

The Supremacy of God in Preaching

John Piper

Revised and Expanded Edition

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To the people of

Bethlehem Baptist Church

*who share the vision
of spreading a passion
for the supremacy of God in all things
for the joy of all peoples
through Jesus Christ*

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Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition

GOD IS STILL THE MOST IMPORTANT, most valuable, most satisfying, most all-encompassing, and, therefore, most relevant reality in the world. So a little book that focuses on the relationship between his supremacy and preaching is still relevant. Twenty-five years after I first wrote it, this is still what I want to say. It was my focus as I began my pastoral ministry in 1980, and it was my focus to the end, as I concluded that ministry on Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013.

So in this edition, I have added four new chapters in a section called “After Thirty-Three Years: God Still Supreme in Preaching and Ministry.” One chapter extends my exultation over Jonathan Edwards into my seventh decade. He was seminal for me in my twenties. He is still teaching me and inspiring me in my sixties.

The second new chapter celebrates the freedom, authority, and power that comes with preaching that is tethered to the Word of God. I contrast the Bible-oriented preacher with the entertainment-oriented preacher, and plead for connections between bold sermons and biblical texts that people can actually see and bank on. After

thirty-three years, the Bible is more real, more powerful, more alluring, more joy-giving, and more inexhaustible to me than it has ever been. To preach as though anything else is more interesting, more insightful, or more satisfying is a symptom of soul-sickness. The third new chapter is a brief reflection on the issue of contextualization in preaching. The point is that we should give as much energy to creating new categories in the minds of our listeners as we should to trying to find existent categories to contain the mind-boggling realities of Scripture. Both efforts are crucial. But category creation is the hardest—namely, impossible. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. But he uses our thinking and preaching to bring it about.

The final new chapter is a litany of wonders at the privilege of being a pastor. It's called "Thirty Reasons Why It Is a Great Thing to Be a Pastor." This is my tribute to the mercy of God in granting me the unspeakable privilege of being carried in pastoral ministry for so long. I look back with stunned amazement that he kept me and gave me a people of such patience. Their love covered a multitude of sins.

I pray that this revised and expanded edition will encourage veteran pastors and will help launch young pastors on a lifetime of God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated devotion to heralding the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.

John Piper
February 2014

Preface to the Revised Edition

MORE THAN EVER I BELIEVE IN preaching as a part of worship in the gathered church. Preaching is worship, and it belongs in the regular worship life of the church no matter the size of the church. In the small church it does not become conversation or “sharing.” In the megachurch it does not become hype and jingles. Preaching is worshipping over the Word of God—the text of Scripture—with explanation and exultation.

Preaching belongs in the corporate worship of the church not only because the New Testament commands “preach the word” (*kēruxon ton logon*) in the context of body life (2 Tim. 3:16–4:2), but even more fundamentally because the twofold essence of worship demands it. This twofold essence of worship comes from God’s way of revealing himself to us. Jonathan Edwards puts it like this:

God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways:
1. By appearing to their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in and enjoying the manifestations which He makes of Himself.
. . . *God is glorified not only by His glory’s being seen, but by its*

being rejoiced in. When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart.¹

There are always two parts to true worship. There is *seeing* God and there is *savoring* God. You can't separate these. You must see him to savor him. And if you don't savor him when you see him, you insult him. In true worship, there is always *understanding* with the mind and there is always *feeling* in the heart. Understanding must always be the foundation of feeling, or all we have is baseless emotionalism. But understanding of God that doesn't give rise to feeling for God becomes mere intellectualism and deadness. This is why the Bible continually calls us to think and consider and meditate, on the one hand, and to rejoice and fear and mourn and delight and hope and be glad, on the other hand. Both are essential for worship.

The reason the Word of God takes the form of preaching in worship is that true preaching is the kind of speech that consistently unites these two aspects of worship, both in the way it is done and in the aims that it has. When Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word," the term he uses for "preach" is a word for "herald" or "announce" or "proclaim" (*kēruxon*). It is not a word for "teach" or "explain." It is what a town crier did: "Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye! The King has a proclamation of good news for all those who swear allegiance to his throne. Be it known to you that he will give eternal life to all who trust and love his Son." I call this heralding *exultation*. Preaching is a public exultation over the truth that it brings. It is not disinterested or cool or neutral. It is not mere explanation. It is manifestly and contagiously passionate about what it says.

