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PREACHERS IN THE HANDS OF A GRACIOUS GOD

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Abstract: *A key premise of the Protestant Reformation is the authority of Scripture as the written Word of God, on which basis churches of Reformation heritage have elevated the office of the preacher and the role of the sermon in forming the life of the congregation. Yet a careful review of Pauline theology and Reformation doctrine—that of Calvin and Luther in particular—offers a helpful corrective to distorted views of preaching and preachers that derive from our cultural context and are frequently implicit within contemporary Protestantism. In this regard, it is important to distinguish the rightful authority of Scripture from excessive claims for the authority of the pulpit and those who occupy it. The difference hinges on our understanding of human agency: rather than viewing Scripture as an instrument to be wielded by human intermediaries, Calvin and Luther describe preachers themselves as "instruments" in the hand of God.*

Key words: *homiletics, theology of preaching, authority, Calvin, Luther, instrumentalism, human agency, character of the preacher, cruciformity*

I. THE AUTHORITY OF PREACHING

True to its core principles, a Reformation theology of preaching appeals in the first instance to the text of Scripture. Paul writes to the church of Thessalonica, "We … thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it 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 NIV). His contrast between the λόγον θεοῦ ("Word of God") and a λόγον ἀνθρώπων ("human word") is categorical. As he tells the Galatian believers, "I would have you know that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man [κατὰ ἄνθρωπον]" (Gal 1:11 NASB). Still more explicit is the succinct but theologically comprehensive homiletic that he articulates in 2 Corinthians: "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God" (2:17 NASB; cf. 2 Cor 4:2; Col 1:25; Titus 1:3). Luke, too, frequently refers to the preaching both of Paul and of other apostles as constituting the "Word of God" (Acts 4:31; 13:5; 17:13; 18:11, etc.).

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It is but a short step from acknowledging the soteriological *content* of the gospel message as the "Word of God" to declaring that each apostolic sermon would also have represented the word or words of God, with Peter or Paul or even Barnabas speaking directly on God's behalf. In the case of the biblical apostles, there is no distinction between the authority of the message and the authority of the messenger.[1] Just so, according to Jeffrey Weima (commenting on 1 Thess 2:13), "There is no difference between Paul's word and God's word."[2] The subsequent canonization of the apostle's pastoral correspondence has served to cement this conviction.

But if the content of the gospel message or the preaching of the apostles or the letters of Paul each represent the Word of God in distinct yet related senses, can the same be said for last Sunday's sermon? John MacArthur is a particularly forceful proponent of the view that it can. Preaching on Titus 2:15 ("Encourage and rebuke with all authority"), he declares,

> We are commanders. We speak with authority. Not just authority … we speak with all authority. That is to say the authority is unassailable and the authority is comprehensive. What the apostle Paul is charging Titus to do is what all preachers must do, and that is to preach with a commanding tone the Word of God. He suggests there are three aspects of that commanding. There is speaking, there is exhorting, and there is reproving. … To speak means to tell something so that people can hear and understand. To exhort means to force that truth upon them in such a way that they believe and appropriate. And to reprove means to take action so that they obey and submit.[3]

Whether intended so or not, the language of "commanding," of "force" and "submission," sounds very much like hearers must submit not just to the saving truth of the Christian gospel or the compelling winsomeness of the crucified Lamb, but to any preacher's interpretation—or autocratic presentation—of the gospel message.

To cite an example from an earlier era, A. W. Tozer (1897–1963) was even more dogmatic:

> I don't want to be unkind, but I am sure there ought to be a lot more authority in the pulpit than there is now. A preacher should reign from his pulpit as a king from his throne. … When a man of God stands to speak, he ought to have the authority of God on him so that he makes the people responsible to listen to

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[1] Compare Jesus's statement to the Seventy in Luke 10:16, where translation variants in English convey significantly different theological overtones: "He who *hears* you hears me" (RSV) vs. "Whoever *listens* to you listens to me" (NIV).

[2] Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 163.

[3] John MacArthur, "The Authority of the Preacher" (20 March 1994), https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-133/the-authority-of-the-preacher. See further "The Responsibilities of the Church: Exercising Authority, Part 1" (9 February 1997), https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-145/the-responsibilities-of-the-church-exercising-authority-part-1; "A Call for Authoritative Preaching" (27 January 2008), https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-350/a-call-for-authoritative-preaching.

