visits are important because, if my own experience is anything to go by, preaching does not get any easier as we grow older. Yes, from one point of view, it does: we have increased resources on which to draw and we have more experience. But these are ancillary to preaching; they are not *preaching itself*—that daunting, wonderful, mysterious, romantic, exciting, humbling-in-the-dust instrument that God has used throughout the centuries to call sinful men and women, young people, and boys and girls to faith in Jesus Christ. Over the years our sense of the privilege of preaching increases, but the task is never less daunting, and the awareness of our weakness and inadequacy only increases; the number of times we come to the conclusion of a message and feel we want to say, once more, “Sorry, Lord; forgive me,” seems to grow exponentially! Of course! This is because no one needs to sit under our preaching more than we do. And if the Lord purposes to use our preaching, he also wants to make sure that the glory remains his. If we are growing as preachers, and realize with Robert Murray M’Cheyne that our people’s greatest need is our personal holiness, then it should come as no surprise that even (perhaps especially) through our own preaching, the Spirit will constantly chip away at the deep, hidden, and most stubborn residual areas of our sinfulness. No matter how much we grow or how great our gifts, we will always be in the position of Isaiah—realizing that sin has entangled itself not only in our weaknesses and faults, but in the very best gifts God has given us. Those whose calling it is to speak God’s Word, of all men, need to be brought to say, “I am a man of *unclean lips*” (Isa. 6:5).

There was a time in my native land of Scotland when the vast majority of twelve-year-old boys and girls knew the answer to the question, “*How is the word made effectual to salvation?*” It was Question 89 in The Shorter Catechism, penned by some of the Reformed experiential preachers of the seventeenth century whose writings and wisdom feature so largely in these pages. The answer? “The Spirit of God maketh the

reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.”

Is this conviction still alive and well in the hearts of preachers today? These pages present a clarion call to return to believe it and live it out in our ministries, for this is the true apostolic tradition:

Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. . . . For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. . . . For which cause we faint not. (2 Cor. 4:1–2, 5–7, 16)

*Reformed Preaching* represents a labor of immense love on the part of its author. It is a great gift to the company of preachers worldwide. It is a sure guide to places and times from which we can learn much. It is, perhaps especially, a gift from Joel Beeke to the coming generation of preachers. And it encourages us all to take a long hard look at the character and fruit of our own preaching, challenging us to keep on growing in this greatest of callings, and to become fruitful ministers of the Word of God. That at least has been my experience in reading it, and I feel sure it is the author’s hope and prayer that it will be yours too.

Sinclair B. Ferguson  
 Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology,  
 Reformed Theological Seminary  
 Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries





# Preface and Acknowledgments

I have wanted to write this book for more than twenty years and have been pecking away at it for more years than that. Two reasons have driven me. First, Reformed experiential preaching—preaching from the preacher’s heart to the hearts of God’s people—has been sorely lacking in Reformed and evangelical churches in recent decades. Second, little has been written on this critical subject. Charles Bridges has a few great sections on it in his classic *The Christian Ministry*<sup>1</sup> and John Jennings has an excellent chapter in *The Christian Pastor’s Manual*, edited by John Brown,<sup>2</sup> but no full-length book has been devoted to this specific subject. Recently, a few helpful books have been written on preaching to the heart,<sup>3</sup> but none have focused as narrowly on the subject of what was known as experimental or experiential preaching as this volume does.

The alert reader will have noticed already that the title of the book, *Reformed Preaching*, is different from the term I used in the paragraph above, Reformed *experiential* preaching. The title was chosen for the sake of simplicity, but the book’s subtitle—*Proclaiming God’s Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People*—is a good summary of what Reformed experiential preaching is. This term has a rich history and meaning, as I hope to show, so I will be using it throughout the book.

I have had the privilege of teaching a homiletics course on Reformed experiential preaching at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS) in Grand Rapids for the last twenty-five years. I also have taught various versions of it for doctor of ministry courses at the Master’s Seminary

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1. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), 259–80.

2. John Brown, ed., *The Christian Pastor’s Manual* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1991), 47–62.

3. See, for example, Murray A. Capill, *The Heart Is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014).

and Westminster Seminary California, as well as for master of divinity courses at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, and for a number of seminaries around the globe. I am grateful for these opportunities and for how they have afforded me the time to revisit and rework my lecture material on numerous occasions.

Though not identical to my lectures, the chapters of this book are organized around the same three major divisions of the course. First, it considers what Reformed experiential preaching is. Second, it looks at a number of examples of experiential preaching, from Ulrich Zwingli, the first Reformed preacher in the sixteenth century, to Martyn Lloyd-Jones in the twentieth century. The book especially focuses on the English Puritan and Dutch Further Reformation preachers, since they specialized in experiential preaching. Finally, it examines how to cross the bridge from earlier centuries of Reformed experiential preaching to today's preaching in a number of areas, stressing how experiential preaching can best be done today.

The target audience for this book is not just preachers, theological students, and seminaries. I trust that educated church members who long for good preaching might find help in this volume and might draw upon it to lovingly encourage their pastors to preach to their hearts as well as to their minds. I have aimed at simplicity in writing so that the target audience might be as wide as possible. My prayer is that this book might help give Reformed experiential preaching a much-needed boost and support.

