

There are several good books on how to prepare and deliver sermons, but there are other pressing questions that we must answer. Why do expositional preaching? Why regard preaching the Word as the center of the church's worship, edification, and evangelism? How can we listen to expositional preaching to benefit the most from it? David Strain responds to these questions (and more) with brief, biblical, and heartwarming answers. This is an excellent book for pastors, seminary students, and the people who hear them preach.

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

David Strain has given us his against-the-stream argument for expositional preaching. He's heard all the gripes and objections to it (and deftly handles them in his own Q&A). His case is evenly balanced yet with an edge that cuts in all the right places. Is it too much to hope that elders and deacons will digest it—as well as all personal-devotion, small-group, online-preaching addicts? How refreshing to read a work that agrees with the orneriness of God in insisting on the supremacy of preaching in the local church.

—**Dale Ralph Davis**, Minister in Residence, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

In a day and age when the Word of God must compete with so many things that distract and vie for our hearts, David Strain opens the pages of the Bible to show the church why hearing the Bible preached is so vital to the Christian life. If you

struggle to benefit from preaching, then this little book is the perfect tonic to invigorate your appreciation for the Word of God. Pick it up to see why “the foolishness of preaching” contains Christ’s words of wisdom, grace, and eternal life.

—**J. V. Fesko**, Harriett Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

David Strain has given us a thoughtful, engaging, stimulating primer on the importance of hearing God’s Word. As a seasoned pastor, Strain understands how vital it is for church members to hear God’s Word rightly and have it shape how they think and live. In these rapidly changing and unsettling times, I am convinced that the health of the church depends on its taking to heart the principles and convictions Strain so plainly and passionately sets out in this little gem. A must-read for church members and pastors alike.

—**Ian Hamilton**, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Undoubtedly, books written with “wisdom from above” on preaching are a blessing. Now David Strain, in God’s providence, has given us a book written with “wisdom from above” on hearing the Word preached. This book is biblical, readable, and engaging. *Tolle lege!*

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

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EXPOSITORY
P R E A C H I N G

DAVID STRAIN


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For my wife, Sheena, who never fails to encourage me
even when submerged beneath great trials of her own.

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FOREWORD

It has often been said—sometimes with a sense of humor and sometimes in annoyance—that Presbyterian and Reformed churches love to do things “decently and in order.” I can understand both the humor and the frustration that lie behind that sentiment. We love our plans, our minutes, our courts, and our committees. Presbyterian and Reformed folks have been known to appoint committees just to oversee other committees (reminding me of the old *Onion* headline that announced “New Starbucks Opens in Rest Room of Existing Starbucks”). We like doing things so decently that we expect our church officers to know three things: the Bible, our confessions, and a book with *Order* in its title.

But before we shake our heads in disbelief at those uber-Reformed types (physician, heal thyself!), we should recall that before “decently and in order” was a Presbyterian predilection, it was a biblical command (see 1 Cor. 14:40). Paul’s injunction for the church to be marked by propriety and decorum, to be well-ordered

like troops drawn up in ranks, is a fitting conclusion to a portion of Scripture that deals with confusion regarding gender, confusion at the Lord's Table, confusion about spiritual gifts, confusion in the body of Christ, and confusion in public worship. "Decently and in order" sounds pretty good compared to the mess that prevailed in Corinth.

A typical knock on Presbyterian and Reformed Christians is that though supreme in head, they are deficient in heart. We are the emotionless stoics, the changeless wonders, God's frozen chosen. But such veiled insults would not have impressed the apostle Paul, for he knew that the opposite of order in the church is not free-flowing spontaneity; it is self-exalting chaos. God never favors confusion over peace (see 1 Cor. 14:33). He never pits theology against doxology or head against heart. David Garland put it memorably, "The Spirit of ardor is also the Spirit of order."¹

When Jason Helopoulos approached me about writing a foreword for this series, I was happy to oblige—not only because Jason is one of my best friends (and we both root for the hapless Chicago Bears) but because these careful, balanced, and well-reasoned volumes will occupy an important place on the book stalls of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. We need short, accessible books written by thoughtful, seasoned pastors for regular members on the foundational elements of church life and ministry. That's what we need, and that's what this series

delivers: wise answers to many of the church's most practical and pressing questions.

