

CHRIST-
Centered
PREACHING

REDEEMING THE EXPOSITORY SERMON

THIRD EDITION

Bryan Chapell


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18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To
my wife, Kathy,
for the love, family, home, and friendship
the Lord has graced us to share.
The cabin in which this book was written
was a palace because of you.

The lands and generations in which this work has been sown
bear the fruit of your love for Christ in our family and church.

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Preface to the Third Edition

I consider this third edition of *Christ-Centered Preaching* to be a sweet gift from the Lord, allowing me to improve my attempts to equip others to honor his Word and proclaim his grace. In the decades since this book's first publication, pastors, students, and colleagues from many nations and multiple generations have offered insights, suggestions, and clarifications that I have attempted to incorporate into this edition. Thank you, friends and colleagues, for your aid and encouragement.

I am especially grateful for my students. Thirty-plus years of teaching you to preach, listening to your sermons, and delighting in the ways God is ministering through you have refined my thought, deepened my appreciation for God's Word, and made me a better preacher. Your diligence and care ministered to me and will minister to many more through this new edition of the book you helped me write.

As a generation of preachers has matured since the first edition of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, so has the field of Biblical Theology that gave rise to much of the emphases of my early work. At the time of the first edition, few voices were calling for a renewal of the redemptive perspectives that inspired early church fathers, energized Reformation preaching, and empowered the great awakenings of the gospel in this country. Liberal theologians had hijacked key aspects of Biblical Theology, making evangelicals skeptical or opposed to its use.

Then the pioneering work of preaching instructors such as Sidney Greidanus, Edmund Clowney, and John Sanderson reminded late twentieth-century preachers that the unity of Scripture is not simply a doctrinal abstraction. These pioneers pointed to early church fathers who took seriously what the Gospels say about "all the Scriptures" revealing the ministry of Christ (e.g., Luke 24:27; John 5:39). There had been obvious abuses of this insight with medieval allegorical methods that sought to make Jesus "magically" appear in every Bible passage through exegetical acrobatics that stretched logic, imagination, and credulity. But Luther

and Calvin, among others, recognized the abuses and attempted to offer corrections that sought to have all biblical preaching “rest on” the ministry of Christ.

Luther’s law/gospel distinctions and Calvin’s forays into unifying the Testaments were not perfect methods for capturing the redemptive message culminating in Scripture. But the prior and following writings of Bullinger, Oecolampadius, and Beza helped refine and systematize a scriptural perspective that should have set the standard for redemptive interpretation in following eras. Sadly, Counter-Reformation battles regarding the nature of the church, justification, and the sacraments eclipsed the discussion of how the unity of Scripture’s redemptive message should guide our preaching.

Later Dutch reformers revisited Biblical Theology and influenced the Puritans, who took up the discussion again through key thinkers such as Jonathan Edwards. His quest for understanding how religious “affections” were stirred by the grace of the gospel led to a proposal to write a history of redemption that unified the whole Bible—a project short-circuited by his premature death.

The dormant discipline was revived again in America through the writings of Geerhardus Vos but declined quickly in evangelical favor as liberal theologians used select aspects of Biblical Theology to undermine the veracity of Scripture. They argued that just as the “trajectory” of Old Testament Scriptures pointed to a Christ beyond ancient expectations, so modern preachers could point beyond the canon of Scripture to disclose the “spirit of Jesus” for new concepts of faith and ethics. In other words, Biblical Theology was misused to dispense with the clear teaching of the Scriptures to advocate novel ideas beyond canonical boundaries. As a consequence, Biblical Theology became a weapon of “liberalism” in the early twentieth century’s modernist/fundamentalist “battle for the Bible.”

Only after evangelicalism gained firmer ground in the 1960s and 1970s did key voices begin to remind the Bible-believing church of the far-reaching implications of our conviction that the proper interpretation of any text requires regard for its context. That context includes not only its literary and historical setting but also its place in God’s redemptive plan. The exegetical and doctrinal disciplines began to register the importance of the organic unity of Scripture for sound interpretation, and these insights inevitably affected our approach to preaching.

In the homiletics field, the instruction of Greidanus, Clowney, and Sanderson—whose voices seemed to be mere cries in the wilderness for decades—found fresh advocacy in the sermons of preachers such as Don Carson, Joel Nederhood, Sinclair Ferguson, John Piper, Steve Brown, Jim Boice, Skip Ryan, Tony Merida, Jerry Bridges, Ray Ortlund, Joe Novenson, David Calhoun, Danny Aiken, Ray Cortese, and, most notably, Tim Keller. Some preached out of an impulse toward grace, while others had more systematic approaches; some were consistent advocates, while others felt their way forward more haltingly—but they were all contributing to a movement that has now swept beyond any anticipated academic, denominational, or generational boundaries.

In the present context, it is almost unthinkable that a new biblical commentary would be published without contextualizing the book or its contents within the redemptive flow of biblical history. Even if elementary preachers are unsure how to preach a particular passage redemptively, they have now been sensitized to detect sermons that are nothing more than moralistic challenges to straighten up, fly right, and do better. My contribution to this tidal wave of grace was simply to write a preaching textbook at an early stage of the tsunami's development in which I summarized and organized what others taught me.

Since that time the movement has grown deeper and broader, multiplying tools and approaches that we will need to consider in this third edition of *Christ-Centered Preaching*. When I wrote the first edition, almost all Biblical Theology was being explored in the context of a redemptive-historical method. That approach is still foundational to our practice, but some Christ-centered preachers have become more oriented toward doctrinal, literary, or relational approaches that also effectively excavate the grace of all Scripture.

We will touch on all these approaches in this third edition, as well as continue to introduce insights and research from the best thinkers in contemporary homiletics. Some of these colleagues have also raised challenges to *Christ-Centered Preaching* that need to be addressed. Some still question whether a gospel-oriented approach to Scripture is antinomian (giving short shrift to the law of God), allegorical (an imaginative effort to shoehorn Jesus into every verse of Scripture, which actually obscures authorial intent), egocentric (so focused on God's grace to individuals that corporate and community responsibilities are forgotten), or Christo-maniac (so focused on the Second Person of the Trinity that the Father and Spirit are marginalized).

