

## COMMENTS ON THE CENTRALITY OF PREACHING IN THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

*by Alan D. Strange*

### Introduction

WE LIVE IN an era in which preaching is continually undervalued, unappreciated, and even despised. Preaching has, in the popular mind, become synonymous with diatribe or harangue, as in “Don’t preach to me.” To the degree that preaching is despised, the Word is also neglected and dismissed. My usage of “Word” here is intentionally ambiguous, referring both to our Lord Jesus Christ, the living Word, and the Bible, the inscripturated Word that speaks of the living Word. It is my conviction that there is no essential separation between the living Word and the written Word, because the Spirit who inspired the holy prophets and apostles to pen the Word is the Spirit who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son and who, by virtue of his procession, both ontologically and economically, sustains a vital relationship to the Word, living and written.<sup>1</sup> It is also this same

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<sup>1</sup>The Eastern and Western Church agree that the Holy Spirit proceeds, in some fashion, from the Father and the Son in regards to the mission of the Spirit at and after Pentecost. The Eastern Church, however, has often failed to appreciate the integral connection between the mission of the Spirit, in his *opera ad extra*, and the ontological relationship of the Spirit to the Word. As Bertrand de Margerie puts it in his important work, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Still River, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1982), p. 170, “The Spirit speaks about the Word because he is first of all in his very being the eternal

Spirit who inspired the written Word (that speaks of the living Word) who illumines that Word to the church, particularly as that Word is preached.<sup>2</sup> This virus of low esteem for Christ, his Spirit-inspired Word revealed and the Spirit-illumined Word preached has sadly not failed to infect the visible church, even in its evangelical and, sad to say, Reformed expressions. In a culture which, as David Wells has put it, has “no place for truth,”<sup>3</sup> it is unsurprising that the regular proclamation of the truth Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day in the pulpits of the land should be greeted with indifference if not hostility.

When church members seek to assess the disease that afflicts the body ecclesiastical—surely we would all agree that there is a need for more love to God and our neighbor in our congregations—they often search for a solution to our spiritual malaise by suggesting changes: “What we need here is some excitement (drama, dance, livelier music)”<sup>3</sup>; or “What we need here is some organization (more specialized ministry programs,

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Listening to the one and only Word.” While we cannot fully explore all the Christological and Pneumatological implications of the *filioque* in this article, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son both ontologically and economically is important for understanding that the Spirit’s work has always been connected to the consubstantial relationship between Father and Son in the most intimate of ways and that the Spirit, by Word and sacrament, takes us up into the life of the Triune God. In preaching the Spirit who revealed the Word and who has always been sent by the Word applies the Word powerfully to the hearts of God’s people. See also Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 153-196; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 72-78; Gerald Bray, “The *Filioque* Clause in History and Theology” in *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983): 91-144; and Daniel J. Nodes, “Dual Procession of the Holy Spirit” in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52:1 (1999): 1-18.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Richard Gaffin, “Challenges of the Charismatic Movement to the Reformed Tradition, parts 1 and 2,” *Ordained Servant* v. 7, nos. 3-4 (July, October 1998): 48-57, 69-74, for an excellent discussion of the relationship of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the resurrected, ascended Christ, especially Gaffin’s discussion on 1 Corinthians 15:45b, “The last Adam became a life-giving spirit,” pp. 49ff.

<sup>3</sup>David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) is a stinging indictment of evangelicalism’s disdain for theology and sound preaching.

committees, socializing, etc).” The subtext of such sentiments is often, “The last thing we need here is more of that boring preaching.” And too often, they are right. Such preaching as they have—even in some Reformed churches—is just that: boring, dry, dull, academic, lacking in life, heart, and passion.<sup>4</sup> All this is to say that preachers cannot blame parishioners entirely for the lack of interest in preaching that is too frequently demonstrated in our churches. To be sure, people want their ears tickled. They want to hear smooth things. And they do not want to be confronted with their sin and with their responsibility. Yet, how often do we as preachers fail to preach in a way that is calculated to engage the hearts of our hearers? How much “reformed” preaching is passionless, droning, and disconnected from the hearts and lives of the hearers? As Samuel Davies, the pre-eminent Presbyterian preacher in colonial America, complained in his assessment of the lackluster preaching that prevailed among the Anglican clergy of Virginia: “They address themselves to perishing multitudes in cold blood.”<sup>5</sup> Are not even Reformed preachers of our day often guilty of such “cool and languid” preaching? Is part of the reason that there is so little taste for preaching the lack of good preaching? I would argue that many in the pews have a low view of preaching, at least in part, because there is a paucity of the kind of preaching that we ought to have, the kind of preaching, in fact, that the church professes to believe in according to her doctrinal standards.

It is unpleasant to admit but also undeniable that a low view of preaching prevails in many of our circles that practically manifests itself in the demand for drama, dance, and other

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<sup>4</sup>Even a cursory survey of journals like *Preaching, Homiletics, Leadership*, etc., over the last several years reveals widespread agreement that there is a “crisis” in preaching, i.e., that preaching is thought by many to be no longer a relevant tool of communication and that such preaching as we have fails to communicate with our postmodern age. Cf. Henderson’s *Culture Shift*, reviewed on pages 270-82 in this journal.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical* (First Series), I (1850; reprint, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), 213.

amusements that will fill the coffers and fill the pews.<sup>6</sup> Even if this low view of preaching stems from our congregants having heard much poor preaching, the solution is not to eliminate preaching, but to combat poor preaching and labor for good preaching. Rejecting preaching places parishioners in a precarious position and exposes them to many dangers. The chief danger to which our people are exposed in their rejection of preaching is that they are tempted to embrace not the Word but the image.<sup>7</sup> God has given us a second commandment, in part, because he wants his people not to be a people of the image, a people who seek to worship him according to their own imagination, but instead a people of the Word, a people who are content to receive that which he has given to us by his fatherly hand and to turn neither to the right nor to the left from his holy Word as faithfully preached by his servants called thereunto. In a culture dominated by TV and MTV, it is crucial that we in the church maintain our heritage as a people of the Word. But to do this we must have a high view of the Word: Christ (the living Word), the Bible (the written Word), and preaching (the living exposition and application of the Word). Preaching, in other words, must remain central in the church if the people of God are to remain faithful to their calling to be a people of the Word. A famine of good preaching means hungry, parched congregations. Without biblical preaching, God's people will wither on the vine spiritually.

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<sup>6</sup>Greg Laurie in "The Measure of a Message: Always to Test the Word in your Words" (at [www.preachtheword.org](http://www.preachtheword.org)) has an interesting discussion of how preaching is thought to be insufficient to hold the attention of the "baby busters" and, therefore, must be supplemented with videos and other forms of entertainment.

<sup>7</sup>Our seemingly insatiable appetite for entertainment and the consequent exaltation of image that has occurred because of it is well-chronicled in works like Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985) and several of the volumes in the *Turning Point Christian Worldview Series*, published by Crossway Books (Wheaton, IL), especially the volumes by Billingsley, Myers, and Veith (the last writing on literature, the arts, and postmodernism).

## Preaching in the Westminster Standards

That preaching has such a central place in the life of the people of God is no mere private opinion. It is the settled conviction of the church. Readers might immediately call to mind statements in earlier Reformed confessional documents, such as Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism or Belgic Confession Articles 29-31 or Head I:3 of the Canons of Dort. The Westminster Standards, and the Larger Catechism in particular, likewise enunciate a high view of preaching. Perhaps a survey of Westminster on preaching would prove helpful in restoring to all of our confessional churches, both Reformed and Presbyterian, a high view of that holy task which in the past God has been pleased to use in mightily building his church. A survey of church history also unfailingly reveals that the times of greatest blessing in the history of God's people, beginning in the Old Covenant, have been those times in which faithful men of God have carefully expounded God's Word to the growth and benefit of God's people.<sup>8</sup>

Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter, WCF) XXV:2 defines the catholic visible church and XXV:3 declares: "Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto." In this concise summary of the goal of the church, the WCF clearly sees that the work of the church is to gather—often referred to as "evangelism"—and to perfect—often referred to as "discipleship"—those who are God's own. So that the church may gather in and build up the elect, God has given to the church as a visible organization the ministry of the Word and sacraments—or as the WCF puts it, "the oracles and ordinances of God." Where, one may ask, does preaching come into the picture?

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<sup>8</sup>This is seen, both positively and negatively, in the American context in Iain Murray's *Revival and Revivalism* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994).

*The Place of Preaching in the Life of the Church*

The question of the place of preaching in the life of the church is particularly taken up in the Larger Catechism (hereafter, LC), Questions and Answers 154-160. It is clear from this set of questions and answers that the church in her confession sees preaching as the primary vehicle used by God to build his church. LC 154 asks, “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?” The answer focuses on what Presbyterians have come classically to regard as the means of grace: “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation are all his ordinances; especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.” LC 161-177 focus on the communication of Christ’s benefits to his church through the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. LC 178-196 focus on the communication of Christ’s benefits to his church through prayer. Before those concluding questions, though, in the Larger Catechism, LC 155-160 focus on the communication of Christ’s benefits to his church through the Word, especially the Word as preached by the minister, the mouthpiece of God.

*The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of the Church*

LC 155 hones in on the question, “How is the Word of God made effectual to salvation?” The answer is, in this writer’s opinion, the clearest statement on the place of preaching in the life of the church to be found in the Reformed confessions: “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith

unto salvation.” In the clamor for novelty and fun that pervades our evangelical culture, how much of the reality of this marvelous statement do we grasp? Few churches today are filled with people who in a constant, ongoing way have the view of preaching set forth in LC 155. Many in our Reformed churches may in theory hold what is taught in LC 155, but the general moral and spiritual torpor that pervades our congregations evidences that few really take to heart the high view of preaching enunciated in the Standards. Few preachers do and thus preach with so little power and unction. Few congregants do and thus live with so little of the blessing of heaven that ought to sweeten our lives. Even the most sanctified preachers and parishioners—and God alone knows who they are—have but little of the power of preaching manifested in their lives.

Notice that LC 155 teaches us that the Spirit does use the reading of the Word, as distinguished from the preaching of the Word, as effectual to our salvation. But the Spirit “especially” uses the preaching of the Word as a means to draw us to Christ. This is not in any sense a denigration of the importance of reading the Word in worship. In fact, LC 156—in answer to the question “Is the Word of God to be read by all?”—grants such importance to the public reading of the Word that it affirms, “all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation” Yet, LC 156 continues, “all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families; to which end the holy Scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages.” The thrust of this question, taken together with LC 155, is not that God does not use the Word read privately and in families and even publicly in church as an effectual means of salvation, but that God centrally and primarily blesses the preaching of the Word. To put it another way, never is the Word so clear to our hearts and never is the Word a greater blessing than when we hear it faithfully preached. The Word, in other words, is not given primarily to individuals to read privately or even to hear read publicly. It was given, rather, to the church as a covenant community to be received in community and

understood in community, especially as that Word is faithfully preached.