I have far too many people to thank for this book than I can mention in this brief space. I owe my emphasis on the experiential aspect of preaching first to my dear father, John Beeke (1920–1993), who often spoke to me as a child and a teenager about the saving work of the Holy Spirit experienced in the souls of God's people. My greatest debt, of course, is to the Holy Spirit himself, who convicted me of sin at the age of fourteen and drew me irresistibly, powerfully, and sweetly to Jesus Christ alone as my total salvation the following year. I trust that he has not ceased to do his work in my soul for the last half century, sanctifying me in some small measure especially through trials and afflictions, so that I hope and pray I can say with conviction, like John the Baptist, "He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

I am grateful to have learned much about God's leadings with his people from my first theological instructors, Rev. Jan C. Weststrate and Rev. William C. Lamain, both of whom emphasized various experiential

dimensions of preaching. Many discussions with each of them about experiential themes have also been profitable for my soul. For my later PhD training at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia in the early 1980s, I learned the most experientially from my good friend Sinclair B. Ferguson, both from his lectures and in private discussions. His friendship has been invaluable over the years, and I am so grateful for his willingness to write the foreword to this volume.

I owe a large debt to each of the three churches I have been privileged to pastor: the Sioux Center, Iowa, Netherlands Reformed Congregation (1978–1981), the Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, Netherlands Reformed Congregation (1981–1986), and the Grand Rapids Heritage Reformed Congregation, which I have had the privilege of serving as pastor since 1986. In all three churches, spiritual friendship and pastoral conversations with mature saints have been a great help in fostering within me a deep appreciation for the Reformed experiential heritage that has been handed down to us from faithful shepherds, especially many in the Reformation, Puritan, and Dutch Further Reformation eras. Thanks too to the staff of Reformation Heritage Books and to the faculty, staff, theological students, and alumni of PRTS for all the influence they've had on my spiritual nurturing. I feel that the brothers (and they are real brothers to me) surrounding me as faculty members are more gifted and godly than I am, and I owe much experientially to the sanctifying graces that exude from their lives. And a big thanks to Paul Smalley, my faithful teacher's assistant, who chased down the footnotes and did so much to make this a better book than it would have been without him. I also owe heartfelt thanks to Greg Bailey, Ray Lanning, and Phyllis TenElshof for their editorial assistance, and to Crossway Books for being such a joy to work with in seeing this book through the publication process.

I would be remiss in not expressing gratitude to God for granting me access to a wonderful collection of books, both in my own library and at PRTS, that convey the experiential Reformed emphasis throughout the centuries. In recent decades, the Puritan Resource Center has provided me with a storehouse of solid Reformed reading material. I have now been reading the Puritans for more than fifty years and have never grown tired of it. Their writings have done more for me perhaps than any other means of grace apart from Scripture itself. I can say with Martin Luther that some of "my best friends are dead ones," sitting on my shelf in the

form of antiquarian books. Countless times I have been deeply moved by reading divines such as John Calvin, William Perkins, Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, John Bunyan, Anthony Burgess, Samuel Rutherford, Willem Teellinck, Wilhelmus à Brakel, and Herman Witsius, as well as women such as Mary Winslow, Ruth Bryan, and Anne Dutton. They, “being dead,” yet speak (Heb. 11:4).

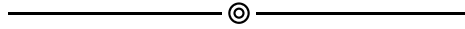
Finally, I am so grateful for my God-fearing family. How can I express in words what I owe to my dear mother—a great prayer warrior—who passed away in 2012 at the age of ninety-two, leaving a legacy of thirty-five grandchildren and ninety-two great-grandchildren. My two brothers, John and Jim, have been a special influence on my life experientially, as have my three children in different ways: Calvin, Esther, and Lydia. Each of them, together with spouses and our young grandchildren, have brought untold joy into my life. But no one has befriended me like my kind and precious wife, Mary. Because of her, I can affirm from experience Richard Baxter’s definition of marriage: “It is a mercy to have a faithful friend that loves you entirely . . . to whom you may open your mind and communicate your affairs. . . . And it is a mercy to have so near a friend to be a helper to your soul and . . . to stir you up in the grace of God.”<sup>4</sup>

May God graciously use this book to promote God-honoring preaching that addresses the real needs of his people—preaching that is not only biblically doctrinal, covenantal, historical-redemptive, and practical, but also biblically and warmly experiential both in its applicatory and discriminatory dimensions for the building up of the universal church.

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4. Richard Baxter, as quoted in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986), 43.

PART 1



Reformed Experiential  
Preaching Defined  
and Described



# What Is Reformed Experiential Preaching?

Perhaps you have heard preaching that fills the head but not the heart. You come away better informed and educated, but little moved by God's glory to do God's will. In the worst case, such preaching puffs people up with knowledge. At its best, it is light without heat. You may also have heard preaching that touches the heart but not the head. Hearing it can be an emotionally moving experience. People leave the service excited, fired up, and feeling good. But they have zeal without knowledge. Like cotton candy, such preaching has lots of flavor but no nutritional value. It might bring people back for more (until they get sick), but it will not nurture life or develop maturity.

The greatest tragedy about these two abuses of preaching is that they sever the vital connection between truth and love in Christ: "But speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15). It's not just that we need both truth and love. Gospel truth has not reached its goal until it produces love. Love has no living roots without gospel truth. Therefore, the truth of Christ must be brought home to the heart by the Holy Spirit in order to produce love. That's the kind of preaching we need. That's what this book is about.

Reformed experiential preaching is not merely aesthetic, causing people to walk away thinking, "What a beautiful idea!" It is not merely informative, imparting knowledge about the Bible and theology. It is



not merely emotional, warming hearts and producing strong feelings. It is not merely moralistic, instructing and exhorting in what is right and wrong. All of these elements are present in good preaching, but none of them is the heart of the matter.