So, as this edition gives opportunity to freshen citations, clarify fuzzy thinking, correct errors, and word concepts better, I also have the privilege of interacting with those who have provided new perspectives and familiar questions. Such interaction has wonderful benefits for this third edition, spurring me forward to explore new ideas, while also deepening my commitment to help teach another generation how to preach expository messages that mine the grace from all Scripture—grace that alone will free from sin and fuel the Christian life.

Acknowledgments

I write this book with deep appreciation for those whose contributions to my own thought and life have been significant.

Thanks are especially owed to Dr. Robert G. Rayburn, my own homiletics professor who settled for nothing less than excellence while consistently teaching that God's glory has to be the sole focus of the preaching task, and to Dr. John Sanderson, the professor of Biblical Theology who opened my eyes to the necessity of Christ-focus in all faithful exposition.

I am greatly indebted to the Rayburn family for allowing me access to Dr. Robert G. Rayburn's unpublished writings and notes. Being entrusted with sharing some of Dr. Rayburn's insights is a great privilege.

I did the original writing and research for the first and second editions of this book during sabbaticals provided by Covenant Theological Seminary. I want to express my thanks to the administration and board of trustees for granting me such wonderful writing opportunities. I have had the privilege of producing this third edition during my years of pastoring at Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Peoria, Illinois, where my family and preaching have been warmly received and encouraged. I am deeply thankful for this body of believers that has also expanded its mission to allow me to serve the next generation of biblical preachers through writing and teaching at numerous institutions nationally and internationally.

Introduction

The two words around which this whole book could be wrapped are *authority* and *redemption*.

In our day, two opposing forces challenge the effective exposition of the Word of God. The first well-documented foe of the gospel is the erosion of authority. The philosophies of relativism have joined hands with the skeptics of transcendent truth to create a cultural climate antagonistic to any authority. Yet as the apostle Paul saw long ago, this release from biblical standards inevitably makes people slaves to their own passions and victims of one another's selfishness (Rom. 6:19–22).

Our culture and the church are desperate for dependable truths that address the world's brokenness, which this loss of authority has made more acute. Not all answers supplied by the church's preachers herald good news. Some preachers have simply abandoned any hope of finding a source of eternal truth or of being able to communicate it to a diverse world. Others who sense our culture's antipathy for all who dare to contend that they have definite, value- and behavior-binding answers have chosen to preach without authority. Though they retain a desire to heal, such pastors too often settle for a mere repackaging of counseling or management theories in religious-sounding words. By offering the subjective comfort of human answers that are due to change with the next wave of popular philosophy or therapy, such preaching masks rather than heals the pain of the soul (1 Cor. 2:4–5; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 4:3).

Expository preaching that explains precisely what the Word of God says for the issues of our day, the concerns of our lives, and the destiny of our souls provides an alternative. In keeping with the mandates of Scripture, such preaching offers a voice of authority not of human origin and not subject to cultural vagaries (Isa. 40:8; 1 Thess. 2:13; Titus 2:15). As obvious as this solution may seem, its widespread adoption faces large challenges. Over the last two generations, the expository sermon has been stigmatized (not always unfairly) as a style of preaching

that requires dry recitations of commentary information or that degenerates into dogmatic defenses of doctrinal perspectives that have little apparent connection with our daily struggles. This challenge has become even more acute as all forms of preaching have increasingly been accused of employing out-of-date methods that are too academic and boring for the tastes and needs of a culture attuned to the impact, innovations, and pace of modern communication and technology.

The time has come for redeeming the expository sermon—not only reclaiming a needed voice of biblical authority for our day but also rescuing the expository approach from practitioners unaware of (or unconcerned about) cultural forces, communication resources, and biblical principles that should be engaged to connect the Word to God’s present purposes and people. This book attempts to provide one approach to such a reclamation and rescue. Initially, this text offers practical instruction that binds the expository sermon to Scripture’s truths while releasing it from tradition-bound attitudes and communication-naïve practices that can needlessly deny both pulpit and pew the power and the hope of an accessible message from God’s Word.

Along with providing practical instruction, this book also attempts to confront a second foe of the effective communication of the gospel. This foe too often arises as an unrecognized side effect of a well-intended quest for authority. Evangelical preachers reacting to the secularization of both culture and church can mistakenly make moral instruction or societal reform the primary focus of their messages. No one can blame these preachers for wanting to challenge the evils of the day. When sin closes in, faithful preachers have a desire, a right, and a responsibility to say, “Stop it!”

However, if these preachers’ actual or perceived cure for a spiritually broken world is mere behavior change or social improvement, then they inadvertently present a message contrary to the gospel. The Bible does not tell us how *we* can fix ourselves to gain God’s acceptance or perfect our world (Gal. 2:15–20). If the Bible were merely about improving our performance or refining our competence, then we would be our own saviors. Fundamentally and pervasively, the Scriptures teach the inadequacy of any purely human effort to claim divine approval or to achieve God’s purposes. We are entirely dependent on the mercy and power provided through our Savior to be what he desires and to do what he requires. Grace rules—as both the most powerful motivation and the only true means of Christian obedience!

However well-intended and biblically rooted a sermon’s instruction may be, if the message does not incorporate the motivation and enablement of the grace of God that culminates in the ministry of Jesus Christ, then the preacher proclaims mere self-improvement. Preaching that is faithful to the whole of Scripture not only establishes God’s requirements but also highlights the redemptive means God provides to make holiness possible. The task may seem impossible. How can all Scripture center on Christ’s redeeming work when vast portions make no

mention of him? The answer lies in learning to see all of God's Word as a unified message of human need and divine provision (Luke 24:27; Rom. 15:4).

By exploring how this gospel of redemption unfolds through all of Scripture to motivate and enable Christian obedience, this book also establishes principles for redeeming the expository sermon from two polar errors in well-intended but ill-conceived evangelical preaching. The first error is moralism, preaching whose entire focus is the promise of a better life through better behavior. The opposite error is cheap grace, preaching the promises of a gracious God without regard for the cost of God's love for us or the response of our loyalty.

