

The Word as a Means of Grace

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INTRODUCTION¹

The differences over grace between the medieval Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation are nowhere more obviously apparent than in the architecture of their respective places of worship. To enter one of the great cathedrals of the high Middle Ages, such as that of Cologne, is to enter a space that is focused on and saturated in the sacraments, specifically the Mass. As one enters the building, one's eyes are drawn to the high altar because the architect knew his theology. He knew that the most important thing that happened in the liturgy was the celebration of the Mass, where Christ literally came down to meet his people in grace. As the bread and wine became the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, Christ was present with his people. Heaven met earth and all eyes should thus be focused on the place where this mystery took place.

Enter a Protestant cathedral, say, St. Giles' in Edinburgh, and one enters a very different world. Not only are the usual elaborate aesthetics of medieval piety missing, one's eyes are drawn not to any altar but rather to the elevated pulpit. Again, the architect knew his theology well, for the most important thing that happens in a Protestant service is the reading and especially (to

use the adverb employed in the Shorter Catechism) the preaching of God's word. God's presence is mediated not under the accidents of bread and wine at the altar. It is not the eyes and the tongue that apprehend God. It is the ears. God comes to his people but through the declaration of his word by the mouths of his preachers. Indeed, as the Second Helvetic Confession so dramatically expressed it in the very first chapter:

We believe that today, when this word of God is proclaimed in the Church by preachers who have been legitimately called, then the very word of God itself is proclaimed and received by the faithful.

The language is emphatic: *the very word of God itself*. When the preacher preaches faithfully, the congregation actually hears God's word. We might put this another way: when the preacher preaches faithfully, it is really God who speaks to the congregation.

Of course, Heinrich Bullinger, the Confession's author, did not believe that his sermons were so to be seen as the word of God that they should therefore be inserted into the canon of inspired scripture. The point he was making was this: when God's word was correctly parsed and proclaimed, God spoke to his people through the words of the preacher in an authoritative and powerful way. In so doing, Bullinger stands as representative of the Reformation Protestant tradition: it is the word of God, not the sacraments, which was the primary means of God dealing graciously with his people. God addressed his people through the word proclaimed; the sacraments gained their significance from being attached to the Word, a point which was also architecturally reinforced in Reformed by having the table placed symbolically in front of, and beneath, the pulpit.

Understanding this point is crucial. Protestantism is not simply a set of theological doctrines. Those doctrines stand in direct relation to practice. If the Reformation understanding of grace is taken seriously, then the reading and especially the preaching of the Word of God, will stand at the center of Protestant practice. Preaching the word is a means of grace, in fact the primary means of grace. It is the means God has appointed for bringing his gracious purpose to fruition in the lives of the men and women who make up the church. God acts first and foremost in the proclamation from the pulpit of his mighty saving acts.

That means that preachers need to understand that what they do is perform a theological action which demands care and earnestness because they handle the Word of God and bring the most important message of all to people's ears. And it also rests upon confidence because the power of the message does not reside ultimately in them as messengers but in the God who speaks through the message. Nothing kills churches faster than preachers who do not seem to understand these various elements of the task. Preachers need to understand God's grace, not simply so that they can preach its content but also so that they can preach, period.

A THEOLOGY OF GOD'S SPEECH

At the heart of the Reformers'—indeed, of all anti-Pelagian—understandings of grace is the idea that grace is something which ultimately comes from without. For the Reformers, as indeed for Paul, this grace breaks into the lives of individuals primarily through the Word proclaimed. The gospel is not an experience, it is the declaration of the identity of Jesus Christ, with all of that entails for the identity of human beings made in his image. Yet in order to understand the Reformers' position, we need to understand something of the biblical teaching on speech, specifically God's speech. This provides the foundation for the Protestant understanding of how the Word proclaimed can be powerful unto salvation.

The Reformers took their cue on the Word of God from the description of how God acts which they found presented in scripture. One of the very first things which the Bible reveals about him, beyond the fact of his mere existence, is that he is one who acts primarily through speech. This is how the creation is brought about in Genesis 1. God speaks, he uses words. There was nothing, God spoke, and then there was something, that which God had spoken into existence.

Now, presumably speech is not predicated of God and humans in a univocal manner: God's speech did not involve the use of vocal chords, for example, and until matter was created there could have been none of the vibrations which we associate with physical sound. Yet by implication the Bible makes it clear that the closest analogy to God's creative act is the human act of speech.