*Preaching and the Perspicuity of Scripture*

It is important to put together LC 155 with WCF I:7, the Confession's teaching on the perspicuity of Scripture. There we are told: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." This important section is often misunderstood, I suspect. Some teach that the doctrine established by WCF I: 7 is that while there are difficult things in the Scriptures, the essential things can be understood by regular folks without the need for some ecclesiastical interpreter. Indeed, we do not need a magisterium instructing the church in a hierarchical fashion. But we do need those gifted of God and called by God to church office agreeing together on the essential dogma of the church. This is what it means to be a confessional church. Most American evangelicals, however, have debased the Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture to "Jesus, my Bible, and me," failing to understand that the Scriptures were given to the church to be understood by the church as a church and not to be subjected to the whim of individualistic and idiosyncratic interpretation.

That subjectivism and the conviction that "one's man opinion about the Bible is as good as another's" reigns in our day is evident by two developments: an ever-increasing number of modern Bible translations and the burgeoning "specialty-Bible" industry. Many of the theories of translation that undergird modern versions stem from a low view of the church and a low view of preaching. How so? The translation theories employed reveal that the goal of translation is to make the text so clear that



you do not need a preacher to exposit it.<sup>9</sup> But you always “need” a preacher, insofar as the Spirit is pleased, by the foolishness of preaching, to gather and perfect the church. This is particularly evidenced by those versions that are paraphrastic or that otherwise seek so strenuously to translate the Bible text into contemporary parlance that they overshoot the mark and end up interpreting rather than faithfully translating. A high view of preaching as is found in the Westminster Standards does not demand that the translation do the preacher’s job—expositing the text—but that the translation should be an exact as possible rendering of the Hebrew and Greek texts. The specialty-Bible industry also often assumes that they must do the job that Christ has given to his church to do.<sup>10</sup> I do not at all argue that there is no place for study Bibles or modern translations but that this should never be undertaken with the aim of rendering preaching passé.

My point is that we can no more allow these to stand in the place of preaching than we can Bill Bright’s popular video, “Jesus.” Bright believes that the great need of the hour is to get this video into as wide a circulation as possible.<sup>11</sup> He genuinely teaches that this video is tantamount to proclamation and that getting this out into all the world is the same, if not better, given

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<sup>9</sup>As an example, the translators of the NIV sought to translate so that any reader at the seventh-grade level might be able to understand the text without ministerial assistance. Subsequent translations, like the New Living Bible and the Contemporary English Version go much further in the liberties that they take with the text.

<sup>10</sup>A cursory examination of a popular Christian book catalog reveals titles such as *The NKJV Study Bible*, *The NIV African American Study Bible*, *The KJV Promise Keepers Bible*, *The KJV Bride’s Bible*, *The NIV Women’s Devotional Bible 2*, and *The NIV Seniors’ Devotional Bible*. Such specialty Bibles not only tend to supplant the ministry of the church, which is face-to-face, but also foster the further Balkanization of the church.

<sup>11</sup>In literature that he has mailed out, Bright claims that this film presents Christians with an unprecedented opportunity to spread the gospel, to reach into places that we’ve never reached. But the film is not preaching the gospel; rather it is a dramatization of events recorded in the Gospel writers. This is not at all the same as preaching the gospel.

the interests of our era, as going out and preaching the gospel to the world. Who would have imagined, even a generation ago, that Protestants would be arguing for the replacement of Word with image? Bright's film, particularly given its stated purpose, is a violation of the second commandment. It is a clear replacement of Word with image: rather than exhibiting Christ in preaching, Bright seeks to exhibit him through dramatization. But our Lord did not say "Go through the world and dramatize the gospel" (the theatre had a prominent role in the Hellenistic world).<sup>12</sup> Rather, he instructed his church to go throughout the world and preach the gospel.

### The Role of the Holy Spirit in Preaching

Turning our attention back more narrowly to the text of LC 155, we see that the Spirit makes especially the preaching of the Word an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners. As the Word is preached, the Holy Spirit

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<sup>12</sup>The plays of Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and other Greek authors, as well as the Roman authors, were quite popular in the ancient world. One might argue that the church should have adapted the theatre or the circus or even the games for the communication of the gospel. This is our approach nowadays, to take whatever the world does and give it a "Christian" spin: if heavy metal music (or grunge, alternative, hip-hop, ska, etc.) reaches lots of young folk, well let's make sure that we have "Christian" heavy metal to reach those folk. Many would demur that these alternative forms of gospel communication do not replace the worship and preaching of the church but in many cases they do, with preaching in particular seeming boring in comparison. Bright and others reason that if movies reach so many, why not bring the gospel to them through this medium? Indeed, it is explicitly stated that this medium is superior to preaching because it not only tells the gospel story, it shows the gospel story as well. What all these forms of entertainment have in common, both ancient and modern, is that a high level of skill—both acting skills and technical skills—are required to "pull off" a Greek theatre production or a major motion picture. In contrast to this is the worship of the church, which, unlike the drama or the oratory of the ancient world, is neither elaborate nor highly ornamental. With the universalizing of the gospel in the New Covenant era, we have no set meeting place but worship God in Spirit and in truth in simple settings with plain preaching, using for our "drama" simple elements of water, bread, and wine (cf. WCF, VII.5-6).

works in, by, and through the Word, as Psalm 19:8 has it, “enlightening the eyes.” Paul was sent preaching to the Gentiles, we read in Acts 26:18 “to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in [the Lord].” Postlapsarian man is born blind and dead in sin, by virtue of Adam’s first sin and his own actual sin (LC 21-29). Fallen, unregenerate man suffers from “blindness of mind” (LC 28). Even as Christ gave sight to the blind man in John 9, so the Spirit gives spiritual sight to his people so that every believer may say with John Newton, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

### *The Spirit’s Work of Enlightening*

The LC elsewhere addresses the question of the enlightening work of the Spirit that goes on in preaching, particularly in its treatment of the *ordo salutis* in LC 58-90. LC 67 expands on this initial work of the Spirit in the hearts of the regenerate in asking the question, “What is effectual calling?” Effectual calling is the Spirit’s incipient inward work, making effectual the Word, particularly the preaching of the Word: “Effectual calling is the work of God’s almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by His Word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.” As a result of this effectual call of the Spirit of God, the elect repent and believe, exercising what the LC calls justifying faith (LC 72) and repentance unto life (LC 76).

The Spirit’s gift of faith and repentance cited in LC 72 and 76 corresponds with the Spirit’s making preaching effectual in LC 155. LC 155 says that the Spirit uses preaching to convince and

humble sinners, i.e., to show them that they are indeed wretched, miserable, and doomed, apart from union with Christ (LC 65-66). When a sinner is enlightened to see his native fallen condition before a holy God, the Spirit convinces him that there is in his flesh no good thing and that in himself the sinner is hopeless and helpless. This is repentance unto life, wrought by the Spirit, particularly through the preaching of the Word: “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the apprehension of God’s mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavoring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.”

One cannot truly be in the exercise of the repentance herein defined without walking in justifying faith, since repentance itself entails an “apprehension of God’s mercy.” LC 155 tells us not only that the Spirit enlightens, convinces, and humbles sinners, but also that the Spirit, especially through the preaching of the Word, drives sinners out of themselves and draws them unto Christ. It is precisely this driving and drawing work that is described in LC 72 in its definition of justifying faith: “Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.” So through preaching the Spirit of God is pleased to effectually call the elect and to grant them faith and repentance, i.e., to convert them. The Lord then ordinarily carries on his converting of souls through the ministry of the Word, particularly the preaching of the Word.

The repenting and believing that is begun in conversion is continued in sanctification. To be sure, in the initial act of faith in

the heart of the regenerate sinner, God declares that regenerate sinner to be justified. Thus conversion—the first “turning to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9)—results in the acts of justification (LC 70) and adoption (LC 74), and the beginning work of sanctification (LC 75). Sanctification involves, in large measure, a continuation and increase of the faith and repentance already in exercise and is enlarged in no small degree by the faithful preaching of the Word. Once again, here we see in LC 155 that preaching, by the powerful application of the Spirit to the hearts of the elect, brings forth not only those initial acts of faith and repentance that we associate with evangelism (the gathering of the church), but also those continuing acts of “conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will” that we associate with discipleship (the perfecting of the saints). The Holy Spirit is pleased to use faithful preaching to make men Christians and to grow men as Christians, as the remainder of LC 155 says, “of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.”

A high view of preaching as set forth in the Westminster Standards, it should be said, does not mean that preaching is the only way in which the Spirit makes the Word an effectual means of salvation. Nothing in this article should be understood as maintaining that preaching is the only way that the Spirit uses the Word to gather and perfect the saints and that there is no evangelism and discipleship apart from that which goes on in preaching. Certainly, as regards the ministry of the Word, there are other ways in which the Spirit is pleased to make the Word an effectual means of salvation: personal, familial, and corporate catechizing; personal, familial and corporate reading and discussion of the Word of God; and memorization of and meditation on the Word of God. All Christians are to be ready to give an answer to those who inquire as to the ground of the

Christians' hope.<sup>13</sup> We ought all to be ready to speak seasonable words and to point folk to Christ. It is not that we ought to have only preaching. We should have preaching plus the vigorous witness that preaching engenders. In fact, unless one is active and engaged in a faithful use of all the means of grace both publicly and privately—other than preaching—preaching will have little impact on the hearers. To come to hear the Word preached without a prepared heart, a heart that thinks upon the Word other than when hearing it preached, is to receive little of what one might otherwise receive from faithful preaching. Thus LC 156 asserts that “although all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families: to which end, the Holy Scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages.”

Thus, all are to make use of the Word of God and not the preacher only. The Spirit does use the personal witness of believers in building the church. He does use the distribution of gospel literature and other commentaries on the Word in building the church. That we all ought to read the Bible was established in LC 156. This holy obligation is so important that LC 157 proceeds to tell us how the Word of God is to be read: “The holy Scriptures are to be read with an high and reverent esteem of them; with a firm persuasion that they are the very Word of God, and that he only can enable us to understand them; with desire to know, believe, and obey the will of God revealed in them; with diligence, and attention to the matter and scope of them; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer.” Thus we are to

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<sup>13</sup>It is commonly but wrongly taught that the Great Commission applies to all Christians as individuals. But what Christians, other than ministers of the Word and sacraments, are called to teach authoritatively and to baptize? The Great Commission belongs to the church as a whole and is to be carried out by her officers and members as is appropriate to their gifts and callings. Everyone, however, is commanded to engage in the task of apologetics, or as 1 Peter 3:15 puts it, to “be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.” An excellent manual for the performance of the apologetic task may be found in Greg Bahnsen’s *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1996).

regard the Word of God in our closets, at the family altar, as we speak of Christ at school, in the barracks, on the job, and in our congregations.

Preachers must do all that is within their power to encourage the people in the serious study of the Word. But preachers must never fail to understand that the Spirit of the living God, as much as he is pleased to make the Word in all its right uses effectual to the salvation of the elect, is pleased *especially* to make the preaching of the Word effectual to the salvation of the elect. It is the conviction of the church in her confession and catechisms that this is so. Insofar as the Word stands first in the means of grace and in the marks of the church, the preaching of the Word is the activity that the Holy Spirit particularly blesses in the life of the church. If we are to be what we ought to be in the church, we must know the blessing of the Holy Spirit, above all, on the preaching of the Word.

