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Description

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The Shepherd’s Seminary

Dr. Barry J. York

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"I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord God. “I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment."

Ezekiel 34:15-16 (ESV)

Five years ago, on becoming the Professor of Pastoral Theology at Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (RPTS), I considered the theme of “The Shepherding Seminary” for my inauguration. Upon becoming the President of the seminary, I want to revisit the same theme and consider the topic of “The Shepherd’s Seminary” in this paper. Though RPTS has a president to lead it, has a Board that oversees it, and is controlled by the RPCNA, RPTS belongs to Jesus, the True Shepherd. It is his seminary! In this paper, I want to explain why a model of shepherding is the best model for RPTS, and how we best ensure that RPTS remains committed to that model.

Reviewing Our Vision

The motto of Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, is “Study under pastors.” The Shepherd’s staff running through the initials of our institution is a reminder that the chief work of a pastor is to be a shepherd. Indeed, the very word “pastor” comes out of French and Latin words for shepherd. At the heart of being a pastor is to be a shepherd; at the heart of doing kingdom work in teaching, counseling, and caring for people is shepherding. Though the seminary is an academic and theological institution, RPTS is to be a place where shepherds are trained and where shepherding takes place.

Yet shepherding is often not the model being employed in many churches and ministries today. In many places, the shepherding structure of the local church has been replaced with a pastor using a business model where he acts like a CEO. To many, a model of the church or seminary training that follows shepherding seems antiquated. The corruption we are seeing today, not just in the Catholic church, but in the evangelical church as well, has much to do with a failure of the shepherds, a failure to teach and insist on having the church structured with a shepherding model.

Compounding the challenge, the Digital Age has brought momentous changes to theological education. Some of these trends in theological education that RPTS and others are facing are:

1) Centralized education in brick and mortar buildings was once the sole means of theological education; now bytes and pixels mean training can be done all over the world.

2) Seminaries used to be supported by the church but basically isolated from the people in the pews; today, means exist for the people of God to know what is happening and being taught at the seminary. Thus, they can also receive various forms of education for themselves.
3) In former days, theological education was basically restricted to those in Western nations; in this new age, the nations themselves are seeking to be trained. Indeed, forty years ago only 7% of those attending seminary in North America were non-white; racial/ethnic student enrollment has grown more than fourfold over the past thirty years.¹

4) The rule used to be that the students came and sat at the feet of the professors; in this new age professors often must go to the students. Men and women have the ability to get a degree without even stepping onto the seminary campus. These challenges also raise the question, “Is shepherding still the best model?”

I believed then, and even more so now, that actually these challenges are met best by a seminary showing it belongs to the Good and Great Shepherd by following his principles. If one looks at works on pastoral theology through the ages, the metaphor of shepherding is one that is consistent. Chief among them is Martin Bucer’s Concerning the True Care of Souls from the 16th century. His work is structured on these two verses of Ezekiel. “I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest,” declares the Lord God. “I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment” (Ez. 34:15-16). Indeed, the full title of the book was Concerning the true care of souls and the correct shepherd-service, how this is to be established and carried out in the Church of Christ. John Calvin, who spent three years in exile from Geneva, arrived in Strasbourg, the year Bucer’s “little handbook” as it was called was published, and was greatly influenced by it. Bucer, as many who followed him, saw Jesus as this wonderful shepherd, and those who were to care for his people as ones who had to be like him in this regard. In this paper, we will consider three concise emphases in Bucer to renew our vision to this model of being and ministering as the Shepherd’s Seminary.

Renewing Our Vision

RPTS will continue to follow a shepherding model because Christ is the head shepherd and king of the church.

Bucer, after citing eleven texts establishing Christ’s headship over the church, states in sharp contrast to Rome,

“And so we have seen from the aforementioned texts that Christ our Lord alone has and exercises all power and rule in his church and congregation. It is he himself who rules the church . . . He acts as a King in his kingdom, a Master with his disciples, a faithful Shepherd with his flock…”²

Bucer is the earliest reformer who gave the most clear expression to the beloved doctrine of the RPCNA, the mediatorial kingship of Christ. Christ alone is head of the church. In Dei Regno Christi he said, “Our heavenly King, Jesus Christ, is, according to his promise, with us everywhere and every day, ‘to the consummation of the world’ (Matt. 28:20). He himself sees, attends to, and accomplishes whatever pertains to the salvation of his own.”³

Consider Bucer’s strong warning to those who would deny this truth and harm the people of God by not shepherding them properly:


² Martin Bucer, Concerning the True Care of Souls (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 13.

This means that all those who claim spiritual authority for themselves over the church of Christ...but do not serve the Lord Jesus with the utmost loyalty in providing pasture for these his holy ones, continually encouraging all the elect of God through true faith in him to forsake all their sins and seek all righteousness, by proclaiming the holy gospel and Christian discipline – that is, those who do not share with him in gathering and feeding his lambs, but rather scatter and devastate Christ’s sheep – such people are opposed to Christ and have neither part nor share in the kingdom of Christ, that is, in the church of Christ. ⁴

RPTS will be the Shepherd’s seminary by continuing to found its teaching on the eternal Word of God; equipping men to feed the Church from that Word; submitting to Christ by requiring faculty, administration, and students alike to live holy lives; and recognizing that it is here to serve the church. Our commitment to Christ as Shepherd means we will follow a shepherding model and be known as a place submitted to Jesus.

RPTS will also continue to follow a shepherding model because Christ, as the chief shepherd, appoints ministers and elders to be his under-shepherds.

Bucer develops in his work that the true care of souls, or conducting proper shepherd-service, involves having pastors as shepherds. Bucer made it clear from the Biblical patterns of Christ and the apostles, as well as from arguments of human nature and need, that ministers had the duty of feeding the sheep the pure Word of God found in the Bible. He stated very clearly what the pastor’s chief work was. “The duties of this sacred ministry include the teaching of Christ, the dispensation of his sacraments, and the administration of his discipline.” ⁵ It is clear that the Reformation understanding of the marks of the church is nothing but a redevelopment of what Bucer and others like him taught. ⁶ He taught that this rigorous ministerial work could not be accomplished merely at public gatherings, but required intense, personal visiting, catechizing, and discipleship.

He also demonstrates that since pastoral work is so great and varied, a need exists for elders to assist the pastor in this work. Bucer develops in the early Reformation period the foundation for what would eventually become known as the office of ruling elders. He taught how each congregation needed shepherds, several elders with a pastor (or “president”, akin to the modern concept of a moderator of a session) to guide the whole. ⁷

RPTS is committed to training these future leaders of the church. This last decade has seen RPTS expand its courses to further train our men in pastoral ministry, from counseling to church planting. We are partnering more and more with churches and ministries to adequately prepare these shepherds, from having them preach the Word of God on the streets and chapels of Pittsburgh; having local pastors mentor students while they do distance learning, having them learn the practice of visitation, be it evangelism in residential homes or sitting with the elderly at the RP Home; working with pastors and churches in providing rigorous internships; or developing courses for ruling elders and deacons. All of this is stressing shepherding!

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⁴ Bucer, True Care, 13-14.

⁵ Pauck, Melanchthon and Bucer, 232.

⁶ For the present author’s work on the marks of the church, see Barry J. York, Hitting the Marks (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2018).

⁷ Pauck, 35.
RPTS will continue to follow a shepherding model because Christ has assembled the church as a flock of needy yet contributing sheep.

The people of God are needy, and ministers and elders must care for them. Yet they must not only see their needs but the contributions to the body each member is to make.

Bucer in his work wonderfully develops the idea of discipline, which to our modern ears can sound only corrective in nature, but he meant more than that with the term. In his ecclesiology, discipline was also formative and sounds like what we might call discipleship. Discipline in Bucer’s work “referred to the sum of all the efforts of the church to encourage piety and to maintain Christian standards of behavior, and thus took in a multitude of practices.”

Bucer has in view the life of self-control and obedience to the word all followers of Christ are to exhibit. He also moves beyond the role of the elders to develop in practical fashion the priesthood of all believers, insisting, for instance, that all Christians and not just pastors are to be evangelistic. The pastor is taught that all believers have a God-given responsibility to attempt to heal straying and hurting sheep. Bucer saw each believer’s need to be “like a perpetual spring” who “must pour out the goodness of which God imparts to him through Christ by furthering the welfare of all men, yet especially to his comrades in faith.”

Seminaries must follow a shepherding model because all of God’s people need to be equipped in caring for one another.

Seminaries can be a dangerous place. Paul Tripp reminds us of this when he says in his book Dangerous Calling:

“I am convinced that the crisis of pastoral culture often begins in the seminary class. It begins with a distant, impersonal, information-based handling of the Word of God... It begins with classrooms that are academic without being pastoral. It begins with brains becoming more important than hearts.”

We must labor and ask the church to pray that as pastors, elders, missionaries, and other kingdom workers are raised up through RPTS, they would go out with a heart burning with love for the people of God.

Often we give this benediction from Hebrews in the Church: “Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21). If he is the one who equips his people “in every good thing” to do the Father’s will, then he must be honored as Lord over the seminary and displayed as such throughout. In times such as these, may the Great Shepherd give us grace to meet these challenges to be his seminary. Amen.

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10 Paul David Tripp, Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012), 52.
Plain Preaching:
Demonstrating the Spirit and His Power
Dr. Joel R. Beeke

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And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

—1 Corinthians 2:1–5 (KJV)

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.

—2 Corinthians 4:1–2 (KJV)

True preaching is God's brush with which He paints a vivid picture of His Son before the eyes of the soul. By the supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit Christ is not only pictured in the preached word, but also present in the preached word. Spirit-filled, Bible-saturated proclamation brings the hearers into an encounter with Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The apostle Paul rebuked the Galatian churches, “before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you,” for turning from the truth (Gal. 3:1). The word translated “evidently set forth” (prographō) here means to “write or draw something before the eyes of the public.” William Perkins said that in this text we “observe the properties of the ministry of the word”: “The first, that it must be plain, perspicuous, and evident, as if the doctrine were pictured and painted before the eyes of men.... The second property of the ministry of the word is that it must be powerful and lively in operation.”

Not all preaching is plain and powerful, and Paul knew that well. The apostle set his own preaching in direct contrast to the oratory that commonly entertains this world. On the one hand, the preaching of the apostles exhibited characteristics distinctly fitting to Christ and His ways; on the other, there is preaching that suits this world and its ways. Though the difference is


2 William Perkins, A Commentary, or, Exposition upon the Five First Chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians.... Continued with a Supplement upon the Sixth Chapter, by Ralph Cudworth, in The Works of William Perkins, Volume 2, ed. Paul M. Smalley (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 148. The only explicit reference in the Holy Scriptures to “plain” preaching is “plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3:12), which may be more precisely translated as “boldness” (parrēsia), as will be discussed later in this message. However, the concept of plain preaching resonates through 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 2 Cor. 4:1–2; and 1 Thess. 2:1–6.
stark, lack of discernment in this matter can quickly open the church to the wrong kind of preaching. We see this in Paul’s words that we read from 1 Corinthians 2 and 2 Corinthians 4, words that should be studied by every preacher and aspirant to the ministry.