It is one of the great insights of Protestantism that this is central to how we are to understand God and the world he created. We should note that this

creative power of God's speech correlates with what we saw earlier with regard to Luther's understanding of the cross and of justification. Justification by grace through faith depended upon the power of God's declaration to make a thing to be that which it intrinsically was not. God's speech determines reality, creates reality. Thus, the person who is actually sinful is declared by God to be righteous because clothed in the imputed, extrinsic righteousness of Christ. He is not righteous in any way that the world would recognize as being "real." But he is really righteous simply because God has said that he is such. This finds its parallel in the work of the cross. Christ hangs on the cross, apparently a crushed, defeated sinner yet in reality the holy, triumphant Lamb of God. To the world, the cross is obviously a crushing defeat of the one who hangs there. But God declares that it is the opposite, a spectacular and decisive triumph over evil. No empirical observation can lead to this conclusion, only the revelation of the truth via the Word of God can do so. Only faith grasping that word can acknowledge the truth. And thus that word grasped by faith makes the cross the power of God to salvation.

Creation is, of course, described in Genesis 1 as a series of verbal actions by God. "And God said..." is the repeated refrain which punctuates the account and brings into existence various parts of the created realm. God's word is not simply a descriptive thing. It is a powerful, creative thing. Psalm 33:6 summarizes this well: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their hosts."

This transcendent creative power of words lies at the heart of Luther's understanding of the nature of language, as he makes clear in a famous passage in his *Lectures on Genesis*:

Who could conceive of the possibility of bringing forth from the water a being which clearly could not continue to exist in water? But God speaks a mere Word, and immediately the birds are brought forth from the water. If the Word is spoken, all things are possible, so that out of the water are made either fish or birds. Therefore any bird whatever and any fish whatever are nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language; through this rule of language those things that are impossible become very easy, while those that are clearly opposite become very much alike, and vice versa.²

The phrase that describes creatures as "nothing but nouns in the divine rule

of language” is fascinating, drawing out the clear implications of Luther’s linguistic philosophy: words constitute reality. It is God’s speech which makes the sea produce birds, a natural impossibility. This is the late medieval nominalism which we noted earlier and which bears some similarities to certain aspects of postmodern literary theory which emphasizes the constructive nature of words. To an extent we can all sense the creative power of language: the use of a racial epithet is regarded as obnoxious because it does something to the people to whom it is applied. It denigrates them and thus transforms reality for them in a negative way. Language is creative and we instinctively know that, as demonstrated by the heated debates over freedom of speech and political correctness.

Yet Luther’s understanding of language here is not that of radical postmodernists in one very important way. For Luther, language is creative because it is spoken by God and he uses this speech as the instrument for determining what exactly reality is. He is in himself unknowable. Prior to his speaking human beings cannot put a limit on what he may or may not do. But when he speaks, his power uses that speech to bring things into being and to constitute reality. That reality has a stability and a certainty to it precisely because it is the speech of the sovereign and omnipotent God who rules over all things. By contrast, I might scream and shout at the ocean all day long, commanding it to give forth fish and birds but it will not happen because I am a mere creature and not creator. It is because it is God who speaks, God who controls all things, that his language is creative. This is a crucial point to understand when it comes to making the transition from God speaking in his Word to the preacher speaking God’s word to the congregation.

There is also a further aspect to God’s speech which is important. As God’s speech creates and determines reality, so the scheme of the Devil is to create an alternative linguistic world which possesses a compelling appearance of reality but which is ultimately false. Here is how Luther describes the temptation in the Garden:

Moses expresses himself very carefully and says: “The serpent said,” that is, with a word it attacks the Word. The Word which the Lord had spoken to Adam was: “Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” For Adam this Word was Gospel and Law; it was his worship; it was his service and the obedience he could offer God in this state of innocence. These Satan attacks and tries

to destroy. Nor is it only his intention, as those who lack knowledge think, to point out the tree and issue an invitation to pick its fruit. He points it out indeed; but then he adds another and a new statement, as he still does in the church.³

This point will be critical in understanding what preaching is and why it is important. The serpent is challenging God's Word by presenting another, alternative Word. Calvin puts it this way: "he wished to inject into the woman a doubt which might induce her to believe *that* not to be the word of God, for which a plausible reason did not manifestly appear."⁴ The serpent's game is a linguistic one: undermining how God had specified reality to be by hinting at an alternative account. The struggle between God and Satan then, begins a struggle over speech.

