

Feed My Sheep



A

**PASSIONATE
PLEA
for
PREACHING**

Eric J. Alexander

Joel R. Beeke

James Montgomery Boice

Sinclair B. Ferguson

Don Kistler

John MacArthur

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

John Piper

R. C. Sproul

R. C. Sproul Jr.

Derek W. H. Thomas

ENDORSEMENTS

“This is the most compelling plea to restore preaching to its time-honored status that I have ever read. This book deserves to be read and reread to light the fire of passion and conviction for all who would publicly proclaim, ‘Thus says the Lord.’”

—*Erwin Lutzer*

Senior Pastor, Moody Church
Chicago, Ill.

“This book combines the wisdom and experience of a number of the foremost preachers of the present day. If it is received as it ought to be, we may yet see a mighty change for good in the current spiritual scene. I hope it will be widely read.”

—*Iain Murray*

Co-founder, Banner of Truth Trust
Edinburgh, Scotland

“*Feed My Sheep* is not only a passionate plea for preaching, but also a thorough review of what constitutes good preaching. Every minister of God’s Word will profit from prayerfully reading this book.”

—*Jerry Bridges*

author of *The Pursuit of Holiness*
Colorado Springs, Colo.

“Here some of this generation’s most skilled shepherds provide passionate explanations of the priority and power of preaching God’s Word so that it is a feast for Christ’s sheep.”

—*Bryan Chapell*

President, Covenant Theological Seminary
St. Louis, Mo.

“There are a lot of books on preaching today, but not many good ones—this one is good. The subjects covered (and the accents of the authors as well) commend this volume to the minister and seminary student—and, indeed, to the church member who wants to learn what a real preaching ministry looks like, and who wants that for his church and from his pastor. It is spiritually challenging and topically pertinent.”

—*J. Ligon Duncan III*

Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church
Jackson, Miss.

“There has never been a greater need for good preaching, and this book will help. In it some of the best preachers I know share their passion for preaching biblical, practical, expositional sermons that inform the mind and touch the heart. *Feed My Sheep* will be a tremendous help to anyone learning to preach and will provide real refreshment for anyone in the gospel ministry.”

—*Philip Graham Ryken*

Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church
Philadelphia, Pa.

“When I was in seminary, my homiletics professor encouraged us to set a lifetime goal of reading at least one book each year on preaching. If you can read only one book this year on preaching, make it *Feed My Sheep*. Students and experienced preachers alike can find both timely and timeless teaching here. *Feed My Sheep* is simply one of the best books on preaching to come along in years.”

—*Don Whitney*

author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*
Kansas City, Mo.

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FOREWORD

J. Ligon Duncan III

The appearance of yet another book on preaching perhaps calls for some explanation. If the names on the title page are not sufficient in themselves to answer any query as to “why,” I suggest the following: preaching in the contemporary English-speaking world—and even in the evangelical and Reformed community—has not been impervious to the negative forces brought to bear on proclamation as a method of evangelism and discipleship. A video-drowned and educationally-challenged culture, and a church bent on accommodating herself to the dominant communication theories of the day, challenge the minister committed to the “foolishness of preaching.” He faces significant pressure to truncate and thin out his message, to entertain, to explore alternative media, and even to abandon historic modes of proclamation altogether. Such a milieu is discouraging in the extreme for the preacher (young or old, novice or master) who simply wants to be faithful. In this setting, every encouragement is useful. Indeed, it helps to beat this old drum and remind men that they are not crazy for wanting to remain faithful, to say to them, “Stay at the wheel; hold fast; keep on; don’t give up; you’re not alone.” For this reason alone, this book may prove to be a real comfort and inducement to servants of the Word.

The subjects covered (and the accents of the authors) commend this volume to the minister and seminary student—and, indeed, to the church member who wants to learn what a real preaching ministry looks like, and who wants that for his church and from his pastor.

R. Albert Mohler Jr. dares to implore the overstretched, multi-tasking modern technician and spiritual therapist called a “pastor” to prioritize his ministry in such a way that the preaching of the Word becomes so central that everything else must fall into place behind it. Surely that is a timely exhortation, and a welcome, balancing

emphasis to the siren calls of various lesser duties and congregational expectations.

James Boice helps buttress the preacher's resolve to stick with the "foolishness of preaching" in an age in which biblical authority is at a discount and congregations want their ears tickled instead of their hearts and minds challenged and instructed.

Derek Thomas's piece on expository preaching is a gem, one of the best short treatments of this issue you'll ever read. He bravely tips over some contemporary sacred cows and manages to advocate ably for the plan of consecutive, expositional preaching (that is, preaching verse by verse through books of the Bible)—surely a necessary emphasis in our time.

Joel R. Beeke makes a strong case for the classical Reformed view of ministerial piety and experiential preaching (a view which, it must be said, is out of step with many of the currents of present-day Reformed thought). A prayerful reading of this chapter may awaken us to the older, wiser counsel of our forefathers and bring a helpful corrective to the anti-experiential tendencies of our theological environment.

R. C. Sproul, in his usual engaging style, urges preachers to know the truth and teach it. He explores the possibilities of and problems in doing that, all the while drawing on the counsel of Martin Luther regarding the task of teaching the Word.