### *Preaching and the Efficacy of the Spirit*

So what we need is the Spirit of God, as LC 155 teaches, making the preaching of the Word an effectual means of salvation in its various aspects: calling God's elect, bestowing the gifts of faith and repentance upon them, and sanctifying them by their growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. Is this not always happening in the hearts of God's people? Does not the Holy Spirit always make effectual the preached Word so that the church will continue to gather and perfect the saints? Yes, he does. But that Spirit is sovereign so that he makes the preaching of the Word effectual in differing degrees in different people at different times. Isaiah was commissioned to herald the truth to a people who would hear, but not understand, who would see, but not perceive (Isa. 6:9). There was no deficiency in Isaiah's message that insured failure. Indeed, Isaiah faithfully proclaimed the message that God gave to him, but it was not in God's sovereign plan that Israel would hear that message. In fact, God made it clear to Ezekiel that he was to preach the message that

God gave to him whether or not Israel received it (Ezek. 2:7). There is then a sense in which the preacher is to preach the divine message and leave the results to God.

We can be thankful that God in his mercy does, even in the dry seasons, give hearing to a remnant (as in Elijah's time) and that he also sends times of refreshing in which many of his people are renewed and reformed by the preaching of the Word. In Jehoshaphat's day, for instance, the priests went throughout the land teaching (2 Chron. 17:7-9), even as in Josiah's reign reformation came through the proclamation of the law (2 Chron. 34:14ff.). In Ezra's time, the Levites "read distinctly from the book, in the law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped [the people] to understand the reading" (Neh. 8:8). God, who is sovereign, and decrees all that comes to pass, is pleased to bless the preaching of the Word more fully and clearly at some times than at other times. We see the reality of the sovereignty of God in preaching not only in the Old Testament but in the New and throughout the entire history of the Christian church. Clearly God powerfully attended the ministry of Chrysostom, Wycliffe, Luther, Edwards, Davies, and Spurgeon, to name but a few. Many preachers of whom we know little or nothing have also surely had their preaching greatly blessed of God. My point here is singular: unless God blesses the preaching of the Word, the hearers will remain unblessed. It is never the province of preachers to reason that the age in which one lives is unfaithful and thus the preacher may slacken his efforts. Whether or not God chooses to bless our preaching, we must execute that sacred task not with an eye to whether we achieve desired "results" but whether or not we give our very best in the service of the master.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Thus our preaching must not founder on the Scylla of Arminianism, which would place all the responsibility upon the preacher to press for "decision" (a good preacher being able to secure many such "decisions"), or the Charybdis of hyper-Calvinism in which the preacher may take little care to preach as convincingly as he can, excusing himself by claiming that even poor preaching is used by the Spirit. To be sure, the Spirit does, thankfully, make even poor preaching an effectual means of salvation to God's people. But this does not mean that the preacher must not do all within his power to preach as



That God chooses to bless the preaching of the Word more or less at various times diminishes neither the responsibility of the preacher nor the parishioner. If we live in an era in which comparatively little blessing seems to accompany the preaching or hearing of the Word, we may not simply conclude that neither pastors nor parishioners need bear no responsibility in the matter. Simply because there are times when powerful preaching and/or faithful hearing are at a low ebb, we are not exempt from doing all within our power to be good preachers and hearers, as we find described particularly in LC 159 and 160. Acknowledging then that it is the Spirit and the Spirit alone who makes preaching effectual to salvation, how does he do it? By equipping men to be good preachers and congregants to be good hearers. LC 159 takes up the question, “How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?” LC 160 addresses the question, “What is required of those that hear the Word preached?” Before addressing the question of how the Word is to be preached or how it is to be received, perhaps it is best to spend some time examining the question that LC 158 addresses: “By whom is the Word of God to be preached?”

### *The Qualifications and Calling of the Preacher*

Why does the Larger Catechism concern itself with the question of the qualifications and calling of the preacher? Because the Larger Catechism is careful to affirm, along with historic Christianity and Reformed Protestantism, that the preaching of the Word that the Spirit is pleased to make effectual unto salvation is a ministry committed to certain men who are recognized by the church as gifted and called to such ministry. This may seem a rather obvious if not to say commonplace observation. Yet, if the Westminster Standards are careful at numerous points to militate against the errors of Rome—and they are—they are also concerned at points to refute notions of

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best he can. We need not adopt church growth tactics of “winsomeness,” but we must make our preaching the best that it can be.

the Radical Reformation. The Radical (or Anabaptist) wing of the Reformation in some of its manifestations sought to eliminate as a distinct class men called to labor as ministers of Word and sacrament. These Radical Reformers developed the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” into something that the magisterial Reformers never intended: if every man is a priest, then every man is a preacher. Insofar as preaching in such communions of the Radical Reformation remained a distinct activity, it was something either that anyone who was so inclined could do or that everyone in the congregation should aspire to do.<sup>15</sup>

The Radical Reformation has not failed to have its strong influence in this country. Indeed, there were those Anabaptist groups—the Amish, Mennonites, and others—who migrated to America seeking religious freedom. The influence of Anabaptism has not been so much an influence of specific ecclesiastical form as it has been an influence of ecclesiastical spirit. America is the place in which every man is not only touted as his own king—as Huey Long promised—but also as his own preacher. Jefferson decidedly rejected the aristocracy of Europe, arguing instead for a meritocracy in which not the well-born but the well-gifted ruled. During the era of Andrew Jackson, in particular, the notion of America as a republic in which those gifted for rule gave way to an America in which the common man was glorified and one man’s opinion was considered as good as another’s.<sup>16</sup> Thus the idea of egalitarianism took deep root in the American soil, as it had in the French Revolution without the anti-religious sentiment that had swept France. Yet part of this egalitarianism did involve

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<sup>15</sup>There have always been those—Korah in the Old Testament, Simon in the New Testament, the Montanists in the early church—who claimed gifts of leadership or authoritative proclamation beyond God’s gifts and callings. The Quakers, Plymouth Brethren, and the churches of the Restoration movement in nineteenth-century America would be later examples of the egalitarian ethos of the Radical Reformation, for which see George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

<sup>16</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville has an excellent discussion of this dynamic in his *Democracy in America*, as well as the works of Robert Remini on Andrew Jackson.

if not an anti-religious conviction something of an anti-clerical one, at least opposition to a trained clergy.

“Preaching” is the term popularly used today, in many evangelical circles (permeated as they often are with egalitarianism), to describe the activity of anyone who witnesses. I was not brought up in the Presbyterian Church, and I was invited as a zealous youth to ascend the pulpit and “preach” to the people. In testimony meetings, I have heard lay folk recount that they have had numerous opportunities to “preach” to colleagues at work, viewing their labor of witnessing to be a “preaching of the Word” on par with the preacher’s work in the pulpit. Is someone “sharing the gospel” with another preaching? If not, why not? LC 158 answers that question of who may preach: “The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.” In the face of egalitarian ideology, this seems an audacious if not to say arrogant claim. Why cannot the activity of every believer in sharing the gospel with another be denominated as “preaching”? Frankly, because only those who have been called and gifted of God to preach, and who have had that calling and gifting confirmed by the church, do, in fact, preach. Christians who are not called by the church to be ministers of the Word and sacrament may share, witness, counsel, guide, exhort, but they do not preach in the sense that the Westminster Standards indicate by the use of the word “preaching.”

LC 158 teaches that “the Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.” This, as we have seen, cuts across the grain of many in our egalitarian society. Most, if not all, evangelicals would agree that a man must be gifted and called. The problem comes in deciding who determines the gifts and calling of a man for gospel ministry. Does my personal, private belief that I am qualified to be a minister suffice? Or must the church be satisfied that I have such qualifications? And must my gifts be developed? Must I receive training? The historic Reformed and Presbyterian answer to these questions has been: a candidate’s opinion that he

is gifted and called to preach is not itself sufficient; while a candidate must, in fact, desire to preach and have gifts to do it, the church's decision in the matter is ultimately determinative. And ordinarily, men must receive intensive training in the arts and sciences necessary for the pastorate. Preaching is a weighty thing, and the gospel is to be committed only to men who have shown themselves conversant with the Scriptures and able to handle them properly. Much preparation is required for the proper treatment of the Word of God. The Westminster Standards stand foursquare in this tradition and in several of its documents demonstrate even more fully what it means for a man to be "sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office."

While a larger portion of the Directory for Worship dealing with the preaching of the Word and the Form of Church-Government dealing with the ordination of ministers appear as Appendices 1 and 2, perhaps it is helpful to note a few of the salient features of these documents as they relate to preachers and preaching. The Directory for Worship reads: "It is presupposed (according to the rules for ordination), that the minister of Christ is in some good measure gifted for so weighty a service, by his skill in the original languages, and in such arts and sciences as are handmaids unto divinity; by his knowledge in the whole body of theology, but most of all in the holy Scriptures, having his senses and heart exercised in them above the common sort of believers; and by the illumination of God's Spirit, and other gifts of edification, which (together with reading and studying of the word) he ought still to seek by prayer, and an humble heart, resolving to admit and receive any truth not yet attained, whenever God shall make it known to him. All of which he is to make use of, and improve, in his private preparations, before he deliver in public what he hath provided."<sup>17</sup> The Directory in this section then proceeds to instruct the preacher how he should preach the sermon. The Form of Church-Government focuses on the various intellectual, personal, and

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<sup>17</sup>In *The Confession of Faith* ... (Inverness, Scotland: Eccles, printed for the Publications Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, 1976), 379.

spiritual qualifications that candidates for the gospel ministry are to possess and instructs the examining bodies on the ways to ascertain whether candidates do possess such qualifications.

As noted above, God the Holy Spirit is the one who must bless the preaching of the Word if it is to do the hearers any good. It is a fact, though, that God has been pleased in many instances to bless the ministry of the Word most evidently through those who were the most prepared to preach it. Part of the preparation for preaching involves training, including intensive intellectual training. Yes, ignorant itinerants have powerfully preached the Word. Indeed, God can strike a straight blow with a crooked stick. This does not mean, though, that we should ordain crooked sticks or that we should be content with being crooked sticks. We ought to do whatever we can to prepare to preach. He who takes it most seriously will. Even as learned and able a man as Samuel Davies, when asked to preach on very short notice and being unprepared, declined, asserting that it was a “dangerous thing to talk nonsense for the Lord.” Here was a man who took preaching very seriously, so much so that he would not dare to enter the pulpit unprepared even though he was highly trained. To be sure, the vast majority of faithful preachers are not master orators or brilliant exegetes. They need not be. But they should do all that they can do to prepare themselves for the high and holy task of preaching.