The early chapters of Genesis also point to another significant theological fact about speech: one of the things which connect God to human beings and to no other creature is the ability to talk, to communicate and to do things with words. Indeed, speech, particularly as it connotes rule and sovereignty, is part of the image of God in which human beings are made. No other creature is given the power of speech, and no other creature is given the mandate which comes with that power. Thus, as God creates by the word of his power and names Adam. This naming of Adam is the sign of his authority over the man. He then gives to Adam authority over all other creatures, a point made clear by his responsibility to name them. Genesis 2:19-20 makes this clear: the Lord brings the creatures to Adam, that he might name them; and whatever name he gave to each creature, that was its name. Adam is thus responsible for bringing a certain element of order to the creation which God has made. We might thus say that Adam's speech too is "creative" in a subordinate manner to that of God himself. Human words carry power and can be used to order and thus (within creaturely limits) to change reality.

This creative power of speech is not restricted to the early chapters of Genesis. Throughout the Old Testament, God's speech continues to be the primary mode of his action and continues to reshape reality or to bring new things into being. He calls Abraham and gives him a covenant promise. He calls to Moses from the burning bush. He speaks again to Moses on Sinai and gives him the Law. Significantly, Heinrich Bullinger refers to this as "preaching."

In the mount Sina [sic] the Lord himself preached to the great congregation of Israel, rehearsing so plainly, that they might understand those ten commandments, wherein is contained every point of godliness.⁵

By using this language of *preaching*, Bullinger points towards a clear analogy which he sees between the act of God in addressing his people and that which God's servants do when they speak God's words to his people. God does things through his Word. He creates, he commands, he promises. And he does things through his Word proclaimed by his servants. Thus, God in the Bible also speaks through various prophets, giving them detailed words to say to his people or even to foreign nations, or using their words to accomplish his own purposes.⁶ This is a very important for understanding the connection between grace and preaching in the Reformation church: New Testament and then post-apostolic preachers are the successors of the Old Testament prophets as they bring God's Word to bear upon God's people and upon the world around. The word they proclaim is the means God uses to accomplish his purposes. Its power is thus rooted in divine action, not in the eloquence of the preacher.

One obvious implication of this is that divine speech is not simply, or perhaps even primarily, a matter of communicating information. It is the typical mode of his presence and power. Speech is how God is present or, to use a more modern idiom, how he makes his presence felt. God's speech created the universe and it also created the people of God. God called Abram and made him the father of all nations. To meet God is to be addressed by him or by his chosen speakers. The Jews were special because God spoke to them in a special way, by means of his covenant promises. His rule was exercised by and through his Word. The Jews were those who had God's Law and his promises. These were the means by which God was gracious to them.

This presence of God by speech is not restricted to the Jews. When God addressed the Gentiles, he was present to them also, whether in general matters, such as the judgment against Babylon or in mercy, as in the particular case of Naaman. His sovereignty over them was also exercised in and through his Word. When God ceased to speak, it was a sign that he had withdrawn his favor from his people. Thus Amos predicts a famine of the Word of God which will cause the people to wander over the face of the earth seeking God but doing so in vain. A silent God was an absent God.

When we move to the New Testament, the power of the speech of God continues to be emphasized. At Jesus' baptism, the Father publicly recognized his Son by speech, as the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. The point is clear: God in Christ is now present with his people, a presence signified by the Word. The economy of grace which is manifested in Christ is inaugurated by a verbal declaration. Then, when Christ is confronted with the Devil's temptations in the wilderness, his weapon of choice is the Word of God. The Word is the means by which Christ is upheld. As the Devil does what he did in the Garden, that is, pervert the Word, so Christ aptly applies it and puts his enemy to flight. Then there are the many examples throughout the gospels of Christ's speech casting out demons, healing the sick and even raising the dead. Not all his acts of power are linguistic (for example, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood) but most are. The Word was the means by which Christ demonstrated his sovereignty and brought grace to bear in the lives of individuals.