> him. When they will not listen to him, they are accountable to God for turning away from the divine Word.[4]

Even if expressed less bluntly, similar views are not difficult to find in more recent accounts of expository preaching. According to Bryan Chapell, for example, "When we say what God says, we have his authority. … In obedience to biblical imperatives, an expositor must preach 'as one who speaks the very words of God' (1 Pet. 4:11)."[5] But while confessional, institutional, or denominational traditions may hold preachers in high regard, it is important to distinguish between Paul's πάσης ἐπιταγῆς ("all authority") in Titus 2:15, which implies a delegated authorization,[6] and the πάσα ἐξουσία ("all power/authority in heaven and earth") that belongs to Jesus alone (Matt 28:18), notwithstanding their apparent similarity in English translation.

II. INSTRUMENTALISM IN THE PULPIT

There is a clear assumption in such accounts that the authority of divine speech devolves directly onto those who repeat or bear witness to such speech, so that the words of the latter are akin to the very Word and words of God.[7] Yet the conceptual underpinnings of this theological perspective deserve careful scrutiny, lest we inadvertently bring presuppositions to our ministry that are incompatible with Christian conviction. Here, brief contributions from the work of Jacques Ellul and Parker J. Palmer help to clarify what is at stake.

As indicated by the title of his most influential work, French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) proposed that ours is a "Technological Society."[8] By this he meant that we idolize technology and "technique," employing them

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[4] "The Holy Spirit Makes the Difference," in A. W. Tozer, *Life in the Spirit*, Hendrickson Christian Classics (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 155.

[5] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 83. Chapell is here citing the NIV; conversely, Wayne Grudem comments on this verse, "*Oracles* (*logia*) means 'sayings,' but especially sayings spoken from God to man. … Yet this cannot mean 'as claiming that the words he speaks are God's own words,' because that would only be true of Scripture, not of every word spoken during a church meeting." Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 175–76. On the ambiguous grammar of the Greek clause, see Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 298–99.

[6] This term typically indicates a command, ordinance, or statute, whether from a human authority (LXX 1 Esd 1:16; 3 Macc 7:20; Wis 14:17; Dan 3:16; Arist. 103) or from God (LXX Wis 18:15; 19:6; 1 En. 5:2); in Pauline usage, it refers to God's commission for proclaiming the Gospel and ordering the life of the church (Rom 16:26; 1 Cor 7:25; 1 Tim 1:1; Tit 1:3, etc.). See further Gerhard Delling, s.v. ἐπιταγή, *TDNT* 8:36–37.

[7] So, e.g., Griffiths on Hebrews 2:9: "Thus to speak his word (in expounding his written, scriptural word) or to read his word written is to encounter Christ and to hear him speak. For the writer, this surely takes place in any context where the word is opened—and not least in and through preaching as he 'speaks' the word." Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study*, NSBT 42 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 115.

[8] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (1954; repr., New York: Knopf, 1964); see further Jeffrey P. Greenman, Read Mercer Schuchardt, and Noah J. Toly, *Understanding Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 19–37.

as instruments to order and pacify the natural world, thereby fashioning a suitable habitat for ourselves. But we also employ tools, techniques, and technological mechanisms (such as cell phones, computers, automobiles, and "labor-saving devices" generally) to construct a sense of personal and social identity. For a technological society, he argues, identity itself is a product of technological self-definition. In keeping with a rationalist, Enlightenment worldview, this perspective implies that all aspects of human existence are subject, in principle, to rational control. According to missiologist David Bosch (1929–1992),

> Modern science tends to be completely deterministic, since unchanging and mathematically stable laws guarantee the desired outcome. All that is needed is complete knowledge of these laws of cause and effect. The human mind becomes the master and initiator which meticulously plans ahead for every eventuality and all processes can be comprehended and controlled.[9]

Whether then by means of concrete physical mechanisms or less tangible but nonetheless powerful plans, techniques, and operational strategies, we use tools of various sorts to negotiate between ourselves, our environment, and our neighbors.