*Excursus: Qualifications for Preachers among Colonial Presbyterians*

The question of qualifications for preachers has, even in the Presbyterian context, long bedeviled Americans. The requirement in the Directory for the Ordination of Ministers that a candidate must, *inter alia*, show “what degrees he hath taken in the university” proved troublesome in colonial America, particularly in the Middle Colonies. Harvard had been founded in 1636 to train men for the gospel ministry and Yale in 1701 for the same purpose. In Virginia, the established church there had William and Mary (founded 1693). There was no university in the Middle

Colonies, except for St. John's in Maryland, which was Roman Catholic. The historic cradle of American Presbyterianism, though, was in the Middle Colonies, particularly the Philadelphia area in which the first presbytery was formed in 1706 and the first synod in 1716. Since there was no ministerial training school in the middle colonies at all and only those of the Congregationalists in New England, the Anglicans in Virginia, and the Roman Catholics in Maryland, men desiring to enter the gospel ministry in the Presbyterian church were hard-pressed: either go to one of the non-Presbyterian American schools (at some distance) or go back to Great Britain (at an even greater distance).<sup>18</sup>

The problem posed by the lack of an indigenous educational institution for training Presbyterian ministers in the Middle Colonies was partially solved by William Tennent, Sr., in 1726. In that year what had probably begun merely as Tennent's instructions of his three sons, who all became Presbyterian ministers, developed into a classical academy, derisively tagged the "log college" by its detractors, and providing ministerial instruction to many in the area. The scholars trained at Tennent's school were ordained into the Presbyterian ministry as if they had obtained a regular university degree. Other log colleges arose out of Tennent's, ultimately leading to the establishment of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University) in 1746. When the Synod of Philadelphia adopted the Westminster Standards in 1729, the Adopting Act included the Directory for the Ordination of Ministers. Some in the Synod questioned whether Tennent's graduates, as well as the graduates of the other log colleges, were really in conformity to the Directory in its requirement for a university degree.<sup>19</sup>

Tennent, and especially his son Gilbert, came to be associated with the religious revivals then occurring—the First Great

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<sup>18</sup>Archibald Alexander, *Biographical Sketches of the Founder and Principal Alumni of the Log College* (Philadelphia, 1851), 10, 41-2.

<sup>19</sup>Alexander, *Biographical Sketches*, 7-23. See also *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788*, Guy S. Klett, ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976) in which the Log College is alluded to in the events leading up to the 1741 split of the church.

Awakening—and many of the more conservative Presbyterians had serious reservations about that religious revival and linked the Awakening to the teachings imbibed in the log colleges. Those who questioned the Awakening and demanded a university degree came to be known as the Old Side, while those who favored the log colleges and the Awakening came to be known as the New Side. Old Side and New Side split in 1741 and were not reunited until 1758. What's important for our purposes here is that the education afforded the ministerial candidates in the log colleges was rigorous by today's standards. The New Side was supposed to be the lax party when it came to ministerial educational requirements. An examination of the curriculum of the log colleges proves, however, that they were anything but lax. Samuel Davies, for instance, at Samuel Blair's academy studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, divinity, rhetoric, logic, ethics, metaphysics, "several branches of the mathematics," and natural philosophy. If the log colleges were academically loose, one would shudder to think what strict entailed.<sup>20</sup>

Not only were New Side academies challenging but examinations of ministerial candidates before New Side presbyteries were no less exacting. We live in an era in which ministerial qualifications have been continually downgraded and seminary curricula watered down to suit the tenor of the times. B.B. Warfield agonized over the revisions of Princeton Seminary's curriculum under J. Ross Stevenson in 1915 and many who believe that the high calling of minister of the Word demands rigorous training have lamented similar revisions since. It is quite extraordinary, though, to read of the Old Side charge against the New Side of loose presbyterial requirements in the light of what a typical New Side presbytery, Hanover Presbytery of Virginia, required of a candidate. An examination of the "tryals for the gospel ministry" of one John Martin, a typical candidate, reveals

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<sup>20</sup>Alexander, 164; George Pilcher, *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 11.

the rigor of a New Side examination.<sup>21</sup> On 18 March 1756, Martin presented himself before the presbytery and “delivered a Discourse upon Eph. 2:1, which was sustained as a Part of Tryal; and he was also examined as to his religious experiences, & the reasons of his desiring the ministry, which was also sustained.” As to his academic qualifications, “He was examined in the Latin & greek languages, & briefly in Logick, ontology, Ethics, natural philosophy, rhetoric, geography, and Astronomy; in all which his answers in general were very satisfactory.”

The moderator of Hanover Presbytery then instructed Martin to prepare a sermon on First Corinthians 1:22, 23 and “an exegesis [sic] on this question, *Cur Revelatio supernaturalis fit Necessarias?* to be delivered at our next” meeting. His sermon and Latin oration were approved by the examining committee, which “proceeded to examine him upon the Hebrew, in sundry extempore questions upon the Doctrines of Religion and some Cases of Conscience: his answers to which were sustained.” The presbytery then appointed Martin to preach a sermon on Galatians 2:20 and deliver a lecture on Isaiah 61:1-3. The examining committee approved these sermons and assigned further texts of increasing difficulty. I will break off following Martin’s examinations here and note simply that the testing of the candidate continued for over five months and then the candidate was licensed to preach the gospel. He went through an entirely additional battery of tests and months of further training as a probationer before he was ordained as a minister and installed as pastor of a church that had called him. The point of all of this is to demonstrate how seriously even a frontier Presbytery of the New Side—this is not the Old Side Presbytery of Philadelphia—in colonial America viewed ministerial preparation. Why? It is quite clear from their own records that they had a very high view of preaching, the view set forth in the Westminster Standards. They also had a high view of the qualifications of the preacher and of his preparation for

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<sup>21</sup>Minutes of the Hanover Presbytery, Union Theological Seminary Library, Richmond, VA, 6ff.



preaching. A high view of preaching entails a high view of who may preach the Word of God, as LC 158 asks and answers.

One may wonder why I place so much emphasis on the qualifications for preachers in an article on preaching. Because the most important preparation for preaching is the preparation of the preacher. When the preacher is prepared, then his preaching is most what it ought to be according to the Standards, which set forth what we believe the Scriptures to teach in this matter. Admittedly, much of the focus thus far has been on the more academic qualifications for preachers. These are not to be dispensed with, because the preacher needs to bring to every sermon all that he possibly can. Jonathan Edwards may have spent thirteen hours a day in his study.<sup>22</sup> But what he brought to every sermon was far more than the time that he spent that week preparing to preach. What he brought to every sermon is what every preacher brings to every sermon that he preaches: the sum of all that he has learned and experienced is, in some sense, brought to bear on every sermon. A preacher brings to the preaching of the Word the totality of who he is with all the natural and spiritual gifts that God has given him. I have emphasized certain natural—even intellectual—gifts thus far because these tend to be despised, neglected, and undervalued in our day, but then no less so than true spiritual gifts. I say true spiritual gifts because I believe that much that passes for spiritual gifts these days are counterfeit.

True spirituality consists, in great part, of humility. We often see little of real humility in our day. Biblical humility is a profound recognition that all that we are and have comes of God and that we gladly take our place before him as his redeemed creatures, praising him that he should bestow such mercy and grace upon such miserable sinners as we. I would argue that while we should dispense with nothing in the way of preparing the preacher to preach, nothing is more important than that he enter the pulpit in true humility, imbued with a sense of the

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<sup>22</sup>Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1987), 137ff.

graciousness of God, enabling him to speak as a dying man to dying men. Nothing, then, is more important in the preacher's preparation than this preparation of his heart in which he is filled with the sense that he stands not *coram hominibus* but *coram Deo*. All of the great preachers in the history of the church were filled with this sense of being in the presence of God himself, delivering the divine message to men. A preacher must then have his heart prepared, not merely his head filled, if he is to preach convincingly, powerfully, effectually, and edifyingly. If he is to speak to the humbling of his hearers, he must be humbled. If he is to speak to the heart of his hearers, he must speak out of his own heart.

As mentioned above, God has been pleased at times to bless the preaching of the Word more or less, in accordance with his own good pleasure. It is quite instructive to note not only what preachers who have had their preaching blessed of the Lord have preached but also what preachers who have had their preaching blessed of the Lord have been. In other words, what has been the personal natural and spiritual gifts of the preacher? I believe that the history of the church bears out that the preachers singularly blessed of God have been men of great gifts—natural and spiritual—but above all, they have been humble men. Before God blesses preachers and their preaching, it seems that he ordinarily grants the preachers a profound sense of their native wretchedness, of their inability, and of their utter dependence upon their covenant God, who loves them with an undying love. There is ample testimony to a growing awareness of his utter dependence upon God in the life of Jonathan Edwards in the early 1730's before God was pleased to bless his preaching so powerfully to the conversion of many souls in 1735. Edwards wrote and spoke of “my extreme feebleness and impotence, every manner of way; and the bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit there was in my heart.”<sup>23</sup> This should not be dismissed as a mere convention, a pious ministerial way of speaking. Edwards's self-understanding informed his preaching so that when he began preaching a series of sermons on

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<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 131.

justification by faith in 1735, he communicated to the congregation their own inability so powerfully that it led to many crying out to God for mercy and receiving the longed-for mercy.

The Word of God, as LC 158 teaches, is to be preached only by those thus qualified. One need not have the intellectual attainments of an Edwards or the pulpit skill of a Davies. The preacher does need to be as well-prepared as possible intellectually and otherwise. The vast majority of faithful preachers, though, will have modest gifts in comparison to an Edwards or Davies. But the preacher does need to seek the heart of an Edwards and the spirit of a Davies, that heart that would abase sinful flesh and exalt our gracious, sovereign God. Any man, by the grace of God, can apply himself to attaining a humble heart before the Lord (a constituent part of that holy pursuit being its lifelong nature, saying always with Paul, “not that I have attained”). Clearly, Davies cultivated such a heart, conducting his entire (remarkably blessed) ministry in the spirit of humility that we discover in a letter that he wrote to his publisher: “As for myself, I am just striving not to live in vain. I entered the ministry with such a sense of my unfitness for it, that I had no sanguine expectations of success. And a condescending God (O, how condescending!) has made me much more serviceable than I could hope. But alas! My brother, I have but little, very little, true religion. My advancements in holiness are extremely small.... It is an easy thing to make a noise in the world, to flourish and harangue, to dazzle the crowd and set them all agape; but deeply to imbibe the spirit of Christianity, to maintain a secret walk with God, to be holy, as he is holy—This is the labour, this is the work.”<sup>24</sup>

Here we see in Samuel Davies a man who sees himself as he is before his God and is humbled at the sight, a man captivated by the love of God for sinners. This is a man prepared to preach. He continued in his letter to his publisher: “I beg the assistance

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<sup>24</sup>Quoted in George Henry Bost, *Samuel Davies: Colonial Revivalist and Champion of Religious Toleration* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1942), 59.

of your prayers in so grand and important an enterprise. The difficulty of the ministerial work seems to grow on my hands. Perhaps once in three or four months I preach as in the sight of God, and as if I were to step from the pulpit to the supreme tribunal. I feel my subject. I melt into tears, or I shudder with horrors, when I denounce the terrors of the Lord. I glow, I soar in sacred ecstasies, when the love of Jesus is my theme, and, as Mr. Baxter was wont to express it..., 'I preach as if ne'er I should preach again and as a dying man to dying men.' But alas! My spirits soon flag, my devotions languish, and my zeal cools. It really is an afflictive thought that I serve so good a master with so much inconstancy."<sup>25</sup> From the *Confessions* of Augustine to the autobiography of Bunyan to the letters of Samuel Rutherford, John Newton, and many other preachers, both in the Westminster tradition or who have a high Westminster-like view of preaching—which is, Presbyterians believe, the Bible's position—we can detect that the preacher who has a high view of preaching has a biblical view of himself. All such preachers see the task that is set before them and cry out with Paul the Apostle, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

### How Preachers are to Preach the Word

We have seen how the Word is made effectual by the Spirit to the salvation of the elect, especially the preaching of the Word, and we have seen by whom the Word is to be preached. In this section of our survey of the Westminster Standards, particularly the Larger Catechism (LC), we want to focus on how preachers are to preach the Word of God and how those who hear it preached are to receive it. As noted above, these concerns are addressed in LC 159-160. LC 159 asks, "How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?" The answer: "They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in

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<sup>25</sup>Bost, 59.

demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.”