This Word-oriented means of God's presence and power continued into the post-ascension apostolic church. Preaching is central to the narrative of the Book of Acts and lies at the heart of the practical realization of God's gracious purposes in Paul's New Testament letters. It was by means of verbal declaration that the Reformers saw the apostles expanding the kingdom. The prophetic Word was a word which tore down illusions and built up realities. Thus, the preacher stood at the very center of the spiritual struggle of the present age, both for judgment and for grace.

THE WORD PREACHED AND THE GRACE OF GOD

It is not surprising that the Reformers saw themselves a standing in continuity with this biblical emphasis on God's Words as his means of action, both for judgment and for grace. Thus, in the Reformation, preaching was power and the preaching office was the most significant one within the church. All of the major Reformers were preachers, with the pulpit being the center of their professional lives. Their various reformations were all centered on and driven by the proclamation of the Word.

There were obvious cultural aspects to this: in an age of low literacy, the preacher was often the person through whom many people obtained their understanding of the world around. Thus, Luther's sermons often ended

with an appendix, not connected to the main exposition which offered commentary on some aspect of current affairs.⁷ This political significance of preaching helps to explain the constant attempts in England to regulate the practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even to suppress it entirely at points in the 1630s.

Yet the cultural power of preaching is clearly only a small part of the story and not one which would have interested the Reformers to any significant degree. For them, the biblical theology of the Word which we have noted above was the driving factor. God's preached and so his servants must preach. Preachers had power because their words connected in some way to the Word and were thus the means of God accomplishing his purposes in this world. Indeed, Reformation preachers saw themselves as the successors in some ways of the great prophets of scripture. This is reflected often in the language they applied to the preaching task. The gatherings of ministers in Reformation Zurich and later in London, where they would hear each other proclaim the Word and offer critique and encouragement, were known as "prophesyings." William Perkins classic text on how to preach was entitled *The Arte of Prophesying*. The preacher was not merely a lecturer or teacher. His task was not simply descriptive. His task was no less than prophetic: in proclaiming the Word of God he was to tear down human inventions and illusions about the world and to build in their place reality as God had declared it to be through the Word of his power. As the Second Helvetic Confession declared, the Word of God preached is the Word of God.

A good example of such confidence in the Word is provided by Luther in 1522. This was the moment when he returned to Wittenberg from his time at the Wartburg Castle in order to bring order back to a town whose Reformation had fallen under the sway of radical iconoclasts and was quickly descending into chaos. Under pressure from the authorities to restore order, Luther did the one thing he knew would have power to transform the situation: he preached. And during this series of sermons, he made one of his most famous comments about the Word of God:

I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark

4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.⁸

The rhetoric is typical of Luther's exuberance yet the content reflected his theology: the Reformation was above all a movement of the proclaimed Word because that was how God achieved his gracious purposes. As long as Luther preached that Word, he could be confident that God would use it to tear down human pride and bring sinners by grace to Christ.

PREACHING AND THE WORD WRITTEN

Given this, the question of authority—never far from the surface in the Reformation—now becomes acute. If preaching is God's primary means of accomplishing his purposes, what are the authoritative norms for post-apostolic preaching? We have noted a number of times that the fact that the Reformation involved a fundamental critique of the medieval church's sacramentally centered view of grace meant that it was also a basic critique of medieval understandings of church and authority. Given this, the question of the content of this preaching comes to the fore. If the Word is the primary means of grace, is preaching the word simply a spontaneous or ecstatic thing prompted by the Holy Spirit or is it regulated and normed in some way?

The first thing to note in answering this is that the practical content of preaching is shaped both by the understanding of grace—God's freely bestowed favor—and of justification—God's righteousness given to the believer via the instrumentality of faith in God's promise. That salvation has a promissory content demands that preaching must have a specific content too. A promise, any promise, requires content: a thing promised and one who promises. It also assumes certain things, such as the promiser's basic integrity—that he is able, desires and will deliver on the promise.

Thus, preaching must highlight the promise and the character of the God who makes the promise. That means talking about human sin and the grace that is embodied in Christ which is the divine response. Thus, to preach is to preach Christ, and Christ is no empty cypher into which any content can be poured. And that points the preacher back to scripture as the norming authority of all statements made in sermons. For a sermon to

be true preaching, it must express the teaching of the Bible. Then it comes with divine power.