Notice the different phrases used of these two kinds of preaching. Apostolic preaching is characterized as: “the testimony of God” (1 Cor. 2:1), concerning “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (v. 2), the “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (v. 4), “the power of God” (v. 5), and the “manifestation of the truth” by which the preacher commends himself “to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). Worldly preaching is noted by these marks: “excellency of speech or of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:1), “enticing words of man’s wisdom” (v. 4), “the wisdom of men” (v. 5), “hidden things of dishonesty,” “craftiness,” and “handling the word of God deceitfully” (2 Cor. 4:2).

The difference between these two approaches to preaching is nearly as great as that between Christ and the devil. Yet, by nature, we crave worldly preaching. Only the grace of the Holy Spirit makes us love spiritual preaching. How can we be sure to follow the right kind of preaching? How can the preacher make sure that he is faithful to his Lord not only in the message but also in his method and manner of delivery? How can a church discern between Christ-honoring, Spirit-empowered preaching, and preaching in the carnal wisdom and power of man? To answer these questions, let us give more specific consideration to the character of plain and powerful Spirit-anointed preaching.

The Renunciation Required by Plain Preaching

Plain preaching is not about a style of preaching, but the spirituality of the preacher. It grows out of biblical convictions strengthening the heart, the fear of God animating the soul, and faith in Jesus Christ working by love. It is crucified preaching by a crucified preacher—one who has died with Christ to this world, and the world to him (Gal. 6:14). Plain preaching is Christian self-denial applied to the ministry of the Word performed under the direction of the Word. Plain preaching requires the preacher to renounce man’s wisdom and carnal ambition.

Renounce Man’s Wisdom

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:1). The word translated “excellency” (huperochē) means superiority, and refers to outstanding eloquence or rhetorical skill in speaking. Today we would say, the ability to wow an audience. But there was no wow factor in Paul’s person or speech (2 Cor. 10:10): he had to work within his own limitations. But more importantly, in the matter of content and method, Paul intentionally chose to preach in such a manner “that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men” (1 Cor. 2:5).

The first two chapters of 1 Corinthians sharply contrast man’s “wisdom” with God’s “wisdom.” For example, Paul says, “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect” (1 Cor. 1:17). God has

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3 Huperochē can be used for human authority (1 Tim. 2:2). Cf. huperechō in Rom. 13:1. A hyperoche is literally a mountain peak or a high place. The rhetoric or eloquence is “outstanding” or “all-surpassing.” The man whose eloquence can wow an audience, or can sway a jury, or win a case is a mountain peak among the little hills with regard to his colleagues or fellow rhetoricians.


5 1 Cor. 1:17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 30; 2:1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13.
intentionally designed His plan of salvation to overthrow “the wisdom of the wise” in this world (vv. 19–20; cf. 3:18–20).

What did Paul mean by “wisdom of men” and “wisdom of words”? Let us not twist these phrases into a rejection of all human intelligence and rational argument. Christians have true wisdom. Paul had one of the finest minds of his day. His writings are not rambling streams of consciousness; they are but thoughtful arguments and moving rhetoric grounded on Old Testament revelation. Paul did not reject wisdom in itself, but he refused to rely upon human wisdom because fallen man cannot find God by the use of human reason: “the world by wisdom knew not God” (1 Cor. 1:21). Paul sought instead to declare God’s gospel with what the old divines called perspicuity, which means clarity in thought and meaning. As Henry Smith (1560–1591) said, “To preach simply, is not to preach unlearnedly, nor confusedly, but plainly and perspicuously [clearly], that the simplest which doth hear, may understand what is taught, as if he did hear his name.”

What kind of wisdom does Paul then reject? He rejects the so-called wisdom that flatters human pride. In the Hellenistic culture that prevailed in Corinth and throughout the Roman Empire, many Greek-speaking people considered themselves to be “wise” in contrast to the “barbarians” of other nations (Rom. 1:14). The Corinthians had become ensnared by “the speech of them which are puffed up” (1 Cor. 4:19). Paul would have none of it, nor would he embrace the pride of his own Jewish culture. He said, “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world?” (1:20; cf. Isa. 33:18). The Greeks had “the wise [man],” that is, the philosopher who by intellectual power was able to reason his way to the truth. In Jewish culture, there was “the scribe,” the scholar who claimed to teach God’s Word but actually based his doctrine on “the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:5; cf. Gal. 1:14). There was also “the disputer” ($susētētēs$), which translates an unusual Greek word and probably refer to someone who engages in witty debates about philosophical topics.

The plain preacher renounces these forms of proclamation, not because reasoning, tradition, and wit are inherently wrong, but because God’s Word must be the sole basis of Christian proclamation. Unlike the Greek philosopher, the plain preacher will make no claim on people’s belief or behavior based merely on human logic. Logic must be the servant of God’s Word, not a usurper that seeks to steal the throne. As opposed to the scribes of Judaism, the plain preacher grounds his doctrine on God’s Word alone, not what a famous teacher said. Tradition and quotations from past theologians are valuable only insofar as they are faithful to what God says and help make His Word plain to the hearers.

In contrast to the disputer, the plain preacher does not aim to impress and please his hearers with how clever or ingenious he is in his communication. Sadly, many preachers today fail at the very outset of their sermons by reaching for the cleverest or funniest way to contrive a “hook” in their introduction. Rhetorical skill and illustrations may be enlisted to press the truth of God home to men’s hearts, but they must not betray their commission by taking on a life of their own. Preaching must never be an empty show of oratorical ability. John Flavel (1628–1691) said, “A crucified style best suits the preachers of a crucified Christ.... Words are but servants to the

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matter. An iron key, fitted to... the lock, is more useful than a golden one, which will not open the door to the treasure.”

Renounce Carnal Ambitions

Gospel preachers must repent of the corrupt motives that may lead them to preach man’s wisdom. Paul says that he and his comrades in ministry “have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty” (2 Cor. 4:2). The word translated “dishonesty” (aischunē) is not about telling lies; rather, it means “dishonor” or “shame.” The idea is that a hidden agenda stands behind that kind of preaching, which, if exposed, would bring public disgrace to the preacher. Paul’s words call us to examine ourselves. If your church could see your motives for preaching, would you slink away in shame, or could you stand before them with a good conscience?

What shameful hidden agenda might a preacher have? Paul said, “For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile” (1 Thess. 2:3). “Uncleanness” refers to using preaching as a way to win people’s affections for the purpose of seducing them into sexual immorality (4:7). Another shameful motive is to win honor from men, or make a name for oneself. Paul says that he speaks “not as pleasing men, but God” (2:4), “nor of men sought we glory” (v. 6). Yet another is greed or covetousness, for Paul said that his words were not “a cloke of covetousness” (v. 5). Sex, fame, and money—these three snares catch and destroy far too many preachers.

Public speaking can be terrifying, but it can also be a thrill to the worldly soul. All eyes are upon the preacher in his pulpit, and he drinks up their attention like wine. Afterward, he modestly gives glory to God, but he secretly treasurers their compliments like medals of honor. Behind his pious prayers for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom are longings for honor. How despicable are such motives in the soul of the preacher! How we need to watch and pray against temptation! Let us put to death the first motions of these sins by the power of the cross of Jesus Christ. “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Let us aspire to be plain preachers, knowing that this calling requires us to deny ourselves.

The Resolution Required by Plain Preaching

Though plain preaching demands that we say no to the wisdom and lusts of this world, the primary thrust of our calling is positive. The man who fulfills this work must be a man of courage and holy resolve. He has turned his back to the world and lifted his eyes to heaven. Plain preaching requires that the preacher resolve to declare God’s Word to inform the mind concerning Jesus Christ and convince the conscience before God.

Resolve to Declare God’s Word

Instead of preaching with “excellence of speech or of wisdom,” Paul commends declaring “the testimony of God” (1 Cor. 2:1). The word translated “testimony” (martyrion) suggests that the word preached by the apostle possessed the solemn authority of a legal or covenantal document (Deut. 6:17; Ps. 25:10 LXX), such as the Ten Commandments (Ex. 32:15; 34:29 LXX). The Word of God bears inherent authority infinitely greater than that of man. John says, “If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater (1 John 5:9). David declares that “the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7b).

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Christian preachers are commissioned “before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ” only to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:1–2). Indeed, as God’s covenant messengers, faithful preachers dare not add or subtract from God’s Word but proclaim and apply only what the Lord has said. Plain preaching is fundamentally the exposition of the meaning of the Holy Scriptures, the faithful drawing out of their sound doctrines, and the experiential and practical application of those doctrines to daily life.

The problem with preaching man’s wisdom is not just what we say, but what we neglect to say. Paul says, “We speak the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 2:7). Though men often despise God’s Word as foolishness, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1:18, 23, 25). God’s wisdom is the gold, silver, and gemstones fit to build a temple of eternal glory; man’s wisdom is wood, hay, and stubble that will burn up and be lost forever (3:12–15). Which would you rather use to build the church? Shall we pass by what is solid, durable, and precious in order to seek to grasp what will ultimately prove to be a mere vapor of smoke?

The inestimable privilege of the Christian preacher is to declare God’s Word. Preachers, resolve with all your heart to be like Ezra, who set his heart to study God’s Word, to put it into practice, and to teach it to God’s people (Ezra. 7:10). Like the faithful priests of ancient Israel, may your lips guard knowledge, and may people seek God’s Word from your mouth, for you are the messenger of the Lord of hosts (Mal. 2:7).

Resolve to Inform the Mind Concerning Jesus Christ

Paul goes on to say, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Note the simplicity of Paul’s resolution: his sermons all brought his hearers to the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul says, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14). To proclaim that a man killed as a criminal is the Lord and Savior is offensive to the world (1 Cor. 1:17), yet it is the heart of the Christian gospel (15:3).

Let us not confuse simplicity in preaching Christ with oversimplification. Paul did not preach the same sermon over and over again. Paul preached “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” because he understood that all the many streams of divine grace meet in Christ and flow to us through Christ, whom God has made to us “wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). At times he preached Christ as our Prophet, “in whom are hid all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2). Never did our Prophet reveal the will of God for our salvation more clearly and powerfully than when He suffered the shame of the cross. At other times Paul’s preaching focused upon Christ the Priest, who offered Himself “a propitiation through faith in his blood,” to glorify God’s righteousness “that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25–26). On the basis of His atoning death, that same Priest intercedes at God’s right hand for His people—which fueled Paul’s assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God (8:33–35). Paul sometimes preached Christ as our King, who “spoiled principalities and powers,” triumphing over Satan’s forces by the cross (Col. 2:15). Having won the victory once and for all at Calvary, the Lord Christ is now risen from the dead to share His power and victory with the church that lives in union with Him (Eph. 1:19–23). Paul did not preach a bland, formulaic, repetitive message, but rather, “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8).

We also should not conclude that Paul always preached the doctrine of Christ explicitly. He preached the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). If Paul preached the doctrine of God, he proclaimed the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:3). If Paul preached the doctrine of sin, it was in order to show that we need the righteousness of God in Christ (Rom. 3:10–26). If Paul preached obedience to God’s law, he did so in the context of the new man created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 4:22–24). Everything brought him back to Christ, for it is God’s
will that Christ be everything to the believer. Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner comment, “For Paul, Christ crucified is more than just the means of forgiveness and salvation; rather, it informs his total vision of the Christian life and ministry.”