*The Necessity of Sound Doctrine*

Those that are called to preach, or, as LC 159 has it, “labor in the ministry of the Word,” are to preach “sound doctrine.” We live in days when many in the pews demand comfort and encouragement from the pulpit. Indeed the preacher ought to provide in his exposition of the Word comfort and encouragement. But he most does so only in the context of preaching the great biblical themes of sin and grace. To preach sound doctrine means to preach that God is holy, that we are sinful, and that the only remedy for our sin is the person and work of Christ, in whom we are to believe and towards whom we are to repent. In other words, preachers are to preach God’s message, not merely what man might wish to hear. And in a confessional church—like the Reformed and Presbyterian churches—we do not have to guess what sound doctrine is. Sound doctrine is defined in the first place by that large body of doctrine which the church agrees upon and is embodied in her confessions. Only confessional churches have real integrity in this matter of sound doctrine because it is not enough to affirm simply that the Bible is inspired and that you believe it. If we cannot agree upon what the Bible teaches, what system of doctrine it sets forth, our confession of infallibility and inerrancy is hollow. The cults believe that the Bible is inspired. But they do not believe its message.

If our confessional churches are to remain such and be confessional not only in name but also in practice, then we must hold our officers, particularly our preachers, to their vow to teach in accordance with the confessions and catechisms of the

church.<sup>26</sup> The only way to preserve sound doctrine in the preaching of the Word is to require those that preach it to preach what the church believes and to preach or teach nothing contrary to our Standards. The church, I say again, has defined in her Standards that which constitutes sound doctrine. For preachers in confessional churches to preach contrary to the confessions and catechisms is to preach unsound doctrine. This is why preachers, even when allowed to take exception to some point in the confessions (as a presbytery might allow), may not teach their scruples or exceptions but must teach what the church confesses. For the church to permit anything less than this is to destroy the church as a confessing church and to jettison any measure for sound doctrine. The confessions are nothing more than the setting forth of what the church believes to be sound doctrine. Any preacher who preaches contrary to the confession and does not preach what the confession teaches is not preaching sound doctrine as we understand it and should reform or leave the ministry.

*Adverbs of Preaching: Diligently*

The minister of the Word, LC 159 further tells us, is to preach sound doctrine “diligently.” To be diligent in the preaching of the Word over the course of many years is no mean task and requires the constant assistance of the Holy Spirit. Preachers must be diligent in their preparation. As we’ve seen above, the preacher is to be prepared in his heart, coming before God’s Word in

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<sup>26</sup>This raises the whole question of confessional subscription. In the America Presbyterian tradition, beginning shortly after the Adopting Act of 1729, any scruples that a minister might have regarding the Confession and/or Catechisms were to be declared, if and when they arose, to his presbytery. It is the prerogative of the presbytery to grant the scruple if it believes that in so doing the system of doctrine is not violated. Even when a scruple is granted, however, no preacher is to preach or teach his scruple but rather is to preach and teach in harmony with the Standards of the church. To do otherwise is destructive of confessionalism. For a good discussion of this issue, and the differences of view on the subject both among Presbyterians and between Presbyterians and the continental Reformed, see David Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995).

profound humility, and to be prepared by God's gifting of him, naturally and spiritually. The preacher should think through his text quite carefully, working in the Hebrew or Greek, checking the commentaries—both ancient and modern—and making sure that his interpretation is in line with the confessions and with Reformed commentators. This does not mean that the preacher may not in his exposition or application of a text depart from the main body of commentators (assuming that he does not teach unsound doctrine, that is, anything contrary to the confessions). A preacher must know that he is departing from the consensus. He ought therefore to know the history of the interpretation of his text and depart only because he is convinced that faithfulness demands it, never for the sake of novelty or to be thought clever. The preacher is to be faithful to the text that he is preaching and diligent in preaching that text, understanding that each particular text is in the Bible for a reason.

The preacher is to preach “in season and out of season” (LC 159). The import of this dictum of Paul to Timothy (in 2 Tim. 4:2) bears upon both the preacher and the auditor, I believe. The preacher is to preach whether he feels like it or not and the preacher is to preach whether the congregation feels like hearing him or not. How many parishioners have gone to church not desirous of then hearing a sermon but have gone away blessed by the preaching of the Word and glad that they had come? Ministers, too, do not always feel like preaching. Perhaps they are not prepared in heart to preach or have not adequately prepared their exposition and application. Nonetheless, when it is time to preach, preachers must do so in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit. The encomium to be ready to stand (the meaning of “be instant”) makes it clear that when a man is called to preach, he is to continue to preach in all the seasons of his life and in all the seasons of the lives of the congregations which he serves. This does not mean that the preacher never needs a vacation, but it does mean that God by his Spirit so equips his preachers that as they have recourse to him who is the fountain of life that they need not fear “burnout.” Burnout occurs when we dig our own

broken cisterns and forsake him who is the well of living water. It is only as the preacher uses all the means of grace himself and grows in intimacy and communion with his God that he can ever hope to serve in season and out of season.<sup>27</sup>

*Adverbs of Preaching: Plainly*

LC 159 also says that the preacher is to preach “plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power.” To speak plainly is often exceedingly difficult. The preacher, especially in preaching year in and year out to the same people, is often sorely tempted to be clever, brilliant, artful so as to hold the interest of the people and often, frankly, from a desire to be seen as a profound preacher. The simple truth is, though, that the profoundest preachers are the plainest. Preachers need not fear boring their people because it is the Spirit who makes effectual the Word, and he is pleased to do it not through the artistry of the preacher but through the plainness of his exposition. Paul contrasted his preaching to that of the “disputer of this age” who speaks merely according to the “wisdom of this world.” Speaking, in Paul’s day, was a much-celebrated art, and few things were desired more than the rhetorical skill of a Cicero and the oratorical skill of a Demosthenes.<sup>28</sup> But the task of the preacher is not to impress his hearer but to edify his hearer. This requires humility because able, learned men in the ministry often have the skill to dazzle the

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<sup>27</sup>We hear much these days of burnout and “mid-ministry crisis.” Yet, of what do these things consist other than a failure of the preacher to tend the garden of his own heart? This means more than simply “ordering his private world.” It means knowing something of the real wickedness of his own heart and the love of God that comes to him in spite of that because of his acceptance in the Beloved. It means knowing on-going heart transformation so that sin is continually weakened and righteousness fortified.

<sup>28</sup>Oratory, like the theatrical stage, was highly developed in the Hellenistic world of the New Testament. The phenomenon of “entertain me!” is not new, as witnessed by Paul in the lust of the Athenians always to “tell or hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21). Highly polished speaking was the craze of the day and Paul did not yield to the temptation to amuse or impress his hearers but spoke powerfully and convictingly to them.



crowd with their speaking abilities, demonstrating the breadth and depth of their learning.

It is tempting to be oblique in our preaching, both for our comfort and that of our hearers, not only because we are tempted to impress hearers with our erudition but also because we are tempted to lessen the offense of the message of the cross. Sometimes preachers succumb to both temptations, concerning themselves more with their literary skills than with their own salvation and that of their hearers. Clear, direct preaching is necessary lest anyone mistake that eternal matters are at issue. I would argue that the preacher has best done his job, not when hearers are amazed with the cleverness of someone who could get what the preacher got from the text, but when folk have the sense that they too, given sufficient time and gifts, could have come up with the same truths from the text. The best preacher gives valuable insight into the text, to be sure, but not “insight” that the auditor after having heard it has to struggle to see in the text. The best preacher is the preacher who imparts the maximum amount of understanding as to the text under consideration.

The preacher is to speak plainly so as to set forth clearly before his hearers the meaning and application of the Bible in the text that he is preaching. He is not to employ subtlety in his message or method of delivery. Subtlety may be desirable—indeed I would argue that it is—in any number of art forms: in the novel, in poetry, in film, even in the essay, as a few examples.<sup>29</sup> Not in the sermon, though. In the sermon the preacher is to be clear, painfully clear, so that his auditors have no doubt as to his exposition of the text or of his application to their hearts. Again, it is a decidedly humbling task for one who may be quite gifted and who has studied a particular passage so much to speak plainly at all times. What the preacher must remember is

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<sup>29</sup>Larry Woiwode in *World*, 13:26 (July 4/11, 1998), p. 20, rightly pointed out the contrast between the novel and the essay, noting that novel is not for the elaboration of the idea but for the development of the characters. The sermon is yet a different form of communication from either of these.

that preaching is not something that he can do with as he wishes, but that he is to be faithful to the Lord in speaking so that it is clear that the blessing that accompanies preaching is not a blessing that comes because of some merit of the preacher but comes solely through the blessing of the Spirit. This is not to say that a preacher may not employ his various skills to their fullest and effectively use what God has given him. I would also argue that there is a beautiful artistry in biblical preaching, that the directness of preaching can be done in a most engaging and winsome way. And the preacher is not excused in laboring hard to rid himself of uninteresting drivel or banal expressions in his preaching. But the preacher must always seek to speak plainly, remembering that, at his very best and greatest, he is but an earthen vessel, a clay jar, a weak man whom a sovereign God is pleased to use so that it might be evident to all that the power is not in, of, and from the preacher but is a power bestowed by the Spirit alone.

The original Directory for Worship says that “the doctrine is to be expressed in plain terms” and that the preacher is to avoid “obscure terms of art” so that the “meanest may understand.” The Standards, in other words, are concerned that the preacher preach as clearly as he can so that as many within the congregation as can will understand him. This does not mean that the preacher may not use theological terms like “justification” or “propitiation”—though he must clearly explain them when he does use them—but that he should make clear the doctrines under consideration and not obfuscate them through the use of technical terminology.

### *Adverbs of Preaching: Faithfully*

The preacher, according to LC 159, is also to preach “faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God.” There is here, I think, an integral connection between faithful preaching and the whole counsel of God. Paul, in his farewell address to the presbytery in Ephesus, boldly claims, “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” The faithful preacher

then is one who takes pain to teach the whole of what the Bible teaches and not merely his pet doctrines. Faithful preaching entails a systematic development of God's Word and not the preacher riding his favorite hobby horse, even if that hobby horse happens to be doctrines particularly dear to the Reformed. No, faithfulness means preaching all of God's truth. Confessional churches have an especially good platform from which to preach the whole counsel of God. By using the Heidelberg Catechism to shape one's preaching of the biblical text, for example, the preacher can present the whole counsel of God in the space of a year. The Larger and Shorter Catechisms can be used in the same way.<sup>30</sup> Another method is preaching a Bible survey: beginning with Genesis the preacher might preach through to Revelation in a year or two, highlighting all the main teachings of the Scripture. Certainly, one may also preach the whole counsel of God by painstaking exposition of individual books of the Bible, though it is unlikely that the preacher who has no detailed confession to work with will present the fullness of God's revelation. A briefer survey may be had by preaching a few sermons on each loci of systematic theology or by preaching through the articles of the Apostles' or Nicene creeds. However he does it, the true biblical preacher is bound to preach the whole counsel of God.