Christ-centered preaching challenges moralism with the reminder that our best works are filthy rags to God and replaces cheap grace with exhortations to obey God as a loving response to the redeeming work of the Son. Both moralism and cheap grace are undermined by preaching whose hope is accurately rooted in the unfolding message of God's unfailing mercy, and whose fruit is thanksgiving offered in God-honoring lives empowered by the Holy Spirit. True holiness, loving obedience, spiritual strength, and lasting joy flow from this precise and powerful form of biblical exposition (1 Tim. 2:1; Titus 2:11–15).

PART 1

Principles
for Expository
Preaching

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GOAL OF CHAPTER 1

To communicate how important preaching is and what is really important in preaching.



1

Word and Witness

The Nobility of Preaching

I “ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.” The prayer of every preacher who loves God’s Word and God’s people echoes this prayer of the apostle Paul for the Colossian church (Col. 1:9–10). We pray that God will also use our preaching to produce such a knowledge of God’s will that others will live to please him and will produce spiritual fruit, resulting in an ever-growing knowledge of their God. These priorities indicate that the goal of preaching is not merely to impart information but to provide the means of transformation ordained by a sovereign God that will affect the lives and destinies of eternal souls committed to a preacher’s spiritual care.

English preacher Ian Tait once quipped that those who study the Bible only to gain more information may believe their minds are expanding when, in fact, only their heads are swelling. Knowledge purely for knowledge’s sake “puffeth up” (1 Cor. 8:1 KJV). The riches of God’s Word are no one’s private treasure, and when we share its wealth, we participate in its highest purposes. Whether your studies take place through a seminary, a Bible college, or a program of personal reading, they will be more rewarding when you realize how each element prepares you to preach with accuracy and authority for the sake of others’ growth in grace. Every biblical discipline reaches a pinnacle purpose when we use it not merely to expand our minds but also to further the priorities of the gospel. That is why,

for more than a quarter century, Robert G. Rayburn taught seminary students, “Christ is the only King of your studies, but homiletics is the queen.”¹

Elevating preaching to such a royal pedestal can intimidate even the most committed student of Scripture. Probably no conscientious preacher has failed to question whether this lofty task is greater than the lowly servant who dares to step behind a pulpit. When we face real people with eternal souls balanced between heaven and hell, the nobility of preaching both awes us and makes us acutely aware of our inadequacies (cf. 1 Cor. 2:3). We know our skills are insufficient for an activity with such vast consequences. We recognize that our hearts are too lacking in purity to lead others to holiness. Honest evaluation inevitably causes us to conclude that we do not have sufficient eloquence, wisdom, or character to be capable of turning others from spiritual death to eternal life. Such a realization can cause young preachers to run from their first preaching assignment and experienced pastors to despair in their pulpits.

The Power in the Word

What we require in the face of the limits of our personal effectiveness and in an age that increasingly questions the validity of preaching² is a reminder of God’s design for spiritual transformation. Ultimately, preaching accomplishes its spiritual purposes not because of the skills or the wisdom of a preacher but because of the power of the Scripture proclaimed (1 Cor. 2:4–5). Preachers minister with greater zeal, confidence, and freedom when they realize that God has taken from their backs the monkey of spiritual manipulation. God is not relying on the sufficiency of our craft or character to accomplish his purposes (2 Cor. 3:5). God certainly can use eloquence and desires lives befitting the sanctity of our subject matter, but his Spirit uses the Word itself to fulfill his saving and sanctifying purposes. The human efforts of the greatest preachers are still too weak and sin-tainted to be responsible for others’ eternal destinies. For this reason, God infuses his Word with his own spiritual power. The efficacy of the truths in God’s message, rather than any virtue in the messenger, transforms hearts.

The Power of God Inherent in the Word

Precisely how the Holy Spirit uses scriptural truth to convert souls and change lives we cannot say, but we must sense the dynamics that give us hope when we

1. Robert G. Rayburn was the founding president of Covenant Theological Seminary and its primary homiletics professor from 1956 to 1984. The quotation is from his unpublished class notes.

2. John Stott, *The Challenge of Preaching*, abridged and updated by Greg Scharf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 1–11; Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 121–33.

preach God's Word. The Bible makes it clear that the Word is not merely powerful; it functions without literary peer or human limitation. The Word of God

creates: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:9).

controls: "He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. He hurls down his hail like pebbles. . . . He sends his word and melts them" (Ps. 147:15–18).

convicts: "'Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully . . . ' declares the LORD. 'Is not my word like fire,' declares the LORD, 'and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?'" (Jer. 23:28–29).

performs his purposes: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth . . . so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:10–11).

overrides human weakness: While in prison the apostle Paul rejoiced that when others preach the Word with "false motives or true," the work of God still moves forward (Phil. 1:18).

Scripture's portrayal of its own potency challenges us always to remember that the Word preached, rather than the *preaching* of the Word, accomplishes heaven's purposes. Preaching that is true to Scripture converts, convicts, and eternally changes the souls of men and women because God's Word is the instrument of divine compulsion, not because preachers have any power in themselves to stimulate such godly transformations (although human powers can certainly bring about all kinds of worldly changes, including those that masquerade as the products of heaven).

The Power of the Word Manifested in Christ

God fully reveals the dynamic power of his Word in the New Testament, where he identifies his Son as the divine *Logos*, or Word (John 1:1). By identifying Jesus as his Word, God indicates that his message and his person are inseparable. The Word embodies him. This is not to say that the letters and the paper of a Bible are divine but that the truths Scripture holds are God's means of making his person and his presence real to his people.

God's Word is powerful because he chooses to exercise his power through it and to be present in it. By his Word God brought the world into being (Gen. 1), and Jesus is the Word by whom "all things were made" (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16) and who continues "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3). The Word uses his Word to reveal his person and to carry out all his purposes.

Christ's redemptive power and the power of his Word coalesce in the New Testament, with *Logos* (the incarnate Word of God) and *logos* (the inscripturated Word about God) becoming so reflexive as to form a conceptual identity. As the work of the original creation comes through the spoken word of God, so the work of new creation (i.e., redemption) comes through the living Word of God. James says, "He [the Father] chose to give us birth through the word of truth" (James 1:18). The phrase "word of truth" reflects the message about salvation and the One who gives the new birth. The same play on words is used by Peter: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). In these passages, the message and ministry of Christ are unified. He is the "living and enduring [W]ord of God" by which we have been born again.