The preaching of Christ and Him crucified shows us that plain preaching is not sentimental, but doctrinal (2 Tim. 4:2). Our aim is not merely to generate emotion, but to inform the mind with the clear light of the truth. Paul called his preaching the “manifestation of the truth” (2 Cor. 4:2), where “manifestation” (phanerōsis) means “clear and open display.” He compared it to the shining of light, “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ,” which is so plain to see that only those “blinded” by Satan can fail to apprehend it (vv. 3–4).

Plain preaching aims to set forth in clearest and simplest terms the doctrinal truths of the Holy Scriptures so that ordinary men, women, and children can see Jesus Christ, their need of Him, and what it means to trust in Him and to follow Him. The preacher must indeed dig into the deep mines of exegesis and theology as he prepares for his sermon. But he does not bring to the congregation raw ore out of those mines; he brings refined gold and silver, and gemstones already cut and polished—ready to adorn God’s living temple. He considers whether or not to discuss the meaning of a Hebrew or Greek word, or to present a theological term and its definition, or to quote some theologian of the past, and weighs it not in the worldly scale of whether it will impress his hearers with his scholarship, but in the balance of the sanctuary as to whether it will make the message of God’s Word plain and clear to them. Cotton Mather said of John Eliot, a Puritan missionary to the Native Americans, that his “way of preaching was very plain; so that the very lambs might wade into his discourses on those texts and themes, wherein elephants might swim.”

**Resolve to Convince the Conscience before God**

Plain preaching not only teaches doctrine, but also calls for the response of “faith” (1 Cor. 2:5). Therefore, Paul says, faithful preachers are always “commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). When Paul speak of “commending ourselves,” he is not seeking men’s praises, but persuading men’s hearts that he is a faithful messenger of God and that his message has divine authority.

To appeal to men’s consciences, the preacher must be absolutely convinced concerning the truth of what he preaches and earnestly moved by its reality. Such conviction and earnestness come from the fear of God and an awareness of preaching in the presence of God. Paul says, “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences” (2 Cor. 5:11).

Nothing is so tragic as a preacher whose mode of preaching breathes an air of unreality. It is said that in the seventeenth century, Archbishop William Sancroft (1617–1693) asked the actor Thomas Betterton (c. 1635–1710) why actors can move their audiences with imaginary things when preachers declare real things but people in church treat them as imaginary. Betterton replied, “I don’t know, except it is that we actors speak of things imaginary as if they were real,

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10 The noun phanerōsis appears in the NT only in 2 Cor. 4:2 and 1 Cor. 12:7. The cognate verb phaneroō means to visibly “appear” (Mark 16:12, 14) or metaphorically to “become plain” (Rom. 3:21; Eph. 5:13), and is the opposite of to “hide” (Mark 4:22; 1 Cor. 4:5). Compare phanerōs in Mark 1:45; John 7:10. Ralph Martin renders phanerōsis as “open declaration.” Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 78.

while you in the pulpit speak of things real as if they were imaginary.” May this never be said of us!

Convinced in his own conscience, the preacher aims to convince the conscience of his hearers. He reminds them that they too are in the presence of God and presses upon them their sins against God and their duties to God. As Paul says, he preaches “to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). He proclaims the truth as a true messenger of God, addressing those who shortly must appear before God's judgment seat. Increase Mather (1639–1723) said of his father, Richard Mather (1596–1669), “His way of preaching was plain, aiming to shoot his arrows not over his people’s heads, but into their hearts and consciences.”

The faithful preacher must invest significant thought in the application of the text to his own life and the lives of his hearers. The Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God says, “He 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.” The directory acknowledges that this may be “a work of great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant,” but says he must do it so that “his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” In the Directory, the Westminster divines identified six kinds of application: (1) instruction in doctrinal implications for the Christian worldview; (2) refutation of errors presently threatening the people; (3) exhortation to obey God’s commands and make use of the means God provides to flourish spiritually; (4) “dehortations,” or warnings against particular sins and their consequences; (5) comfort for believers to strengthen them to keep fighting the good fight; and (6) help in self-examination by giving marks from God’s Word to determine one’s spiritual condition.

Applied preaching is possible only by the fear of God. This was the case for the faithful Levitical priest, of whom the Lord said, “He feared me, and was afraid before my name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity” (Mal. 2:5–6). Such was the great principle behind the book of Ecclesiastes, summed up in its final words: “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccl. 12:13–14).

Such holy resolutions are essential to plain preaching, but they are not natural to our souls. They require us to crucify the flesh by the death of Christ and to live unto God by His resurrection life. Plain preaching requires that the preacher resolve to declare God’s Word to inform the mind concerning Jesus Christ and convince the conscience before God.

The Results God Gives through Plain Preaching

We cannot produce results, but we do desire results for the glory of God and the good of our hearers. Therefore, we pray for and labor to bring forth spiritual children. We may do so in confidence. Plain preaching is God’s ordinary means to exercise spiritual power, not by human manipulation, but by the Holy Spirit who gives faith.

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God’s Ordinary Means to Exercise Spiritual Power

The Word plainly preached is a powerful tool in the hands of God. Paul says he preaches Christ in this plain manner “that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5). He heartily believed that the gospel was “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Yes, “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,” and they scoff at it; but to those “who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

Are we satisfied merely by the dissemination of information if the power of God is not present to change lives? May it never be so. We must not mistake Paul’s emphasis upon teaching the truth for merely educating the mind. Paul says, “For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20), and we find him rejoicing that “our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power” (1 Thess. 1:5). The faithful preacher does not shrug and say, “Whether or not anyone is saved or sanctified through my preaching, it does not matter to me.” No, his heart’s cry is for the power of God to come flaming from heaven and strike the altar so that the people turn back to God and declare, “The LORD, he is God!” (cf. 1 Kings 18:37–39).

Nor is the power of God divorced from the preacher and his manner of preaching. Consider carefully this point. The preacher does neither provide the power, nor that he merits God’s blessing. All is of sovereign grace. However, when God sends power through the preacher, he generally sends power to the preacher. When Paul and Barnabas preached in Iconium, Luke reports that they “so spake, that a great multitude…believed” (Acts 14:1). The manner of their preaching impacted their hearers. How did they preach? Luke goes on to say that they were “speaking boldly” (parrēsiazomai). Paul likewise says, “We were bold in our God to speak unto the gospel of God with much contention” (2 Thess. 2:2). When Paul says of his ministry, “We use great plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3:12), the Greek text may be literally translated, “We use boldness [parrēsia]” (cf. KJV mg., ESV). This is characteristic of Spirit-filled preaching - a supernatural boldness, freedom, and authority (Acts 4:8, 13, 31).

Powerful Christian preaching is not human boldness or proud self-confidence. It is boldness rooted in God and in His Word, and is entirely consistent with preaching “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling,” as Paul says (1 Cor. 2:3). Spirit-empowered boldness humbles man and exalts God alone. Paul’s “fear” and “trembling” have sometimes been explained as the consequence of his personal problems or the challenges of the ministry, but it may well be that he preached with fear and trembling precisely because he spoke as one who knows that he speaks in the presence of the living God.15 In other words, a sense of your own weakness and unworthiness mingled with the fear of God may be a sign not of poor preaching, but preaching in the fullness of the Spirit.

Not Power by Human Manipulation

This spiritual power is not the natural influence that a skillful speaker can exercise over a crowd. Paul says, “My speech and my preaching was not with enticing [peithos] words of man’s wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:4). The word translated “enticing” (peithos) means “persuasive.”16 The idea here is that the faithful preacher does not rely upon techniques of persuasion to motivate people apart from their sincere belief and conviction of the truth. The plain preacher is “not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully” (2 Cor. 4:2). Instead he is relying upon the power of God while he faithfully preaches the truth to the minds and consciences of his hearers.

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15 Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 115–16. See the use of “fear” (phobos) and “trembling” (tromos) in Ex. 15:16; Ps. 2:11; Isa. 19:16 LXX; Phil. 2:12.

16 Peithos is *hapax legomena* in the NT and not attested in other Greek literature. It is an adjective related to “persuade” (peithō).
Speechwriters understand that there are certain methods that often succeed in getting people on your side and motivated to do what you want them to do. For example, a speaker might talk in a way that moves people to say, “He’s one of us. I like him. He’s a really impressive person. He can help us get what we want.” However, Paul says, “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

Another method of human manipulation is the emotional appeal. Even if the truth is not on a speaker’s side, he can often stir people up with appeals and stories that keep them laughing, or play on their fears, or incite their anger. Demetrius the silversmith caused a riot in Ephesus with a speech like that, and the angry mob was ready to attack Christians though they hardly understood why (Acts 19:24–41). In contrast, Paul appealed to the emotions of his hearers only as he “reasoned with them out of the scriptures” (Acts 17:2). Affections must stand on truth. If we cannot move people with the truth of God, we have no alternative.

God made people to be motivated by hope (cf. Prov. 13:12), but a preacher can manipulate his hearers by giving them false hope of salvation without repenting of their sin. In Jeremiah’s day, people in Jerusalem assured one another that they were safe because “the temple of the Lord” was with them—while neglecting to turn from injustice and oppression and bloodshed to keeping God’s commandments (Jer. 7:1–15). Paul refused to use “flattering words” that stroked the pride of his hearers and boosted their self-confidence instead of calling them to faith in Christ (1 Thess. 2:5). Paul also warned Timothy that people “will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3). The faithful preacher will not scratch people where they itch or stoop to gratify their pride and sinful desires.

Spiritual power flows from Christ and Him crucified, and thus bears the character of the cross. It is power to embrace the truth that offends us and humbles us. It is power to love what is good and hate what is evil, even though what is evil resides in our own hearts. It is power to hope in the glory that we cannot see and to have no regard for what we can see. Such power is not an effect produced by human manipulation. It is the power of God, speaking in His Word, and speaking through His faithful servant.

**Power by the Holy Spirit Who Gives Faith**

Paul says, “My speech and my preaching was...in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4–5). The power of plain preaching is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, using the preaching of the gospel to create and nurture faith in Jesus Christ. There is no substitute for the work of the Spirit. There is no safety net or fallback position for the preacher if the Holy Spirit does not do His work. All depends upon His gracious influence. Such preaching is a fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy that God’s temple will be built “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).

The word translated “demonstration” (apodeixis) means an exhibition or proof. Among the ancient Greeks, the word could be used of logical proofs or arguments, such as in the philosophy of Aristotle. Paul uses the word in direct contrast to the persuasive words of human wisdom. The “demonstration of the Spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit’s powerful work to convince the hearts of men that God’s preached Word is true so that they trust in Him.

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17 *Apodeixis* is *hapax legomenon* in the NT. The cognate verb *apodeiknumi* means to display, exhibit, or prove to be genuine (Acts 2:22; 25:7; 1 Cor. 4:9; 2 Thess. 2:4).