The utility of such an approach is immediately apparent if one is attempting, for example, to survive a Canadian winter. But the danger in this way of thinking is that it may lead us to imagine that our relationship with the Creator can be negotiated in a similar manner. Living as a disciple of Jesus—even more so seeking to nurture that life in others—depends less on technology or "strategies for success" than on the priority of divine grace. In the present context, questioning the primacy of "technique" is not to disparage sermon preparation in principle, since logic, structure, and good diction are all essential for effective communication. Rather, Ellul is concerned, at a more basic level, with the idolatry of employing methods, strategies, or even words themselves, as substitutes for radical dependence on God. He characterizes such an approach as "propaganda," by which he means the use of persuasive language as a tool for producing specific effects among its hearers—instead of relying on divine power for spiritual transformation.[10] Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986) offers a similar critique:

> The propaganda of men, even when it masquerades as a kind of evangelism and becomes an enterprise of the church, is always based on the accursed notion that success and failure, fruit and harvest are dependent upon our human activity, upon our imagination, energy, and intelligence.[11]

In practice, preaching is an intrinsically inefficient undertaking: some sermons catch fire while others appear ineffectual, often without the preacher knowing why in

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[9] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 265. Similarly, Ellul defines "technique" as "the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity." Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxv.

[10] Further, Greenman, Schuchardt, and Toly, *Understanding Jacques Ellul*, 38–59, esp. 44–46.

[11] Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1960), 89.

either case. Even this assessment may be inaccurate, since preaching often works in ways that are neither visible nor easily quantified.

In similar fashion, Parker Palmer distinguishes between "instrumental" and "expressive" forms of action. An instrumental action is something carried out as a means to a specific end; since it is "governed by the logic of success and failure," it can be evaluated in terms of its ability to accomplish an intended goal.[12] By contrast, expressive action is not directed toward a predetermined objective; it simply expresses something that is internal to the one who acts:

> An expressive act is one that I take not to achieve a goal outside myself but to express a conviction, a leading, a truth that is within me. An expressive act is one taken because if I did not take it I would be denying my own insight, gift, nature.[13]

According to Palmer, expressive acts tend to achieve more because they are expressions of an intrinsic reality, even though achievement is not their primary goal. By way of illustration, he differentiates between scientific research conducted for the purpose of solving a particular problem or achieving a specific goal, and research pursued out of curiosity and the desire simply to understand. Although the analogy to preaching is imperfect, the distinction is important, since it allows us to see the difference between preaching as a human act that seeks by strategic use of rhetorical or homiletical techniques to bring about an encounter with God (on the one hand),[14] and preaching as non-agential (that is, non-causative) testimony to the unconstrainable grace and sovereignty of God (on the other).

Ellul and Palmer help to identify uncritical presuppositions and expectations that contemporary preachers may inadvertently carry into the pulpit: that powerful words, derived from the Word that is Scripture and presented in strategic fashion by a powerful speaker, are themselves capable of bringing life to their hearers. Indeed, this summary seems so self-evident as to be almost banal. Yet it entails at least four significant dangers. First, it reduces the Word of God to the status of a manipulable tool or instrument, employed in human hands for the conviction, empowerment, or transformation of the hearers. Yet Scripture is not subject to manipulation, even for godly ends, since the attempt to do so (second) situates the preacher between God and the congregants, implying that preachers are representative of Christ in a manner that does not apply equally to the rest of the hearers. To be sure, "pastors" and preachers are authorized as under-shepherds subject to the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet 5:3) who is Christ himself, but in a culture that easily succumbs to the cult of personality (and as heirs of a reform movement originally critical of clericalism), we need additional caution and humility on this point. Equally

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[12] Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 23.

[13] Palmer, *The Active Life*, 24.

[14] As described, for instance, by James Neiman, "Why the Idea of Practice Matters," in *Teaching Preaching as Christian Practice*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 36.

problematic (third) is the danger that over-emphasizing the role of the preacher can appear to diminish or detract from the role of the Holy Spirit. Although we retain the ability to suppress or ignore the Spirit of God, the Third Person of the Trinity is not normally subject to our direction, much less our homiletical strategizing. The Spirit, after all, "blows where it wills" (John 3:8) and not where we wish it to go. The fourth and greatest theological danger, of course, is that of subtracting from, even appearing to supplant, Christ himself. To invoke Karl Barth's familiar model of the threefold word of God (incarnate, written, and preached),[15] the words of the sermon must derive from and remain wholly dependent not only on the authoritative Word of Scripture but above all on the living presence of the incarnate Word, via the agency of the Holy Spirit.[16] The Lord himself cannot be severed from the Word that he authorizes.

In sum, Christian faith is predicated on the conviction that "there is one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5). Because he is Lord, and not our servant, Christ can be neither co-opted nor constrained, much less replaced in his mediatorial role. Apart from "the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20), there is no instrument or means of negotiation by which to mitigate the encounter between ourselves and a holy God: Jesus himself—not preachers or their sermons—arbitrates irreplaceably between humanity and the Father.