Thus, it is not merely prosaic to insist that a faithful preacher should serve the text.³ Since the Word is the mediate presence of Christ, service is due. Paul rightly instructs the young pastor Timothy to be a workman "who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15) because the Word of God is "living and active" (Heb. 4:12). Scriptural truth is not a passive object for examination and presentation. The Word examines us. "It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). Christ remains active in his Word, performing divine tasks that one presenting the Word has no right or ability personally to assume. Preaching is a redemptive act in which Christ himself ministers to his people, by his Spirit opening and transforming their hearts with the truth that same Spirit inspired in the pages of Scripture.⁴

These perspectives on the Word of God culminate in the ministry of the apostle Paul. The bookish missionary who was not known for his pulpit expertise nonetheless wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). As students of elementary Greek soon learn, the word for "power" in this verse is *dunamis*, from which we get the English word *dynamite*. The gospel's force lies beyond the power of the preacher. Paul preaches without shame in his delivery skills because he trusts that the Spirit of God will use the Word the apostle proclaims to shatter the hardness of the human heart in ways no stage technique or philosophical construct can rival.

In some ways, the entire process seems ridiculous. Common sense rebels against claims that eternal destinies will change simply because we voice thoughts from an ancient text. When Paul commends the foolishness of preaching—not foolish preaching—he acknowledges the apparent senselessness of trying to transform attitudes, lifestyles, philosophical perspectives, and faith commitments with mere words about a once crucified rabbi (see 1 Cor. 1:21). Yet preaching endures and

3. Herbert H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (New York: Scribners, 1942), 16–17.

4. Darrell Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God's Transformation of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), Kindle edition, loc. 35–43, 102–5.

the gospel spreads because the Holy Spirit uses puny human efforts as the conduit for the force of his own Word. By the blessing of God's Spirit, the Word yet transforms (i.e., causes our hearts to love God and our wills to seek his will).

Each year I recount for new seminary students a time when the reality of the Word's power struck me with exceptional force. The Lord's work overwhelmed me when I walked into a new members' class of our church. Sitting together on the front row were three young women—all cousins. Though they had promised to come to the class, the reality of their being there still shook me.

In the previous year, each of these women had approached our church for help with serious problems. I got acquainted with the first after she left her husband because of his alcoholism. As an Easter-only member of our church, he had previously expressed little use for "religion," but he came seeking help when she left. He said he was willing to do anything to get her to return. They came together for counseling. He dealt with his drinking. They reunited, and now she wanted to become part of our faith family.

The second cousin also had fled her marriage and had come seeking help at the first cousin's suggestion. She was the victim of spousal abuse and had sought solace with another man outside her marriage. Although neither man sought God, our ministry to this woman warmed her heart toward Christ. Even after her husband turned to other women, she left her lover and submitted her life to God's will.

The last cousin was also married, but she worked as a traveling salesperson and was living with several men as though each were her husband. An accident that injured a young nephew brought our church into her life. As she witnessed the care of Christians for the child and for her (despite her initial hostility toward us), she found a love that her sexual encounters had not supplied. Now she too came to be a part of the family of God.

The presence of these three cousins in a church membership class was a miracle. How foolish it would be to think that mere words I had said—some consonants and vowels pushed out of the mouth by little bursts of air—could account for their decisions. No amount of human convincing could have turned them from their selfish, pleasure-seeking, or self-destructive lifestyles to an eternal commitment to Jesus Christ. Hearts hostile to God's Word now wanted fellowship with him simply because Christians had lovingly and faithfully expressed its truth.

God plucked three souls from a hellish swirl of family confusion, spousal betrayal, and personal sin by the means of his Word. Yet as unlikely as these events seem, they are readily explained. The Lord uses the truth of his Word to change hearts. In the terms of Scripture, these cousins "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven" not because of any preacher's skills but because of the Word's own power (1 Thess. 1:9–10).

When preachers perceive the power that the Word holds, confidence in their calling grows even as pride in their performance withers. We need not fear our

ineffectiveness when we speak truths God has empowered to perform his purposes. At the same time, acting as though our talents are responsible for spiritual change is like a messenger claiming credit for ending a war because he delivered the peace documents. The messenger has a noble task to perform, but he jeopardizes his mission and belittles the true victor with claims of personal achievement. Credit, honor, and glory for preaching's effects belong to Christ alone because his Word alone saves and transforms.

The Power of the Word Applied in Preaching

EXPOSITORY PREACHING PRESENTS THE POWER OF THE WORD

The fact that the power for spiritual change resides in God's Word advocates the cause of *expository* preaching. Expository preaching presents and applies the truths of a biblical passage.⁵ (See further definition below and in chap. 6.) Other types of preaching that proclaim biblical truth are certainly valid and valuable, but for the beginning preacher and for a regular congregational diet, no preaching type is more important than expository.

Biblical exposition binds the preacher and the people to the only source of true spiritual change. Because hearts are transformed when people are confronted with the Word of God, expository preachers are committed to saying what God says.⁶ The expository preacher opens the Bible before God's people and dares to say, "I will explain to you what this passage means." The words are not meant to convey one's own authority but rather humbly to confess that the preacher has no better word than God's Word.⁷ Thus the preacher's mission and calling is to explain to God's people what the Bible means.

The most dependable way to explain what the Bible means is to select a biblical text prayerfully, divide it according to its significant thoughts and features, and then explain the nature and implications of each. Explaining the text according to the intent of the author also requires that we not skip portions of the passage or neglect features of its context that must be understood in order for the principles the passage is teaching to be grasped. *An expository sermon may be defined as a message whose structure and thought are developed from a biblical text, covering its scope, in order to explain how the features and context of the text disclose enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended*

5. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 5–7.

6. Phillip Jensen and Paul Grimmond, *The Archer and the Arrow: Preaching the Very Words of God* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias, 2010), 17; Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 15.

7. Jim Shaddix, *The Passion-Driven Sermon: Changing the Way Pastors Preach and Congregations Listen* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 26.

by the Spirit, who inspired the text. The expository sermon uses the features and context of the text to explain what that portion of the Bible originally meant *and* what its significance is for us today.