R. C. Sproul Jr. urges us to aim to preach the Word, and thus to preach to both the minds and hearts of our hearers. He also argues that while our preaching aspires to bring changed hearts and changed lives (under God's sovereignty, as His appointed means of grace), these are the fruits of changed minds. This nexus between our thinking and our living, also championed by the great Princeton theologians of the nineteenth century, is why the minister of the Word preaches to the mind and conscience of the hearer, and never bypasses the mind by a direct emotional appeal. Emotional experiences may be the product of truth worked deep into the soul, but the life emanates from the heart (which includes the mind and will in Bible thought), so that our thinking and desiring must be tapped if our living is ever to be right.

Sinclair Ferguson helpfully addresses the task of preaching to the heart. Reformed preachers aren't known for this in our day, but this was a hallmark of the older Reformed tradition, and Sinclair is himself a master of it. Lest one acciden-

tally get the impression that this book's cry for substance in preaching is a call for arid conveyance of information, this chapter will put you right. (Of course, there are many calls for heart preaching throughout this book.)

Don Kistler urges men to preach with authority, citing examples of biblical preachers who did so, the greatest of whom was our Lord. This, too, is an important counterbalance to the chatty, self-effacing, tentative, informal, dialogical banter that sometimes passes for preaching today.

Eric Alexander, one of the archetypal Reformed preachers of our time, provides us with a Pauline perspective on evangelistic preaching (for those who still harbor suspicions that Reformed evangelistic preaching is an oxymoron!).

John Piper's timely treatment of preaching to those who are in the seminary of suffering (and that's all of us!) is simply brilliant. In his characteristic, God-exalting, grace-conveying manner, Piper deals with a subject of vital importance to the gospel ministry. There are broken hearts under our noses every time we preach, and that means we need a biblical grid for speaking to them. Piper gives this to us, while also helping us to respond appropriately to our own suffering

John MacArthur concludes the book by pointing us away from the messenger to the message preached, surely an important word of spiritual counsel in our success-focused and personality-centered culture. We are not the reason the gospel works; the gospel is the reason the gospel works.

This is a good book to read on preaching; it is spiritually challenging and topically pertinent. We find here an assemblage of veritable titans of robust evangelicalism, all of whom share in common a firm commitment to and ability for expository preaching (that is, the faithful explanation and application of the Bible in which the text of Scripture supplies the matter of the preacher's exhortations rather than the preacher using the text as an occasion for his own expostulations, however helpful those may be). The authors' topics are timely, their counsel is wise, and they will richly and quickly reward the teachable reader.

—*J. Ligon Duncan III*
Senior minister
First Presbyterian Church
Jackson, Miss.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the late 1990s, Don Kistler assembled an outstanding team of contributors to pour out their hearts on a crucial issue—preaching. The result was *Feed My Sheep*, one of the outstanding lay-level introductions to true evangelical preaching to be found today.

The book became one of the top sellers for Dr. Kistler’s Soli Deo Gloria Publications, which was a tribute both to the men who graciously wrote chapters for the book and to Don’s foresight in bringing the issue to the attention of Reformed believers.

When Soli Deo Gloria became part of Ligonier Ministries in 2004, demand for *Feed My Sheep* continued to be strong. Clearly interest in the subject matter remained high. Thus, when supplies of the paperback edition began to run low, it was an easy decision to reissue the book anew in a well-deserved hardback format.

Most of the authors of the various chapters in *Feed My Sheep* are pastors, and they often speak directly to their fellow ministers. This conversation is far from “shop talk,” however. Every concerned layman can benefit from listening in as these gifted men discuss this vital topic.

It is our dual hope that this new edition of *Feed My Sheep* will help enflame a new generation of preachers to preach the Word and will educate a new generation of believers in the pew to understand what they ought to expect from the pulpit each Lord’s Day.

—*The Publishers*
Reformation Trust

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr. is the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He holds the M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Southern Seminary. He has appeared on such national television programs as *Larry King Live*, the *Today* show, and *Dateline NBC*, discussing contemporary issues. The *Chicago Tribune* has called him “an articulate voice for conservative Christianity at large.” He is the author of *Culture Shift: Engaging Current Issues with Timeless Truth* and *Desire and Deceit: The Real Cost of the New Sexual Tolerance*, and he has contributed to numerous other books. Dr. Mohler is an ordained Southern Baptist minister.

Dr. James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000) was pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pa., for more than 32 years. He was a member of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and an editor for *Christianity Today*. Dr. Boice founded the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology and had an extensive radio ministry through his “Bible Study Hour” program. His many books include commentaries on such biblical books as Genesis, Daniel, the Minor Prophets, John, Romans, Ephesians, and Philippians, as well as *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, and *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World*.

Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas, a native of Wales, is professor of systematic and practical theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Miss., where he also serves as minister of teaching at First Presbyterian Church. He is a council member of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and serves as editorial director of the Alliance’s Reformation21 online magazine. He graduated from RTS in 1978 and earned the Ph.D. from the University of Wales, Lampeter. He pastored in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for seventeen years before returning to the United States in 1996. He has written or edited numerous books, including *The Storm Breaks: Job Simply Explained*; *Wisdom: the Key to Living God’s Way*; *God Strengthens: Ezekiel Simply Explained*; and *Making the Most of Your Devotional Life*, based on the Ascent

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Dr. R. C. Sproul is founder, chairman, and president of Ligonier Ministries in Orlando, Fla. He is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves as minister of preaching and teaching at St. Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla. He has taught at several seminaries around the United States and is in constant demand as a speaker at conferences. His teaching is heard on the daily radio program *Renewing Your Mind*. He has written many books, among them *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, *Abortion: A Rational Look at an Emotional Issue*, *A Taste of Heaven: Worship in the Light of Eternity*, and *The Truth of the Cross*. He also served as general editor of *The Reformation Study Bible*.

Dr. R. C. Sproul Jr. is the founder, chairman, and teacher at the Highlands Study Center in Southwest Virginia. He serves as a pastor at Saint Peter Presbyterian Church, a church he planted in 1996. A graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary, he received his D. Min. in 2001. He is the author or editor of a dozen books, including *When You Rise Up: A Covenantal Approach to Homeschooling* and *After Darkness, Light: Essays in Honor of R. C. Sproul*. He is the husband of Denise and the father of seven children.

Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson is senior minister of the historic First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., and a distinguished visiting professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas. A native of Scotland, Dr. Ferguson earned three degrees, including his Ph.D., from the University of Aberdeen. He was ordained into the ministry in the Church of Scotland and spent some sixteen years in ministry in his homeland, including five years at St. George's Tron Church in Glasgow. He has been an editor and a trustee with the Banner of Truth Trust publishing house and is a prolific author. His published titles include *The Holy Spirit*, *Grow in Grace*, *Let's Study Philippians*, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel-Centered Life*, and, for children, *The Big Book of Questions and Answers* and *The Big Book of Questions & Answers About Jesus*. Dr. Ferguson is a member of the council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.

Dr. Don Kistler is a Bible teacher, author, and editor. He founded Soli Deo Gloria Publications, which published hundreds of classic Puritan titles, and now heads The Northampton Press. Dr. Kistler holds the M. Div. from Luther Rice Seminary and the D. Min. from Whitefield Theological Seminary, and is an ordained minister. Prior to entering the gospel ministry, Dr. Kistler coached high school and college football for more than 15 years. He is the author of the books *A Spectacle Unto God: The Life and Death of Christopher Love*, and *Why Read the Puritans Today?* and has contributed to numerous other books.

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Dr. John Piper is pastor for preaching and vision at the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn. He holds the B.Div. degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and a doctorate from the University of Munich. He taught biblical studies at Bethel College for six years before accepting his pastorate. Dr. Piper is known

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Dr. John MacArthur has served as pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, Calif., for nearly forty years and is heard on more than two thousand radio outlets worldwide on the radio program *Grace to You*. He is president of The Master's College and Seminary and has written numerous books, including *Charismatic Chaos*, *Faith Works*, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, *A Tale of Two Sons*, and *The Truth War*. He is also the author of the twenty-six-volume *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* series.

Chapter 1



THE PRIMACY OF PREACHING

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Evangelical pastors commonly state that biblical preaching is the hallmark of their calling. Nevertheless, a careful observer might come to a very different conclusion. The priority of preaching is simply not evident in far too many churches.

We must affirm with Martin Luther that the preaching of the Word is the first essential mark of the church. Luther believed so strongly in the centrality of preaching that he stated, “Now, wherever you hear or see this Word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica* [Christian, holy people] must be there. . . . And even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God’s Word cannot be without God’s people and, conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s Word.”¹

A Servant of the Word

The preacher is called to be a servant of the Word. That statement is an expression of a very proud and glorious lineage in Christian history. But it was made particularly well-known among preachers in 1941, when H. H. Farmer delivered a series of addresses on preaching and then published them under the title *The Servant of the Word*.²

Farmer represented the neoorthodox recovery of preaching. After a period of

theological and homiletical sterility, figures such as Farmer in England, Karl Barth in Switzerland, and others in the English-speaking world and in greater Europe sought to reassert the case for preaching. In *The Servant of the Word*, Farmer had a great deal to say about preaching; he argued for the affirmation of the Christian message through the continuation of preaching in the church. But despite his book's title, Farmer actually had very little to say about the Word. As a result, this neoorthodox argument for preaching was a house built on theological sand—it did not last.

Such an argument for preaching was made necessary by the assertion, which was widespread at the time, that preaching was outmoded as a form of Christian communication. It was seen as something the church could do without. Farmer maintained, however, that the practice of preaching was indispensable to Christianity.

Farmer got a number of things right. First, he argued for the unique power and preeminence of preaching in Christianity. The history-of-religion approach was very influential at that time. This school of thought held that preaching was part of virtually every religious system in one way or another. Farmer maintained, however, that such a claim simply was not honest. Preaching has a priority among Christians that it does not have in other faith traditions, and this is because of the very nature of the gospel.