*Adverbs of Preaching: Wisely*

Continuing with the fourth of the six adverbs of LC 159 ("diligently, plainly, faithfully, wisely, zealously, sincerely"), preachers are to preach "wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers." How does a preacher apply himself to the necessities of his hearers? A preacher applies himself to the necessities of his hearers by an insightful and accurate understanding of the lives that his people lead. No

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<sup>30</sup>There is historic support for catechetical preaching within the Presbyterian tradition as seen in Thomas Watson, among others, whose *Body of Divinity* works through the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. See also R. E. Knodel on Catechetical Preaching in *Ordained Servant*, 7:1 (January 1998): 16-19.

preacher knows his people perfectly. The most sensitive and genuinely intuitive preacher knows something of what his people are really like but he does not know their hearts. Such knowledge is God's prerogative. Nevertheless, that the preacher does not know the hearts of his hearers as only the Lord does, does not relieve him of the responsibility of knowing the real needs of his hearers as accurately as possible. I stress the real needs of his hearers because his hearers themselves will often not realize what their real needs are. The reason that parishioners often remain strangers to their own needs is because they lack a deep knowledge of self. And the reason that folk lack a deep knowledge of self is because they do not have a deep knowledge of God, which alone teaches us who we are. Both believers and unbelievers, in fact, suffer from a lack of self-knowledge, indeed they suffer from self-deception, a more pervasive self-deception in the case of unbelievers, to be sure, but also in the case of believers.<sup>31</sup>

Unbelievers live their whole lives, of course, in self-deceit, pursuing after idols that will never satisfy their needy hearts, longing for what only God himself can fill within them. Believers, too, though, are perpetually plagued with heart idols that they must see, recognize, and be instructed to mortify. Often believers do not clearly see their heart idols (because they are self-deceived) and may resist when such idols are pointed out to them. For the preacher to do his job in a heart-searching manner, he must delineate sin in its various guises to his hearers so that the Spirit may make application. As the Directory for the Publick Worship of God puts it, the preacher "is not to rest in general

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<sup>31</sup>Greg Bahnsen has done important work on the apparent paradox of self-deception from an epistemological viewpoint as a development of the transcendental method of Cornelius Van Til, about which he has written both in his doctoral dissertation (from USC) and in an article, "The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics" in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, 57:1 (Spring 1995): 1-31. An understanding of self-deception is quite important not only to our apologetics but to our psychology. Any preacher who does not enter the pulpit with some understanding of our monumental capacity for self-deception, including himself first of all, operates at a decided disadvantage.

doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers.” This means that a preacher must know his people: he must know what they need and not merely what they think that they need. This honesty about one’s true needs must begin with the preacher, though, if it is to bear conviction in the hearts of his auditors. A preacher must know the depths of his own depravity and be well-acquainted with his characteristic flesh and the sin that clings so closely. This brings us back to the point that humility is a *sine qua non* for the would-be effectual preacher. True self-awareness and continual repentance for one’s characteristic flesh are constitutive of biblical humility.

It is common, especially for a young preacher in getting to know his flock, to see their shortcomings and to put more on them than they are able to bear, particularly at any one time. This is why great pastoral wisdom is needed not only in truly understanding the necessities of one’s hearers but also the capacities of one’s hearers, as LC 159 reminds us. Parishioners, or counselees, are not able to see all that is wrong with them at the same time. Sanctification is progressive; so is reformation in the church. We are preachers not of a legalistic works-righteousness but of God’s grace, which grace should suffuse all that we preach, even our very calls to duty. Obedience, preachers of grace must always remember, flows from our continual renewal in the redeeming love of God.<sup>32</sup> It takes ministerial wisdom to recognize the real needs of the various members of the flock and then to minister to them the grace of God so that the flock does not despair in the face of demonstrated shortcomings but continues to draw near to Christ. The preacher must rebuke and

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<sup>32</sup>This is why it is crucial to maintain the distinction between justification and sanctification and to remember that our sanctification is always predicated upon our justification. If we forget that we have access to the Father through the merits and mediation of the Son at all times and instead come to God as if we must gain his favor, then we make the mistake that Rome makes in believing that sanctification does not flow from justification but is unto justification. This fatal error is sadly not challenged by the Protestant signatories of “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.”

reprove as needed, but even then he must take care not to break the bruised reed or to quench the smoking flax. We are gospel preachers, and the grace of God in Christ must undergird all of our preaching. We must be wise, then, in evaluating the capacities of our hearers, giving them milk when that is their need and meat when that is their need. This ministerial differentiation will prove quite a challenge in preaching. In the counseling room it is easier to deal with the different needs of different parties differently. In the pulpit it is not so easy because the preacher must say the same thing in the same way to everyone at the same time. This is why every sermon should have in it both milk and meat, both stronger stuff for those who need it and can take it and more easily digestible stuff for those who choke on meat. In this regard, it is important that preachers not forget the children. If we take seriously our covenantal commitment to having our children in the worship service, the preacher must take pains to address some part of his sermon to them. Admittedly, the bulk of the sermon is to the parents who have responsibility to train their children and to explain to them the content of the sermon. Nonetheless, it is vital that the minister preach to the capacities of the younger, the newer, and the less-educated, as well as the mature, so that all will sense that they belong in the worship service and that they are welcome in it.<sup>33</sup>

*Adverbs of Preaching: Zealously*

LC 159 further instructs those who preach to do so “zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people.” Preachers who preach without zeal betray the very message that they preach. If the gospel message is good news, indeed, the best news that a poor sin-enslaved humanity could ever hope for—and it is—then the one who preaches it ought to be consumed with it and burning with an insatiable passion to deliver this message to needy, dying men. It is one of the telltale marks of the need for revival and reformation when the pulpit is held by men who lack

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<sup>33</sup>Martin Ban has an excellent article, “Stooping to Greatness,” on children in worship in *New Horizon*, 20:1 (January 1999): 3-5.

conviction and do not burn with the zeal of the Lord but languish with the lukewarmness of Laodicea. Sadly, much of what has passed for Reformed preaching has lacked zeal and has lulled whole congregations into dangerous somnolence. It is little wonder that a number of churchgoers these days lack zeal and commitment: they witness so little of it in the pulpits of our churches.<sup>34</sup> Davies's complaint about the cold formalism of the Anglican clergy in colonial Virginia (cited above) is with us yet. The very words of LC 159 discover the cause of our lack of zeal: simply put, we preachers lack—greatly lack—in love for God and his people. The preacher must spend time before God seeking that heart of love and then carrying out the duties of love if he is to be zealous in his preaching. The reason that we fail in love to God and to our people is because we fail to see how much God loves us. It is only when we preachers have frequent recourse to the fires of God's love that our cold hearts are melted and made hearts that burn with a zeal to preach the Word of God above everything else in this world. We only love others as we ought when we love him as we ought—and we always fall far short of this in this life—and we love him as we ought only when we see that he first loved us. Preachers need then to see the love of God for them as a love that comes to them even in the face of their sin, because the diamond of God's love never appears lovelier than when set against the dark, felt background of our sin.

*Adverbs of Preaching: Sincerely*

We come finally to the last of the six adverbs in LC 159 that describe how the Word of God is to be preached by those that are called thereunto: “sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.” That the Word is to be preached sincerely means with one's heart, from one's heart, not for fame, fortune, or the praise of people, but for the glory of

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<sup>34</sup>I do not mean the emotional excesses of the “Laughing Revival” or other superficial and spurious expressions of zeal but a real zeal that flows from “true religious affections.”

God and the good of the hearers. We live in an era in which the media are filled with religious hucksters and charlatans. The sincerity of some well-known preachers is, at best, questionable. Preachers have in every age had among their numbers those who have fallen into gross sin and become public scandals. While we may seem to have more clerical immorality now than in times past, it may simply be that such ministerial sins as there are receive more widespread media coverage.<sup>35</sup> Paul knew about clerical scandal and for that reason, *inter alia*, insisted that pastors have a good reputation with those on the outside. Nothing undermines the preaching of the gospel more than the preacher doing it for personal gain or the perception that the preacher is doing it for personal gain. It is of the utmost importance that the gospel preacher be a man of integrity and that he be seen to be a man of integrity to a watching world. This does not mean that the preacher does not enjoy the Christian liberty that all Christians enjoy or even that he is under a stricter standard of ethical requirements than other Christians. Rather, the preacher is one who possesses, by the grace of God, those character qualities that the Scripture enjoins upon all. The preacher who would be effective in the pulpit must be a man who lives what he preaches, albeit imperfectly, out of the pulpit. He must be a man known by those closest to him as a man of principle and courage. He must be the kind of man described in Psalm 1, and he must be such not so much in his own judgment but in the judgment of those who know him best and who themselves are competent to render such judgment.

John Calvin's personal motto—*Cor meum tibi offero, Domine, prompte et sincere*—illustrated by a hand lifting up a pierced heart to God, ought to be the motto of every preacher. To be sincere is to be transparent, to pursue purity and to be brutally honest about how far we fall in the flesh from being what we ought to be. The sincere gospel preacher is one who, knowing the depths of his

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<sup>35</sup>America has always had ministerial scandals (from Beecher to McPherson) but in a media-dominated era the scandals of a Bakker and a Swaggart receive much attention and are used to tarnish all preachers by the enemies of the gospel.



own depravity, preaches in real humility to his hearers and in so doing puts to death his own sin and lives unto the righteousness of God. Note that the sincere preacher aims not at his own glory but at God's. The sincere preacher realizes that in the flesh he would always and only aim for his own glory. But he crucifies that flesh so that his leading motive is the glory of God and the good of his people, namely, the evangelization of his people ("their conversion," as LC 159 puts it), and the discipleship of his people ("their edification" according to LC 159), all of which amounts to their "salvation," as LC 159 concludes. This last phrase of LC 159 ("their conversion, edification and salvation") coupled with the earlier phrase of LC 159 ("his glory") recall for us Question 1 of the Shorter Catechism, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer—"man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever"—highlights a marvelous truth: that which makes for the glory of God also makes for the good of God's people (it is a good thing, indeed the best thing in all of creation, to enjoy God forever). That these two conspire together as they do, i.e., in every instance that which makes for God's glory is also best for his people, is purely a matter of the love and mercy of God. In other words, when God is most glorified, we his people benefit the most and enjoy him the most. To say then that the aim of the preacher is the glory of God and the salvation of his people is to say that the preacher's task is of the highest order and that his privilege in preaching is a privilege *non pareil*.

*The Revolt against a "High" View of Preaching*

There can be little dispute that the Westminster Standards (along with the Directory for the Publick Worship of God and the Form of Church-Government) espouse what might be called a "high" view of preaching. As we've noted above, though, it can scarcely be said that many these days would embrace such a view of preaching. Why do so many people in contemporary American evangelicalism revolt against this high view of preaching and this high view of the office of the preacher? To be sure, there are

those who want to be preachers but do not want to undergo all the rigorous training and testing required in Presbyterian and Reformed communions and wish thus to downgrade what is required to be a preacher. But some folk who have no aspirations whatsoever to be preachers oppose a high view of preaching and preachers: they simply cannot stomach the notion of some man standing before them as the herald of the Lord. Again, much of broader Protestantism has embraced a notion of the priesthood of all believers quite at odds with that envisioned by Luther and Calvin. In such a conception of the priesthood of all believers, the parishioner is as called of God to proclaim the Word of God as is the preacher.

