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Why Do We Preach? A Foundation for Christian Preaching, Part Three

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The neglect of the work of the Spirit is a symptom of the decline of biblical Trinitarianism in our midst. Charles H. Spurgeon warned, "You might as well expect to raise the dead by whispering in their ears, as hope to save souls by preaching to them, if it were not for the agency of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit performs His work of inspiration, indwelling, regeneration, and sanctification as the inner minister of the Word; it is the Spirit's ministry of illumination that allows the Word of the Lord to break forth.

Both the preacher and the hearers are dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit for any adequate understanding of the text. As Calvin warned, "No one should hesitate to confess that he is able to understand God's mysteries only in so far as he is illumined by God's grace. He who attributes any more understanding to himself is all the more blind because he does not recognize his own blindness." This has been the confession of great preachers from the first century to the present, and the absence of a conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit is a sign that the preacher does not understand his task and calling. Tertullian, for example, called the Spirit his "Vicar" who ministered the Word to himself and to his congregation.

The Reformation saw a new acknowledgement of the union of Word and Spirit. This *testimonium* was understood to be the crucial means by which the Spirit imparts understanding. This Trinitarian doctrine produced preaching that was both bold and humble; bold in its content, but uttered forth by humble humans who knew their utter dependence upon God.

John Calvin described the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit as absolutely necessary in order for the individual to receive the Word: "For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in His Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded."

Martin Luther had affirmed this same truth in various ways, most famously in his exhortation to his young students that they must preach the Word faithfully in order to get the Word to the ears of the congregation. Nevertheless, Luther also insisted that only the Holy Spirit could take the Word from the ear into the human heart.

Luther had another important point to make as well. Even as the preacher is dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the Word, Luther insisted that the Father had willed that the Spirit should work uniquely through the Word, and not independent of it. He rejected the notion that the Holy Spirit would impart spiritual life through sacraments or other actions apart from the Word.

In Luther's own words: "Therefore no one desiring comfort should wait until the Holy Spirit presents Christ to him personally or speaks to him directly from heaven. He gives His testimony publicly, in the sermon. There you must seek Him and wait for Him until He touches your heart through the Word that you hear with your ears, and thus He also testifies of Christ inwardly through His working." This quality of confidence in the Holy Spirit's work through the Word, and only through the Word, would be a much-needed corrective in today's confused church.

The same God who called forth human vessels and set them to preach also promised the power of the Spirit. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was aware that preachers often forget this promise: "Seek Him always. But go beyond seeking Him; expect Him. Do you expect anything to happen when you get up to preach in a pulpit? Or do you just say to yourself, 'Well, I have prepared my address, I am going to give them this address; some of them will appreciate it and some will not'? Are you expecting it to be the turning point in someone's life? That is what preaching is meant to do. . . . Seek this power, expect this power, yearn for this power; and when the power comes, yield to Him."

To preach "in the Spirit" is to preach with the acknowledgement that the human instrument has no control over the message—and no control over the Word as it is set loose within the congregation. The Spirit, as John declared, testifies, "because the Spirit is the truth" [1 John 5:6].

J. I. Packer defined preaching as "the event of God bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction from Himself through the words of a spokesperson." That rather comprehensive definition depicts the process of God speaking forth His Word, using human instruments to proclaim His message, and then calling men and women unto Himself. A theological analysis reveals that preaching is deadly business. As Spurgeon confirmed, "Life, death, hell, and worlds unknown may hang on the preaching and hearing of a sermon."

The apostle Paul revealed the logic of preaching when he asked, "How then, can they call upon the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" [Rom. 10:14]

The preacher is a commissioned agent whose task is to speak because God has spoken, because the preacher has been entrusted with the telling of the gospel of the Son who saves, and because God has promised the power of the Spirit as the seal and efficacy of the preacher's calling.

The ground of the preaching is none other than the revelation which God has addressed to us in Scripture. The goal of preaching is no more and no less than faithfulness to this calling. The glory of preaching is that God has promised to use preachers and preaching to accomplish His purpose and bring glory unto Himself.

Therefore, a theology of preaching is essentially doxology. The ultimate purpose of the sermon is to glorify God and to reveal a glimpse of His glory to his creation. This is the sum and substance of the preaching task. That God would choose such a means to express His own glory is beyond our understanding; it is rooted in the mystery of the will and wisdom of God.

Yet our God has called out preachers and commanded them to preach. Preaching is not an act the church is called to defend, but a ministry preachers are called to perform. And as we are well reminded, we are not called to accomplish this task alone. The Holy Spirit is the seal and promise of our preaching. Thus, whatever the season, the imperative stands: Preach the Word!