How does the Holy Spirit work this “demonstration”? It cannot refer to miracles, signs, and wonders worked by the Holy Spirit, for Paul has just said that “the Jews require a sign” and consequently reject the message of “Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:22–23). His point here is that God’s saving message is not one of outward power, but apparent weakness (v. 25). The “demonstration of the Spirit” is the inward, secret work of effectual calling by which God makes people into believers (v. 24). Paul tells us in the second chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians that the Spirit gave the words of God to the apostles (1 Cor. 2:9–13). Now the Spirit enables us to receive the apostolic words as true wisdom. The person who does not have the Holy Spirit “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (v. 16). So there are two powers at work: the power of God’s Spirit-inspired Word, and the power of the Spirit working with and using that Word as it is proclaimed to sinners of mankind.

The greatest demonstration or proof of God’s Word, and the only proof sufficient for saving faith, is the inner demonstration when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see the truth of God. When the Holy Spirit exercises his power through the preached Word, then the message comes with “much assurance,” a strong inward conviction of the reality of unseen spiritual things (1 Thess. 1:5). John Calvin (1509–1564) says, “If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences... we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.” He explains, “For truth is cleared of all doubt when, not sustained by external props, it serves as its own support.”

This, then, is the power of the Holy Spirit: not a visible or outward display of power, but an inward demonstration or proof by which the Spirit convinces the heart of the gospel’s truth so that the person intelligently and willingly cannot but trust in Christ. Faith may not seem like an impressive result in the eyes of this world. However, saving faith in Christ is the effect of “the exceeding greatness” of God’s power, power no less than that which raised Christ from the dead and exalted him to the right hand of God (Eph. 1:19–20). Faith unites a poor sinner to a rich Christ so that all the benefits purchased by Christ’s death on the cross are now his (John 1:12). Such faith conquers this evil world (1 John 5:4). By faith, God saves us and will bring us to eternal glory. Truly, the gift of faith is a work of sovereign power, and its preservation and growth a cause for glorifying God forever.

Though God could exercise His power to create faith through whatever means He chooses, it is very fitting that faith in Christ is worked through plain preaching. Plain preaching requires the preacher to renounce man’s wisdom and carnal ambitions. Faith likewise is turning from our own understanding to trust in the Lord with all our hearts (Prov. 3:5). Faith in Christ trusts Jesus to save us from our sins, and therefore is incompatible with the reign of sinful ambitions and desires in the heart. Plain preaching requires that the preacher resolve faithfully to declare God’s Word, and faith rests entirely upon the testimony of God as true and trustworthy. Plain preaching aims to inform the mind concerning Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and that is precisely the great object of saving faith and the only confidence of the believer. Plain preaching aims to convince the conscience before God, and faith arises from a wounded conscience seeking healing by the blood of Christ, so that the sinner finds peace in the presence of a righteous God whose justice is satisfied once and for all by the finished work of Christ. How wise it was for our God to choose plain preaching as His primary means to exercise spiritual power unto faith!

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19 Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 118. They comment, “Power here is about moral conviction, not miraculous display.”


21 Ibid., 1.8.1.
Conclusion

Ministers of God, will you be a plain preacher? Members of churches, will you pray that your ministers would be plain preachers? If you or your pastor will persevere in plain preaching, it will require more than an understanding of what it is. Plain preaching is only sustainable by faith in Christ and the fear of the Lord.

It takes faith to preach with plainness and boldness, especially when crowds of people are not flocking to hear you but are swarming about popular, worldly preachers. It requires faith to believe that plain preaching is God’s method to bring many sons and daughters to glory. Even as the preacher calls his hearers to faith in Christ, he too must exercise faith in Christ that the Word preached is the power of God for salvation.

The pressure to employ worldly methods to bolster your ministry will be intense at times. Who among us is not tempted to please people? However, the fear of the Lord can deliver us from this snare. Let us remember that we are messengers of the King. Both we and our hearers will stand before His judgment seat one day. Let the preacher preach as a dying man to dying men with the world behind his back and the glory of God before his eyes.

Plain preaching is contrary to the nature of fallen mankind. It is ignored, derided, and scorned. Yet the plain preaching of God’s Word is exceedingly precious. This is the box in which God brings the wedding ring of faith to His bride. Far from being boring, plain preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit is a beam of heavenly glory touching this sin-darkened earth.

Therefore, let us devote ourselves to prayer for the ministry of the Word, that it may be plain and powerful. Let the preacher make his study into his prayer closet, and read and write with continual petition and praise. Robert Traill (1642–1716) said, “Many good sermons are lost for lack of much prayer in study.”22 May it never be said of our preaching, “Ye have not, because ye ask not” (James 4:2). Rather, may our preaching be a continual testimony to the promise, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matt. 7:7). And as we pray, let us labor to conform our preaching as much as possible to the gospel-pattern exemplified by the apostle Paul, who preached “not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4).

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Faithful Preaching:
Making Known the Whole Counsel of God
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“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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 complete, equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:14 - 17 (ESV)

The final charge of Apostle Paul to Timothy is to preach the word (2 Tim.4:1-2). We have to ask ourselves, why is Paul so concerned to charge Timothy to preach the word? Why would that be so important to him? The pericope we are considering in this article gives us the answer to that question. Why is it so important for Timothy to preach the word as opposed to preaching something else? It is because of what Paul says that the word is and does in verses 14 to 17 of chapter 3. This is the framework of what we are going to consider in this article, as we look especially at verses 16 and 17 as supplying the answer to the question on why is Paul giving this charge to preach the word. According to Paul, the word is God-breathed and profitable. Therefore, when the people of God hear the word of God preached, it is God that they hear. We come to church to engage and encounter the living God by hearing him speak to us. How do we hear God? Only if the preacher preaches the word; if he preaches something else, we do not get God. To have God in our worship, we have to hear His word. For the only way to worship a spirit is to obey the spirit’s word. For without the spirit’s self-disclosure, there is no means to know who he is or how to worship him.

Calling attention to this crucial role of the word of God, J.I. Packer defines preaching by describing what a sermon is. He says, “A sermon is an applicatory declaration, spoken in God’s name and for his praise, in which some part of the written word of God delivers through the preacher some part of its message about God and godliness in relation to those whom the preacher addresses.”1 A sermon is an applicatory declaration, so it is not a lecture on a particular topic. It has exhortation and application in it. Also, it is a declaration in which the word of God delivers through the preacher. Notice it does not say, the preacher delivers the word of God; rather, the word of God delivers through the preacher. In other words, the preacher is just a tool. All that preachers are supposed to do is to facilitate a word mediated encounter between the living God and the congregation. We are merely the vessels through which a message from God to his people is delivered. Thus, it is important that we preach the word because if we do not preach the word we are not facilitating that word mediated encounter between the living God and the people. We would rather be getting in the way of that encounter. Our job is to deliver God’s word and get out of the way, so that his people commune with him by the word. We are not mediators, but we are instruments, tools and facilitators. We are the tools of the word, and the word of God delivers through the preacher a message about God and

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godliness. First of all, it is the message about God, as the Bible is about God, and then, it is about how you can live in communion with God, and in godliness. And so the word of God delivers through the preacher a message about God and godliness to the gathered congregation.

The second reason why we are to preach the word is because of what the word does or what the word is for. In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul says that we are saved by grace through faith, not of works, in order to do good works, which we were created beforehand in Christ to do so. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul goes on to explain why God has given the church the gift of Pastor-Teachers or Shepherd-Elders. It is to equip us for every good work. Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:17 that the word of God equips us for every good work. So, putting the two together, we can say, the word of God has been given to Pastor-Teachers and Shepherd-Elders to equip the people of God for every good work, for which they have been created in Christ Jesus, and for which they have been saved by grace through faith alone. The word of God instructs them and equips them for every good work. Hence what the word is and what the word does, explains why Paul charged Timothy to preach the word.

Let us turn our attention now to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 to understand faithful preaching. In this passage, the Apostle Paul is exhorting us, as he exhorts Timothy, to live by the book. For this book comes from the mouth of God; it is the most practical book in the world; and it alone tells one how to live with God. In other words, we are to continue and persist in the truth that we have learned from the Scriptures because they are: i) God breathed (v.16a), ii) profitable (v.16b), and iii) they are the sufficient foundation of Christian living (v.17). This will be the outline for this article. The scriptures are God breathed, profitable, and sufficient to equip us for the living of the Christian Life. Therefore, we preach the whole counsel of God because it is God-breathed, profitable, and equips men and women in Christ to live the Christian Life. This is the threefold assertion of the Apostle Paul:

I. All scripture is breathed out by God; it is one word in the Greek of v.16a. It is quite literally, all scripture is God-breathed.

II. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable. Profitable for four things: for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness (v.16b).

III. The God-breathed word is profitable to equip you for every good work as verse 17 says, “that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”. So all Scripture is capable for equipping the saints for faith and life.

Preach the Whole Counsel of God: All Scripture is God-breathed

Paul tells us that the Bible is fully, verbally inspired and he does it in three words - all scripture is God-breathed, πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος. Paul does not have an original thought here. Every single thing that Paul asserts in this passage comes directly from the mouth of Jesus.

First of all, notice that Paul speaks here of the plenary inspiration of God’s word. All of it is God-breathed, not some of it, not most of it, but all of it. This passage speaks against any theory of partial inspiration. Many young people, even if they embrace the glorious doctrines of grace in salvation, will not embrace what the Bible teaches about gender, marriage, and sexuality. In fact, they tend to be suspicious of what the Bible teaches about culture and so they will limit the authority of God’s word to the sphere of salvation narrowly construed. But, they will not understand properly, the mediatorial reign of Jesus Christ over everything. That Jesus by his word and Spirit rules the world — everything is under his dominion — is something that young people struggle with, for a whole variety of reasons. This calls for pastors to declare the totality of the Bible’s authority. All scripture is authoritative, not just some of the things that the Scripture says, but everything that the Scripture says is God-breathed; it is plenary inspiration.
It's also all scripture is God-breathed. Interestingly, it's not just the writers that are inspired, though they were (2 Pet.1:21) It is also not just their ideas that are inspired, as this is not dynamic inspiration. It is verbal inspiration - the words are inspired. This book - γραφὴ - these words are God breathed. He is speaking of a plenary, verbal inspiration in this passage.

Notice also his use of this language God-breathed. It is a New Testament hapax legomenon. Paul takes the word for God, theos, he adds the word breathed, pneuo, and gets the New Testament hapax theopneustos. Paul, however, did not innovate this notion about the Scriptures. It comes from Jesus. In Matthew's gospel, we read about Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness to command the stones to become loaves of bread (Matt.4:3). As we consider this temptation, we have to keep in mind what Jesus later in the sermon on the mount would teach his disciples about trusting in the providential care of the Father. One of the things he teaches them would be that if a child asks his father for bread, he would not give him stones. In other words, Jesus wants his disciples to trust in the goodness of the Father in the gifts that they ask him. In light of this teaching, it is interesting that Satan, here in this temptation in the wilderness, tells Jesus to turn stones into bread. Satan is not just trying to get Jesus to do a magic trick with stones. Rather, Satan is trying to get Jesus to doubt his Father's goodness. He is, in effect, telling Jesus to look out for himself, as his Father has only provided stones and no bread. Here, Satan is not just trying to tempt Jesus, he is trying to adopt him. He is in effect saying, “The Father has not been good to you, Jesus, but if you will follow me, it will turn out good for you.” The gall of what Satan is doing here! How does Jesus respond to this temptation of Satan? He says, “For it is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt.4:4). As Jesus quoted Moses from Deuteronomy, consider this phrase “every word that comes from mouth of God.” It should sound familiar in light of Paul's assertion in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is God-breathed. Notice how the words of Jesus and Paul correspond to each other: every/all, word/Scripture, that comes from the mouth of God/God breathed. Hence, we can deduce that Paul did not indulge in any kind of doctrinal innovation as he was only articulating Jesus's doctrine of Scripture.