Nevertheless this heralding contains teaching. You can see that as you look back to 2 Timothy 3:16—the Scripture (which gives rise to preaching) is profitable for *teaching*. And you can see it as you look ahead to the rest of 2 Timothy 4:2, “Preach the word . . . reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” So preaching is expository. It deals with the Word of God. True preaching is not the opinions of a mere man. It is the faithful exposition of God’s Word. So in a phrase, preaching is *expository exultation*.

In conclusion, then, the reason that preaching is so essential to the corporate worship of the church is that it is uniquely suited to feed both *understanding* and *feeling*. It is uniquely suited to waken *seeing* God and *savoring* God. God has ordained that the Word of God come in a form that teaches the mind and reaches the heart.

May God use this revised edition of *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* to advance a movement of God-centered worship and life. May the preaching of our churches more and more show the truth of Christ and savor the glory of Christ. May the pulpits of the land ring with exposition of the Word of God and exultation in the God of the Word.

John Piper
2003

Preface to the First Edition

PEOPLE ARE STARVING FOR the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow. Preaching that does not have the aroma of God's greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul: "Show me thy glory!" Years ago during the January prayer week at our church, I decided to preach on the holiness of God from Isaiah 6. I resolved on the first Sunday of the year to unfold the vision of God's holiness found in the first four verses of that chapter:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!"

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

So I preached on the holiness of God and did my best to display the majesty and glory of such a great and holy God. I gave not one word of application to the lives of our people. Application is essential in the normal course of preaching, but I felt led that day to make a test: Would the passionate portrayal of the greatness of God in and of itself meet the needs of people?

I didn't realize that not long before this Sunday one of the young families of our church discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. It was incredibly traumatic. They were there that Sunday morning and sat under that message. I wonder how many advisers to us pastors today would have said, "Pastor Piper, can't you see your people are hurting? Can't you come down out of the heavens and get practical? Don't you realize what kind of people sit in front of you on Sunday?" Some weeks later I learned the story. The husband took me aside one Sunday after a service. "John, these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God's holiness that you gave me the first week of January. It has been the rock we could stand on."

The greatness and the glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God.

Another illustration of this is the way missions mobilization has happened at our church and the way it has happened again and again in history. Younger people today don't get fired up about

denominations and agencies. They get fired up about the greatness of a global God and about the unstoppable purpose of a sovereign King. The first great missionary said, “We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith *for the sake of his name* among all the nations” (Rom. 1:5). Missions is for the sake of the name of God. It flows from a love for God’s glory and for the honor of his reputation. It is an answer to the prayer, “Hallowed be thy name!”

So I am persuaded that the vision of a great God is the linchpin in the life of the church, both in pastoral care and missionary outreach. Our people need to hear God-entranced preaching. They need someone, at least once a week, to lift up his voice and magnify the supremacy of God. They need to see the whole panorama of his excellencies. Robert Murray M’Cheyne said, “What my people need most is my personal holiness.”¹ That’s right. But human holiness is nothing other than a God-besotted life—the living out of a God-entranced worldview.

God himself is the necessary subject matter of our preaching, in his majesty and truth and holiness and righteousness and wisdom and faithfulness and sovereignty and grace. And by that I don’t mean we shouldn’t preach about nitty-gritty practical things like parenthood and divorce and AIDS and gluttony and television and sex. What I mean is that every one of those things should be swept right up into the holy presence of God and laid bare to the roots of its Godwardness or godlessness.

It is not the job of the Christian preacher to give people moral or psychological pep talks about how to get along in the world. When that is needed, someone else can do it. But most of our people have no one, no one in the world, to tell them, week in and week out, about the supreme beauty and majesty of God. And so many of

them are tragically starved for the God-entranced vision of that great old preacher Jonathan Edwards.