This series of books on Presbyterian and Reformed theology, worship, and polity is not a multivolume exploration of 1 Corinthians 14:40, but I am glad it is unapologetically written with Paul's command in mind. The reality is that every church will worship in some way, pray in some way, be led in some way, be structured in some way, and do baptism and the Lord's Supper in some way. Every church is living out some form of theology—even if that theology is based on pragmatism instead of biblical principles. Why wouldn't we want the life we share in the church to be shaped by the best exegetical, theological, and historical reflections? Why wouldn't we want to be thoughtful instead of thoughtless? Why wouldn't we want all things in the life we live together to be done decently and in good order? That's not the Presbyterian and Reformed way. That's God's way, and Presbyterian and Reformed Christians would do well not to forget it.

Kevin DeYoung
Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church
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Introduction

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO STEVE AND RACHEL?

Steve and his wife Rachel have been visiting your church for about six months. You've gotten to know them both a little, and, as part of the "greeters ministry" at your church, you've come to visit them in their home and welcome them to the fellowship. You ask about their story and what brought them to the congregation.

"Well, the truth is we've been sort of drifting for a while," Steve replies. "My wife and I were both raised in small country Baptist congregations, and that's where we came to know the Lord. They loved us well and disciplined us faithfully. After college we started attending a local Bible church with friends, and the welcome we received and the practical messages we heard from the front really made a difference in our lives."

"But then our daughter, who was a senior in college at the time, was hit by a drunk driver late one night," Rachel says. "Our lives changed forever. We buried her two years ago, and that's when we began looking for something

different in church. I guess the short, upbeat messages that were so much a part of the Sunday worship experience in our church started to sound hollow. Bouncing along with happy music and listening to teaching that skimmed across the surface of both the Bible and the hard realities of our lives at that time left us dissatisfied. We needed something more.”

Steve picks up the story. “We tried various options. We’ve even stayed home and tried listening to preachers online. But none of that really worked out. And then, about six months ago, a friend invited us to come here with her one Sunday. Honestly, we were pretty reluctant. You see, we’ve been all over the place and tried all sorts of things. We’ve done the bells and smells of high liturgy. We’ve done the anonymity of the megachurch scene. We’ve done fundamentalist churches where the preacher screamed at us about fornication for forty-five minutes. And the truth is we were worn out and fed up and about ready to give up on church for good. But . . . we love our friend, and she was so eager that we give this place a try, so we came along. Now, we’ve never been in a Reformed church before. In fact, I’m still not really sure what a Reformed church is. I hope you won’t be offended if I tell you that we still find it a bit weird at times.”

“But we’ve been here every week since she first brought us,” Rachel says. “I’m not sure I totally understand why, but the approach to the Bible we’ve found here is beginning to fill a gaping hole in our spiritual

lives. Having said that, we do have some questions and a few concerns. I mean, it's great that the pastor wants to explain whole books of the Bible, piece by piece, each week like that. I love it, don't get me wrong. But won't we miss out on some important practical guidance that we really need if that's all we get? And while I'm thinking about it, maybe having a praise service once in a while would lighten things up. I mean, I love the close study of the Bible and all, but it's pretty intense. Maybe we could have a Sunday of singing and prayers from time to time instead."

Steve looks thoughtful. "One of the things that is really striking about our worship here is that preaching is so central. Everything builds up to it. The pastor is always talking about 'the centrality of preaching.' And I like preaching. We're here for the preaching. But what about Communion? I wasn't really into the high liturgy we encountered at the Anglican and Lutheran churches we visited. But I must say their focus on the 'Eucharist,' as they called it, was really moving. There was such an air of mystery about it all, you know? I read somewhere that young people are looking for more of that these days. So maybe we need to downplay preaching just a little. Not too much, you understand, but enough to make room for a bit more ritual in our services."

Rachel chimes in again. "Another thing I don't get is why we insist on a monologue every week. I mean, the pastor is a fine communicator, but a bit more dialogue

would go a long way. Maybe I'm the only one, but I've got to tell you honestly that after binge-watching Netflix till 1:30 a.m. the night before, I have a really hard time staying tuned in to a thirty-five-minute exposition of Leviticus! Maybe the sermon could be broken into shorter chunks and some video or drama added in between—just to help to hold our attention.”