Second, Farmer argued that the unique authority of Christian preaching comes from the authority of revelation and, in particular, the Bible. Contrary to those who maintained that revelation was basically internal, emotional, and relational, Farmer argued that it was external, historical, and given. He stated:

For Christianity is a religion of revelation; its central message is a declaration, a proclamation that God has met the darkness of the human spirit with a great unveiling of succoring light and truth. The revelation moreover is historical, that is to say, it is given primarily through events which in the first place can only be reported and affirmed. As we have already said, no merely internal reflection can arrive at historical events. If a man is to be saved, he must be confronted again and again with the givenness of Christ.³

This is an interesting statement. In it, we discover an argument that Christian preaching is distinguished by virtue of its grounding in revelation. It is the preaching of a God-given Word, not a human message (2 Peter 1:16)

My concern, of course, is not with what *H. H. Farmer* thought about the preacher as the servant of the Word. I want an apostolic authority, one inspired by the Holy Spirit, namely, the apostle Paul. I am concerned to discover what the great apostle thought about preaching and how he understood *himself* to be the servant of the Word. To make this discovery, I want to examine a portion of Paul's letter to the Colossians:

Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the Word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but now has been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we might present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. (Col. 1:25–29)⁴

This is a majestic passage. Paul writes here of his understanding of the apostolic ministry, of his stewardship of the mysteries of God, and of his task of proclaiming the Word of God. He speaks of his calling, his message, and the purpose of his preaching. This is Paul's declaration of his ministry: he sees himself as a servant of the Word.

We must notice what goes before this passage: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (v. 24). Here Paul states that he not only endures suffering but, of all things, rejoices in it. Why? The passage that follows gives the explanation, and it is gloriously counterintuitive. He rejoices in his sufferings because they have earned him the opportunity to preach the gospel. Paul sees his purpose on earth as preaching this Word and proclaiming Jesus Christ.

This passage, then, does not represent superficial triumphalism, but genuine gospel triumph. It is a sober triumph, because Paul acknowledges the sufferings he is enduring, but he also understands the victory that is assured in Christ. It is not Paul's triumph. It is Christ in Paul, the hope of glory.

Hidden Results, Frequent Controversies

In contrast, we see the exhaustion of preaching that has taken place in so many pulpits in the contemporary church. Rarely do we hear these days that a church is distinguished primarily by its preaching. When we hear people speak about their own congregations or make comparative remarks about other congregations, generally they speak about something other than preaching. They might speak of a church's "ministry." They might speak of specialized programs for senior adults, children, or young people. They might speak of a church's music. Sometimes they might speak of things far more superficial. Or perhaps they speak of the church's Great Commission vigor and commitment—and for that we are certainly thankful. But rarely do you hear a church described, first and foremost, by the character, power, and content of its preaching. This is because few preachers today are true servants of the Word.

I acknowledge that pastors have a certain "product envy." We envy those who build houses or sell cars or build great corporations or assemble automobiles. Why? It is because they have something tangible to show for their labor at the end of the day. They may be assembling widgets. They may be putting things in boxes, sealing them up, and sending them out. They may be cutting the grass. But in each case, they can see the product of their hands. A carpenter or an artist or a building contractor has something to which he can point.

But what about the preacher? The preacher is denied that satisfaction. We are not given the sight to see what we would like to see. It seems as if we stand up and throw out words and wonder what becomes of them. What, after all, is our product? Words, words, and more words. We sometimes feel as if we are flattering ourselves that people even remember what it was we had to say. We are chastened from even asking our own church members and fellow believers to recall our text halfway through the next week. Why? Because we are afraid that we will get that shocked look of anticipated response when a person of good intentions simply

says: “That was a fine message. I don’t remember exactly what it was about, and I have a very vague recollection of something you may have said, but I want you to know it was powerful.”

Paul responds to this, at least in part, in verse 23, when he writes, “[All of this is true,] if indeed, you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.” Paul understood that it was possible to hear in vain, and he hoped that it was not true of the Colossian church, that their response to his preaching was not just a succession of nice accolades and respectful comments.

Wouldn’t we like to have an assembly line of maturing Christians going out the door of the church, wherein we could at least see something and note some progress? Perhaps we could even statistically mark what kind of impact one sermon had over against another. But we do not have that sight; the pulpit ministry is largely a hidden work in the human heart. Such a work will bear good fruit, but it will take time to show.

Since the Lord established His church, there have been preachers—lots of preachers. The church has heard good preachers and poor preachers, faithful preachers and faithless preachers, eloquent preachers and pulpit babblers, pulpit humorists and pulpit bawlers, expository preachers, narrative preachers, thematic preachers, evangelistic preachers, literary preachers, sawdust preachers, postmodern preachers, seeker-sensitive preachers, famous preachers, infamous preachers—lots and lots of preachers. Accumulated, their work amounts to many millions of hours of preaching.

This represents a massive investment of human time, energy, and attention in the task of preaching, as well as countless books, conferences, and controversies. So what? The preacher may sound like Luther on Sunday, but he feels like bathing in Ecclesiastes on Monday morning: “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.” Preaching can seem like striving after the wind. We feel like the preacher of Ecclesiastes, who laments in 1:15, “What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.” Vanity. Such is life for those who are called to preach: Hard work with (often) no tangible, positive result.