In many ways, while Luther was not the greatest exegete of the Reformation, his theology of justification by grace through faith set the basic criteria for Reformation preaching. The antithesis of Law and Gospel as destroying self-righteousness and creating faith in Christ was foundational to the Christian life and foundational to the content of preaching. As his Catechisms and his liturgies move from Law to Gospel, so the preacher was to do this in his sermons. The pattern of the economy of grace was to be reflected, indeed, enacted, in the preaching which came from the pulpit. Each sermon was to be a microcosm of the human condition and the divine, gracious response. The preacher must first declare the Law and then declare the promise in Christ.⁹ This is content regulated entirely by the being and action of God as revealed in his great deeds throughout history, the words of his scriptures and the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Both must be taught or else problems ensue, either despair or presumption.¹⁰

This understanding of preaching as regulated by scripture was another point of contact between the Reformers's understanding of post-apostolic ministry and that of the Old Testament prophets. Indeed, the precedential model for the post-apostolic preacher. Calvin himself describes Moses and the Old Testament prophets in terms that might equally apply to contemporary preachers:

[T]he law was promulgated, and prophets were afterwards added to be its interpreters. For though the uses of the law were manifold, and the special office assigned to Moses and all the prophets was to teach the method of reconciliation between God and man.¹¹

Calvin's use of the term ministry of reconciliation resonates with Paul's characterization of his own apostolic ministry (and, by implication, that of those who follow in his footsteps) in 1 Corinthians 6. Post-apostolic preaching was to be like the preaching of biblical times: an exposition of God's revealed truth. Of course, the words of the preachers recorded in the Bible possessed a peculiar authority by virtue of their canonical status. But the principle of a sound sermon—the exegesis and application of divine revelation—remained the same for post-apostolic preachers.

Bullinger expresses the matter thus:

But we read, that the Lord hath used this ordinary means even from the first creation of all things. Whom he meaneth to bestow knowledge and faith on, to them he sendeth teachers, by the word of God to preach true faith unto them. Not because it lieth in man's power, will, or ministry, to give faith; nor because the outward word spoken by man's mouth is able of itself to bring faith: but the voice of man, and the preaching of God's word, do teach us what true faith is, or what God doth will and command us to believe. For God himself alone, by sending his Holy Spirit into the hearts and minds of men, doth open our hearts, persuade our minds, and cause us with all our heart to believe that which we by his word and teaching have learned to believe. The Lord could by miracle from heaven, without any preaching at all, have bestowed faith in Christ upon Cornelius the Centurion at Cesaria: but yet by an angel he doth send him to the preaching of Peter; and while Peter preacheth, God by his Holy Spirit worketh in the heart of Cornelius, causing him to believe his preaching.¹²

Here Bullinger makes it clear that faith is the product of preaching. This is not simply in the sense that preaching sets forth the promise that the human mind can then grasp and trust. Rather the preaching itself is an instrument used by the Holy Spirit as the means for creating this faith or, we might perhaps add in the case of, say, Pharaoh, of hardening the heart.

Indeed, in *The Bondage of the Will*, the case of Pharaoh's hardening is one of the biblical passages to which Luther had to respond at some length because of the use made by it of Erasmus in his *Diatribes*. Luther's resolution of the problems of both the shift in narrative from Pharaoh hardening his own heart to it being hardened by God focuses on the role of the proclaimed Word. Pharaoh is, like all unregenerate people, in bondage to sin. When God's Word comes from outside and the Lord chooses not to have the Spirit use that Word to liberate him, he grows harder and more implacable in his wickedness. This is because God's Word is not simply a collection of facts. It makes moral demands upon people. It condemns their unrighteousness and points them towards the all-sufficiency of Christ whose grace in itself is also a reminder of human insufficiency. Thus, Pharaoh is both hardened by the Lord via the Word and yet chooses to be harden himself by not responding in faith to that which is presented to him.¹³

Behind this, of course, stands the fact that grace rests upon the divine decree of predestination. Preaching the Word thus becomes the means by which election is realized and revealed in time. This is the point Calvin makes in Book 3 of the *Institutes* when he reflects upon why the preaching of the Gospel does not seem to have the same saving power amongst all those who hear it:

The covenant of life is not preached equally to all, and among those to whom it is preached, does not always meet with the same reception. This diversity displays the unsearchable depth of the divine judgment, and is without doubt subordinate to God's purpose of eternal election.¹⁴

In other words, preaching is not simply a question of describing something; preaching is powerful. It is God's means of bringing into reality his gracious purposes for his people. It is itself a spiritually constructive exercise which confronts the individual and is used by God to transform him through the Holy Spirit or to harden him in his sin. One cannot hear the Word of God and be left indifferent to it, for the Word of God is the means by which God works out his purposes, both of grace and of judgment. As God's Word was God's instrument for creation by the Spirit in the beginning, so his Word remains his instrument for recreation by the Spirit in the ongoing extension of his kingdom.