Reformed experiential preaching uses the truth of Scripture to shine the glory of God into the depths of the soul to call people to live solely and wholly for God. It breaks us and remakes us. It is both exhilarating and humbling. Such preaching brings us face to face with the most glorious and delightful Being in the universe, and also face to face with our own profound wickedness. By such preaching, the holy God binds himself to sinful men heart to heart with a word of blood-bought grace.

What is Reformed experiential preaching? Let's look at it from a number of angles, then conclude by putting together a working definition.

## **Experiential (or Experimental) Preaching**

### *Idealistic, Realistic, and Optimistic*

The Reformers, such as John Calvin (1509–1564), talked about “experimental” Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Calvin paraphrases Psalm 27:9 this way: “Make me truly to experience that thou hast been near to me, and let me clearly behold thy power in saving me.” He then comments, “We must observe the distinction between the theoretical knowledge derived from the Word of God and what is called the experimental knowledge of his grace.” The latter is when “God shows himself present in operation,” yet “he must first be sought in his Word.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Calvin believed that the truth of Scripture is foundational to Christianity, yet truth must be experienced in the form of “experimental knowledge.” The Puritans used this same language. For example, William Perkins (1558–1602) said that the spiritual knowledge of God consists in an “experimental knowledge” of Christ’s death and resurrection, “an effectual and lively knowledge, working in us new affections and inclinations.”<sup>3</sup>

The word *experimental* comes from a Latin root meaning “to try, prove, or test.” Calvin did not wonder whether Christianity would crash

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1. Parts of this and the next few sections are revised and expanded from Joel R. Beeke, “Experiential Preaching,” in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 94–128. Used with permission.

2. John Calvin, *Commentaries of Calvin*, various translators and editors, 45 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846–1851; repr., 22 vols., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979) [Ps. 27:9].

3. William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (1617; facsimile reprint, New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 270 [Gal. 4:8–11].

like an experimental airplane. The “experiment” envisaged is not testing the Bible, but testing *us* by the Bible. The root for *experimental* also shows up in the word *experiential*. Experimental preaching stresses the need to know the great truths of the Word of God by personal experience. It also tests our personal experience by the doctrines of the Bible. It brings truth to the heart to illuminate who we are, where we stand with God, how we need to be healed, and where we need to be headed.

On the day I left my six months of active duty with the Army Reserves to begin the follow-up years of weekend meetings and summer camps, a sergeant, knowing I might be called up one day, laid his large hand on my shoulder and said, “Son, if you ever have to fight in war, remember three things: first, how the battle ought to go ideally with the tactics you have been taught; second, how the battle really is going (which is often quite different from the ideal, as wars are bloody and seldom go the way that is expected); and third, the ultimate goal, victory for the American people.”

This translates well into experiential (or experimental) preaching. Reformed experiential preaching explains how things ought to go in the Christian life (the ideal of Romans 8), how they actually go in Christian struggles (the reality of Romans 7), and the ultimate goal in the kingdom of glory (the optimism of Revelation 21–22). This kind of preaching reaches people where they are in the trenches and gives them tactics and hope for the battle.

Paul Helm writes of the need for experiential preaching:

The situation [today] calls for preaching that will cover the full range of Christian experience, and a developed, experimental theology. The preaching must give guidance and instruction to Christians in terms of their actual experience. It must not deal in unrealities or treat congregations as if they lived in a different century or in wholly different circumstances. This involves taking the full measure of our modern situation . . . and entering with full sympathy into the actual experiences, the hopes and the fears, of Christian people.<sup>4</sup>

### *Discriminatory*

Experimental preaching must be discriminatory. I am not referring to discrimination on the basis of skin color or ethnicity. Neither am I speaking of any form of bigotry and hatred. Discriminatory preaching aims to

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4. Paul Helm, “Christian Experience,” *Banner of Truth* 139 (April 1975): 6.

distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian so that people can diagnose their own spiritual conditions and needs. The preacher applies biblical truth to help his hearers test whether they belong to Christ and have his Spirit (Rom. 8:9; 2 Cor. 13:5).

Ministers use the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:19), entrusted to us by Christ, to open or shut the door of the kingdom by the preaching of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins (John 20:23). How does the preacher do that? The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 84) says:

Thus: when according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ’s merits; and on the contrary, when it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted; according to which testimony of the gospel, God will judge them both in this and in the life to come.<sup>5</sup>

In a manner of speaking, through discriminatory preaching, the Holy Spirit brings judgment day near to the consciences of men, either to their vindication and joy or to their guilt and terror.

Preaching must also target the spiritual maturity and condition of the preacher’s audience. This is no easy task, because many kinds of hearers are present. Archibald Alexander (1772–1851) writes: “The word of God should be so handled, that it may be adapted to Christians in different states and stages of the divine life; for while some Christians are like ‘strong men,’ others are but ‘babes in Christ, who must be fed with milk, and not with strong meat.’”<sup>6</sup> Alexander goes on to explain how the Reformed preacher also should rightly divide the Word by making specific applications to the backsliding, the worldly minded, the afflicted, and the dying believer.<sup>7</sup>

Charles Bridges (1794–1869) presents three aspects of discriminatory preaching. First, preachers must distinctly “trace the line of demarcation between the Church and the world,” he says. Ministers must bear in mind

5. Quoted in Joel R. Beeke, ed., *Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, and Church Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2003), 64.

6. Archibald Alexander, “Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth,” in *The Princeton Pulpit*, ed. John T. Duffield (New York: Charles Scribner, 1852), 42.