III. LUTHER AND CALVIN ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE PREACHING OFFICE

Although American evangelicals tend to view his theology of preaching with suspicion, Barth nonetheless manages in a single sentence to encapsulate the danger implied by too high a view of human agency and authority in the pulpit. "Under no circumstances and in no sense," he insists, "ought we to desire to be *creatores Creatoris* [creators of the Creator]. Ours is not to give *birth* to God but to give *testimony* of him."[17] The intended distinction is subtle, yet significant. As Martin Luther (1483–1546) explains in his *Church Postil* of 1522, preaching derives its authority from the nature of Christ's own ministry:

> Since the advent of Christ the gospel, which used to be hidden in the Scriptures, has become an oral preaching. And thus it is the manner of the New Testament and of the gospel that it must be preached and performed by word of mouth

[15] On this see John Webster, *Barth*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers (London: Continuum, 2000), 56.

[16] See further J. I. Packer, "Introduction: Why Preach?," in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, Samuel T. Logan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 11–12. Packer notes, "The authority of preaching flows from the transparency of the preacher's relation to the Bible and to the three Persons who are the one God whose Word the Bible is.… It is only as the preacher is truly under, and is seen to be under, the authority of God and the Bible that he has, and can be felt to have, authority as God's spokesman."

[17] Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Boston: Pilgrim, 1928; repr., New York: Harper, 1957), 131, emphasis his.

> and a living voice. Christ himself has not written anything, nor has he ordered anything to be written, but rather to be preached by word of mouth.[18]

In June of 1542, Luther comments, "God the creator of heaven and earth speaks to you through his preachers.… These are the words of God, not of Plato or Aristotle. It is God Himself who speaks."[19] For the Reformer, as Jaroslav Pelikan explains, "the Word spoken in Christ was identical with the Word of God now being spoken in the church. By means of the Word of God the church became and remained a community of redemption."[20]

Yet for Luther, such weighty theological claims do nothing to dignify the preacher, whose task is onerous and demanding, with any spiritual benefits that ensue a divine rather than human prerogative:

> The office of preaching is an arduous office.… I have often said that, if I could come down with good conscience, I would rather be stretched upon a wheel or carry stones than preach one sermon. For anyone who is in this office will always be plagued.… If I had known I would not have let myself be drawn into it with twenty-four horses.[21]

Preaching in late August of 1531, Luther explains 2 Corinthians 3:5 ("Not that we are sufficient of ourselves … our sufficiency is from God") in the following terms:

> What Paul means is that whatever good we do in preaching is done by God; when we preach it is God's work if it has power and accomplishes something among men. Therefore if I am a good preacher who does some good, it isn't necessary for me to boast. It's not my mind, my wisdom, my ability.… If my ministry is profitable, I ascribe it to God. If it produces fruit, I do not glory in myself; this is not my work, but the mercy of God, who has used me as His instrument [*qui sibi hoc instrumentum elegit*].[22]

Complaining bitterly (and at length) of how little effect his own preaching has had on those to whom he speaks, Luther acknowledges that words alone cannot accomplish the work of God: "It is easy enough for someone to preach to me, but only God can put it into my heart. He must speak it in my heart, or else nothing at all will come of it. If God remains silent, the final effect is as though nothing had

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[18] Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [WA], 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 10.1.48, cited in Arthur Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word. Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 90; cf. *Luther's Works* [*LW*], ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg/Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986), 52:205: "Christ did not write his doctrine himself … but transmitted it orally, and also commanded that it should be orally continued, giving no command that it should be written." See further Dennis Ngien, "Theology of Preaching in Martin Luther," *Them* 28.2 (2003): 28–48.

[19] Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1912–1921), 4.531 §4812, cited in Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 93.

[20] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 63 (and on Luther's theology of the "Word of God" more broadly, 48–70).

[21] "Sermon on 2 Corinthians 3:4–6" (August 27, 1531); *LW* 51:222.