Since all Scripture is God-breathed, it is inerrant and authoritative as it is breathed out from the mouth of a holy, perfect, sovereign God. The Apostle Paul is articulating what Scripture is in order that we would understand what Scripture is for: what it does in the Christian Life. It is important for pastors to inculcate these truths about Scripture, by teaching these things, and pressing these things upon their people. Do not assume that one’s congregation believes these things about the word of God. Persuade them to believe the authority of the word of God, especially the young people in the congregation. They have all manner of questions in their hearts, as people in the culture work to cause them not to believe in the truthfulness and authority of the word of God. Minister by the word of God to them, in preaching it to address those kinds of questions, and build their confidence in the authority of the word of God.

**Preach the Supreme Value of Scripture: All Scripture is Profitable**

Second, Paul goes onto say that Scripture is profitable. It is useful and beneficial. Notice what Paul says, “all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable” (2 Tim.3:16b). Notice he does not just say, “Scripture is relevant.” There was a time, especially in the 1970s, when “relevant” was the cool word. Everything needed to be relevant and Paul's assertion here is that the Bible is much more than merely relevant; it is profitable. Many Evangelical preachers today will say that their job in preaching is to make the Bible relevant. But, they are wrong! The Bible is already relevant. Certainly we want to make sure that it is not made irrelevant in the way it is preached. Moreover, to say the Bible is relevant is not an overclaim for the Bible; rather, it is an underclaim for the Bible. Harry Blamires illustrates this point well in drawing an analogy, when he says,
The word ‘relevance’ ought to be examined in this connection, for it can be argued that familiar slogans about Christianity being relevant to this and that underplay rather than overstate the Christian demand. If someone told you that a supply of gasoline was relevant to the smooth running of your car, you would suspect him of making a feeble joke, for of course gasoline is essential to the smooth running (or even the rough running) of your car.²

The Bible is much more than relevant, as it is absolutely useful and necessary. As Jesus put it, a man cannot live without the word of God. We need the word of God as much as or even more than we need food.

So, the Bible is profitable and thus is useful and necessary. Paul explains this usefulness explicitly in 4 words - teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. It is teaching and, therefore, instruction. The word “Torah,” often rendered as law, but recall that the first meaning of that word is instruction. It is family instruction, wherein God explains to his people who he is, what he is like, what he has done, who we are, and how we are to live. It is positive instruction for the people of God.

The Bible is also reproof or admonition, or words of warning. The good old Puritan word is dehortation. Exhortation is to exhort one to do the right thing; dehortation is to persuade one not to do the wrong thing. The Bible warns us, which is one of the ways the Bible manifests to us that it is the word of the living God. We do not just read the Bible, the Bible reads us. It is a common experience of Christians to read Scripture and to ponder how something written well over two thousand or three thousand years ago could discern and confront the sins they are struggling with in their lives. The only explanation is that the Bible is God-breathed, and not just a human product. It is God’s word and God knows his people. God knows the sin in their lives, and God knows how to speak to that sin. All Scripture is also for correction, that is, God does not just say that we are wrong, but his word redirects and points us again in the right direction. It rectifies misbelief and misconduct.

The Bible is also for training in righteousness. In other words, it is for discipline: for discipling and preparing the believer in godliness. Paul is saying that the Bible is inherently practical and profitable. There was a period of time in the church growth movement, when in the name of reaching out to unbelievers, it was decided that sermons were irrelevant because unbelievers found them boring and impractical. There was then a famous conversation between Dr. R.C. Sproul and one of the leaders of the church growth movement. This leader told Dr. Sproul about their findings from unbelievers and their decision to make the church exciting and relevant by discarding sermons. Dr. Sproul responded by calling it one of the stupidest things he has heard in his life. Dr. Sproul challenged this leader to look to the Scriptures for any encounter with the living God where someone found it as boring and irrelevant. Dr. Sproul further asserted that in the Bible, we find on the contrary that when men and women have an encounter with God, they are struck with abject horror, they dance for joy, or they even die. We look in vain to the Bible for an encounter with God which is banal and trivial. Maybe the reason why people come to our churches and find it boring and relevant is that God is not there. God's Word is never boring and irrelevant unless you want something other than the living God.

Preach the Sufficiency of Scripture: All Scripture is capable for equipping the saints for faith and life

Having seen that the Bible is God-breathed and is profitable, let us consider the question: what is the Bible for? Or, the matter of what Paul says the word does. He says, it equips us and

prepares us to live the Christian life, that we might be adequate, or competent, equipped for holiness and godliness to do every good work. In other words, the Bible’s God-breathedness and profitableness are for our being equipped in life and godliness. Paul’s idea again comes directly from Jesus. We have already noted that Pastor-Teachers, or Shepherd-Elders, are to equip us to do good works, but that idea comes from Jesus. In the Great Commission, Jesus not only commands his disciples to make disciples, but also how to accomplish it. Jesus instructed them, first of all, to baptize their disciples, and then to teach them “to observe all that I have commanded.” So, how is disciple-making done? By baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded. We should take note that Jesus does not tell us to go and make disciples by teaching them a very simple three-point gospel outline. Rather, we are to make disciples by teaching them to observe everything Jesus has ever taught. Moreover, disciple-making is not teaching someone to merely ascend to all the doctrinal truths that Jesus taught. Discipleship is teaching someone to observe everything that Jesus has commanded. Therefore, to summarize on the methodology of discipleship. First of all, discipleship is done in the context of the church as we have to baptize that disciple in the name of the Triune God. For, a sacrament is an ordinance that happens in the context of the gathered church. In discipleship, we then teach them to observe everything that Jesus commanded.

Notice the apostle Paul’s line of thought. All Scripture is given by inspiration or God-breathed, and profitable in order to equip us for every good work. To equip the disciple, the disciple has to know the whole counsel of God and obey it. The minister’s job then is not over until men and women have been conformed to the whole counsel of God; to everything that Jesus commanded. That is the goal of scriptural learning and doctrine, and we must not rest in seeing people merely profess Christ, or begin to study their Bibles, or even to embrace sound doctrine. The pastor cannot rest until the right doctrine by the Spirit’s power is working out in holy living in all of the congregation. We really do not have a high view of Scripture until we love it, cherish it, learn it, obey it, and live it out. This is what the pastor is aiming for and what faithful preaching also aims to do.
Wise Preaching:
Applying Oneself to the Abilities of the Congregation

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Let us begin with a simple question: What is wisdom? What does the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 159) have in view when preachers are instructed to “preach sound doctrine ... wisely.” What is wisdom?

“Wisdom” is one of those terms that has developed a different meaning in popular usage than its technical definition. Popular usage treats “wisdom” as roughly synonymous with being smart or being brilliant. It is construed as a measure of intelligence. There is nothing wrong with this popular usage of the word, so long as we carefully distinguish those contexts in which the term is being used for its proper meaning — like in the Westminster Standards and in Scripture.

Employing the term for its proper import, even a poorly educated person may be deemed “wise.” And a brilliant person might be labeled a “fool.” Wisdom is not about how much you have in your head, but how well you use what is in your head. Wisdom is a skill, not a measure of smarts. A mechanical engineer may understand the processes taking place under the hood of your car; but if he cannot tell you what to do about a rattle in your engine, you had better seek the wisdom of the mechanic at the local garage. Wisdom is practical insight for life.

Under the popular notion of “wisdom,” we might suppose that “wise preaching” means erudite or smart preaching. But that is not what we have in mind, here. The Catechism invokes the proper meaning of the term in its definition of wise preaching: “They that are called to labor in the ministry of the word, are to preach sound doctrine ... wisely,” which the Catechism expands upon with this definition: “applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers.”

Wise preaching does not require lots of degrees or fluency in the original languages. Wise preaching does not require big words or a background in philosophy. There is nothing wrong — and lots to appreciate — in such gifts of education. But what makes preaching wise is the minister’s capacity to understand his congregation — to know their capacities and their needs, to empathize with their joys and their struggles — and to apply skillfully God’s Word to the experiences they face.

There is one passage in the Scriptures where the exhortation to wise preaching is given particular emphasis. In fact, as will be shown in this article, this narrative is provided in the Bible specifically as a model for wise preaching. The passage concerned is the preaching of Ezra and his model worship service recorded in Nehemiah chapter 8. After a quick consideration of Ezra’s commission in Ezra chapter 7, his model preaching service in Nehemiah chapter 8 will be explored at more length.

Ezra’s Diaspora Commission (Ezra 7:25)

Ezra’s commission for his work in Jerusalem is recorded, in full, in Ezra 7:12–26. There is one line that needs to be highlighted, for this article, from verse 25: “And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the
people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who
do not know them, you shall teach” (ESV).

Ezra’s calling was to teach God’s Word. Not only in Jerusalem, but Ezra was to take God’s Word
out to the diaspora. Some have interpreted the wording of this charge to indicate that the whole
Persian province called “Beyond the River” was placed under the Law of Moses. But this
conclusion is not necessarily what the passage has in view. Rather, the Hebrew people had been
dispersed throughout that province. And Ezra has been charged to administer the wisdom of
God to His people throughout that province.

Some of the Hebrews in the diaspora knew God’s Law and needed officers to oversee their
organization into observant communities, far from Jerusalem. But many of the Hebrews in the
diaspora had lost sight of their heritage and did not know the Law of Moses. These Jews needed
to be taught the Law.

The phrase “according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand” captures the portability
of what Ezra was doing. As a scribe, Ezra had been recompiling the Law of Moses into portable
scrolls to extend the teaching ministry of the Temple into the wider world. (By the way, Ezra is
also the most likely candidate for having compiled a certain subset of the vast library of Temple
songs into the portable, 150 Psalm collection we now have in the canon.) Indeed, Ezra was
earnest about the proper organization of worship on-site in Jerusalem. But his further calling
was to facilitate the ability of the Jews, living far away from Jerusalem in settings where they
cannot sacrifice and cannot see the Temple, to remain faithful and live in keeping with the
wisdom of God. It is that aspect of Ezra’s commission which offers an important backdrop for
the events recorded in Nehemiah chapter 8.

### Ezra’s Diaspora Model (Neh. 8:1–12)

Nehemiah 8:1-12 describes a worship assembly held on a specific date: “And all the people
gathered as one man ... on the first day of the seventh month” (verses. 1–2). According to
passages like Leviticus 23:23–25 and Numbers 29:1–6, the assembly held on the first day of the
seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets. It was a day when the Trumpet was sounded, and the
people gathered at the Temple for worship with a series of appointed sacrifices. Nehemiah 8:2
identifies this assembly as being that gathering.