7. Alexander, “Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth,” 42–45.

that there are fundamentally two kinds of hearers before them—the saved and the unsaved. Bridges stresses the biblical support for this division:

They are described by their state before God, as righteous or wicked (Prov. 14:32; Mal. 3:18)—by their knowledge or ignorance of the Gospel, as spiritual or natural men (1 Cor. 2:14–15)—by their special regard to Christ, as believers or unbelievers (Mark 16:16; John 3:18, 36)—by their interest in the Spirit of God, “being in the Spirit, or having not the Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9)—by their habits of life, “walking after and minding, the things of the Spirit, or the things of the flesh” (Rom. 5:1, 5)—by their respective rules of conduct, the word of God, or “the course of this world” (Ps. 119:105; Matt. 25:46)—by the Masters whom they respectively obey, the servants of God, or the servants of Satan (Rom. 6:16)—by the road in which they travel, the narrow way or the broad road (Matt. 7:13–14)—by the ends to which their roads are carrying them, life or death—heaven or hell (Rom. 8:13; Matt. 25:46).<sup>8</sup>

Second, preachers must identify the line that separates the false professor (the hypocrite) from the true believer. Jesus himself draws that line sharply when he speaks of those who claim to belong to his professing church and who cry, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? . . . and in thy name done many wonderful works?” only to hear his response: “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:22–23).

Of this second line of discrimination, Bridges writes: “Every part of the Christian character has its counterfeit. How easily are the delusions of fancy or feeling mistaken for the impressions of grace. The genuineness of the work of God must be estimated, not by the extent, but by the influence, of Scriptural knowledge—not by a fluency of gifts, but by their exercise in connexion with holiness and love.”<sup>9</sup> David Brainerd (1718–1747) puts it this way: “Labor to distinguish clearly upon experiences and affections in religion, that you may make a difference between the ‘gold’ and the shining ‘dross’ (Prov. 25:4); I say, labor here, as ever you would be an useful minister of Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

8. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (London: Banner of Truth, 2006), 277.

9. Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 278.

10. Quoted in Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 7, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 495.

Ministers need to help their hearers rightly examine themselves. Second Corinthians 13:5 says, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.” Pastors must not assume or presume that all churchgoers, including children, are saved. They also are to avoid presumed church “unregeneration,” as if only a few who have professed faith in Christ are truly saved. Rather, preachers are to present repeatedly before their people the biblical marks of those who have been born again and have come to Christ by way of saving faith and genuine repentance.

Third, Bridges says, preachers “must also regard the different individualities of profession within the Church.”<sup>11</sup> Like Jesus, preachers must distinguish between the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear (Mark 4:28). Like Paul, they must differentiate between babes and adults in grace (1 Cor. 3:1). Like John, they must preach to various believers as little children, young men, and fathers in grace (1 John 2:12–14).

Alexander makes the case for discriminatory preaching. He writes: “The promises and threatenings contained in the Scriptures [must] be applied to the characters to which they properly belong. How often do we hear a preacher expatiating on the rich consolations of the exceeding great and precious promises of God, when no mortal can tell, from anything which he says, to whom they are applicable. In much of preaching, there is a vague and indiscriminate application of the special promises of the covenant of grace, as though all who heard them were true Christians, and had a claim to the comfort which they offer.” After concluding that, in true preaching, “the saint and the sinner are clearly distinguished by decisive scripture marks, so that every one may have a fair opportunity of ascertaining to which class he belongs, and what prospects lie before him,” Alexander goes on to lament:

It is much to be regretted that this accurate discrimination in preaching has gone so much out of use in our times. It is but seldom that we hear a discourse from the pulpit which is calculated to afford much aid to Christians in ascertaining their own true character; of which will serve to detect the hypocrite and formalist, and drive them from all their false refuges. In the best days of the reformed churches, such discriminating delineation of character, by the light of Scripture, formed an important part of almost every sermon. But we are now more attentive to the rules of rhetoric than to the marks of true religion. How do Owen, Fla-

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11. Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 279.

vel, Boston, and Erskine abound in marks of distinction between the true and false professor? And the most distinguished preachers of our own country,—the Mathers, Shepards, Stoddards, Edwardses, as also the Blairs, Tennents, Davies, and Dickinsons, were wise in so dividing the word of truth, that all might receive their portion in due season.<sup>12</sup>

In short, discriminatory preaching must remain faithful to God’s Word. Grace is to be offered indiscriminately to all (Matt. 13:24–30); however, the divine acts, marks, and fruits of grace that God works in his people must be explained to encourage the elect to know themselves aright and to uncover the false hopes of the hypocrites. As Bishop Joseph Hall (1574–1656) says of the minister, “His wisdom must discern betwixt his sheep and wolves; in his sheep, betwixt the wholesome and unsound; in the unsound, betwixt the weak and the tainted; in the tainted, betwixt the natures, qualities, degrees of the disease, and infection; and to all these he must know to administer a word in season. He hath antidotes for all temptations, counsels for all doubts, evictions for all errors; for all languishings, encouragements.”<sup>13</sup>

Robert Hall (1764–1831) says that it is difficult to decide “which we should most anxiously guard against, the infusion of a false peace, or the inflaming of the wounds which we ought to heal.”<sup>14</sup> Little wonder, then, that Richard Baxter (1615–1691) warns preachers that when, as spiritual physicians, they apply the wrong spiritual medication to their parishioners, they can become murderers of souls, which has grave ramifications for eternity.<sup>15</sup> Preachers must be honest with every soul and strive to bring them and the touchstone of Holy Scripture together.

Such preaching teaches us that unless our religion is genuinely experienced, we will perish. Experience itself does not save us, but the Christ who saves us must be experienced personally as the foundation of our eternal hope (Matt. 7:22–27).