Furthermore, this line of work has a nasty way of getting you into trouble. It seems that the more faithful one is in preaching, the more trouble one encounters.

Why? You did not come up with the Word. This is not your opinion. It is not something you are saying in order to offend people. You are simply preaching it. After all, that is your assignment. So you preach the truth, and the next thing you know you are on the front page of the papers. You are the subject of gossip for the deacons and their wives; even the youth group is up in arms over what you said. Conflict and controversy are always hard, and they tend to be correlated to faithfulness in preaching. The harder you work at it, the greater the risk.

Sometimes it happens that preaching the Word is met with antipathy and resistance. Why? Because “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12a). And as the Lord spoke to His prophet Isaiah, “[My Word] will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire” (55:11b). Sometimes this means that God uses the Word to rebuke and correct His people. And it is the preacher who must speak that word and reap the response. Sometimes preachers are ejected and fired. That is simply one of the realities of pulpit ministry.

And it is not just conflict and controversy. Sometimes, preachers experience persecution or even martyrdom. The man who wrote the letter to the Colossians was himself to be a martyr for the faith. In giving his final instructions to Timothy, he speaks of being poured out as a libation. He is ready to be offered as an offering. The sufferings of which he speaks in Colossians 1:24 are going to be realized in a martyrdom that is yet before him. There have been martyrs throughout the history of the church, but the blood of those martyrs has been the seed of the church, nourishing its growth.

Do you not imagine that your preaching priorities would become clear under persecution? After all, if you are forced to meet with your congregation in a catacomb, and if you know that you might be arrested at any time, you are going to weigh every word. There is not going to be any time for pulpit frivolity. There is not going to be any time to promote the next youth program. You are going to be concerned with getting down to the reality of the eternal Word of God.

Indeed, I will go so far as to assert that if you are at peace with the world, you have abdicated your calling. You have become a court preacher to some earthly power, no matter how innocuous it may appear. To put it straight: you have been bought! If there is no controversy in your ministry, there is probably very little

content to your preaching. The content of the Word of God is not only alive and active, it is sharper than any two-edged sword, and that means it does some surgery. Cutting leads to bleeding, and by God's grace healing then comes, but there is *always* controversy.

Paul is emphatically aware of this dynamic. He understands the reality of preaching. He understands the frustration, and he sometimes articulates it in his own words. Just read his letters. It is not as if he avoided controversy. In 1 Corinthians 1:14, he lays it right before them, even to the point of saying, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius." That's a rather strong word of rebuke. But this text hits us where we need it, because Paul not only endures all of this, he seems to revel in it, to celebrate it. Paul seems to understand all of the frustrations, the conflict, the controversy, and the trouble of preaching, and yet he says, as it were: "Bring it on. This is what I was made for. This is what I was called to do. This is what I am here for. Let's get at it!"

In Colossians 1:24, Paul even rejoices in his sufferings for the sake of the church, for the body of Christ and for His glory. "Of this church," Paul says, "I was made a minister. I was not made a minister of some hypothetical, non-problematic, non-controversial church. I was made a minister of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the body of Christ on earth, a chosen, purchased possession being sanctified even in the present, and struggling against the powers of sin and death and evil and darkness."

The Chief Priority of Ministry

Then Paul makes the point in verse 25 that the central purpose of ministry is the preaching of the Word. In the end, everything comes down to this. "Of this church, I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out *the preaching of the Word of God*" (emphasis added). The words "the preaching of" are not in the original language, but are inserted in some translations, and I believe that is a legitimate insertion. It is clear that what Paul means is that the ministry of the Word of God is achieved by the proclamation, the teaching, and the preaching of the Word of God.

Paul speaks in very strong language. He speaks of the fact that he was *made* a minister. He did not make himself a minister anymore than he saved himself

or appeared to himself on the Damascus Road. He was claimed, and as he was claimed, he was made a minister of the Word. In fact, he was made an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he understood his situation clearly. In 1 Corinthians 15:8, he explains that Christ appeared to him as “one untimely born.” He called himself the “least of the apostles” in verse 9, because he had persecuted the church. But God’s great triumphant sign was His choice of the chief persecutor of the church to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul goes on to say that he *received* this ministry according to the stewardship from God bestowed on him for the benefit of the Colossian church. I think this is critical to the pastor’s understanding of his calling and stewardship. We have a stewardship from God that is bestowed on us, not for our benefit but for the benefit of the church. It is as if we have been drafted, called out, assigned, and granted a stewardship that we do not deserve and are not capable of fulfilling. Nonetheless, God chooses such instruments. In 1 Corinthians 1:20, 27–28, Paul wrote:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are.

Why has God done these things? So that there may be no boasting except in God.

“We are stewards of the mysteries of God,” Paul says, according to the stewardship God bestowed on him “for the benefit of the church.” Why? What is the bottom line? What is the essential point? The point, as you can see in the purpose clause of Colossians 1:25, is, “so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the Word of God.” Paul’s intention was not to dabble a little bit in preaching; nor was it his intention merely to add preaching to his ministerial resume or itinerary in order that he might complete himself as a well-rounded minister of the gospel. Neither was it that he would eventually get around to preaching in the midst of other pastoral responsibilities. No, he said, “All of this, in the end, is

fulfilled, and is only fulfilled, in fully carrying out my responsibility of preaching the Word.”