As expository preachers, our ultimate goal is not to communicate the value of our opinions, others' philosophies, or speculative meditations but rather to show how God's Word discloses his will for those united to him through his Son. Truths of God proclaimed in such a way that people can see that the concepts derive from Scripture and apply to their lives preoccupy the expository preacher's efforts. Such preaching puts people in immediate contact with the power of the Word.

EXPOSITORY PREACHING PRESENTS THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD

Preaching addresses the perpetual human quest for authority and meaning. Though we live in an age hostile to authority, everyday struggles for significance, security, and acceptance force every individual to ask, "Who has the right to tell me what to do?" This question, typically posed as a challenge, is really a plea for help. Without an ultimate authority for truth, all human striving has no ultimate value, and life itself becomes futile. Modern trends in preaching that deny the authority of the Word⁸ in the name of intellectual sophistication lead to a despairing subjectivism in which people do what is right in their own eyes—a state whose futility Scripture has clearly articulated (Judg. 21:25).

The answer to the radical relativism of our culture and its accompanying uncertainties is the Bible's claim of authority. Paul commended the Thessalonian Christians because they accepted his message "not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). The claim of Scripture and the premise of expository preaching is that God has spoken in his Word. Long ago Augustine simply summarized, "When the Bible speaks, God speaks." Thus the expository preaching task is to communicate what God committed to Scripture in order to give God's people his truth for their time.⁹ Such effort is not blind adherence to fundamentalist dogma but rather a commitment to a source that both faith and reason confirm is the only basis of human hope—for without a source of transcendence and certitude, all foundations for society, identity, and sanity vanish.

Without the authority of the Word, preaching becomes an endless search for topics, therapies, and techniques that will win approval, promote acceptance, advance a cause, or soothe worry. Human reason, social agendas, popular consensus, and personal moral convictions become the resources of preaching that lacks

8. A key work to consult in regard to what became known as "the New Homiletic," which sought to proclaim existential meaning from a presumed nontranscendent Bible, is David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 408.

9. Shaddix, *Passion-Driven Sermon*, 11–14.

“the historic conviction that what Scripture says, God says.”¹⁰ The opinions and emotions that formulate the content of preaching that lacks biblical authority are the same forces that can deny the validity of those concepts in a changed culture, a subsequent generation, or a rebellious heart. Expository preaching avoids this shifting sand by committing a preacher to the foundation of God’s Word.¹¹

When we preach, God is the true audience of our efforts. Just as true but perhaps more humbling and emboldening is the conviction that when we speak the truths of God’s Word, God speaks (cf. Luke 10:16). The Second Helvetic Confession of the Protestant Reformation says, “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” The idea that what comes out of our mouths is the word of God initially sounds arrogant, if not blasphemous. Yet the humility implicit in such a confession is that we have nothing of importance, merit, or authority to say comparable to what God has said. When we speak, therefore, we design our messages to express the truths of the eternal Word so that the church may be the “mouth house” of God that Martin Luther described.

When preachers approach the Bible as God’s very Word, questions about what we have a right to say vanish. God can tell his people what they should believe and do, and he has. Scripture obligates preachers to make sure others understand what God says. We have no biblical authority to say anything else. It is true that our expressions are culturally conditioned, but the transcendence of God’s truth and the divine image-bearing privileges of our nature make it possible for us to receive and communicate his Word.¹²

Only preachers committed to proclaiming what God says have the Bible’s imprimatur on their preaching. Thus expository preaching endeavors to discover and convey the precise meaning of the Word. Scripture determines what expositors preach because they unfold what it says. *The meaning of the passage is the message of the sermon.* The text governs the preacher. Expository preachers do not expect others to honor their opinions. Such ministers adhere to Scripture’s truths and expect their listeners to heed the same.

EXPOSITORY PREACHING PRESENTS THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

The expectations of expository preachers are themselves based on the truths of the Bible. If no amount of eloquence and oratory can account for spiritual transformation, who alone can change hearts? Leaders of the Protestant Reformation answered, “The Holy Spirit working by and with the Word in our hearts.”¹³

10. J. I. Packer, *God Speaks to Man: Revelation and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 18.

11. Jason C. Meyer, *Preaching: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 69–72, 302.

12. Greg R. Scharf, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: Strategies for Overcoming Bottlenecks in Preaching God’s Word* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 22–24. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.5.

13. Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.5.

The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17; cf. Acts 10:44; Eph. 1:13). The extraordinary but regular means by which God transforms lives is through his Word, which is accompanied by the regenerating, convicting, and enabling power of his Spirit.¹⁴

When we proclaim the Word, we bring the work of the Holy Spirit to bear on others' lives. No truth grants greater encouragement in our preaching and gives us more cause to expect results from our efforts. The work of the Spirit is as inextricably linked to preaching as heat is to the light a bulb emits. When we present the light of God's Word, his Spirit performs his purposes of warming, melting, and conforming hearts to his will.

The Holy Spirit uses our words, but his work, not ours, affects the hidden recesses of the human will. Paul writes, "God . . . made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:6–7). The glory of preaching is that God accomplishes his will through it, but we are always humbled and occasionally comforted by the knowledge that he works beyond our human limitations. Ours is only the second sermon; the first and last are those of the Holy Spirit, who first gave his Word and quickens it in the hearts of hearers. Faithful preachers of all generations pray for what was once called "unction," the work of the Holy Spirit that accompanies his Word with a spiritual anointing that rises above the personal thoughts and talents of the preacher, to melt and mold the hearts of listeners through the biblical message anointed with God's transforming power.¹⁵

These truths challenge all preachers to approach their task with a deep sense of dependence on the Spirit of God. Public ministry true to God's purposes requires devoted private prayer.¹⁶ We should not expect our words to acquaint others with the power of the Spirit if we have not met with him. Faithful preachers plead for God to work as well as for their own accuracy, integrity, and skill in proclaiming his Word. Success in the pulpit can be the force that leads a preacher from prayerful dependence on the Spirit. Congregational accolades for pulpit excellence may tempt one to put too much confidence in personal gifts, acquired skills, or a particular method of preaching. Succumbing to such a temptation is evidenced

14. Tony Merida, *Faithful Preaching: Declaring Scripture with Responsibility, Passion, and Authenticity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 59.