Church historian Mark Noll describes the tragedy like this:

Since Edwards, American evangelicals have not thought about life from the ground up as Christians because their entire culture has ceased to do so. Edwards's *piety* continued on in the revivalist tradition, his *theology* continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to his God-entranced world-view or his profoundly theological philosophy. The disappearance of Edwards's perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.²

Charles Colson echoes this conviction:

The western church—much of it drifting, enculturated, and infected with cheap grace—desperately needs to hear Edwards' challenge. . . . It is my belief that the prayers and work of those who love and obey Christ in our world may yet prevail as they keep the message of such a man as Jonathan Edwards.³

The recovery of Edwards's "God-entranced world-view" in the messengers of God would be a cause of great rejoicing in the land and profound thanksgiving to the God who makes all things new.

The chapters in Part 1 were first delivered as the Harold John Ockenga Lectures on Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in February 1988. The chapters in Part 2 were first given as the Billy Graham Center Lectures on Preaching at Wheaton College in October 1984. This privilege and effort was far greater gain to me than anyone else. I give public thanks to the administrative

leaders at these schools who trusted me in this way and stretched my own grasp of the high calling of the Christian preacher.

I continually thank God that he has never left me on a Sunday morning without a word to speak and a zeal to speak it for his glory. Oh, I have my moods. My family of four sons [and a daughter since the first edition] and a steady wife is not without its pain and tears. Letters of criticism can stab to the quick. Discouragement can go so deep as to leave this preacher numb. But it is a gift of measureless, sovereign grace that, beyond all desert and all adequacy, God has opened his Word to me and given me a heart to savor it and send it forth week after week. I have never ceased to love to preach.

In the mercy of God there is a human reason for this. Charles Spurgeon knew it, and most happy preachers know it. Once, while visiting the continent, Spurgeon was asked about the secret of his ministry. After a moment's pause Mr. Spurgeon said, "My people pray for me."⁴ This is why I have not ceased to love to preach. This is why I have been revived again and again for the work of the ministry. With all its weaknesses and imperfections owing to me, this is how *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* came to be written. My people pray for me. To them I dedicate this book with affection and gratitude.

My prayer is that the book may turn the hearts of God's heralds to the fulfillment of this great apostolic admonition:

Whoever speaks, [let it be] as one who speaks oracles of God . . . by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 4:11)

John Piper
1990

PART 1

WHY GOD SHOULD BE
SUPREME IN PREACHING

The Goal of Preaching

The Glory of God

IN SEPTEMBER 1966 I was a junior at Wheaton College. I was a pre-med student majoring in literature. I had just finished a chemistry course in summer school, was head over heels in love with Noël (now my wife of more than thirty-five years), and was more sick than I have ever been before or after, with mononucleosis. The doctor confined me to the health center for three weeks—three of the most decisive weeks of my life, for which I do not cease to thank God.

Back in those days the fall semester began with a “Spiritual Emphasis Week.” The speaker in 1966 was Harold John Ockenga. It was the first and last time I ever heard him preach. WETN, the college radio station, carried the sermons, and I listened as I lay on my bed two hundred yards from his pulpit. Under the preaching of the Word by Pastor Ockenga, the direction of my life was permanently changed. I can remember my heart almost bursting with longing as I listened—longing to know and handle the Word

of God like that. Through those messages God called me to the ministry of the Word irresistibly, and I believe, irrevocably. It has been my conviction ever since that the subjective evidence of God's call to the ministry of the Word (to use the words of Charles Spurgeon) "is an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work."¹

When I got out of the health center, I dropped organic chemistry, took up philosophy as a minor, and set my face to get the best biblical and theological education I could. Almost forty years later I can testify that the Lord has never let me doubt that call. It rings as clear in my heart today as it ever has. And I simply stand in awe at the gracious providence of God—to save me and call me as a servant of the Word, and then two decades later to let me speak under the banner of "The Harold John Ockenga Lectures on Preaching" at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

That was a precious privilege for me. And I prayed that it would be an acceptable tribute to Dr. Ockenga, who never knew me—and therefore a testimony to the fact that the true usefulness of our preaching will not be known to us until all the fruit on all the branches on all the trees that have sprung up from all the seeds we've ever sown has fully ripened in the sunshine of eternity.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
 and do not return there but water the earth,
 making it bring forth and sprout,
 giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
 it shall not return to me empty,
 but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
 and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
 (Isa. 55:10–11)