When the minister of the gospel faces the Lord God as judge, there will be many questions addressed to him. There will be many standards of accountability. There will be many criteria of judgment. But in the end, the most essential criterion of judgment for the minister of God is, “Did you preach the Word? Did you fully carry out the ministry of the Word? In season and out of season, was the priority of your ministry the preaching of the Word?”

This is not to say that there are not other responsibilities or that there are not even other priorities for a pastor. However, there is one central, non-negotiable, immovable, essential priority, and that is the preaching of the Word of God. And Paul speaks to this so clearly when he states his purpose: “That I might fully carry out the preaching of the Word of God.”

Contrast the absolute priority of preaching in Paul’s ministry with the frequent confusion in today’s congregations. What we see is the marginalization of the pulpit. Some would tell us, “Preaching has its place, but let’s not let preaching get in the way of music, which is, after all, what draws people, and what establishes fellowship.” Perhaps many of us could testify of going to a church service where something was said or even printed in the bulletin to the effect that “first we are going to have a time of worship and then we are going to turn to preaching.” What do we think preaching is? It is the central act of Christian worship! As a matter of fact, everything else ought to build to the preaching of the Word, for that is when the God of whom we have been speaking and singing speaks to us from His eternal and perfect Word.

When we look at manuals, books, magazines, seminars, and conferences addressed to pastors, we notice that preaching, if included at all, is most often not the priority. When we hear people speak about how to grow a church and build a great congregation, few and far between are those who say it comes essentially by the preaching of the Word. We know why this is so. It is because growth comes by the preaching of the Word *slowly*, immeasurably, sometimes even invisibly. Hence we are back to the problem mentioned above. If you want to see quick results, the preaching of the Word just might not be the way to go. If you are going to define results in terms of statistics, numbers, and visible response, it just might be that

there are other mechanisms, other programs, and other means that will produce that faster. The question is whether other methods produce Christians.

Indeed, such techniques will *not* produce maturing and faithful believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Only the preaching of the Word yields that sort of fruit. Preaching is not a mechanism for communication that was developed by preachers who needed something to do on Sunday. It was not some kind of sociological or technological adaptation by the church in the first century in an effort to come up with something to fill the time between the invocation and benediction. It was the central task of preaching that framed not only their understanding of worship, but also their understanding of the church. And so it ought to be today.

Luther tried to go back to the first century and understand the essential marks of the church, and the first mark he listed was preaching. Where the authentic preaching of the Word takes place, the church is there, he said. By contrast, where it is absent, there is no church. No matter how high the steeple, no matter how large the budget, no matter how impressive the ministry, it is something other than the church.

Paul was fully determined to carry out his ministry of preaching the Word of God, and he did so in the face of the tyranny of the practical, the immediate, and the seemingly productive, because his confidence, after all, was in the Word of God.

The Content of Preaching

The essential content of Christian preaching, Paul says, is the mystery of the gospel. He writes that the preaching of the Word of God is seen in “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints” (Col. 1:26). A mystery? All around Asia Minor and the ancient world at this time, there were mystery religions and mystery cults, and there were some who thought, especially from the Roman perspective, that Christianity was just another one of them. After all, it had its mystery. And Paul said, “Guilty as charged.” Yet this is not a mystery of esoteric knowledge. This is not a gnosticism of elitist intellectuals. No, this is a mystery that was hidden by God until it could be publicly revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, in His death, burial, and resurrection. This is a mystery!

There is something deeply mysterious about Christian preaching, both in terms of its communication and in terms of its content. After all, what we preach is not what the world expects to hear. It is not a message they will hear anywhere else. No human wisdom, no school of philosophy, no secular salesman, no TV commercial speaker selling his CDs is ever going to come up with this on his own. Take a look at what is selling in the bookstores and who is hosting the big conferences. You'll realize that if you can tell people how to buy property and profit from its renovation, you can sell your messages. If you can tell people how to lose weight, you can sell just about anything. If you can tell people how to become handsome and wise, raise children who are well-behaved, and have their pets like them, you will find yourself to be a very popular speaker. You could put your DVDs and CDs together and write books that would be sold in bookstores and hawked on television.

But if you preach the gospel, you just might discover that it is not quite so popular. But it is powerful and it is mysterious. Why? Because it was a mystery that God hid from previous generations in order that it might be displayed publicly at the time of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look at Paul's statement in verses 26–27: “that is, the mystery which has been hidden from past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” As Paul quite personally knew, true preaching often leads to a riot. But the true preaching of the gospel is the preaching of the mystery of God. It was hidden, but now it is revealed to the Gentiles. The Gentiles had been understanding God's way about as correctly as someone using a Ouija board. But out of that darkness, out of that confusion, out of that sinful depravity, out of that backwardness, and out of that ignorance had come the shining light of the gospel, which is a mystery. It is the mystery of mysteries: Christ in us, the hope of glory.