WORD AND SPIRIT

This connection between Word and Spirit is crucial in the Reformation for dividing magisterial Protestantism from more radical movements. Indeed, early on in the Reformation, more radical voices than those of Luther or even Zwingli emerged which posed a challenge not simply to traditional Catholicism but also to the magisterial Reformers themselves. Thus, in 1521-22, during Luther's absence while he sojourned at the Wartburg, the Wittenberg leadership welcomed the arrival of the so-called Zwickau prophets to the town. These three men were representative of a theological tendency which was to continue throughout the Reformation and indeed finds counterparts even in the church today. What they did was offer a radical separation of Spirit from Word, or at least from the written word of scripture. The result was chaos. In effect, this position cedes church leadership to the

most charismatic and forceful personalities who convey the conviction that their plans are those of God himself.

For Luther, the prime example of this in 1521-22 was his former friend and co-belligerent in the Reformation, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. Karlstadt claimed to be led by the Spirit beyond the Word to a more dynamic and, in practice, socially and politically radical version of the Reformation. Karlstadt had once stood shoulder to shoulder with Luther but by this time he had come under the influence of others. Here is Luther's denunciation of his former colleague's theology:

But should you ask how one gains access to this same lofty spirit they do not refer you to the outward gospel but to some imaginary realm, saying: Remain in "self abstraction" where I now am and you will have the same experience. A heavenly voice will come, and God himself will speak to you. If you inquire further as to the nature of this "self abstraction," you will find that they know as much about it as Dr. Karlstadt knows of Greek and Hebrew. Do you not see here the devil, the enemy of God's order? With all his mouthing of the words, "Spirit, Spirit, Spirit," he tears down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and the oral proclamation of the Word of God he wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit. They would have you learn how to journey on the clouds and ride on the wind. They do not tell you how or when, whither or what, but you are to experience what they do.¹⁵

The problem was clear: claims to such direct inspiration from the Spirit, separate from the Word, were ultimately immune from criticism through their acknowledgment only of some kind of subjective, mystical authority. This preaching was preaching unregulated by the Word and subject only to the tastes and whims of the preacher.

By contrast, Luther and indeed all the other magisterial Reformers were concerned to keep together both Word and Spirit, such that claims to the latter which did not involve the outward proclamation of the former, and the sacraments which were themselves tied to the Word. It is also worth noting the theological direction which Luther speaks of such a Spirit emphasis implying in the passage above. Detaching Spirit from Word turns Christianity

into a quest for God, a work in which man engages in trying to reach out to the Divine. Tying Spirit to Word makes the Spirit the agent of grace and Christianity into something which seizes hold of the sinner. The spiritualist radicals have a form of works righteousness. Those who see the Word as the instrument of God through the Spirit know that this is of grace.

Calvin is similarly emphatic on inseparability of Word and Spirit:

Those who, rejecting Scripture, imagine that they have some peculiar way of penetrating to God, are to be deemed not so much under the influence of error as madness. For certain giddy men have lately appeared, who, while they make a great display of the superiority of the Spirit, reject all reading of the Scriptures themselves, and deride the simplicity of those who only delight in what they call the dead and deadly letter. But I wish they would tell me what spirit it is whose inspiration raises them to such a sublime height that they dare despise the doctrine of Scripture as mean and childish. If they answer that it is the Spirit of Christ, their confidence is exceedingly ridiculous; since they will, I presume, admit that the apostles and other believers in the primitive Church were not illuminated by any other Spirit. None of these thereby learned to despise the word of God, but every one was imbued with greater reverence for it, as their writings most clearly testify.¹⁶

Thus, the magisterial Reformers emphasized the need to tie together both the Word and the Spirit. They could not be separated, let alone set in some kind of opposition to each other. To separate them would lead simply to a nightmare of subjectivity and chaos. As a result, scripture was set forth as the normative criterion for the public proclamation of God's Word. The content of preaching was to be the content of scripture and thus regulated by the same. Then this would be used by the Holy Spirit to bring God's grace to bear upon those who heard.