But remarkably, this text says nothing about the day’s eponymous trumpet blast. Nor does the
text say anything about the sacrifices that were appointed for that date. In fact, the gathering
that is described takes place in a secular space, “And all the people gathered as one man into the
square before the Water Gate” (verse. 1). The Temple is never mentioned anywhere in this
narrative. The lack of reference to these stock features of the Feast of Trumpets does not mean
Ezra ignored the instructions of the Law for the festival celebration. We do not argue from
silence that the sacrifices and trumpet blasts and Temple courtyard gatherings did not happen.
On the contrary, from the date assigned for this gathering, we can assume those instructions
would have been fulfilled. But this text is selective in the features it reports for a purpose.

Rather than reporting what happened inside the Temple, this narrative is focused on what a holy
day gathering looks like outside the Temple — in a space where sacrifices cannot be offered. In
his role as a teacher of the diaspora, Ezra presents this service as a model of festival worship for
those who must gather in a city square, where they can neither hear the Temple’s trumpet blast

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1 On the present author’s writings on the canonical Psalter, its redactional shape and intent, see Michael
LeFebvre, “Torah-Meditation and the Psalms: The Invitation of Psalm 1,” in *Interpreting the Psalms:
Issues and Approaches*, ed. Philip S. Johnston & David Firth (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2005),
213-225 and Michael LeFebvre, “‘On His Law He Meditates’: What Is Psalm 1 Introducing?,” *JSOT* 40, no.
nor perform the assigned altar sacrifices. And we notice how, in such a setting modeled in this narrative, the centerpiece of worship outside of the Temple is the proclamation of the Word. The emphatic theme of this narrative is on preaching. “All the people ... told Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses ... And he read from it facing the square ... And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law ... And Ezra opened the book ... [and] the Levites helped the people understand the Law ... They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

Now the reading and preaching of Scripture had always been a vital aspect in the worship of God’s people. But in the Temple, it was the acted-out message of atonement performed by the priest at the altar that was the centerpiece of worship. The performance of the atonement in an object lesson at the altar was the heart of Temple worship. However, in cities and gathering places far away from the Temple, where the sacrifices were not to be practiced, Ezra—in his duty as a teacher of the diaspora — sets this model. The proclamation of God’s Law about the sacrifices and the high priest’s intercession was central.

The atonement still took center stage in diaspora worship, but through its proclamation from the Book of the Law rather than its typological performance at the altar. This record of Ezra’s service on the Feast of Trumpets is recounted by Nehemiah in a manner that provides a model for diaspora worship gatherings on such a holy day. As such, the model it provides is one that stresses the preaching of God’s Word. Indeed, as we will see next, wise preaching is here emphasized.

The Centrality of Wise Preaching

The narrative in Nehemiah 8:1–12 emphasizes preaching with wisdom in connection with this model worship gathering conducted outside of the Temple courts. Five times this text repeats the term “understanding” (verses. 2, 3, 7, 8, 12) with emphasis on the people — not just the priests — understanding what is preached. Preaching for the congregation’s understanding (i.e., wise preaching) is the emphatic heart of what Ezra models.

In the first two references to “understanding” (verses. 2, 3), we are told that the people assembled in order to understand. “All the people gathered ... both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard” (verses.1–2; see also verse. 3). That final phrase, “and all who could understand,” serves as a purpose statement for the “men and women” gathering. The people assembled with an expectation to hear and to understand.

Granted, the construction of these phrases might refer to three groups of people (rather than two groups of people and a purpose statement). Many commentators read this text as a description of three groups: (1) the men, (2) the women, and (3) this mysterious additional group called, “all who could understand what they heard.” The natural assumption, then, is that “all who could understand” refers to children of a certain age and capacity. Including children in worship is certainly beneficial, even when children cannot fully understand. But that is not the likely intent in this passage. The Hebrew waw conjunction (“and”) is sometimes used appositionally for emphasis, comparable to the English word “indeed.” And that is likely the intent here. The people gather, “both men and women, indeed all who could understand.” This focus on understanding is not to place limitations on the group gathering, as though Levitical ushers stood at the gate and gave an I.Q. test to allow entry. The point is to emphasize the purpose for having all the men and women there. An apt paraphrase would be, “The people assembled with both men and women, indeed all in their capacity to understand.” The text is emphasizing the congregation’s expectation to understand. Worshipers are here introduced primarily as “understanders.”

After those two references to the people’s expectation to understand, the narrative gives two references to the leaders in their capacity to give understanding. First, verses 4–8 show the
leaders reading and preaching the Scriptures with two-fold emphasis (verses. 7, 8) on their specific concern for the people’s understanding.

The reading of the Law is described in verses 4–5. The text lists a panel of men who join Ezra on the platform for the reading portion of the service. “Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Masseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand” (verse. 4). There are 14 readers altogether, including Ezra in the center. Ezra is the one who leads the reading, but the implication seems to be that this whole line of men participates in the reading with him.

Then in verse 7, the explanation or preaching of the Word follows its reading. Again, there is a panel of colleagues who join Ezra for the preaching. “Also Jeshua, Bani, Shebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law” (verse. 7). Including Ezra, there are fourteen preachers. They are all Levites, ordained ministers of the Law, who participate with Ezra in the exposition following the reading.

We have no idea who these twenty six readers and expositors are, who serve alongside of Ezra. They are all named, but they are not mentioned again in Scripture. They are likely listed here to demonstrate that Ezra shared the mantle of this office of the Word with others. Most listeners who hear this story will not have Ezra himself as their reader and preacher. They will not have an inspired prophet to preach for them. Most who hear this narrative will have a Shema or a Mishael or a Kelita in the pulpit. Our text is not setting up celebrity preaching as the model, as though the success of this institution depends on having an inspired prophet in the pulpit. Ezra is shown in partnership with others, in order to demonstrate that the audience’s local worship gathering, whoever their ministers of the Word might be, legitimately participates in the model established by Ezra. This preaching arrangement indicates a sharing of the mantle between Ezra and those standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him in the work.

But notice how the text underscores the purpose of the fourteen readers and the fourteen expositors. The section ends with the simple statement, “The Levites helped the people to understand the Law” (verse. 7). Then, expanding upon that goal of “understanding,” verse 8 unpacks that thematic conclusion with a grand summary of the efforts by both readers and preachers to promote the people’s understanding. “They [referring back to the panel of readers] read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, [and] they [now referring to the Levitical preachers] gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (verse. 8).

This summary statement indicates that this message of understanding truly is the author’s focus in this text. The Holy Spirit wants us to see how devoted these worship leaders are to reading and preaching wisely — that is, to preach in a way that brings the people to understand. They are not preaching to show the preacher’s brilliance, nor to accomplish a ritual experience, but to bring the Word to bear upon the capacities and needs of the congregation.

The fourteen readers read from the book in a manner that made the reading “clear.” Some commentators limit this clarity to clear enunciation or to paragraph by paragraph reading. Others think that the clarity involves translation, reading the Hebrew text in Aramaic for the benefit of Aramaic speakers in the audience. Whatever it took to make the reading clear, that is what the first panel of leaders did.

Second, the Levites gave “the sense” of what was read, so the people understood. This would involve what we call “preaching.” It is not enough for the people to comprehend the words that are read; they must be helped to understand how the Scriptures apply to their own lives. Such preaching is what Westminster calls “wise preaching,” or preaching “to the necessities and capacities of the hearers.”
Thus, we have seen how our text twice presents the people as gathering with an expectation to understand the Word. And twice, our text presents the leaders, reading and explaining, in order to give the people understanding. Finally, the entire worship service is brought to its climax with the text’s fifth emphasis on “understanding.”

Verse 12, at the end of Ezra’s worship gathering, reports the outcome of the assembly. “And all the people ... made great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” The people rejoiced on that day because God had spoken to them, and they understood his words. Five times, this model service for diaspora congregations scattered far from the Temple features wise preaching as its centerpiece — applying the word to the capacity and needs of the people.

**The Uniqueness of Wise Preaching**

This emphasis on wise preaching in worship might seem unremarkable to Christians, today. Reading and explaining God’s Word is rightly ingrained into the DNA of the church. Because of the model Ezra set for us, wise preaching has become the norm of any well-ordered church. So it might not seem all that remarkable. However, such preaching was a remarkable distinctive in Ezra’s day.

Typically, in the ancient world, the stories of a nation’s religion were taught to the people. At a nation’s temples and in other settings, the stories of a people were told. But the laws — and in particular the cultic laws — of ancient religions were only taught to the religious experts, not to the general public. But the Pentateuch that Ezra recompiled for teaching the diaspora was strangely unique in this regard. Here was a set of books combining national stories with lots of judicial and ritual laws into one collection of books intended for public preaching and — as Nehemiah 8:1–12 emphasizes — for public understanding. That kind of preaching is remarkable and needed to be emphasized for Ezra’s generation.

Has the reader ever noticed how much of the Pentateuch is devoted to ritual instructions? Half of the Book of Exodus — a full half of the book, from chapter 25 to the end — is devoted to the design and manufacture of the tabernacle in all its intricate details. Also, the entire Book of Leviticus is devoted to all manner of instruction on sacrifices and rituals. No other ancient law book for public teaching was like the Old Testament!

Rather than viewing such a preponderance of ritual alongside stories in the Pentateuch as a point of onerous drudgery, we should realize what Ezra is doing. Ezra’s republication of the Law, combined with wise preaching, would enable the people of God living far away from the Jerusalem Temple to participate vicariously in the sacraments taking place there. Diaspora believers might never see the Temple for themselves. They might never be able to take their own sacrifice there, in person. And they might never meet the high priest. Nevertheless, through the institution of wise preaching of the Law (including its ritual components), Ezra was enabling the people to understand the high priest’s work in God’s presence to intercede and atone for them. Scripture is eager for us to see that Ezra undertook his commission to take God’s Law to the diaspora with institutions in place to ensure the people understood it. We are shown the institution of wise preaching under Ezra toward that end in Nehemiah 8:1–12.

Surely, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and all the prophets, sought to preach to the needs and capacities of the people. But with the dawning of diaspora worship far from the object-lessons of the temple, the role model worship service under Ezra placed preaching front-and-center. What the *Catechism* calls “wise preaching” is the main emphasis of the scene here displayed.

**Understanding the Word—and Responding**

In this treatment of Ezra’s model preaching service, we have only focused on the five places where “understanding” is mentioned as the goal of the gathering. There are many other
liturgical details that further highlight the centrality of the Word in that service. A platform was built to uphold the Word. The people rose, they bowed to worship, and they engaged in various other practices that helped to open their hearts to hear from God through his Word. Such details strengthen the narrative’s interest in the congregation’s reception of the Word. But the story’s conclusion centers on the people’s response to the Word after they understood it. In fact, the closing paragraph (verses. 9–12) introduces a stunning twist in the story.

The people’s initial response to Ezra’s preaching was to weep. “All the people wept as they heard the words of the Law” (verse. 9). God’s Law exposed their sins, revealing how much the people had lost because of their rebellion. The people heard and understood; and, because they understood, they wept. Their weeping was proper. But, this was not a day for weeping.

The first verse of the subsequent chapter (Neh. 9:1) points to another assembly held on a later date in order to give the people an opportunity to fast and repent. This would be a day for weeping. The people’s initial response to weep upon understanding the Law was, ultimately, correct. However, that particular assembly on a holy day was not to be such a day. That was to be a day for feasting. “Nehemiah ... and Ezra ... and the Levites ... said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the L ORD your God; do not mourn or weep’” (verse. 9).