[22] "Sermon on 2 Corinthians 3:4–6"; *LW* 51:225; Latin text: WA 34/2:161.

been said."[23] Accordingly, he makes a critical distinction between the authority of the preacher, on the one hand, and the efficacy or actual effects of preaching, on the other: "We have the *jus verbi* [right to speak] but not the *executio* [power to accomplish]. We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure."[24] Luther's point is the same as that of the apostle Paul, whose response to congregants who esteem one preacher above another is that "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor 3:6). Indeed, for Luther, "The Word of God remains free to be heard even if it comes from the mouth of Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod."[25] In other words, the dignity and honor of God's word remains independent of the honor or dishonor of the one who proclaims it.[26] Paul's confidence that Christ is preached even by those who do so from base motives (Phil 1:15–18) offers a case in point.

Whatever else may distinguish his theology from that of Martin Luther, John Calvin (1509–1564) is in close agreement both as to the paramount importance of preaching and its absolute dependence on divine grace. Preaching, he insists, is both a gift and a privilege: "Among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them."[27] Implicit in this reference to divine "gifts" is the agency of the Holy Spirit, who alone is able to pierce the darkness of human understanding:

> God's word ought indeed to be enough to engender faith in us, if our blindness and stubbornness did not prevent it. But since our spirit is inclined to futility it can never hold to God's truth and since it is stupefied it cannot see His light. That is why the bare word profits nothing without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, from which it is clear that faith is above all human understanding.… God's word is like the sun, for it shines on all to whom it is proclaimed, but it is without effectiveness among the blind. Now we are all naturally blind in this matter; that is why it cannot enter into our spirit unless God's Spirit, who is the inward Master, gives it access by His illumination.[28]

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[23] "Sermons of 1522," WA 10.3:260; "Sermons of 1525," WA 17.2:174; cited in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 39.

[24] "The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit"; *LW* 51:76; WA 10:15; cf. Michael P. Knowles, "Preaching before Posting: Lessons for the Postmodern Church from the Early Sermons of Martin Luther," *PCS* 2 (2017–2018): 61–62.

[25] Ngien, "Theology of Preaching in Martin Luther," 32, citing *LW* 35:396.

[26] Similarly, the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 begins, "We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures … to be the very true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men.… Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church and received of the faithful … the Word of God which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; who, though he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God abides true and good." Cited from James T. Hennison, Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014), §63.

[27] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John McNeill, LCC 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1018 (4.1.5).

[28] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 188–90 (cf. *Institutes* 3.2.33–34).

But it is not as though the Spirit of God sanctifies any and all preaching. Rather, the authority of preaching derives solely from the authority of Scripture, which derives in turn from the authority of God as its ultimate, true author. Accordingly, the requisite blessing of the Spirit testifies to the fact that Scripture is the word *of God*, and not of human authors alone:

> For even as God alone is sufficient witness to himself in his Word, so also that Word will not find belief in the hearts of men before it is sealed by the inward witness of the Spirit. It is therefore necessary that the same Spirit who spoke by the mouth of the Prophets shall penetrate into our hearts to convince us that what had been divinely commanded had been faithfully declared.[29]

Of course, the work of the Spirit requires human preachers (Rom 10:14), but preachers must rely directly on the Spirit of God (rather than ecclesiastical or personal authority) to accomplish the inner work of spiritual transformation. As Calvin observes in his commentary on First Peter (quoting 1 Cor 3:6):

> It is God alone who regenerates us, but for that purpose He employs the ministry of men.… It is indeed certain that those who plant and those who water, are nothing; but whenever God is pleased to bless their labour, He makes their doctrine efficacious by the power of His Spirit, and the voice which is in itself mortal, is an instrument of eternal life [*et vox quae per se mortua est, vitae aeternae sit organum*].[30]

The reformer thus maintains a subtle balance between necessary human agency, on the one hand, and unconstrainable, unsubstitutable divine authority, on the other:

> By calling himself a minister of the Spirit Paul does not mean that the grace and power of the Holy Spirit are tied to his preaching.… We are ministers of the Spirit, not because we hold him enclosed and as it were captive, not because we confer his grace to all and sundry at our own will, but because through us Christ enlightens minds, renews hearts—in a word, regenerates men wholly.[31]

Accordingly, Calvin echoes Luther in referring to the minister or preacher as no more than an "instrument" (*instrumentum*, *organum*) in the hand of God.[32] This is an important theological distinction: the written Word of God is less an instrument

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[29] *Institutes* 1.7.4, quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville: Westminister John Knox, 1992), 4.

[30] John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter*, trans. William B. Johnston, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and David W. Torrance, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 255. Latin text: *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* [CO], ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke and Son [M. Bruhn], 1863–1900), 55:231.