Of course, egalitarianism is uncomfortable with the notion of a man standing before a congregation preaching the Word of God without fear or favor. “Who is he to speak to us like that?” some might demur. What lies at the base, though, of this “my-opinion’s-as-good-as-yours” mentality? Rebellion against a God who sovereignly chooses, gifts, and calls some men to preach the gospel. Doubtless, sometimes the struggle is against arrogance or incompetence on the part of those who are preachers. It is difficult to have a high view of preaching when those serving in the preaching office are so evidently ill-qualified, being either academically or pastorally deficient. Quite often, though, in an age in which people who claim to be evangelical also assert that one may know Jesus as Savior though one has never bowed the knee to Jesus as Lord, an uprising against Christ and his lordship is what lies at the base of a low view of preachers and preaching.<sup>36</sup> Fallen, unregenerate men do not like the notion that God chooses and gifts; we want to be the one who chooses. That God would gift some man to preach his Word to me reminds me that this is God’s world and that he alone reigns and rules.

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<sup>36</sup>Even as there are those who would confuse justification and sanctification, there are those who would divorce the two and teach sanctification as an additional work, as if one could be justified without ever being subsequently sanctified. This is the heart of the “lordship controversy”: Can one have Jesus as Savior without ever having bowed to him as Lord? Of course not! He is not the Savior of all and the Lord of those who will bow to him. Rather, he is the Lord of all and the Savior of those who bow to him.

We have a low view, then, of preachers because we reject the notion that certain men are called to be heralds in preference to others. Why cannot everyone be equally a herald? And we have a low view of preaching because we want dialogue and not proclamation. Some modern educational models reject “lecturing” in favor of more “interactive” styles of teaching. This has a carryover into the church: many folk today, even in evangelical churches, argue that we need to get beyond preaching as historically conceived, i.e., as the proclamation of the Word of God, to a style of communication that is less authoritative and one-sided and more “open” and participatory. Preaching is thus replaced by “sharing” and everyone gets a turn at giving their thoughts on passages that they have never studied. This is not to argue against opportunities in the church for the saints to ask questions about biblical and theological concerns or to share insight into God’s truth. It is important, in fact, to have various educational forums in the church for the discussion of ideas and for broader participation. One-on-one counseling is often helpful; small group discipleship is valuable; women’s Bible studies can be very encouraging: all of these, properly conducted, can be a great blessing to the church but must never displace preaching.<sup>37</sup> Preaching is central to the life of the church and has always been since the time of the prophets and apostles. Again, God in his sovereignty has ordained through preaching to save some. It will do us no good to complain that we do not want someone called a preacher “talking at us.” We must have a high view of preachers and preaching because God does; and it is the primary means that he is pleased to use to bring sinners to himself. We must all humble ourselves to receive God’s Word as it is preached.

Yes, preaching is, all around the board, a humbling thing. Preaching is humbling to the preacher because he must be in

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<sup>37</sup>So much said and published today carries the tacit assumption that preaching is simply insufficient to hold the attention of our entertainment-crazed world. But preaching has never held the attention of anyone except those given spiritual sight (1 Corinthians 2).

submission to the lordship of Christ in his life as well as in his doctrine if his preaching is to be blessed of God in the long run. And preaching is humbling to the hearer because the hearer must submit to the Lord—which is always hateful to all of us in the flesh—and he must submit to receive the Word of God on the lips of an ambassador who is in every respect far from what he ought to be. It is not easy to submit to the preaching of the Word from the lips of another when those lips are faltering, stammering, fallible lips. But insofar as those lips bear witness to the truth of God, they speak the word of God and are faithful proclaimers of God's truth. Preachers often find it hard to submit to the preaching of other preachers: it is quite tempting to sit in the pew as a preacher and be quite critical of the one preaching the Word of God—to be so critical, in fact, as to render any real obedience to the Word preached impossible. To do so is not a “professional prerogative” (even for seminary professors!) but rather is sin, the sin of rebellion against God. Poor preaching, so long as it is biblically faithful, is not to be despised but to be heeded. So the preacher must humble himself in preaching, in delivering a message that is not dazzling in its artistry, but edifying in its faithful exposition and application of the text. And the hearer must not rebel against the properly appointed messenger of God but must submit himself to the right exposition of the Word, even if he is far superior to the preacher in skill and intellect. The greatest preacher is but a clay vessel and does not come close to being all that he should be. He is not exempted by this recognition from striving to be the very best that he can by the aid of God's Spirit. Likewise, his auditors are not exempted from hearing him because of his shortcomings but must strive to be the very best listeners—and doers—of the Word preached.

### The Hearers of the Word

While the bulk of this essay has focused on the preacher and preaching—as indeed so does the bulk of the material in the Westminster Standards—LC 160 concludes the section in the

Larger Catechism dealing with preaching with a question that pertains to the hearers of the Word: “What is required of those that hear the Word preached?” Preachers have obligations to their hearers and hearers have obligations to their preachers, according to LC 160: “It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.” Hearers, we might say, have obligations before, during, and after the hearing of Word preached.

### *Obligations before Hearing the Word*

Before the Word is preached, hearers are to prepare themselves to hear the Word. Since the Lord’s day (or Sabbath) is the ordinary day upon which the Word of God is preached—acknowledging, of course, that the Word is preached at other times as well—hearers ought to prepare to hear the Word of God preached by preparing for the Lord’s day. There is, of course, quite a lot in the Westminster Standards on the question of the Lord’s day (LC 116-121, for example, deal with the Lord’s day). Particularly to the point of preparing to hear the Word preached is the part of LC 117 that speaks about preparation for the Sabbath day: “we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.” To put it another way, one will profit little in hearing the Word preached on the Lord’s day when one has not properly prepared for that day. If during the sermon the hearer is most occupied with worldly business carelessly done or left undone, with whether dinner is burning at home or not, or with staying awake due to a late night, then little benefit is likely to accrue to the auditor. One should come to hear preaching well-rested, in a proper frame of mind, and desiring and

expecting the blessing of God. Thus one who well prepares for the Sabbath day will be fitted to attend upon the preaching of the Word “with diligence, preparation, and prayer” (LC 160).<sup>38</sup>

*Obligations while Hearing the Word*

During the preaching of the Word, hearers, according to LC 160, are to do several things, among which they are to “examine what they hear by the Scriptures.” Even as preachers have an obligation to proclaim the Word of God in faithfulness, hearers have an obligation to examine what they hear by the Scriptures. If a hearer is not convinced that the preacher has faithfully expounded the Word of God, he may seek conference with the preacher to clear up any potential misunderstandings. In such conference, the hearer should not rush to judgment but listen carefully to the preacher’s explanation. If the hearer after such conference remains convinced that the preacher is not preaching correctly—generally gauged by the preacher’s denying what the church teaches as embodied in her confessions—then the hearer may take the matter further by speaking to an elder, the elders being charged with the purity of what is preached in the pulpits of our churches. There is in the Reformed and Presbyterian communions a mechanism furnished to those alleging false teaching by which heresy might be condemned and sound teaching vindicated. Insofar as the preacher is faithful in his preaching, the Word that he preaches is to be received as “the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind as the Word of God.” Hearers are not to regard what the preacher preaches as being merely “his opinion,” but rather a “thus saith the Lord” that is to be obeyed, unless through proper church disciplinary procedures his preaching is shown to be other than sound. Again, that the preacher is to be respected and that the Word he preaches is to be obeyed cuts against the grain of our

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<sup>38</sup>Until there is reformation and revival in our sanctification of the Lord’s Day, there will be no beneficial hearing of the Word. Until we call the Sabbath a delight, we will not properly delight in our God and his ordained means of grace.

autonomy and self-will. We might say that we object to the notion of any man speaking God's Word to us in a binding way. If the truth be told, though, we would object to God himself speaking in his own proper person to us because, at base, we want to be God and do not want anyone, including the true and living God, to rule over us. It may further be noted here that LC 160, in harmony with the Second Helvetic Confession in particular, teaches that the preaching of the Word obliges the auditors to "receive the truth [preached] ... as the Word of God."

*Obligations after Hearing the Word*

There ought to be, then, according to LC 160, on the part of hearers a readiness, an eagerness, and a willingness to receive the Word of God preached as from God. That means, of course, that hearers should meditate on the Word preached (which audio tapes wonderfully provide opportunity for) and that they should confer of it, or seek divine guidance for the course and conduct of their lives from it. This is to say that not only should hearers by all appropriate means prepare to hear the Word preached and pay close attention during the time of its exposition but that after the Word has been preached hearers also ought to give heed to it, not being forgetful hearers. That hearers should "hide it in their hearts and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives" (LC 160) is simply further evidence of how high a view the Westminster Standards have of preaching: plainly put, the Word faithfully preached is to be received as the Word of God and to be regarded by God's people as such. Does this mean that preaching itself is new revelation and that the canon remains open as long as preaching continues in our Lord's church? No, the canon is closed, and preaching adds nothing to the Word of God.<sup>39</sup> But

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<sup>39</sup>But if the canon is not closed and revelation is continuing, preaching must, of necessity, take a back seat. If the canon remains open, any word from God is to be preferred over a man preaching the Word. Since the canon is

close, faithful, biblical preaching is seen by the Standards as the Word of God to be received and obeyed by the people of God. Preaching brings home to us God's Word, demonstrating clearly to us God's will and enabling us to praise and serve God with understanding and confidence.

*The Preacher's Obligation to the Word*

The view of preaching set forth in this essay—that it is to be received insofar as it is true as the Word of God—reflects back on the enormous responsibility that the preacher bears. Even though LC 160 addresses the question of what is required of the hearer in preaching, if what is required of the hearer is to receive the Word preached as the Word of God, then the preacher must make sure he is preaching the Word of God and nothing else. It is nothing short of dereliction of duty for the preacher to stand in the sacred desk and to give to the people something other than the very Word of God. This means that the preacher must take the utmost care that his application of the Word is a true and proper deduction from Scripture and not some mere whim of his or pet ideas of which he wishes to persuade the people. The preacher who would use the pulpit to promote partisan political causes or to give dubious and unsupported suggestions for conduct or to advance psychological theories is abusing his office and his hearers. Because what the preacher declares in the sermon is to be received by his auditors as authoritative and binding, anything that the preacher presents as binding that exceeds any scriptural warrant denies true Christian liberty.<sup>40</sup> The preacher, in other words, may only bind where the Word of God binds. He may not preach his preferences as if they were the very Word of God. He should always be careful in preaching anything that is not confessional as if we all agree and it is binding. Preaching is not the opportunity for the preacher to say what it is that he's been wanting to say to the people, regardless of whether

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closed, though, we may not waste our time seeking new revelation but should get down to the serious business of preaching the Word.