Because it was a festival day, this day was for communion with God and feasting with one another. Even though God’s Law convicted their hearts on that day, the overarching fact that God had delighted to speak to the people was itself a cause for them to rejoice. So, the final scene of the passage, which takes place after the end of the preaching service, shows the governor, along with Ezra and the Levites, going about to calm the people in their weeping, urging them to set aside their tears and to rejoice. The day needed to be celebrated with feasting, not with fasting, because God had rejoiced over them by giving them His Word.

Unfortunately, the key phrase of the leaders’ exhortations is an enigma for interpreters: “Do not be grieved, for the joy of the L ORD is your strength” (verse. 10). What does this expression mean, for “the joy of the L ORD” to be the people’s strength? Is it the people’s joy in the Lord that is in view (an objective genitive), or the Lord’s joy in the people that is intended (a subjective genitive)? Both are grammatically possible. Without sorting through the many interpretations attempted for this assertion, the sense is that it is God’s joy over His people that is in view. This phrase is not about our waxing and waning joy in the Lord, but the fact of the Lord’s joy over His people. When the Lord rejoices over His people, that rejoicing, on its own, is a source of security and peace for the people. The Hebrew term translated “strength” (ma’oz) typically refers to “a strong place” or “a refuge.” When the Lord delights in his people, that delight in itself is a place of security.

Ezra and his colleagues have helped the people understand the Law, such that they are weeping. But now, they further help the people understand the delight of God indicated by the mere fact that he has given them His Word, and their assurance of peace in that blessing. So, they are exhorted to honor the holy day with joy, and to wait to fast on another day. The day is holy — a day when God’s delight in his people has been discovered in the hearing of His Law. Therefore, as guilty and broken as the people may be under the strictures of that Law, the promised atonement of that Law comforts the people with peace. So they are helped to rejoice. “And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (verse. 12).

This flipped response — from weeping to feasting — is a remarkable twist in the story. It is a twist that further underscores the wise shepherding that accompanies the wise preaching of God’s Word. Wise preaching does not end with the pulpit. Wise preaching seeks to help the congregation both to understand God’s Word aright and to respond to his Word aright. Like the auto mechanic who helps the driver understand — and know what to do about — that rattle
under the hood, wise preaching includes helping the people know what to do about the truths they have heard.

This closing scene captures, in a nutshell, the complexity of wise preaching, with its call for grieving and joy, often in the same context. Preaching must not be done to satisfy the preacher’s own position of power or insight. Preaching is for the nurture and care of the flock. The Word must be brought to bear on the believers, both for their conviction (with weeping) and for their faith (with joy). Wisdom is not scholarly brilliance. Wisdom is practical guidance. Ezra serves as the model for preachers today, as we continue the calling to help the people of God understand His law in the global diaspora awaiting our final ingathering into His house — when Jesus comes again.

**Preaching for a Living Faith**

In Nehemiah 8:1–12, we encounter a model of wise preaching painted with broad but vivid strokes. This scene centers on wise preaching, but we do not actually hear the sermon itself that Ezra and his associated preached. For that kind of content, we would need to press further ahead into Nehemiah chapters 9 and 10.

In Nehemiah chapter 9, a long prayer is recorded, wherein the people are led in specific points of repentance before God’s Law. And, in Nehemiah chapter 10, the people are led in a specific series of reforms in response to God’s Law. Preaching with wisdom does involve specific points of application, as indicated in those subsequent passages. However, in closing, note the importance of this heart of grieving and joy which we have already recognized in Ezra’s inaugural preaching service.

Far too often, we suppose that wise preaching will focus on those practical applications of “things to do.” Practical application of the Scripture is part of wise preaching, as just noted. But often, what the people of God need first and foremost, is simply to be renewed in their faith — with hearts stirred to grieve and rejoice before the Lord. In fact, whatever “practical” applications we might further draw from Scripture, all our responses to the Word must be anchored in renewed faith. And more than anything else, wise preaching is preaching that enables the congregation to understand the majesty of God and the marvel of his mercies from the heart.

The closing picture of the people’s emotional state is provided as a window into their hearts’ renewal in living faith. In the typical “show and tell” style of Old Testament narrative, the external actions of the people are provided as a window into the invisible transitions of their souls. The story describes their tears and their feasts as an external demonstration of faith, which is the vital response sought through wise preaching. It is faith that comes from the hearing of the Word, and which is the goal of preaching the Word wisely.

The joy of the Lord is the security of God’s people (Nehemiah 8:10). This is why our calling as preachers is not to be scholars of the book, but pastors of the flock. Our calling is not to wow the people with the cleverness of the teacher, but to open the congregation’s hearts to the joy of the Savior. Therefore, to be a wise preacher, one must know the Scriptures — and one must also know the congregation, as did Ezra and his fellow preachers.
Zealous Preaching: 
Exercising Fervent Love for God and His People

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Throughout much of their time at the Westminster Assembly, the divines worked on a single catechism. Yet this attempt to write just one catechism left the assembly disappointed, as some stressed conciseness for lay people, while others wanted fuller statements for the learned. Finally, the decision was made to produce two catechisms - the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, published in 1647. For, as Samuel Rutherford said, the divines were not satisfied to “dress up milk and meat both in one dish.”

Clearly, one place that the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) expanded the “milk” of the Shorter Catechism (WSC) into “meat” is in this area of preaching. From Question 89, which asks, “How is the word made effectual to salvation?” we hear the only real mention regarding preaching and its work in the WSC. “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.” But the description of preaching is expanded in the WLC into six descriptive phrases, only four of which we consider in this issue of the journal.

Correspondence: Preaching in the Larger Catechism and the Directory of Publick Worship

Interestingly, these six phrases have a high degree of correspondence to a document published earlier by the assembly, which testify to their origin. The Westminster Directory for Publick Worship (WDPW) contains, in the section headed “Of the Preaching of the Word,” one of the best descriptive statements on preaching. This chapter on preaching begins by declaring, “Preaching of the word, being the power of God unto salvation, and one of the greatest and most excellent works belonging to the ministry of the gospel, should be so performed, that the workman need not be ashamed, but may save himself, and those that hear him.” This chapter continues by describing the qualifications of a minister, how he should develop the text for a sermon, how to structure a sermon, and errors he should avoid. Then it concludes with how “the servant of Christ, whatever his method be, is to perform his whole ministry.” It is here, in these concluding statements on the minister’s preaching duties, that the correspondence to the WLC’s description of preaching is seen.

For instance, Dr. Joel Beeke considered the WLC’s phrase “plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit.” The WPDW also says, “Plainly, that the meanest may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in

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3 Ibid.
demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect”. Likewise, the phrase in the WLC that the present author is considering says preaching is to be done “zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people.” The WDPW turns that around and fleshes it out a bit more by saying the minister’s work is to be done with “loving affection, that the people may see all coming from his godly zeal, and hearty desire to do them good.” Recognizing this correspondence helps one to properly understand the catechism’s descriptive phrase and emphasis as we move now to clarifying further what zealous preaching means.

Table: Correspondence between Larger Catechism and Directory for Publick Worship on the Manner of Preaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directory for Publick Worship</th>
<th>Larger Catechism Q. 159</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Painfully, not doing the work of the Lord negligently</td>
<td>1. Diligently, in season and out of season</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Plainly, that the meanest may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect; abstaining also from an unprofitable use of unknown tongues, strange phrases, and cadences of sounds and words; sparingly citing sentences of ecclesiastical or other human writers, ancient or modern, be they never so elegant.</td>
<td>2. Plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Faithfully, looking at the honour of Christ, the conversion, edification, and salvation of the people, not at his own gain or glory; keeping nothing back which may promote those holy ends, giving to every one his own portion, and bearing indifferent respect unto all, without neglecting the meanest, or sparing the greatest, in their sins.</td>
<td>3. Of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Wisely, framing all his doctrines, exhortations, and especially his reproofs, in such a manner as may be most likely to prevail; shewing all due respect to each man’s person and place, and not mixing his own passion or bitterness.</td>
<td>4. Wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Gravely, as becometh the word of God; shunning all such gesture, voice, and expressions, as may occasion the corruptions of men to despise him and his ministry.</td>
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Numbers in the table reflect the order of which each phrase or statement appeared in the original document.
Clarifications: What Defines Zealous Preaching

Describing preaching as being done in a zealous fashion certainly can conjure up different imagery in people’s mind. The word “zealous” is defined as “fervent partisanship for a person, a cause, or an ideal,” and has synonyms such as “fervent”, “ardent”, “impassioned”, or even “fanatical” or “fierce”. Thus, talking about zealous preaching could make us think of preaching by a pastor with his voice raised, gesticulating wildly, his eyes glaring avidly at you as he preaches hellfire and brimstone. However, in the sixteenth century, zeal had more the sense of “intense devotion.” Yet the meaning soon began to move toward the sense we have in our modern day. In the book Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë uses zeal in this manner, when she described the priest, Mr. St. John, who “was comparatively seldom at home: a large proportion of his time appeared devoted to visiting the sick and poor among the scattered population of his parish,” and as “zealous in his ministerial labours.” However, Mr. St. John did not have the true sense of zeal, for as she continues, she says of him, “yet (he) did not appear to enjoy that mental serenity, that inward content, which should be the reward of every sincere Christian and practical philanthropist.”

These examples fall short of precisely what is meant by the use of the word “zealous.” The Scripture reference attached to the word “zealously” in the WLC points to Apollos, the great New Testament preacher, who was “fervent in spirit” for “he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus” (Acts 18:25). His fervent spirit has more to do with his commitment to the gospel and his desire for people to embrace it than in his manner of speaking.

For as Thomas Ridley says in his commentary on the WLC, “This zeal does not consist in a passionate, furious address, arising from personal pique and prejudice, or in exposing men for their weakness, or expressing an undue resentment of some injuries received from them.” Rather, it is “such a zeal as is consistent with fervent love to God and to the souls of men.” Here is where the WDPW’s expression with proof texts that the minister is to conduct his preaching with “loving affection, that the people may see all coming from his godly zeal, and hearty desire to do them good” gives clear insight. The preacher is to say to God’s people what Paul said to the church at Corinth about his zeal in preaching, “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us” (2 Cor. 5:13-14). Preaching with zeal means preaching with love for the people, for, again, as Paul said “some preach Christ out of envy and strife” but others preach from a posture “of love” (Phil. 1:15-17). Yet again he said, “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor.12:15).

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
The majority of the people in our generation does not hear this type of preaching. Often, when we attempt to go back and try to preach with the zeal we see in those of the Westminster generation, the Reformers, and the Puritans, we can fall into the following error spoken of by Sinclair Ferguson. Speaking of our modern day exegetical preaching, he states,

“One of the hidden snares in systematic biblical preaching is that we may become so taken up with the task of studying and explaining the text that we forget the actual poverty and falsehood it addresses. One distinctly Reformed manifestation of this is that our love for the works of the past (coupled with their ready availability today)—our discovery, for example, of the depth of Puritan preaching by comparison with contemporary preaching—may suck us into the very language and speech patterns of a past era, thus making us sound inauthentic to our own generation.”