[31] "Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Corinthios II" on 2 Cor 3:6, in Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 31. Latin text: *Joannis Calvini opera selecta* [OS], ed. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Doris Scheuner, 5 vols. (Munich: Kaiser, 1926–1952), 50:40.

[32] Significantly, Paul characterizes discipleship and sanctification in similar terms: "Do not yield your members to sin as instruments [ὅπλα] of wickedness, but yield … your members to God as instruments [ὅπλα] of righteousness" (Rom 6:13; cf. 6:19).

in human hands for us to wield as we wish than we are instruments in God's hands for God to employ according to his sovereign will.[33] So Calvin goes on to say:

> Because [God] does not dwell among us in visible presence … he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work [*qualiter ad opus quoque faciendum instrumento utitur artifex*] … to serve as his ambassadors in the world, to be interpreters of his secret will and, in short, to represent his person.[34]

Although the foregoing passage is frequently quoted to support a high view of preachers and preaching alike, seldom does the discussion acknowledge Calvin's insistence that God does not delegate divine honor to his servants. In fact, Calvin goes on to explain the implications of God's choice in surprisingly negative terms:

> Again, this is the best and most useful exercise in humility, when he accustoms us to obey his Word, even though it be preached through men like us and sometimes even by those of lower worth than we. If he spoke from heaven, it would not be surprising if his sacred oracles were to be reverently received without delay by the ears and minds of all.… But when a puny man risen from the dust speaks in God's name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we show ourselves teachable toward his minister, although he excels us in nothing. It was this reason, then, that he hid the treasure of his heavenly wisdom in weak and earthen vessels [II Cor. 4:7] in order to prove more surely how much we should esteem it.[35]

Calvin's characterization of the preacher as "a puny man risen from the dust [*homuncio … ex pulvere emersus*]" is unflattering, certainly a poor foundation on which to erect a doctrine of the dignity of the office. In his view, God's use of frail human instruments is proof of divine condescension, not homiletical dignity or honor:

> When a man climbs up into the pulpit, is it so that he may be seen from afar and that he may have a higher place than the rest? No, no! But so that God may speak to us by the mouth of man and be so gracious to us to show himself here among us and will have a mortal man to be his messenger.[36]

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[33] For a summary of Calvin's instrumental view of preaching, see Dawn DeVries, "Calvin's Preaching," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 108–10.

[34] Calvin, *Institutes* (trans. Battles) IV.iii.1 (2.1053). Latin text: OS 5:42. Similarly with reference to Isa 55:11 in *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1838), 4:172. In his commentary on Romans, Calvin speaks of preaching itself as God's "instrument": "We ought … to understand that preaching is an instrument for effecting the salvation of the faithful [*praedicationem tamen intelligamus instrumentum esse peragendae fidelium salutis*], and though it can do nothing without the Spirit of God, yet through his inward operation it produces the most powerful effects." *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 424. Latin text: CO 49:219.

[35] Calvin, *Institutes* (trans. Battles) IV.iii.1 (2.1054).

[36] Sermon 22 on 1 Tim 3:2; John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (1579; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 269, rendered into modern idiom by Glen Clary, "John Calvin:

Here it is important to remember that Calvin's purpose (like that of Luther before him) is to countermand excessive claims of ecclesiastical authority on the part of clergy—a temptation to which the church of every age and theological persuasion remains susceptible.[37]

IV. PREACHING THE "MESSAGE OF THE CROSS"

As the Reformers consider the role of preachers and preaching in the life of the church, their theology is firmly rooted in the primary testimony of Scripture, in particular its paradoxical account of human weakness redeemed by the grace of God. In this regard, Paul offers an unexpected, even troubling account of his own apostolic ministry:

> When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor 2:1–5 NRSV)

As borne out in detail by his own life experience, Paul explains that the weakness of the messenger is in direct contrast to the glory of the gospel itself: "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor 4:7 NRSV). Just as the cross itself is a historical scandal, a source of offense that represents the very antithesis of how ancient Greeks and Romans understood divinity, so equally the "word" or "message of the cross" constitutes a "stumbling block," a contradiction of human wisdom that must be given life by God if it is to prove persuasive once proclaimed. In the words of Paul, "the message of the cross is foolishness [μωρία] to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18 NIV). John Stott summarizes the theological dynamics of Paul's argument in the following terms:

> The central theme of Paul's Corinthian correspondence is power through weakness. We have a weak message, Christ crucified, which is proclaimed by weak preachers who are full of fear and trembling, and is received by weak hearers who are socially despised by the world. God chose a weak instrument (Paul) to bring a weak message (the cross) to weak people (the Corinthian working classes), but through that triple weakness he demonstrated his almighty power. Above all we see this principle in Christ and the cross, that he who is in very nature God from eternity did not think equality with God a prize or privilege to be

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Servant of the Word of God," online: https://reformedforum.org/john-calvin-servant-of-the-word-of-god. Latin text: CO 53:266. Cf. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 24–25.