Thus, preaching regulated by scripture was no dead letter. As Calvin says just two paragraphs after the above quotation, commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:8, "the Holy Spirit so cleaves to his own truth, as he has expressed it in Scripture, that he then only exerts and puts forth his strength when the word is received with due honour and respect."¹⁷ Thus, faithful preaching of the Word in accordance with scripture brings the Spirit to bear and is the means by which the Spirit works in order to do his deeds of power.

This is important because it helps reinforce the fact noted above, that preaching is not, for the Reformers, simply a matter of the communication of information. It is a means, a real means, of grace. Indeed, it is the principle means of grace because it bridges the gap between the ancient text of scripture and the congregation, bringing the promise of Christ to a present reality. God's Word preached is thus confrontational, creative and transformative, and this is linked to the connection between the preacher and the text he preaches and the Spirit which takes his words and makes them the words of God. For Luther, of course, God's grace is only manifest in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ and thus all preaching must ultimately bring Christ to bear upon the congregation. Christ is the very embodiment and fulfillment of God's gracious purposes as set forth in the Bible. To speak meaningfully about Christ is to explicate what the Bible says about him. That means that the preacher has to regulate his declarations by the facts set forth about Christ in scripture but also by the commands and the promises expressed therein which drive home the personal existential urgency of the gospel message. As Luther declares in *The Freedom of the Christian Man*:

[I]t is not enough or in any sense Christian to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice for the conduct of life; yet this is the fashion among those who must today be regarded as our best preachers. Far less is it sufficient or Christian to say nothing at all about Christ and to teach instead the laws of men and the decrees of the fathers. Now there are not a few who preach Christ and read about him that they may move men's affections to sympathy with Christ, to anger against the Jews, and such childish and effeminate nonsense. Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him.¹⁸

This a powerful wake-up call to preachers. The purpose of preaching is certainly not to tell people how to live their lives, to handle crises or to reach their full potential, whatever that may be. Nor is it simply to describe Christ to them and outline what he did. Nor is it to inspire warm, fuzzy feelings

about him by playing on their emotions. Christ's story is certainly an emotionally powerful one but that is not where its true significance lies. Christ is not supposed to be an inspiring or moving example. He is the manifestation of God's grace, coming from outside to bring salvation to a sinful and lost people. Thus, the preacher's task is to be focused on that. His job is to press the personal existential significance of Christ upon those who hear, to make them realize that Christ's words and actions are of immediate and eternal significance to them. The preacher must not think of himself as a lecturer, simply explaining some historical events. I cannot as a preacher simply declare that Christ is died and risen. I have to bring out why he has died and why he risen. Then I have to drive home the personal importance of this for each and every person listening. They need to know that what I say to them on a Sunday morning is going to be the most vital thing they hear all week. That is what preaching as a means of grace means.

CONCLUSION

In his Lyman Beecher lectures, delivered at Yale in 1907, the Scottish Congregationalist theologian, Peter Taylor Forsyth, began with this dramatic statement:

It is perhaps an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls. This is surely so, at least in those sections of Christendom which rest less upon the Church than upon the Bible. Wherever the Bible has the primacy which is given it in Protestantism, there preaching is the most distinctive feature of worship.¹⁹

In saying this, Forsyth stands in the line of Protestant thinking which goes right back to the Reformation. Forsyth understood that preaching is not ultimately about communicating information, still less entertaining a crowd for a few minutes on a Sunday morning. It is about life and death, an utterly serious undertaking through which God confronts people with their sin and his grace in Christ.

For those who hold to the Reformation understanding of salvation by grace alone, the proclamation of the Word of God is the principle means of grace. It is the thing which God uses to force people to reckon with their

sin, to drive them to their knees in repentance and then to draw them to the resurrected Christ by faith. After all, what is faith but the God-given trust in the promise of God's Word as it is declared week by week to the congregation?

For this reason, the Reformers' emphasis on grace alone cannot be separated from the specific form of church life which they advocated. We often think that form and content can be routinely separated. There is a whole industry committed to this, where talk of contextualization seems to trump everything else. Certainly attention to context is important. The Reformers understood this. Luther once bewailed a student who preached on the merits and joys of childbearing to an audience made up of elderly widows and spinsters. All the Reformers were committed to scripture and preaching in the vernacular. But the meat of the message was not a function of context but of the content of the Word of God.