15. Arturio G. Azurdia III, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2007), 47; Keller, *Preaching*, 17; Albert N. Martin, *Preaching in the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 50; Merida, *Faithful Preaching*, 58; Kevin D. Zuber, "What Is Illumination? A Study in Evangelical Theology Seeking a Biblically Grounded Definition of the Illuminating Work of the Holy Spirit" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996), 195–216.

16. David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 91.

not so much by a change in belief as by a change in practice. Neglect of prayer signals serious deficiencies in a ministry even if other signs of success have not diminished. We must always remember that popular acclaim is not necessarily the same as spiritual effectiveness.

The spiritual dimensions of preaching undercut much of what you may be tempted to believe about this book—that if you learn to speak well enough, you can be a great preacher. Not true! Do not let the necessary emphases of this book, the comments of others, or the desires of your own heart mislead you. Great gifts do not necessarily make for great preaching. The technical excellence of a message may rest on your skills, but the spiritual efficacy of your message resides with God.

The Effectiveness of Testimony

Faith in the working of God’s Word and Spirit does not mean you are without responsibility. Early American pastor John Shaw once preached at an ordination: “It’s true as one observes, God can work by what means He will; by a scandalous, domineering, self-seeking preacher, but it is not His usual way. Foxes and wolves are not nature’s instrument to generate sheep. Whoever knew much good done to souls by any pastors but such as preached and lived in the power of love, working by a clear, convincing light, and both managed by a holy, lively seriousness? You must bring fire to kindle fire.”¹⁷

There is no need to presume on the goodness of God. Although the power inherent in the Word can work despite our weaknesses, there is no reason to put hurdles in its path. Good preaching in one sense involves getting out of the way so that the Word can do its work. Shaw’s comments remind us what clearing the path usually means: preaching and living in such a way as to make the Word plain and credible.

Classical Distinctions

The apostle Paul teaches the inherent efficacy of the Word, but he also relates his personal resolve to put no stumbling block to the gospel in anyone’s path (2 Cor. 6:3). Aristotle’s classic rhetorical distinctions, though not inspired, can help us understand the basic components of every message we preach so that we do not needlessly cause others to stumble over what or how we speak.

In classical rhetoric, three elements compose every persuasive message:

logos: the verbal content of the message, including its craft, organization, and logic

17. John Shaw, *The Character of a Pastor according to God’s Heart* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 3–4.

pathos: the emotive features of a message, including the passion, fervor, and feeling that a speaker conveys and the listeners experience

ethos: the perceived character of the speaker that listeners evaluate by assessing the *credibility* and *compassion* of the speaker as evidenced in everything from structural clarity to illustration choices to consistency of life with message. Even if the message displays great intelligence, listeners tend to distrust or disregard a speaker who does not seem to care enough for them to make the message accessible and helpful. Aristotle's belief (confirmed in countless modern studies) was that *ethos* is the most powerful component of persuasion.

Listeners automatically evaluate each of these elements of persuasion in sermons in order to weigh the truths that the preacher presents.¹⁸ This realization should convince preachers who want to create clear access to the Word to strive to make each aspect of their messages a door and not a barrier. For example, it may be hard for men in a popular culture of impassive heroes like Harrison Ford, Denzel Washington, Johnny Depp, and Aragorn to express emotion (*pathos*) when they preach. Yet failing to speak with conviction appropriate to one's subject—to appear to be unmoved or unaffected by the joy of salvation or the plight of the lost—actually undercuts Scripture.

Genuine expressions of emotion that are true to our personality are integral to our testimony of the truth of the message—affirming that it is so true as to have real impact on us. To speak without appropriate passion or pain, as though the gospel doesn't mean anything to the preacher, is actually to seem to deny its significance to listeners. If sermons were just doctrine essays, then *Star Trek's* Spock or our computers could deliver them better than we could. But the realities and relationships of our world require us to engage heart and head, life and logic, truth and love in the proclamation of God's Word.¹⁹

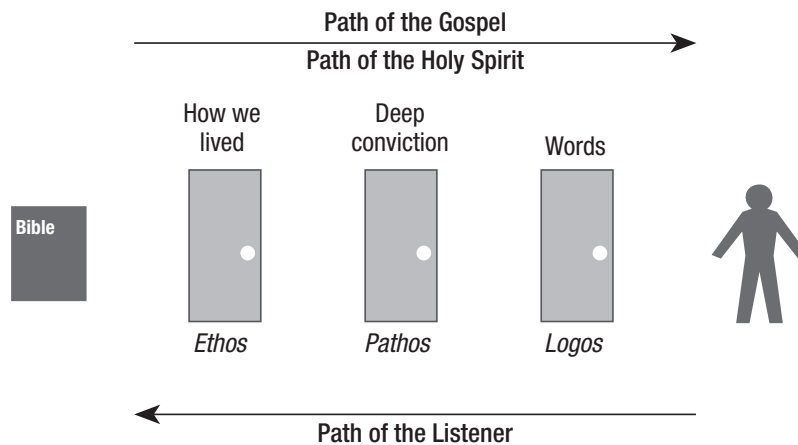
Paul reflects the importance of each of the components of persuasion in his First Letter to the Thessalonians (see fig. 1.1). Although his terms are not Aristotle's, they echo features of these classical categories of speech and remind us that well-crafted logic (though it is important) does not effectively communicate the gospel if expressions of one's heart and character are inconsistent with its truths. Paul makes it clear that though the Holy Spirit forges the path of the gospel, listeners advance to confrontation with the Word through doors the preacher opens with the message. Significantly, Paul cites his own life as affecting the reception of the message, thus giving scriptural credence to the notion that *ethos* is a powerful force in the ordinary process of spiritual persuasion.

18. Tony Merida, *The Christ-Centered Expositor: A Field Guide for Word-Driven Disciple Makers* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 223–25.

19. Helm, *Expositional Preaching*, 90. See also Andrew A. Bonar, *The Biography of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 42–43.

Paul cites his conduct and his compassion not only as evidences of his “deep conviction” but also as integral sources of his message’s “power.” Although this book of homiletical method necessarily focuses on the elements of *logos* and *pathos* in preaching, the Bible’s own emphases remind us that pastoral character remains the foundation of ministry.²⁰ Preaching’s earthly glory may be eloquence, but its eternal heartbeat is faithfulness.