Dr. Ockenga never knew what his preaching did in my life. And you can mark it down: God will hide from you much of your fruit. You will see enough to be assured of his blessing, but not so much as to think you could live without it. For God aims to exalt himself, not the preacher, in this affair of preaching. And that brings us to the theme: the supremacy of God in preaching. Its outline is intentionally Trinitarian:

The Goal of Preaching: The Glory of God

The Ground of Preaching: The Cross of Christ

The Gift of Preaching: The Power of the Holy Spirit

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are the beginning, middle, and end in the ministry of preaching. Written over all ministerial labor, especially preaching, stand the words of the apostle: “From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Rom. 11:36).

The Scottish preacher James Stewart put it like this: the aims of all genuine preaching are “to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.”² In other words, God is the goal of preaching, God is the ground of preaching, and all the means in between are given by the Spirit of God.

My burden in these pages is to plead for the supremacy of God in preaching—that the *dominant note* of preaching be the freedom of God’s sovereign grace, that the *unifying theme* be the zeal that God has for his own glory, that the *grand object* of preaching be the infinite and inexhaustible being of God, and that the *pervasive atmosphere* of preaching be the holiness of God. Then when

preaching takes up the ordinary things of life (family, job, leisure, friendships) or the crises of our day (AIDS, divorce, addictions, depression, abuses, poverty, hunger, and, worst of all, unreached peoples of the world), these matters are not only taken up—they are taken all the way up into God.

John Henry Jowett, who preached for thirty-four years in England and America until 1923, saw this as the great power of Robert Dale and Horace Bushnell and John Newman and Charles Spurgeon. He says:

They were always willing to stop at the village window, but they always linked the streets with the heights, and sent your souls a-roaming over the eternal hills of God. . . . It is this note of vastitude, this ever-present sense and suggestion of the Infinite, which I think we need to recover in our preaching.³

Here we are a century later and the need for that recovery is ten times as great.

Nor am I talking here about a kind of artsy elitist preoccupation with philosophical or intellectual imponderables. There are aesthetic types who gravitate to high church services because they can't stand the slapstick of many evangelical worship services. But that is not what I am calling for. Charles Spurgeon was anything but an intellectual elitist. There has scarcely been a pastor with more popular appeal. But his messages were full of God, and the atmosphere was charged with the presence of awesome realities. "We shall never have great preachers," he said, "till we have great divines."⁴

That wasn't because he cared more about great ideas than lost souls. He cared about the one because he loved the other. It was the same with Isaac Watts, who lived a hundred years earlier. Samuel Johnson said of Watts, "Whatever he took in hand, was, by his

incessant solicitude for souls, converted to theology.”⁵ Which I take to mean, in Watts’s case, that everything was brought into relation to God—because he cared about people.

Today Johnson would, I believe, say of much contemporary preaching, “Whatever the preacher takes in his hand, is, by his incessant solicitude for relevance, converted to psychology.” And neither the great aims of preaching nor the worthy place of psychology is honored in this loss of theological nerve. My guess is that one great reason why people sometimes doubt the abiding value of God-centered preaching is because they have never heard any. J. I. Packer tells about how he heard the preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones every Sunday evening at Westminster Chapel during 1948 and ’49. He said that he had never heard such preaching. It came to him with the force and surprise of electric shock. Lloyd-Jones, he said, brought him “more of a sense of God than any other man.”⁶

Is this what people take away from worship nowadays—a sense of God? A note of sovereign grace, a theme of panoramic glory, the grand object of God’s infinite Being? Do they enter for one hour in the week—not an excessive expectation—into an atmosphere of the holiness of God, which leaves its aroma upon their lives all week long?

Cotton Mather, who ministered in New England three hundred years ago, said, “The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men.”⁷ And that was not a rhetorical flourish. It was a measured and accurate exegetical conclusion from one of the great biblical texts on preaching, which leads to the biblical foundation for God’s supremacy in preaching. The text behind Mather’s statement is Romans 10:14–15:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?
 And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never
 heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?
 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written,
 “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

From this text *preaching* could be defined as “the heralding of good news from a messenger sent by God” (“heralding”—from the word *kērussontos* in v. 14; “of good news”—from *euangelizomenōn agatha* in v. 15; “sent by a sent messenger”—from *apostalōsin* in v. 15).