### *Applicatory*

Experiential preaching is applicatory. It applies the text to every aspect of the listener’s life, promoting religion that is not just a “form of godliness”

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12. Alexander, “Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth,” 40–42.

13. Joseph Hall, “To My Brother Mr. Sa. Hall,” Epistle 5 in *The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall*, ed. Philip Wynter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1863), 6:231.

14. Robert Hall, “On the Discouragements and Supports of the Christian Ministry,” in *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall* (New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1830), 2:138.

15. Quoted in Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 280.

but also the “power” of God (2 Tim. 3:5). Robert Burns (1789–1869) says that experiential religion is “Christianity brought home to ‘men’s business and bosoms.’” He writes, “Christianity should not only be known, and understood, and believed, but also felt, and enjoyed, and practically applied.”<sup>16</sup>

Paul was never content merely to declare the truth, so he could write to the Thessalonians that his “gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance” (1 Thess. 1:5). To use Baxter’s language, Paul wanted to screw the truth into the hearts and minds of men and women. Baxter writes, “It would grieve one to the heart to hear what excellent doctrine some ministers have in hand, while yet they let it die in their hands for want of close [searching] and lively [living] application.”<sup>17</sup> If only it could be said of more ministers’ preaching today what one might say of the preaching of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758): all his doctrine was application and all his application was doctrine.

Application is the major emphasis of experiential preaching. The Reformers and Puritans spent many times more effort in application than in discrimination. Many preachers today fall far short in this area. They have been trained to be good expositors, but they have not been trained in the classroom or by the Holy Spirit to bring the truth home to the heart. That is why, when you hear certain preachers, you say to yourself: “Oh, he can really handle the Word of God well, but he stopped just when I thought he was starting. He didn’t bring it home to me. I seem to have escaped the preacher’s notice altogether. What should I do with the sermon now?”

Some preachers say, “Application is the Holy Spirit’s job, not mine.” But that is not the way the Bible handles truth. People need to be spoon-fed when you bring them the Word of God, not only in your exposition but also in your application. They need help to know what the truth implies for what they must do and how they must do it. If you read Calvin’s sermons, you stand amazed at his constant attention to application. Take his book of sermons on Deuteronomy. It would not surprise me if ten to twenty times per sermon he says, “Now this is to teach us that,” “This is how we are to handle that,” or, “This is the way we are to live out that.”

16. Robert Burns, introduction to the *Works of Thomas Halyburton* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1835), xiv–xv. The expression “come home to men’s business and bosoms” comes from scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) in his dedication to later editions of his *Essays*.

17. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 147.

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) exaggerates only slightly when he says, “Where the application begins, there the sermon begins.”<sup>18</sup> However, the best preachers include application *throughout* their sermons, not only when concluding. Bridges writes:

The method of perpetual application, where the subject will admit of it, is probably best calculated for effect—applying each head distinctly; and addressing separate classes [or groups] at the close with suitable exhortation, warning, or encouragement. The Epistle to the Hebrews [itself a series of sermons] is a complete model of this scheme. Argumentative throughout, connected in its train of reasoning, and logical in its deductions—each successive link is interrupted by some personal and forcible conviction; while the continuity of the chain is preserved entire to the end.<sup>19</sup>

The Puritan preachers, who learned from the Reformers, were masters of the art of application. This art is beautifully summarized in a short chapter titled “Of the Preaching of the Word” in the Directory for the Public Worship of God, composed by the Calvinistic and Puritan Westminster divines. They wrote, “He [the preacher] is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers.”<sup>20</sup> I will explore the wise counsel of the Westminster divines in a later chapter.

Finally, it needs to be said that applicatory preaching is often costly preaching. As has often been said, when John the Baptist preached *generally*, Herod heard him gladly. But when John applied his preaching *particularly* (criticizing Herod’s adulterous relationship with his brother’s wife), he lost his head (Mark 6:14–29). Both internally in a preacher’s own conscience, as well as in the consciences of his people, a fearless application of God’s truth will exact a price. And yet, how needful such preaching is! One day, every preacher will stand before God’s judgment seat to give an account of how he handled God’s Word among the flock of sheep entrusted to him. Woe to that preacher who has not striven to bring home the Word of God to the souls and consciences of his hearers.

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18. Quoted in John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Edwin C. Dargan (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1898), 245.

19. Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 275.

20. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 380.



Preachers, I urge you to remember that we are not to speak *before* people but *to* people. Application is not only critical, it is an essential part of true preaching and, in many respects, the main thing to be done. And those who fear God will want God’s Word personally administered to them. As Daniel Webster says, “When I attend upon the teachings of the gospel, I wish to have it made a personal matter—a *personal matter*—a *personal matter*.”<sup>21</sup>

### ***Biblical, Doctrinal, Experiential, and Practical***

Experiential preaching, then, teaches that the Christian faith must be experienced, tasted, and lived through the saving power of the Holy Spirit. It stresses the knowledge of scriptural truth “which [is] able to make [us] wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). Specifically, such preaching teaches that Christ, the living Word (John 1:1) and the very embodiment of the truth, must be experientially known and embraced. It proclaims the need for sinners to experience God in the person of his Son. As John 17:3 says, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” The word *know* in this text, as elsewhere in the Bible, does not indicate mere casual acquaintance but a deep, abiding relationship. For example, Genesis 4:1 uses the word *know* to express marital intimacy: “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain.” Experiential preaching stresses the intimate, personal knowledge of God in Christ.