Thus, those things which place the Word central in the church are non-negotiable to those who believe in the Protestant view of grace alone. The reading of the Word must occupy a prominent place in every service. That is foundational to God's grace for it is there that he reveals himself, there that he describes and interprets the human condition and his great saving acts in response. And then preaching must lie at the very heart of the service, for that is where God truly meets his people, as the preacher takes the text of scripture, expounds and applies it, and trusts the Holy Spirit to take those words and use them to transform those who hear them.

This has implications for ministerial preparation. Preachers need to be well-trained and able to speak clearly. They need to be able rightly to divide and apply the word of truth and that means study. Yes, there will always be the occasional Spurgeon or Lloyd-Jones who, with little or no formal training are yet outstanding preachers; but they are the exceptions, not the rule. There is a reason why the Reformers required rigorous study as a prerequisite for pastoral ministry: most aspiring ministers urgently need that if they are to the central task of the ministry, preaching the Word, with any degree of competence.

This view of grace and preaching also puts an onus on congregants. Christians need to attend church with a desire to encounter God primarily by hearing him speak to them through the words of the preacher. It is as they hear God's Word and as they grasp it by faith that their hearts and minds will be transformed.

I used to fret that I could remember very few of the sermons I have heard in any detail. Now I sometimes fret that I can remember very few of the sermons I preach in any detail either. I also remember no details from any of the Latin lessons I took throughout my entire school career, and yet I can still pick up a book of Latin prose or verse and read it. I may have forgotten the details of individual classes but my mind was rewired by what happened there and I was changed from someone for whom Latin looked like an impenetrable code to someone who now delights in the cadences and periods of Cicero and his ilk.

I believe preaching is like that. It is not remembering all the details that makes us into those who grow in grace. It is the slow, incremental impact of sitting under the Word week by week, and year by year, that makes the difference. That is how we mature as Christians. God uses this means of grace to make us into vessels of his grace. And that is why a Protestant theology of grace must place the clear, powerful, unequivocal proclamation of God's Word right at the very center of its existence.

¹ This article was first presented at The Southern Seminary Theology Conference on September 24-25, 2015 at the The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works (LW)* 1, 49.

³ *Ibid.*, 1, 146.

⁴ John Calvin, *Genesis* (trans. J. King; Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010) 1, 148.

⁵ *Decades* (trans. H. I.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849) I. i, 38.

⁶ "But in times past, and before that the Son of God was born in the world, God, by little and little, made himself acquainted with the hearts of the holy fathers, and after that with the minds of the holy prophets; and last of all, by their preaching and writings, he taught the whole world. So also Christ our Lord sent the Holy Ghost, which is of the Father and the Son, into the apostles, by whose mouths, words, and writings he was known to all the world. And all these servants of God, as it were the elect vessels of God, having with sincere hearts received the revelation of God from God himself, first of all, in a lively expressed voice delivered to the world the oracles and word of God which they before had learned; and afterward, when the world drew more to an end, some of them did put them in writing for a memorial to the posterity." *Decades* I. i, 38-39.

⁷ Thus, and most unfortunately, his very last sermon of 1546 included an appendix which was simply a tirade against the evil of the Jews.

⁸ Luther, *LW* 51, 77.

⁹ "We must bring forth the voice of the law that men may be made to fear and come to a knowledge of their sins and so be converted to repentance and a better life. But we must not stop with that, for that would only amount to wounding and not binding up, smiting and not healing, killing and not making alive, leading down into hell and not bringing back again, humbling and not exalting. Therefore we must also preach the word of grace and the promise of forgiveness by which faith is taught and aroused. Without this word of grace the works of the law, contrition, penitence, and all the rest are done and taught in vain." *LW*, 364.

¹⁰ As the Reformation progressed, Luther became increasingly concerned that some Lutheran preachers declared only the Gospel without also declaring the Law. This led to presumption and practical laxity in

living the Christian life. On this point, see Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 159-74.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.6.2.

¹² *Decades* I. iv, 84-85.

¹³ Luther, *LW* 33, 183.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.1.

¹⁵ Luther, *LW* 40, 147.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.9.1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.9.3.

¹⁸ Luther, *LW* 31, 357.

¹⁹ P. T. Forsyth, *Postive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent Press, 1907), 1.