There is glory, and this glory can even come to us, but it is not ours. There is a glory we should seek, but it is not glory for ourselves, but the glory of Christ. And that glory is most evident not just when Christ is preached as an abstract and objective truth, but when Christ becomes in us the hope of glory. Paul's concern was not just that his hearers would come to a correct cognitive understanding of the gospel, although that was essential. His concern was that the gospel would be

received by faith and that lives would be transformed. Paul's wonderfully symphonic presentation of the gospel in the book of Romans helps us to understand how sinners become saints, how we are justified by faith, and how we are adopted as sons and daughters of the Most High God.

Paul understood this to be a mystery. And if it is a mystery for the Jews, it is even more a mystery for the Gentiles. Indeed, in those central passages in Romans, Paul helps to explain how it is that the branch of the wild olive tree has been grafted onto Israel. It is a mystery, and if you do not get excited about preaching this, I'm not sure what will excite you! The gospel is simply the most transformative, the most powerful, and the most explosive message there is. If you have a problem finding something to preach, I guarantee that you are not preaching the gospel.

The gospel, according to Paul, is not simply offered to us on a platter for our convenience, our investigation, or our tasting. It is thrown at us like hot, blazing rocks spewed forth from the crater of a volcano. It is uniquely dangerous. Our task is to preach the Word and to make known the mystery.

Making known the mystery requires diligence—painstaking, systematic, rigorous, expository preaching. Why? Because we have to paint the entire canvas. Too many preachers are working out of one little corner of the great canvas of the work of God. There are some preachers who, as painters, only have certain colors. Some have the vivid colors. Some have the subdued colors. But in order to get the entire picture out there, what is required is rigorous expository preaching, because we have to connect the dots.

Painting the whole picture requires that we go into the Old and New Testaments, and we have to use the analogy of faith, that is, the analogy of Scripture, to interpret and apply Scripture by Scripture. We have to build upon knowledge so that the people of God are continually increasing in the knowledge of the Word of God, and so that the Word of God is taking root in them and growing in them. Only then will they begin to see the whole picture. They will understand its component parts. They'll understand the bright colors and the subdued hues. Indeed, they will understand the gospel. The mystery will come into focus.

That is the power of preaching. Focus will not come by any other means. Sadly, however, the doctrinal ignorance in the pulpits of today is being replicated in

the doctrinal ignorance and indifference of the pews, and the people are not even seeing the picture, much less getting it.

The Goal of Preaching

What does it mean to be a servant of the Word? It means that the promise of true preaching is to present every Christian complete in Christ. Paul says this in verse 28: “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.” How about that for a job description? What a challenge!

Note again what Paul says here: “We proclaim *Him*.” We preach Christ; we proclaim Him; we focus our message on Christ. We show Christ, the mystery of the ages, revealed in Scripture in the Old Testament and in the New. We proclaim Him at every opportunity and from every text. The best exhortation I know concerning this practice comes from the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who, in speaking to his students about expository preaching, told them to preach a particular text and, as soon as possible, make a beeline to the cross and show its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

In addition to proclaiming Christ, Paul says we are to admonish every man. This issue of admonishing is undervalued in our day, as exemplified by the precious little admonishment we hear in our pulpits. Paul, however, believed in admonishing. In fact, he described his ministry in many ways as admonishing. He even spoke of his ministry to the Ephesians as years of admonishment (Acts 20:31).

What does it mean to admonish? For one thing, it means to get in the face. These days, with our ideals of personal autonomy and personal privacy, we Americans feel that no one has the right to tell us what to believe, how to act, or what is correct in terms of behavior or patterns of thought and life. After all, we reason, “Our marriages are our marriages. We are free to make and to break them. Our vocations are between us and our employers. Our lives are our own. God does not have anything to do with them, and the church certainly better not stick its nose into them.” In our day, this would be seen as an intolerant and invasive imposition. Indeed, it would be seen as arrogant.

That is hardly the pattern in the New Testament. Under a ministry of authentic

Christian preaching, the Word is applied. I do not mean that it is applied in the sense that the preacher tries to find some way to make the text relevant. Rather, it is applied in that the text is directly addressed to persons in the congregation: “This is what you must do. This is what you must be.”

Isaac Backus, the great Baptist, was an exhorter before he was a preacher. In revolutionary America, the exhorter had a particular task in the congregation, and it was not one that was likely to be popular. After the preacher had preached, it was his responsibility to apply the message. This might mean going up to somebody and saying, “This is going to be how you change your behavior.” Backus was 15 years old when he took on this assignment. He would come up after the preaching and say, “Now, Widow Jones, this means you are going to have to change the way you raise your children.” Or, “Mr. Smith, this means you are going to have to change the way you do your business.” We have to be accountable to the Word of God, and we have to be accountable together.

Whether from the preacher or the believer in the pew, there simply is not much admonishment going on in today’s church. But the role of the preacher is to expose error and to reveal sin. The Word of God will do that, I promise you, as you preach the Word. It is simply there in the text. So we have to come into alignment with this text in terms of the way we think, the way we worship, and the way we live, or we are going to disobey. Those are the only options.

In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Paul told Timothy that in the preaching of the Word he was to rebuke and to correct. Correcting is not very politically correct. Why? Because you have to say that someone is wrong, that someone’s particular understanding needs to be brought into alignment with God’s Word. It means a behavior needs to be rebuked. Sadly, the general absence of church discipline in our age has often made the church just another volunteer association, except with a steeple.