Biblical preaching must combine doctrinal, experiential, and practical elements. This subject was discussed by John Newton (1725–1807) and other evangelical ministers at one of their Eclectic Society meetings in London in 1798. John Clayton (1754–1843), an English independent minister, raised the question, “What are we to understand by doctrinal, experimental, and practical preaching?” He pointed out that doctrinal preaching by itself tends to produce argumentative thinkers, experiential preaching can overemphasize our inward feelings to the neglect of truth and action, and practical preaching may become man centered and self-righteous, belittling Christ and the gospel. Clayton said that all three components must have their place in preaching, quoting Thomas Bradbury (1677–1759) as say-

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21. Quoted in “Funeral of Mr. Webster,” *The New York Daily Times*, Oct. 30, 1852.

ing, “Religion is doctrinal in the Bible; experimental in the heart; and practical in the life.”<sup>22</sup>

John Goode (1738–1790) said, “In the members of our flock, there would be sight, feeling, and obedience; and to produce these, all three—doctrinal, experimental, and practical preaching—must be combined in their proper proportion.” Newton declared the organic and vital unity of these three, saying, “Doctrine is the trunk, experience the branches, practice the fruit.” He warned that without the doctrine of Christ we say nothing more than pagan philosophers.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Scott (1747–1821) also warned that there is a false way to handle each dimension of preaching: doctrines may not be biblical truth or may be only half-truths, which effectively are lies; experience may follow human prescriptions or be based on visions, impressions, or man-made schemes; and we may substitute mere morality for evangelical or gospel-empowered obedience.<sup>24</sup>

So we see that Reformed experiential preaching aims to bring together the doctrinal, experiential, and practical dimensions as one unified whole. Though we must humbly admit that in our sermons we often do not attain the kind of balance and completeness we strive for, we must stress that we cannot neglect any aspect of biblical preaching—doctrinal, experiential, and practical—without damaging the others, for each one flows naturally out of the others.

### *Walking with Our Triune God and Savior*

Reformed experiential preaching grounded in the Word of God is God centered (theocentric) rather than man centered (anthropocentric). Some people accuse the Puritans of being man centered in their passion for godly experience. But as J. I. Packer argues, the Puritans were not interested in obsessing over their own experience but in entering into fellowship with the triune God. Packer writes, “The thought of communion with God takes us to the very heart of Puritan theology and religion.”<sup>25</sup> The Puritans avoided “false mysticism” by approaching communion with God “objectively and theocentrically.” They grounded the Christian’s experience upon

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22. Quoted in John H. Pratt, ed., *The Thought of Evangelical Leaders: Notes of the Discussions of The Eclectic Society, London, During the Years 1798–1814* (1856; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), 77–78.

23. Quoted in Pratt, ed., *Thought of Evangelical Leaders*, 79.

24. Quoted in Pratt, ed., *Thought of Evangelical Leaders*, 80.

25. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 201.

the objective truth of how God saves sinners through Christ. They also shaped experience according to the form of the Trinity, relating to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the gospel reveals the triune God.<sup>26</sup>

This passion for fellowship with the triune God means that experiential preaching not only addresses the believer's conscience but also his relationship with others in the church and the world. If experiential preaching led me to examine only my experiences and my relationship with God, it would fall short of impacting my interaction with family members, church members, and others in society. Self-centered preaching produces self-centered hearers. Instead, true experiential preaching brings a believer into the realm of vital Christian experience, drawing him away from himself and promoting a love for God and his glory as well as a burning passion to declare that love to others around him. A believer so instructed cannot help but be evangelistic, since vital Christian experience and a heart for missions are inseparable.

In other words, my life is an open epistle of the grace of God. I want to speak to others about the Lord. It is an oxymoron to say that I am an experiential Christian and not be an evangelistic Christian. These two things belong together. When we preach experientially, and people experience the power of God unto salvation, the whole congregation becomes evangelistic. People learn to treasure truth so much that they want to share it. The Father, Christ, and his Spirit become real for them under experiential preaching. God's glory fills them and moves them so that they want to start evangelistic programs and talk to their unsaved relatives about Christ—out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).

In sum, Reformed experimental preaching brings the entire range of Christian living into connection with the Savior of the world. Where Christ is truly known as Savior, he is also served as Lord. With the Spirit's blessing, the mission is to transform the believer in all that he is and does so that he becomes more and more like the Savior.

### *Bible-Based Experience*

Experiential knowledge of God is never divorced from Scripture. According to Isaiah 8:20, all of our beliefs, including our experiences,

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26. Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 204; see John Owen, "Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 2:1-274.

must be tested by the witness of Holy Scripture. Martin Luther (1483–1546) reputedly quipped that if we can't find our experiences in the Bible, they are not from the Lord but from the Devil. That is really what the word *experimental* intends to convey. Just as a scientific experiment tests a hypothesis against a body of evidence, so experiential preaching involves examining experience in the light of the Word of God.

Of course, there is also the danger that ministers may discriminate and apply the Bible, but not exegete and expound it. They fall into what I call *experientialism*, where experience becomes the savior (though often only implicitly). We do not preach experience, but Christ Jesus our Lord from the Holy Scriptures (2 Cor. 4:5). As a safeguard, we should always be preaching out of a particular text of Scripture, showing what God has said in it and how that truth applies to the hearers. However, I have heard ministers insert into every sermon a set form of what a sinner experiences when God converts him, whether the particular Scripture text being expounded taught it or not. Other preachers fall into a similar trap by constantly preaching some particular aspect of experience. This does not make it true experiential preaching!