[37] See further Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 9–11.

> selfishly enjoyed, but laid aside his glory, divested himself of his glory, and humbled himself to serve (Phil 2:6–7).[38]

Certainly, this is Paul's own attitude, no doubt occasioned in part by his history of lethal opposition to the gospel. Far from imagining himself a worthy servant or spokesperson for Christ, he declares his own ministry to be, quite simply, an expression of divine mercy rather than an endorsement of any qualifications for the task (2 Cor 4:1).

The paradox of preaching the "Word of the cross" is that proclaiming God's gracious reversal of human rebellion and failure is not a matter of accurate theology or clear communication alone (as much as it must include both). Rather, to preach the cross requires that preachers submit personally to the same conditions as did the one whom they proclaim: just as Jesus yielded his life so that God could raise him from death, so in the sermon only God can give life to human words that would otherwise remain inert and ineffectual. To press the point further: for preachers to claim the right or ability to administer divine power—even more so for individual preachers to insist on their own power and importance—is nothing short of homiletical idolatry. As pastoral theologian Andrew Purves insists, "*It is not our ministries that make Christ present and possible; it is the present, living Christ who makes our ministries possible.*"[39]

If then the conditions of the cross apply as much to preachers as to the Lord whom we preach, then our preaching will prove effectual only as we acknowledge our own *non*-instrumentality, our definitive *inability* to convey or impart the life and salvation to which we bear witness. As Luther and Calvin both contend, faithful preaching is an exercise in humility or, more precisely, paradoxical non-utility—a renunciation of its own essentialism that defers to the Lordship of Jesus and the primary agency of the Holy Spirit. As Barth insists, "Preaching may not try to create the reality of God."[40] To be clear: it is not as if the gospel itself is powerless; on the contrary, preachers submit to the powerlessness of the crucified Lord only so as to point beyond themselves to the grace and power of God who alone is able to raise the dead. This is how the Apostle Paul responds when the saints at Corinth demand proof of his ministerial credentials:

> Not that we are competent [or "sufficient," ἱκανοί] in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence [ἱκανότης] comes from God. He has made us competent [ἱκάνωσεν ἡμᾶς] as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:5–6 NIV)

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[38] John R. W. Stott, "Power through Weakness (1 Corinthians 1:17–2:5)," in *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods*, ed. Michael P. Knowles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 138.

[39] Andrew Purves, *The Resurrection of Ministry: Serving in the Hope of the Risen Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 79, emphasis his.

[40] Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (1966; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 48.

Distinguishing between the glory and dignity of Christ, of Scripture, or of the gospel message, on the one hand, and the consideration due preachers, on the other, is subtle indeed. Likewise, the temptation for preachers to think of themselves "more highly than they ought" (Rom 12:3) is considerable, not least on account of what contemporary culture has taught us about the indispensable nature of human agency. Yet Paul implies that the efficacy or "success" of preaching depends in part on the willingness of preachers to trade their own dignity, even their homiletical agency, for the glory of Christ. As we have seen, both Luther and Calvin forthrightly distinguish between the two: theological humility and a full awareness of our own insufficiency, rather than personal esteem or desire for power, are the characteristics of faithful preaching. Just so, John Stott's conclusion on this point offers a fitting end to our own consideration of the question:

> At the very center of God's throne, which is a symbol of power, is a slain lamb, which is a symbol of weakness. In other words, power through weakness, dramatized by God on the cross or the lamb on the throne, lies at the very heart of ultimate reality and even of God himself. So I pray that this mind may be in us which was and still is in Christ Jesus. The Christian leaders and preachers needed in the world today are those who have seen the slain lamb on the throne and who follow him wherever he goes because they know that God's power will be revealed and demonstrated in their acknowledged weakness.[41]

[41] Stott, "Power through Weakness," 138–39.