“Anyway, those are just a few thoughts on our experience here. I'd love to hear your feedback.”

What should you say to Steve and Rachel? Clearly, they've been drawn to the approach to the preaching of the Word they've found at the church. Certainly, you will want to encourage them to stick with it and to give them some tools to help them to get the most out of it. And yet, there's still some confusion in their minds about what preaching is and about its place in the life of a Christian and in the worship of the church. They demonstrate an awareness that the “something more” they've been searching for is the exposition of the Scriptures. But there remains a gap between what they instinctively recognize they *need* and what years of broad evangelical church life has trained them to *want*.

Perhaps their questions mirror some of your own. You'd be quick to tell Steve and Rachel that being in a Reformed church has been a great blessing to you. And yet you'd have to admit that, while you've grown accustomed to how things are done, you've rarely asked *why* they're done that way. Presented with these thoughtful

questions from a new family in the congregation, you are hard-pressed to know how best to answer them.

This book aims to be a short(ish!), one-stop shop for you *and* for Steve and Rachel. It's designed to establish the basic biblical and theological foundations for expository preaching in a Reformed church, to highlight some historical examples, and to answer questions, fears, and objections people often have about preaching. This book is offered in the conviction that while we *do* need to equip pastors to preach the Word with faithfulness and urgency, we also need to equip those who hear the Word to profit from it. There are countless useful volumes for preachers about preaching. There are very few about preaching for those who listen to it. This is an attempt to begin to fill that gap.

The central question we're answering is this: In our digital, fast-paced information age, why should we center our Christian lives on the weekly reading and exposition of the Bible?

1

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

Before we can come to grips with the *why* and the *how* of preaching, we need to consider the *what* of preaching. I'm going to argue that the complete text of the Old and New Testaments provides the *matter*, the basic *stuff*, of faithful preaching. But essential to making that case is a number of convictions about the nature of the Bible itself. Put a little differently, our deep belief in expositional preaching rests on an even deeper belief in the character of the Holy Scriptures. Our method is designed to honor the text because of the nature of the text itself.

What Kind of Book Is the Bible?

If the Bible were only a record of the best wisdom of the time, penned by a diverse and contradictory collection of ancient authors, we might well find it fascinating. We might even discover what we consider to be rich seams of ancient wisdom with which to inform our modern lives. But when it would come to the role such a book should

play in the worship of the church or the life of a Christian, there would be no compelling reason that it should exert more influence than any other. We might even conclude that this book, far from offering fresh wisdom for modern problems, was out-of-date at best or downright offensive to contemporary sensibilities at worst. Perhaps the wisest thing to do with it would be to pick out those “inspirational” passages most acceptable to modern ears and to consign the rest to the rubbish heap of history, lest the Bible would prove itself to be the biggest liability for the church’s success in reaching a new generation! We are happy to admit that on the presupposition that the Bible is nothing more than an ancient religious text, that would be a perfectly reasonable conclusion.

But that is not how the Bible speaks about itself. To be sure, the sixty-six books that comprise the canon of Scripture, penned over the span of about sixteen hundred years by an unknown number of human authors, are replete with cultural, historical, and stylistic diversity. But when the Bible speaks about itself, it is not primarily to the humanness of the authors that it directs our attention. This, it is assumed, is obvious and uncontroversial. (“*Of course* the Bible was written by an array of different people, from different backgrounds and personalities, for different purposes! So what?”) Instead, when the Bible speaks about itself, it insists that, in addition to being the product of human culture, it is also at the same time the very Word of God.

In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul says that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” The word translated *Scripture* here means something like “sacred writings,” and in all fifty-one instances in which it appears in the New Testament, it refers to the Old Testament. Importantly, however, in two places the word *Scripture* refers to New Testament writings *alongside* the Old, indicating that the two share the same character and authority.