FIGURE 1.1
Components of a Gospel Message



“Our gospel came to you not simply with **words** [*logos*], but also **with power, and with deep conviction** [*pathos*]. You **know how we lived** [*ethos*] among you for your sake” (1 Thess. 1:5).

Phillips Brooks’s oft-cited observation that preaching is “truth poured through personality” reflects biblical principles as well as common sense. Our fathers taught, “Your actions speak so loudly I can’t hear what you say.” Today’s young people tell us, “Don’t talk the talk if you don’t walk the walk.” Each maxim merely reflects a higher wisdom that urges Christian leaders to “conduct [themselves] in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). Our preaching should reflect the uniqueness of our personalities, but our lives should reflect Christ’s priorities in order for his message to spread unhindered.

Scriptural Corroboration

There is no scarcity of Scripture passages that confirm the importance of *ethos* for effective proclamation. Beginning with the preeminent passages on pastoral theology, with emphases added, the following texts link the quality of preaching with the quality of a preacher’s character and conduct.

20. Scharf, *Let the Earth*, 67–69.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:3–8 AND 2:11–12

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, *we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.* . . .

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

2 TIMOTHY 2:15–16 AND 2:22–24

Do your best to present yourself to God as *one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed* and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. . . .

Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

TITUS 2:7–8

In everything set them an *example* by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:3–4

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God *we commend ourselves in every way.*

JAMES 1:26–27

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

JAMES 3:13

Who is wise and understanding among you? *Let them show it* by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Ethos *Implications*

GUARD CHARACTER

The influence of a preacher's testimony on the acceptance of a sermon requires that one's life be under the rule of Scripture.²¹ With unblinking candor, John Wesley once explained to a struggling protégé why his ministry lacked power: "Your temper is uneven; you lack love for your neighbors. You grow angry too easily; your tongue is too sharp—thus, the people will not hear you."²² Wesley's honesty reflects Scripture's admonition and challenges each of us to guard our character if we desire effectiveness with the Word.

True character cannot be hidden, although it can be temporarily masked. Character oozes out of us in our messages. Just as people reveal themselves in conversations by their words and mannerisms, we constantly reveal ourselves to others in our preaching. Over time our word choices, topics, examples, and tone unveil our hearts regardless of how well we think we have cordoned off deeper truths from public display. The inside is always on view. People sense more than they can prove by the way we present ourselves in the most inadvertent ways.

With the insight of many years of preaching experience, Haddon Robinson summarizes:

As much as we might wish it otherwise, we cannot be separated from the message. Who has not heard some devout brother or sister pray in anticipation of a sermon, "Hide our pastor behind the cross so that we may see not him but Jesus only." We commend the spirit of such a prayer. . . . Yet no place exists where a preacher may hide. Even a large pulpit cannot conceal us from view. . . . We affect our message. We may be mouthing a scriptural idea yet we can remain as impersonal as a telephone recording, as superficial as a radio commercial, or as manipulative as a con man. The audience does not hear a sermon, they hear a person—they hear you.²³

No truth calls louder for pastoral holiness than the link between a preacher's character and a sermon's reception.

If I were to return to churches I have pastored, it is unlikely that people would remember many specifics from my previous sermons. They might remember a particularly vivid illustration, the way a verse had a telling effect at a crisis moment in their lives, or the impression a particular message left on their minds. Yet not one person would remember a dozen words of the thousands I spoke throughout the years. People may not remember what we say, but they will remember *us* and whether our lives gave credence to the message of Scripture. The impressions that

21. Merida, *Faithful Preaching*, 29.

22. Quoted in James L. Golden, Goodwin F. Berquist, and William Coleman, *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 1978), 297.

23. H. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 25.

others have of our lives are the videos they will replay in their minds to discern whether the truths of the gospel we proclaim are real for us—and therefore can be real for them.

Effective ministry corresponds so much with the character of a minister that theologian John Sanderson advised people to play softball with pastoral candidates interviewing for a position. “Then on a close play at second base,” Sanderson said (with his tongue *mostly* in cheek), “call him out when he is really safe. Then see what happens!”²⁴

Of course, no one reflects Christ’s character as purely as he or she desires. That is why God does not make the effects of his Word dependent on our actions. But as the eighteenth-century minister George Campbell said, “When our practice conforms to our theory, our effectiveness trebles.”²⁵ This does not deny the extraordinary power inherent in God’s Word but affirms that it is the ordinary pattern of the Holy Spirit to affirm and further the purposes of his Word by the testimony of our lives. It is the joy of the Christian minister to serve God in this way. Yet it is also a comfort to recognize that if the Spirit must leapfrog over human frailty to reach the heart of others with the sufficiency of the Word, then he can certainly do so. In the course of our ministries, it will often be necessary for him to do so.

Perhaps most of us have experienced the influence of pastoral character on a sermon when we have visited a church at a friend’s request to hear the preacher’s “marvelous messages” and have heard mediocrity instead. Our friend’s love and trust of the pastor generated regard for the sermon and obscured its weaknesses. The credibility and compassion of a minister more than the excellence of the message preached determine the quality of the message heard.

EMBRACE GRACE

Emphasis on the character of a preacher is undeniable in Scripture but frightening for real ministry. After all, who really measures up to the standards of holiness that the proclamation of the gospel deserves? (And note, if you think you do, then you *really* don’t.) Exhortations to meet ministry qualifications are futile and errant without underscoring the grace we require to do and proclaim God’s will. Human effort is engaged in holy living but does not itself produce holiness. Selfless righteousness and sacrificial love are never self-induced. Attempts to conform our character to God’s requirements by the sufficiency of our actions are as arrogant as efforts to save souls by our talents. Powerful preachers must become well-acquainted with the grace their character requires.