Ferguson further warns that “preaching to the heart will not be encrusted with layers of ill-digested materials from the past, however relevant these were to their day. Those preaching helps must rather be fully digested by us, made our own, and applied to people today in today’s language.” What the Scottish minister Alexander Whyte said of his own day a century ago is still true today:

Spiritual preaching; real face to face, inward, verifiable, experimental, spiritual preaching; preaching to a heart in the agony of its sanctification; preaching to men whose whole life is given over to making them a new heart—that kind of preaching is scarcely ever heard in our day. There is great intellectual ability in the pulpit of our day, great scholarship, great eloquence, and great earnestness (of manner), but spiritual preaching, preaching to the spirit—‘wet-eyed’ preaching—is a lost art.

Thus, as Ridgley further explains,

The love which is to be expressed to God, discovers itself in the concern ministers have for the advancing of his truth, name, and glory,...and their love to the souls of men induces them to preach with concern and sympathy. Their hearers not only have the same nature in common with themselves, in which they must either be happy or miserable forever; but they are liable to the same infirmities, difficulties, dangers, and spiritual enemies. Hence they who preach the gospel should express the greatest sympathy with them in their troubles, while they are using their utmost endeavours to help them in their way to heaven.

To further clarify, zealous preaching then is that preaching which is motivated by a love for God the Father, where the preacher aided by the Holy Spirit displays a passionate and earnest desire for people, whom he views like himself, to know Christ as contained in the Scriptures in such a way that he is preparing them to live with God in heaven forever.

Given this definition, we then need to deepen further our Biblical sense of what knowing Christ in zealous preaching truly means.

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9 Sinclair Ferguson, “Preaching to the Heart,” Feed My Sheep (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008), 108.


11 Alexander Whyte, Bunyan Characters, Third Series (Scotts Valley, CA: Create Space, 2018), 115.

12 Ridgley, A Body of Divinity, 478-479.
Christology: What Drives Zealous Preaching

As recorded in John 2, Jesus entered Jerusalem several months after beginning his public ministry in the year 27 A.D. It was the time of the Passover, followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was the celebration of God's deliverance of the people out of Egypt, a week long feast where many memorial sacrifices were offered. Jesus deliberately went into the temple and was met with quite a sight.

The construction of the temple, called Herod’s temple because he had provided for its rebuilding, had begun some 46 years earlier in 19 B.C. A magnificent structure, the temple and its courtyards were surrounded by outer walls enclosing roughly twenty acres of land. In the area outside the temple building proper, but inside the walls, was the open air place called the Court of the Gentiles. In this courtyard, the Gentiles, who were not allowed into any part of the temple structure, could come and worship the God of Israel.

Yet Jesus found there was no room for them to pray or worship, for it was filled with those selling animals and exchanging money. For the priests and Levites, who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the people, instead were overseeing a business. Most likely they were only accepting those animals sold on site in the courtyard for sacrifices. Like the food at an airport or movie theatre, they charged exorbitant prices. Each worshipper also had to pay a temple tribute, which could only be paid with a certain Jewish coin, and the priests controlled the circulation of this coin. The people then would have to exchange common money, at a high rate, to purchase one to pay their temple assessment. Thus, the temple courtyard had taken on the air of a county fair, complete with stockyard smells and noises, vendors who overcharged, booths to buy special tokens, yet all under the guise of worship and honoring God.

What did Jesus do when he saw this scene? He gathered some of the ropes undoubtedly lying on the ground that most likely had been used for tethering the animals. He then fashioned a scourge or whip out of them, and drove away these merchants. It was not a peaceful scene. He whipped and beat the sellers and animals out of the courtyard, flung over the tables of the moneychangers, and spoke directly to the sellers of the doves, "Take these things and get out of here. My Father’s house is not to be a house of merchandise.” Recall from the Old Testament that the doves were sacrifices that the poor offered, so these merchants were taking advantage of the poor. When animals are moved quickly, they can react in a panicked fashion, so one can only imagine the sounds, sights, and smells of what was taking place.

As his disciples witnessed the Lord on this occasion, John tells his readers what came to their minds. “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’” (John 2:17). Again, hearing these words in this immediate context could cause the reader to interpret this verse, a quotation from Psalm 69, simplistically, as only describing Jesus’ outer actions on this occasion. Again, the association of zeal would then be with ardent, fervent behavior. Though certainly that is on display here, there is an underlying understanding in the heart of our Savior over what is taking place that deepens our comprehension of the statement “zeal for your house will consume me.”

For the house that truly was the Father’s and for which Jesus was consumed with zeal, was not the physical temple structure around them. Rather, his zeal was for the spiritual house of the church that the temple represented and that which Christ came to build. This fact is clear from John 2, for when he is asked to give a sign that he had the authority to do what he had just done, Jesus declared to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). His giving of his life in his crucifixion for his people, and his resurrection from the dead to give them life forms the cornerstone of the church, the temple of the living God. The temple of the Old Testament with its priesthood, its sacrifices, its holy places, its ark – all of it was to picture Christ’s offering for his people. However, the leaders of Israel with their merchants were
corrupting this picture, and blinding people to the Christ who was now standing before them. Hence Jesus’ holy anger was aroused. Therefore, He drove these corrupters away, and proclaimed the true gospel which is the only source of salvation for mankind: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

For it is this true zeal for his Father’s house that consumed Jesus. He is so desirous for men, women, and children to be saved from their sins, experience life instead of death, know his Father, and be a member of his household forever. His zeal for us led him to be devoured by the hateful act of wicked men who put him to death on the cross.

For zealous preaching is gospel preaching not only in the content of the message but in the character of the messenger. The only God-ordained way out of this aforementioned corruption is preaching, the primary mark of the church. What must characterize such preaching is that it is zealous like Jesus’ own preaching was. What will then chiefly characterize this zealous preaching is that the preacher is consumed himself with a solemnity that people will know and experience themselves the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Conclusions: What Develops Zealous Preaching

So what will develop zealous preaching? Five resulting applications are apparent.

First, zealous preaching can only be done by zealous preachers who love the people of God.

At the heart of what Christ was teaching in John 2, and behind the words of the Westminster standards on zealous preaching, is sincere love for the people to whom you are preaching. We must have a “loving affection” and a “hearty desire to do them good.” Cold-hearted, brain-dulling, browbeating, unimaginative preaching is not showing love to the people. As Sinclair Ferguson states, the minister is not to be “lugubrious (sad, dismal, burdensome) and censorious, but rather filled with a loving affection for those to whom he ministers and preaches.”

Yet this truth goes deeper. T. David Gordon asks this question, “Do hearers get the impression that the minister is for them (eager to see them blessed richly by a gracious God), or against them (eager to put them in their place, scold them, reprimand them, or punish them?). At the heart of preaching is loving people enough to tell them what they need in a manner that convinces them that you also need it and have nothing but their best interest in mind as you tell them. The preacher must thus know his flock. “Christ did not ordain pastors on the principle that they only teach the Church in a general way on the public platform, but that they care for the individual sheep, bring back the wandering and scattered to the fold, bind up the broken and crippled, heal the sick, support the frail and weak.”

Next, zealous preaching is accomplished only through the minister being in prayer.

If God’s house is to be a house of prayer, then the minister of prayer and the Word (that is the order of his ministry given in Acts) must be a man of prayer. Before the preacher stands behind the pulpit, he must kneel in his prayer closet. As the Westminster Directory for Public Worship explains the need for the minister to have a knowledge of theology and God’s Word, it says he is to have “his senses and heart exercised in them above the common sort of believers” and encourages this to be sought through prayer. John Angell James asks, “How came the spirit of

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slumber over the church? Was it not from the pulpit? And if a revival is to take place in the former, must it not begin in the latter?

Third, zealous preaching opens up the Scriptures to show Christ to His people.

Even Jesus told the Jews, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). The zealous preacher also should have his heart so filled with the love and glory of God's Son that whether he is in Genesis or Revelation, or any text in between, there is a clear, redemptive-historical bridge that leads his hearers from the text to Christ. To use Paul’s great chain of preaching in Romans 10, if people cannot call on Christ unless they believe in Him, and they cannot believe on him unless they hear, and they cannot hear him unless someone preaches him, then a Christ-less sermon is not only a sermon without zeal but also a failure to preach.

Thomas Goodwin reminds us that the Scriptures are to “open a window into Christ’s heart.” The preacher in communicating those Scriptures is to speak with the words, voice, and tones of Jesus, so that the people listening to him are hearing their Savior. Again, Goodwin states the the Bible “doth, as it were, take our hands and lay them upon Christ’s breast, and let us feel how his heart beats.”

A zealous preacher, aided by the Holy Spirit, will seek to put the heartbeat of Christ into his hearers. Preaching is not just an exchange of information, it is an exchange of energy, of communicating with passion the heart of Christ into others.

Fourth, zealous preaching longs and calls for the conversion of unbelievers.

The next phrase that follows in the catechism answer after zealous preaching is that preaching is to be done “sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.” Too often Reformed preaching contains no clear call for people to repent of their sins and believe upon Christ. We preach as if people are in no danger, no need of Christ, and that just by being in church, it means they are converted. John Stott warned against such faithless preaching when he said,

“(Christian preachers) can be faithful to Scripture, lucid in explanation, felicitous in language, and contemporary in application. It would be hard to find fault with their content. Yet somehow they appear cold and aloof. No note of urgency is ever heard in their voice, and no suspicion of a tear is ever seen in their eyes. They would never dream of leaning over the pulpit to beg sinners in the name of Christ to repent, come to Him, and be reconciled with God.

May it not be! If you are a preacher, beg God for conversions in prayer. If you are not a preacher, beg God still for conversions. Pray that your minister will hold the bread of life out to all assembled. Preachers, call sinners to come to Christ and like the blind man cry out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

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18 Ibid., 4:111.

Zealous preaching will purify and even purge the church of Christ.

Jesus was the greatest prophet to stand in the temple and declare the corruption of God’s people. But he was not the first one to do so. Clearly the Lord had in mind the words of Jeremiah when he spoke on that day. For centuries earlier, Jeremiah had lifted his voice before temple worshipers preaching against those who trusted in the physical structure and their involvement in its activities. He said, “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?” (Jer. 7:9-11).

We live in an age where the church has grown corrupt once again. Not only is the Church of Rome reeling from sexual abuse cases by its non-marrying priests, but the evangelical church cannot stand on any higher moral ground either as daily it seems that married preachers are doing the same. These corruptions of behavior and morality begin with idolatry and corruption in worship. As the Cambridge Declaration states, “Evangelical churches today are increasingly dominated by the spirit of this age rather than by the Spirit of Christ.”20 This statement traces the said corruption to the lack of commitment to Scripture and preaching:

“Scripture alone is the inerrant rule of the church’s life, but the evangelical church today has separated Scripture from its authoritative function. In practice, the church is guided, far too often, by the culture. Therapeutic technique, marketing strategies, and the beat of the entertainment world often have far more to say about what the church wants, how it functions and what it offers, than does the Word of God.”21

When the preachers of a generation are characterized as “lovers of self rather than lovers of God,” then zealous preaching has disappeared. Again, may it not be! May the Lord be pleased in our generation to raise up a multitude of preachers who are consumed with zeal for his house.

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21 Ibid., 15.