Finally, Paul says that in addition to proclaiming Christ and admonishing every man, we must teach every man, specifically, the positive teaching of the Word of God with application. This is something that cannot be sequestered to Sunday school. We cannot assume that the teaching ministry of the church is fulfilled when we have a good children’s education system. The teaching of the Word of God should be cross-generational. It is to be progressive and accumulative, thereby growing saints toward maturity in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the teaching of the Word of God is to comfort, and it should do so, foremost, from the pulpit, for the pastor is, of all things, the teacher of the church.

The Authority of Preaching

Teaching assumes authority. After all, we have to know what it is we are to teach. Far too many preachers think this is an authority that is personal. “It is my authority, for I am the one who has been elected to teach,” or so the thought often goes. Others think that it is the authority of modern knowledge they bring in or the authority of secular consensus that is needed. But there is only one authority that undergirds and justifies the preacher’s teaching ministry, and that is the authority of the Word of God. This Word is inerrant, infallible, authoritative, and trustworthy. It is not only the foundation, but the substance, the content of our teaching and preaching. In too many churches today there is an uncertain sound from the pulpit, a multiple-choice curriculum of doctrine being offered. We have our own version of “values clarification,” but that is not the model of the apostle Paul. It was not his understanding of his stewardship and it is not the nature of our calling.

The awesome power of authentic preaching is seen in the fact that God uses preaching to present His saints complete in Christ. How are Christians to grow? How are they to be matured? How is the process of Holy Spirit-directed sanctification to be seen in them? It happens by the preaching of the Word.

The fruit of the preaching of the Word will be made visible. Our product envy will be very temporary. For when we get to glory, we will see the product of our preaching. We will see saints clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We will see men and women, brothers and sisters in Christ, made complete in Him. When we measure whether or not we are successful, it must be by this criterion, namely, are we seeing the saints growing to completeness in Jesus Christ?

Paul concludes by stating in verse 29 that it is for this purpose that he struggles, a struggle not in his own strength, but according to Christ’s power which works mightily within us. The apostle knew that he was not up to this, but Christ was. Paul’s authority was nothing, but Christ was all-sufficient, as revealed in His Word. This means we have to devote ourselves to preaching not as one priority among others, but as our central and highest priority.

Faithful Servants of the Word

What does it mean to be a servant of the Word? First, if we are to be servants of the Word, the priorities of our ministry must be such that the preaching of the Word is central—*everything else* must fall into place behind this priority. Are there other important tasks of ministry? Of course. Are there other important priorities of the church? Of course. But your personal schedule must reflect the priority of preaching, showing just how serious you are about it. You can find out quickly what a church believes about preaching by looking at its calendar for worship and other activities, and you can find out what a preacher believes about preaching by looking at his schedule. Every other task and priority must be subordinated to that first priority, the preaching of the Word—with the promise that it will balance all the others. Everything comes into proper balance because we do not have to worry about balancing a schedule, balancing a budget, or balancing priorities when we understand that the Word of God will establish those priorities. Then everything else will become clear.

Second, our congregations must be aware of this priority and honor it. The congregation needs to understand that preaching is not merely the preacher's responsibility. It is the congregation's responsibility to see that it is fed, so it is the congregation's responsibility to call a preacher who will preach the Word. Then it is the congregation's responsibility to hold him accountable for that preaching and to measure his effectiveness and his faithfulness to, of all things, the pulpit ministry.

Third, if we are to be servants of the Word, our preaching must be truly expository. That is, it must truly expound and apply the text of Scripture, declaring the Word of God to the people of God with admonishment, then trusting the Holy Spirit to apply that Word. Preaching the Word of God takes rigorous exposition—by which I do not mean just choosing the texts we like, the texts we think will preach, or the texts that will fall on all the right ears, but the text as it stands. I believe in verse-by-verse exposition, because otherwise we would never get to some of those challenging texts that are just so difficult to preach. But they, too, are the inerrant, infallible, and authoritative Word of God. They are profitable for our preaching and for our teaching, and how we deal with them is a measure of our stewardship. As noted above, this kind of preaching can get a man into serious

trouble, and the lack of trouble ought to be a signal that, perhaps, this kind of preaching is not found in his pulpit.

In the final analysis, we will know how faithful we have been only in glory. When we see our Savior face to face, and when we see all the saints to whom we have preached, we will discover whether or not our preaching contributed to their completeness in Christ. Paul said that all of the suffering, the diligence, the hard work, the controversy, and the martyrdom was for the glory of preaching the gospel. And he said the purpose behind it was to see every man, every Christian, perfected in Christ and presented to our Lord and Savior. Failure at this task is simply too awful to contemplate.

Endnotes

- ¹ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," in Luther's *Works [LW]*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (vols. 1–30) and Helmut T. Lehmann (vols. 31–55), vol. 41, *Church and Ministry III*, ed. Eric W. Gritsch, trans. Charles M. Jacobs and Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 150.
- ² Herbert H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1941).
- ³ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁴ All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New American Standard Version.