Emphasis on the power of *ethos* without dependence on God’s mercy has the potential to drive preachers either to arrogance or to despair. While it is certainly

24. From classroom lecture notes at Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, 1978.

25. Golden, Berquist, and Coleman, *Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 295.

true that a life of consistently hidden or unrepentant sin makes a poor vehicle for the gospel, it is equally true that pride in one's moral superiority is damaging to the communication of faith in Christ alone. In contrast, some preachers are so conscience-stricken by their inability to live faultlessly that they cannot enter the pulpit without stumbling over mountains of self-accusation. By such over-conscientiousness, which parades in the soul as spiritual zeal, many preachers actually deny to themselves and others a deep and authentic understanding of the efficacy and sufficiency of Christ's blood.

You must know grace to preach it. No matter how great your skill or accolades, you are unlikely to lead others closer to God if your heart does not reflect the continuing work of the Savior in your life.²⁶ A testimony that reinforces the message of the gospel is not merely a matter of public conduct. It is a product of consistent private meditation on the gospel that conforms our character and heart to God by daily repentance and reliance on grace that makes it real and precious to us. The more we fill tanks with the wonder of grace, the more our lives are fueled with the desire to live for Christ, and the more our messages fountain his presence and power. Jack Miller's encouragement to "preach the gospel to our own hearts" is not just to provide us with a daily lift but to flood our hearts and minds with the grace God's people require from us.²⁷

Grace-focused ministers embrace the daily repentance their private prayers must include, confess to others the divine aid that grants them the strength of their resolutions, obey God in loving thankfulness for the forgiveness and future Christ supplies, model the humility appropriate for a fellow sinner, express the courage and authority of one confident of the Savior's provision, exude the joy of salvation by faith alone, reflect the love that claims their souls, and perform their service without any claim of personal merit.²⁸

Preaching without a grace focus concentrates on means of earning divine acceptance, proofs of personal righteousness, and comparisons with those less holy. Preaching with a grace focus concentrates on responding to God's mercy with loving thankfulness, joyful worship, humble service, and a caring witness to the Savior's love.

The necessity of grace in balanced preaching inevitably points both preacher and parishioner to the work of Christ as the only proper center of a sermon. Christ-centered preaching is not merely evangelistic, nor is it confined to a few gospel accounts. It perceives the whole of Scripture as revelatory of God's redemptive plan and sees every passage within this context—a pattern Jesus himself

26. Byron Forrest Yawn, *Well-Driven Nails: The Power of Finding Your Own Voice* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador, 2010), 34.

27. See attribution in Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 8.

28. Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 130–35.

introduced (Luke 24:27). More will be said about this later. What is critical at this point as we begin to consider the structural components of a sermon is to understand that our union with Christ is the end and the means of all biblical obedience (Rom. 6:1–14; Phil. 2:1–5). Thus the Bible requires that we construct our messages in such a way as to reveal the grace that is the ultimate foundation of every text, the ultimate enablement for every instruction, and the only source of true holiness.

Without understanding our daily dependence on grace, we have little hope of reflecting the character that endorses the integrity of our messages. Discovering the redemptive context of every text allows us to use the entire Bible to discern the grace we need to preach and to live so as to lead others to closer fellowship with the Lord. Joseph Ruggles Wilson, a nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister and the father of Woodrow Wilson, advises, “Become what you preach and then preach Christ in you.”²⁹ His words remind us that the sanctifying Redeemer who unites and conforms us to himself to endorse his message cannot be neglected in our sermons. Word and witness are inextricably linked in preaching worthy of Christ’s gospel.

Without a redemptive focus, we may believe we have exegeted Scripture when in fact we have simply translated its parts and parsed its pieces without reference to the role they have in God’s eternal plan. John Calvin said, “God has ordained his Word as the instrument by which Jesus Christ, with all His graces, is dispensed to us.”³⁰ No such process occurs when passages of the Word are ripped from their redemptive context and are seen as mere moral examples and behavioral guidelines. Grace keeps our character true to God, our messages true to Scripture, and our efforts true to Christ’s will. Reliance on this grace results in sermons that are empowered by God (despite our knowledge of our sin and inadequacy), for he alone is responsible for the holiness and truth that fuel preaching’s spiritual force.

PREACH CONFIDENTLY

Consciousness of God’s enablement should encourage all preachers (including beginning preachers) to throw themselves wholeheartedly into their calling. Although the degree of homiletical skill will vary, God promises to perform his purposes through all who faithfully proclaim his truth. Even if your words barely crawl over the edge of the pulpit, love of God’s Word and his people ensures an effective spiritual ministry. You may never hear the applause of the world or pastor

29. Joseph Ruggles Wilson, “In What Sense Are Preachers to Preach Themselves?” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 25 (1874): 360.

30. Quoted in David L. Larsen, *Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 19. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.9.1; 4.1.6.

a church of thousands, but you can be confident that a life of godliness combined with clear explanations of Scripture’s saving and sanctifying grace will engage the power of the Spirit for the glory of God.

On the days of despair, when we know we are unworthy of entering the pulpit because of the fight we had with a spouse on the way to church, or the delinquency of a child that underscores our parental failings, or the lack of apparent fruit from our preaching—on those days, we need to know that the Holy Spirit works beyond us with the inherent power of the Word we faithfully expound. And on the days of pride, when we are sure that our talents were the key to our church’s record attendance and offering, we need to remember that “unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1 ESV).

Just as the Bible’s affirmation of the inherent power of the Word should rescue preachers from ministry despair or pride, the scriptural affirmation of *ethos*’s power should help us deal with the dejection or conceit that come from comparing our pulpit “gifts” with others. However the world, our hearts, our fans, or our critics may evaluate our pulpit skills, we have the calling of co-laboring with Christ in the mission of God (1 Cor. 3:9). If his Word is in our mouths and his grace is evident in our lives, then Christ is ministering through us—and there is no greater gift or calling.

If your goal is Christ’s honor, you *can* be a great preacher through faithfulness to him and his gospel. Paul offers this same encouragement to Timothy with promises that yet apply to you:

Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. . . .

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Timothy 4:12–13, 15–16

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

1. Why are expository preachers committed to making the meaning of the passage the message of the sermon?
2. Who or what alone has the power to change hearts eternally?
3. What are *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*? Which most affects the persuasiveness of a message?
4. Why should every sermon have a redemptive focus?
5. On what does great preaching most depend?

EXERCISES

1. Locate and comment on biblical passages that confirm the inherent power of the Word.
2. Locate and comment on biblical passages that link the character of the messenger to the effects of the message.