An experiential preacher addresses the whole range of the Christian's experience by preaching through the whole range of Scripture. He knows how to draw out the Christian's experience from each particular text, be it in the area of misery, the area of deliverance, the area of thankfulness, or the area of wrestling with backsliding. The experiential preacher knows how Scripture promotes vital religion. This is what Paul refers to when he says that "all scripture," being breathed out by God through his Spirit, is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

When a preacher preaches this way, something resonates from the pulpit into the believer's soul. The believer who has a real relationship with God feels this preaching to be a great force of transformation—it moves him, challenges him, exhorts him, and molds him. He feels the reality of the Holy Spirit's unction in such preaching. Such preaching, then, becomes "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16).

Such preaching stands by the gates of hell, as it were, to proclaim that those who are not born again shall soon walk through these gates to dwell forever in the homelessness of the abyss—unless they repent. But such preaching also stands at the gates of heaven, preaching that

the regenerate, who by God's preserving grace persevere in holiness, will soon walk through into eternal glory and unceasing communion with God.

### **Ask for the Old Paths, Where Is the Good Way**

As I will show in the chapters of the second part of this book, experiential preaching is part of the grand tradition flowing out of the revival of biblical godliness in the sixteenth-century Reformation. Until the mid-nineteenth century, many Reformed ministers preached experientially. Baptist minister and educator Francis Wayland (1796–1865) wrote in 1857:

From the manner in which our ministers entered upon the work, it is evident that it must have been the prominent object of their lives to convert men to God. . . . They were remarkable for what was called experimental preaching. They told much of the exercises of the human soul under the influence of the truth of the gospel:

- the feeling of a sinner while under the convicting power of the truth;
- the various subterfuges to which he resorted when aware of his danger;
- the successive applications of truth by which he was driven out of all of them;
- the despair of the soul when it found itself wholly without a refuge;
- its final submission to God, and simple reliance on Christ;
- the joys of the new birth and the earnestness of the soul to introduce others to the happiness which it has now for the first time experienced;
- the trials of the soul when it found itself an object of reproach and persecution among those whom it loved best;
- the process of sanctification;
- the devices of Satan to lead us into sin;
- the mode in which the attacks of the adversary may be resisted;
- the danger of backsliding, with its evidences, and the means of recovery from it.

Wayland concludes with these sad words: “These remarks show the tendency of the class of preachers which seems now to be passing away.”<sup>27</sup>

How different experiential preaching is from what we often hear today. I live in a city with more than one hundred Reformed churches (perhaps more Reformed churches than any city other than Seoul, South Korea). But I would guess that if you gathered us all together and asked ministers to raise their hands if they preach Reformed experiential sermons, at least half would ask, “What is that?” Things have changed dramatically in Reformed circles since the mid-nineteenth century.

The Word of God is preached too often in a way that cannot transform listeners because the preacher fails to discriminate and to apply. Such preaching is reduced to a lecture, mere catering to what people want to hear, or the kind of subjectivism that is divorced from the foundation of scriptural truth. It fails to biblically explain what the Reformers and Puritans called vital religion: how a sinner must be stripped of his self-righteousness, driven to Christ alone for salvation, and led to the joy of simple reliance upon Christ. It fails to show how a sinner encounters the plague of indwelling sin, battles against backsliding, and gains victory by faith in Christ.

Experiential preaching, rightly understood, is transforming because it accurately reflects the vital experience of the children of God (Rom. 5:1–11), clearly explains the marks and fruits of the saving grace necessary for a believer (Matt. 5:3–12; Gal. 5:22–23), and sets before believer and unbeliever alike their eternal futures (Rev. 21:1–8) and their calling at the present hour.

That kind of preaching is very different from much contemporary preaching, which never deals with the experience of the soul. It always stays on a shallow level:

“You must believe.”

“Yes, I believe.”

“OK, you are a Christian.”

This preaching does not talk about the experience of losing my life, dying to my own righteousness, and finding my life in the righteousness of Christ. Contemporary preaching, though not without some value,

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27. Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, and Co., 1857), 40–43. I have separated Wayland’s paragraph into bullet points for easier reading.

often fails to transform people because of a lack of discrimination and application of truth to the heart.

### **Preaching to Satisfy Spiritual Taste Buds**

Ultimately, Reformed experiential preaching is not just a homiletic method but a spiritual exercise of satisfying the appetite of the soul. The Scriptures use the language of sense perception to communicate that spiritual realities produce true experiences of the soul, not just mental ideas. The Bible says, “He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God” (3 John 11; cf. 1 John 3:6). No one can see God in the literal sense of perceiving with the vision of the eyes (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12, 20). John is speaking of the vision of the soul, the seeing of God’s grace and glory by faith in Christ (John 1:14).

Similarly, the Lord spoke of having “ears to hear,”<sup>28</sup> not referring to physical ears but “the hearing of faith” by the soul (Gal. 3:2, 5). The gospel is compared to the stench of death to the perishing, but to the sweet fragrance of life to the saved (2 Cor. 2:15–16). Only the Holy Spirit can produce spiritual senses that apprehend God in the Word.

Perhaps the most vivid sensory metaphor for spiritual experience is that of taste. Psalm 119:103 says: “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” Jeremiah says, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts” (Jer. 15:16). We read in 1 Peter 2:2–3, “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”

Edwards writes that when God saves a person, he gives him “a real sense of the excellency of God, and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption, and the ways and works of God revealed in the gospel”—“the sense of the heart” that brings “pleasure and delight.” He illustrates, “There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness.”<sup>29</sup>

Herman Hoeksema (1886–1965) explains the difference between theoretical knowledge and experiential knowledge in this manner:

28. Deut. 29:4; Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35.

29. Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, *Sermons and Discourses 1730–1733*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 413–14.