But the key question now is, What does the preacher herald? What is the good news referred to here? Since verse 16 is a quotation of Isaiah 52:7, we do well to go back and let Isaiah define it for us. Listen for what Cotton Mather heard in this verse concerning the great design of Christian preaching.

How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet of him who brings good news,
 who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
 who publishes salvation,
 who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

The good tidings of the preacher, the peace and salvation that he publishes, are boiled down into one sentence: “Your God reigns!” Cotton Mather applies this, with full justification, to the preacher: “The great design . . . of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men.”

The keynote in the mouth of every prophet-preacher, whether in Isaiah’s day or Jesus’s day or our day, is “Your God reigns!” God

is the king of the universe. He has absolute Creator rights over this world and everyone in it. But there is rebellion and mutiny on all sides, and his authority is scorned by millions. So the Lord sends preachers into the world to cry out that God reigns, that he will not suffer his glory to be scorned indefinitely, that he will vindicate his name in great and terrible wrath, but that for now a full and free amnesty is offered to all the rebel subjects who will turn from their rebellion, call on him for mercy, bow before his throne, and swear allegiance and fealty to him forever. The amnesty is signed in the blood of his Son.

So Mather is absolutely right: The grand design of the Christian preacher is to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men. But why? Can we go deeper? What is driving the heart of God in demanding that we submit to his authority and in offering the mercy of amnesty?

Isaiah gives the answer in an earlier text, Isaiah 48:9–11. Speaking of his mercy to Israel, God says:

For my name's sake I defer my anger,
 for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you,
 that I may not cut you off.
 Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
 I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.
 For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it,
 for how should my name be profaned?
 My glory I will not give to another.

Behind and beneath the sovereign exercises of God's mercy as king is an unwavering passion for the honor of his name and the display of his glory.

So we can go deeper than Mather's point. Behind God's commitment to reign as king is the deeper foundational commitment that his glory will one day fill the earth (Num. 14:21; Ps. 57:5; 72:19; Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14). And this discovery has a tremendous implication for preaching. God's deepest purpose for the world is to fill the earth with reverberations of his glory in the lives of a new humanity ransomed from every people and tribe and tongue and nation (Rev. 5:9).⁸ But the glory of God does not reflect brightly in the hearts of men and women when they cower unwillingly in submission to his authority, or when they obey in servile fear, or when there is no gladness in response to the glory of their king.

The implication for preaching is plain: When God sends his emissaries to declare, "Your God reigns!" his aim is not to constrain man's submission by an act of raw authority; his aim is to ravish our affections with irresistible displays of glory. The only submission that fully reflects the worth and glory of the king is glad submission. Begrudging submission berates the king. No gladness in the subject, no glory to the king.

This is what Jesus said in effect in Matthew 13:44: "The kingdom [the rule, the dominion] of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy [his glad submission to that kingship and his delight in its glory, its value] he went and sold all that he had to buy that field." When the kingdom is a treasure, submission is a pleasure. Or to turn it around, when submission is a pleasure, the kingdom is glorified as a treasure. Therefore, if the goal of preaching is to glorify God, it must aim at glad submission to his kingdom, not raw submission.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:5, "What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord." But then in verse 6 he goes beneath that proclamation of the Lordship of Christ—beneath the rule and

authority of King Jesus—and tells the essence of his preaching: It is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The only submission to the Lordship of Christ that fully magnifies his worth and reflects his beauty is the humble gladness of the human soul in the glory of God in the face of his Son.

The wonder of the gospel, and the most freeing discovery this sinner has ever made, is that God’s deepest commitment to be glorified and my deepest longing to be satisfied are not in conflict, but in fact find simultaneous consummation in his display of and my delight in the glory of God.⁹ Therefore, the goal of preaching is the glory of God reflected in the glad submission of the human heart. And the supremacy of God in preaching is secured by this fact: The one who satisfies gets the glory; the one who gives the pleasure is the treasure.