In 2 Peter 3:16, “the ignorant and unstable” are said to twist and distort the letters of Paul “as they do *the other Scriptures*.” Here Peter puts Paul’s writings on a par with the Old Testament as belonging to the category of “Scripture.” Similarly, in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 alongside the words of Jesus from Luke 10:7 and calls them both “Scripture.” Paul clearly considers Jesus’s words, recorded by Luke in his gospel, as sharing the same character as Moses’s words in the Torah (an extraordinary claim for a Jew schooled, as was Paul, in rabbinic tradition). The Torah was given to Israel through Moses directly by God. Nothing carried greater authority for the Jewish people. And Paul places Jesus’s words on par with it without a moment’s hesitation.

To these two passages we might add many others that demonstrate the New Testament’s knowledge that it is no mere human text. Consider 1 Corinthians 14:37 as an example. There Paul demonstrates his awareness that his

teaching carries divine authority: “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.” The Lord is addressing the Corinthians in Paul’s writings.

So when 2 Timothy 3:16 says that “all Scripture is breathed out by God,” we may safely apply “all Scripture” to the writings of both Testaments. The thirty-nine books of the Old and the twenty-seven of the New are alike “breathed out by God.” That is to say, the words of the Bible are words spoken by God. Bible words are divine words. The Bible is the Word of God. Second Peter 1:20–21 even gives us some sense of *how* the Bible understands this to be so. “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” How was the Bible “breathed out by God”? The authors “were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” “We could almost say they were *ferried* by the Spirit,” writes Donald MacLeod. “Now when you’re carried, you aren’t led and you aren’t prompted. There’s a degree of passivity here: an emphasis on the controlling influence of the agent doing the carrying. In the production of Scripture God superintended and supervised the whole process, so that as the human agents thought and spoke and wrote, and as they used their sources, He was in control, setting them down at His own chosen destination and ensuring that they spoke exactly what He intended them to speak.”¹

There is, in other words, a beautiful compatibility at work here. The choices of the human authors and the divine superintendence of their every choice combine wonderfully, if mysteriously. The words and phrases, genres and styles, sources and influences that comprise the rich variety and texture of the Bible were all freely selected by its authors. God did not reduce them to automata, mere copyists to whom he dictated every word. Rather, he overruled in every circumstance that shaped the formation of their personalities and gifts. He governed the preoccupations and driving concerns that moved them to write. And he worked subtly to oversee and direct the writing of every word of every book of Holy Scripture. At no point was violence done to the will of the biblical author. And at no point did the biblical author fail to write only and exactly what God willed the author to write. Thus, these very human words are simultaneously and exhaustively the precise words God intends for us to know and the means by which he reveals himself and his will for us.

The fact that the whole Bible is the Word of God has a number of important implications.

Inerrancy

First, since the Bible is God's Word, it follows that it can be trusted completely. Since *God* cannot lie (see 2 Sam. 7:28; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), it follows that God's *Word* cannot lie. It is without error and truthful in all that

it teaches. The psalmist celebrated that fact with joyful abandon—and so should we.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether. (Ps. 19:7–9)

Authority

Second, since the Bible is the reliable Word of God, it carries the authority of God himself. There is an interesting incident in the gospel of John in which Jesus is accused of blasphemy. His answer reveals his understanding of the authority of the Bible.

The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are

gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'" (John 10:33–36)

Note *the way* Jesus argues. He appeals to the Word of God in Scripture that "cannot be broken." The Bible may not be violated. It has the force of absolute law. What the Bible says settles the matter. All Jesus need do is point to what "is written."

Along similar lines Jesus prayed to the Father on our behalf in John 17:17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." He did not say merely, "Your word is truthful." He said that the Word of God "*is truth*." Absolute truth, the truth of God, the truth according to which all other truth must conform, and by which it must be judged, has been sufficiently revealed for us in the Scriptures. The Bible is the *norma normans non normata*. It is the norm that norms all other norms but is not itself normed by any of them. Put a little differently, the Bible is the regulating principle, the owner's manual, the royal law of the great King of Kings. We are subject to the limits and rules of the Word of God; the Word of God is not subject to our private judgments and preferences.

Christian experience, personal prejudice, historic tradition, deeply held convictions—all must bow before the judgment of God in his Word. The Scriptures of the Old