A dietitian may be able to analyze thoroughly every item on a menu and inform you exactly as to the number and kinds of vitamins each dish contains. But if he has cancer of the stomach, he cannot taste the food and enjoy it; neither is he able to digest it and derive the necessary strength from it. In contrast, a man with a hungry stomach may sit at the table with the dietitian, knowing absolutely nothing about vitamins; but he will order his meal, relish his food, and appropriate it to himself in such a way that he is refreshed and strengthened.<sup>30</sup>

Such is the difference between having bare intellectual knowledge about Christ, which any unbeliever might have, and knowing Christ in a personal and life-changing way, as only a believer can. Reformed experiential preaching is more than reading the menu to people and giving them a nutritional report. It is dishing out hot food in all its rich aromas and tastes to satisfy the hungry soul.

### **Preaching from Heart to Heart**

Experiential preaching often grows out of the preacher's own experience of Christ in the midst of his sorrows and sins. It is one thing for you to preach about the intercession of Christ and ask, "Isn't it wonderful, congregation, that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, interceding for you every single second?" That is not a bad statement. People might walk away and say, "Wasn't that wonderful? That's comforting." But how much richer is your preaching if you have experienced in the depths of your soul what it means to be brought to an end of your own prayer. You have been at your wit's end in a situation for which you couldn't find a solution. You have learned to cry to God Almighty, and God has assured you, through his Word, that his Son is at his right hand, interceding for you. If you have heart knowledge of that comfort, then you are going to preach it with far more power and energy than if you are preaching it only from head knowledge.

It is very hard to explain the difference in words, but I can tell you that I have experienced it. I preached about the intercession of Christ with much greater liberty after I felt so needy and helpless I hardly knew how to pray except to cling to the promise that "he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Then I was able to say, "Lord, if that

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30. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 2:75.



is true, then right now, when I can hardly pray and am at my wit's end, Thou art praying for me!" Comfort swept over me. Then I was able not merely to describe Christ's intercession from my head to my people's heads, but to preach it from my heart to their hearts.

A major element in this process is growing in humility. Our native pride constantly pushes away heart religion and replaces it with a superficial form of godliness lacking the power of true religion. We all by nature prefer either to reject the Bible entirely or merely clean the outside of the cup while the inside remains filthy. God must break into our whitewashed tombs with the gift of humility before we can truly experience his grace. A key aspect of Reformed experiential preaching is that the knowledge of God humbles the preacher and those to whom he preaches. Calvin points out that such humility arises directly from seeing the Lord as he is:

Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face and then descends from contemplating Him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured.<sup>31</sup>

We must constantly keep in view our depravity and Christ's righteousness. It is critical that these be contrasted so that we see the Savior in all his glory and beauty. As long as we declare over and over that his righteousness exceeds our unrighteousness and his holiness exceeds our perversity, then all our hope is in Christ. Nevertheless, it is critical for a preacher to stress our sinful depravity often in preaching, because the Holy Spirit uses such preaching to drive us to Christ repeatedly as the only remedy for our indwelling sin. Under such heart-convicting preaching, we see deeper into our souls' experience: our selfishness, pride, unbelief, and disobedience. We see more deeply who God is in all his riches, glory, beauty, and grace for sinners. Then we both preach experientially and live experientially.

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31. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.1.2.

## **Conclusion: A Tentative Definition**

So what then is Reformed experiential preaching? I have touched briefly on a number of its ingredients. It is preaching that:

- tests genuine Christian experience by the standard of biblical truth—idealistically, realistically, and optimistically;
- draws lines distinguishing between believers and unbelievers;
- makes frequent and wise application of truth to life;
- balances biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical elements;
- cultivates a life of communion with our God and Savior;
- builds experience upon the foundation of Holy Scripture, God’s Word;
- goes beyond contemporary superficiality into the deep wisdom of old paths;
- offers food to satisfy the new spiritual sense of the believer’s soul; and
- touches the heart with the bitterness of sin and the sweetness of grace.

You can see that there is a multidimensional richness to Reformed experiential preaching. Yet it is not that complicated. All these ingredients, when blended together and baked in the fires of the Spirit and suffering, produce a single, satisfying loaf of delicious bread.

I will examine these matters in more detail in the rest of this book. For now, I can offer the following tentative definition: Reformed experiential preaching is preaching that applies the truth of God to the hearts of people to show how things ought to go, do go, and ultimately will go in the Christian’s experience with respect to God and his neighbors—including his family members, his fellow church members, and people in the world around him. Even more simply, we could say that the Reformed experiential preacher receives God’s Word into his heart and then preaches it to the minds, hearts, and lives of his people. I am not saying that preachers who speak mostly from head knowledge are useless—far from it. They may accurately instruct people in God’s truth. They may edify the church. We must remember that we do not change people by our experiences. The Holy Spirit changes people, and he can use even defective preaching of Christ (Phil. 1:15–18). But how much more can he use preachers whose hearts burn with love. If the Spirit intends to work in the hearers of the Word, he generally works first in the preacher of the

Word. That's why wise preachers so covet the prayers of God's people for the filling of the Holy Spirit that they may preach powerfully (Acts 4:8, 29–33; Eph. 6:18–20).

May the Holy Spirit fill you now, dear reader, and may he fill you more and more as you proceed through the rest of this book so that Christ will be magnified in the eyes of your faith, and in your life and ministry.

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