<sup>40</sup>WCF, XX.2.



what he wants to say is clearly biblical or not. A preacher, for example, may preach, “The Word of God requires all parents to train their children in the ways of the Lord.” The preacher may not preach that the Word of God requires all parents to homeschool their children because such application exceeds anything that one can deduce from any text of Scripture.

## Conclusion

It must be said clearly and plainly: we have in our Presbyterian and Reformed churches departed from the high view of preaching found in the Westminster Standards. Preachers do not preach as if their lives and the lives of their hearers depended upon it. Yet, as we have seen, particularly in LC 155 and LC 159, preaching is a means of grace that the Spirit “especially” makes effectual to the elect for their salvation and the Spirit does it through weak and fallible men. That God chooses to save men through the “foolishness of preaching” will always be an offense to sinful flesh—both the sinful flesh of the preacher and of his hearer. It is offensive because in true preaching both preacher and hearer are abased and God is exalted. Ever since the Fall man has been natively self-centered rather than God-centered. But our era is one in which self-centeredness is particularly pursued and extolled: we are regularly told by the “experts” that the highest good is the glorification of self. To the degree that the church has bought into self-glorification the church will minimize preaching. It must. Because preaching centers on God so that our understanding even of ourselves is tied into our understanding of God. And true, biblical preaching centers on the person and work of Christ, who he is and what he has done for us.

What we need, then, in our era is a revival of true biblical preaching. And in such a revival, I would argue for a real embracing of the view of the Lord’s Supper as set forth in the Reformed Standards, particularly Article 35 of the Belgic Confession. The church needs reformation, and I believe that a revival of Calvin’s doctrine of Word and sacrament would be key

to any lasting reformation. But the relationship of Word and sacrament is another article. A revival of true biblical/confessional preaching would produce as its fruit a reformation in all the means of grace. We need to pray for such a revival of the high Westminster view of preaching, and we need to take seriously our calling as preachers so that we might, by the grace of God, witness such a revival in our own time. Preachers must preach as if their eternal destinies and those of their hearers depended upon faithful preaching, because, in fact, they do.

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### *Appendices*

## Directory for the Publick Worship of God

### *Of the Preaching of the Word*

Preaching of the word, being the power of God unto salvation, and one of the greatest and most excellent works belonging to the ministry of the gospel, should be so performed, that the workman need not be ashamed, but may save himself, and those that hear him.

It is presupposed (according to the rules for ordination), that the minister of Christ is in some good measure gifted for so weighty a service, by his skill in the original languages, and in such arts and sciences as are handmaids unto divinity; by his knowledge in the whole body of theology, but most of all in the holy scriptures, having his senses and heart exercised in them above the common sort of believers; and by the illumination of God's Spirit, and other gifts of edification, which (together with reading and studying of the word) he ought still to seek by prayer, and an humble heart, resolving to admit and receive any truth not yet attained, whenever God shall make it known unto him. All which he is to make use of, and improve, in his private preparations, before he deliver in public what he hath provided.

Ordinarily, the subject of his sermon is to be some text of scripture, holding forth some principle or head of religion, or suitable to some special occasion emergent; or he may go on in some chapter, psalm, or book of the holy scripture, as he shall see fit.

Let the introduction to his text be brief and perspicuous, drawn from the text itself, or context, or some parallel place, or general sentence of scripture.

If the text be long (as in histories or parables it sometimes must be), let him give a brief sum of it; if short, a paraphrase thereof, if need be: in both, looking diligently to the scope of the text, and pointing, at the chief heads and grounds of doctrine which he is to raise from it.

In analysing and dividing his text, he is to regard more the order of matter than of words; and neither to burden the memory of the hearers in the beginning with too many members of division, nor to trouble their minds with obscure terms of art.

In raising doctrines from the text, his care ought to be, *First*, That the matter be the truth of God. *Secondly*, That it be a truth contained in or grounded on that text, that the bearers may discern how God teacheth it from thence. *Thirdly*, That he chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended, and make most for the edification of the hearers.

The doctrine is to be expressed in plain terms; or, if any thing in it need explication, it is to be opened, and the consequence also from the text cleared. The parallel places of scripture, confirming the doctrine, are rather to be plain and pertinent, than many, and (it need be) somewhat insisted upon, and applied to the purpose in hand.

The arguments or reasons are to be solid, and, as much as may be, convincing. The illustrations, of what kind soever, ought to be full of light, and such as may convey the truth into the hearer's heart with spiritual delight.

If any doubt obvious from scripture, reason, or prejudice of the hearers, seem to arise, it is very requisite to remove it, by reconciling the seeming differences, answering the reasons, and discovering and taking away the causes of prejudice and mistake. Otherwise it is not fit to detain the hearers with propounding or answering vain or wicked cavils, which, as they are endless, so the propounding and answering of them doth more hinder than promote edification.

He is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers: which albeit it prove a work of great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant; yet he is to endeavour to perform it in such a manner, that his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discernor of the

thoughts and intents of the heart; and that, if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest, and give glory to God.

In the use of instruction or information in the knowledge of some truth, which is a consequence from his doctrine, he may (when convenient) confirm it by a few firm arguments from the text in hand, and other places of scripture, or from the nature of that common-place in divinity, whereof that truth is a branch.

In confutation of false doctrines, he is neither to raise an old heresy from the grave, nor to mention a blasphemous opinion unnecessarily: but, if the people be in danger of an error, he is to confute it soundly, and endeavour to satisfy their judgments and consciences against all objections.

In exhorting to duties, he is, as he seeth cause, to teach also the means that help to the performance of them.

In dehortation, reprehension, and publick admonition (which require special wisdom), let him, as there shall be cause, not only discover the nature and greatness of the sin, with the misery attending it, but also shew the danger his hearers are in to be overtaken and surprised by it, together with the remedies and best way to avoid it.

In applying comfort, whether general against all temptations, or particular against some special troubles or terrors, he is carefully to answer such objections as a troubled heart and afflicted spirit may suggest to the contrary.

It is also sometimes requisite to give some notes of trial (which is very profitable, especially when performed by able and experienced ministers, with circumspection and prudence, and the signs clearly grounded on the holy scripture), whereby the hearers may be able to examine themselves whether they have attained those graces, and performed those duties, to which be exhorteth, or be guilty of the sin reprehended, and in danger of the judgments threatened, or are such to whom the consolations propounded do belong; that accordingly they may be quickened and excited to duty, humbled for their wants and sins, affected with their danger, and strengthened with comfort as their condition, upon examination, shall require.

And, as he needeth not always to prosecute every doctrine which lies in his text, so is he wisely to make choice of such uses, as, by his residence and conversing with his flock, he findeth most needful and seasonable; and, amongst these, such as may most draw their souls to Christ, the fountain of light, holiness, and comfort.

This method is not prescribed as necessary for every man, or upon every text; but only recommended, as being found by experience to be very much blessed of God, and very helpful for the people's understandings and memories.

But the servant of Christ, whatever his method be, is to perform his whole ministry:

1. Painfully, not doing the work of the Lord negligently.

2. Plainly, that the meanest may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect; abstaining also from an unprofitable use of unknown tongues, strange phrases, and cadences of sounds and words; sparingly citing sentences of ecclesiastical or other human writers, ancient or modern, be they never so elegant.

3. Faithfully, looking at the honour of Christ, the conversion, edification, and salvation of the people, not at his own gain or glory; keeping nothing back which may promote those holy ends, giving to every one his own portion, and bearing indifferent respect unto all, without neglecting the meanest, or sparing the greatest, in their sins.

4. Wisely, framing all his doctrines, exhortations, and especially his reproofs, in such a manner as may be most likely to prevail; shewing all due respect to each man's person and place, and not mixing his own passion or bitterness.

5. Gravely, as becometh the word of God; shunning all such gesture, voice, and expressions, as may occasion the corruptions of men to despise him and his ministry.

6. With loving affection, that the people may see all coming from his godly zeal, and hearty desire to do them good. And,

7. As taught of God, and persuaded in his own heart, that all that he teacheth is the truth of Christ; and walking before his flock, as an example to them in it; earnestly, both in private and publick, recommending his labours to the blessing of God, and watchfully looking to himself, and the flock whereof the Lord hath made him overseer: So shall the doctrine of truth be preserved uncorrupt, many souls converted and built up, and himself receive manifold comforts of his labours even in this life, and afterward the crown of glory laid up for him in the world to come.

Where there are more ministers in a congregation than one, and they of different gifts, each may more especially apply himself to

doctrine or exhortation, according to the gift wherein he most excelleth, and as they shall agree between themselves.

## The Form of Church Government

### *The Directory for the Ordination of Ministers*

It being manifest by the word of God, that no man ought to take upon the office of a minister of the gospel, until he be lawfully called and ordained thereunto; and that the work of ordination is to be performed with all due care, wisdom, gravity, and solemnity, we humbly tender these directions, as requisite to be observed.

1. He that is to be ordained, being either nominated by the people, or otherwise commended to the presbytery, for any place, must address himself to the presbytery, and bring with him a testimonial of his taking the Covenant of the three kingdoms; of his diligence and proficiency in his studies; what degrees he hath taken in the university, and what hath been the time of his abode there; and withal of his age, which is to be twenty-four years; but especially of his life and conversation.
2. Which being considered by the presbytery, they are to proceed to enquire touching the grace of God in him, and whether he be of such holiness of life as is requisite in a minister of the gospel; and to examine him touching his learning and sufficiency, and touching the evidences of his calling to the holy ministry; and, in particular, his fair and direct calling to that place.

### *The Rules for Examination are these:*

- (1.) That the party examined be dealt withal in a brotherly way, with mildness of spirit, and with special respect to the gravity, modesty, and quality of every one.
- (2.) He shall be examined touching his skill in the original tongues, and his trial to be made by reading the Hebrew and Greek Testaments, and rendering some portion of some into Latin; and if he be defective in them, enquiry shall be made more strictly after his other learning, and whether he hath skill in logick and philosophy.
- (3.) What authors in divinity he hath read, and is best acquainted with; and trial shall be made in his knowledge of the grounds of religion,

and of his ability to defend the orthodox doctrine contained in them against all unsound and erroneous opinions, especially these of the present age; of his skill in the sense and meaning of such places of scripture as shall be proposed unto him, in cases of conscience, and in the chronology of the scripture, and the ecclesiastical history.

- (4.) If he hath not before preached in publick with approbation of such as are able to judge, he shall, at a competent time assigned him, expound before the presbytery such a place of scripture as shall be given him.
- (5.) He shall also, within a competent time, frame a discourse in Latin upon such a common-place or controversy in divinity as shall be assigned to him, and exhibit to the presbytery such theses as express the sum thereof, and maintain a dispute upon them.
- (6.) He shall preach before the people, the presbytery, or some of the ministers of the word appointed by them, being present.
- (7.) The proportion of his gifts in relation to the place unto which he is called shall be considered.
- (8.) Beside the trial of his gifts in preaching, he shall undergo an examination in the premises two several days, and more, if the presbytery shall judge it necessary.
- (9.) And as for him that hath formerly been ordained a minister, and is to be removed to another charge, he shall bring a testimonial of his ordination, and of his abilities and conversation, whereupon his fitness for that place shall be tried by his preaching there, and (if it shall be judged necessary) by a further examination of him.