

PREACHING AS THE PUBLIC MEANS OF DIVINE REDEMPTION*

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Preaching as a Mark of the Church

WE WISH TO reflect together about preaching, which, according to the confession of the churches of the Reformation, is the first mark of Christ's church.

When we read about preaching in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession, for example, we are immediately struck by the fact that in terms of its significance for the church, preaching is presented to us not as a statistical datum, but as a normed reality. Here is no neutral observer who first discovered the phenomenon called "church" and then noticed that in this church someone regularly preached—an observation leaving him no other possible conclusion than that the sermon is a defining mark of the church.

Article 29 of the Belgic Confession is not the commentary of a neutral observer, but the confession of a believing Bible reader. He speaks after first having listened to that Bible. He is not saying: In the church there is always preaching, or: The church is a place of preaching, like the stock exchange is a place of

*This essay comprises Section I in *Woord, water en wijn. Gedachten over prediking, doop en avondmaal*, 2nd edition (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1989), 7-30. Dr. Trimp's title for this section is simply "De prediking" ("Preaching"); the English title above this translation is entirely the translator's invention.

business. The professing believer declares in his confession: it is the will of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, that in the church of Christ the good news of Christ is purely proclaimed again and again. That is the normative characteristic of the church. By that mark anyone can recognize the church *of Christ*. By that mark the church herself can recognize her own life principle.

Here, then, we are dealing with maintaining (our forefathers spoke of “exercising” or “using”) the *pure* preaching of the *gospel*. Here the professing believer is focusing on investigating not first whether preaching occurs but rather the content of that preaching.

In this section of Article 29 of the Belgic Confession, we encounter the impulse of the sixteenth century Reformation. For that movement sought to recover and restore the preaching of the gospel of Christ. From the Word of God the Reformers had understood that primarily through this means God was doing his redemptive work upon earth and was seeking his people with his proffered peace. We shall have a lot to say about this in what follows. But at this point we may be satisfied with an initial exploration of the subject. The fixed and largely incomprehensible ritual of the Roman sacramentalized church was dismantled and exchanged for the living preaching of the Word (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 98). And the Reformers were so sure of this endeavor that they spared no praise for that activity. In response to the pretensions of powerful Rome the Reformers raised high the confession that in the *preaching* being done in all those local congregations and little churches, the kingdom of God was being opened to believers. Christ intended nothing else than this when he entrusted to Peter the keys of that kingdom (Matt. 16:19; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 31). So it was that in the sixteenth century a brand new phase began in the history of preaching.

It is so refreshing to retrace our path to the fountainhead of a new historical phase. We have at our disposal the sources of the Reformation, and we are confronted with the immense powers the Holy Spirit desired to unleash in the sixteenth century. We are deeply impressed with the delightful consequences flowing

from this new spring, especially in countries influenced by the Reformation, with respect to church and society, culture and politics.

Nevertheless, at our time in history we face a different and more difficult issue. For the question confronts us inescapably, whether in our day we have reached the *end* of that phase. Is it not our historical calling to expend our efforts in very different ecclesiastical “exercises” and “usages” than preaching? Is not preaching afflicted nowadays with that shortness of breath endemic to old age, an old-timer’s ailment induced by the climate we inhabit together, something we can do little to change? Is ours perhaps a blind conservatism trying to cling to that sixteenth century rediscovery? Are we not fighting a losing battle when we attempt to extol preaching and plead its cause in the closing years of the twentieth century?

Among us we find articles and books with titles like these (to take only a small sampling): *Are They Still Preaching?*, *Is Preaching Relevant?*, and *Is the Sermon Dying?*

At this point we are not concerned with the arguments and conclusions advanced by these publications. Our interest is captivated merely by these arresting titles. At the very least, they alert us to the fact that something is going on around us with regard to preaching. And as with so many other new developments, that “around us” is not restricted to our small country called the Netherlands.

For that reason we wish to identify the current state of things, since especially when it comes to preaching, we may not think, write, and speak ahistorically.

The Sermon in Disrepute

What explains the fact that specifically in our day the market value of preaching is plunging so dramatically? Why has the exclamation point of the sixteenth century become a question mark in the twentieth century?

We will be unable to answer these questions fully. We will be able merely to point to a few facets of the problem, in the hope that we can highlight a number of its characteristic features.

Our *first* observation in this connection is that our age is characterized by a strong attraction to *observable* and *measurable events*. People term this the “honesty” of our generation. We need not adopt this description in order to agree that, indeed, our culture places a high experiential value on the observable. For that reason theologians like to speak of a “shift to the empirical.”

For evaluating the sermon this means, among other things, that people register the following opinions without apology:

- church membership continues to decline, so that church buildings are becoming superfluous
- many who still go to church and subject themselves to preaching nevertheless feel that the sermons hardly speak to them
- accordingly, sermons have little positive effect, and they have virtually no political and social relevance
- most sermons echo an ideology foreign to the modern world; they create and sustain a kind of world far different from our modern everyday society.

Little wonder, then, that people are no longer satisfied with a brilliant sermonic idea constructed with the help of biblical exegesis and on the basis of sound doctrinal theology. What is the market value, anyway, of a minister loudly declaring that salvation is brought about in and through the sermon? What is the flesh and blood payoff of saying that in the sermon Christ lands a blow against the devil? What does modern man care when an ivory-tower theologian defends the premise that the sermon is really a new incarnation of the Word? All such claims reveal exalted pretensions. But the realities of life tend to strip these pretensions bare. Nice-sounding ideas about preaching cannot satisfy the listeners' need.

A *second* observation is directly related: far more than in the past, nowadays the *listener* must be brought into the picture and become the subject of homiletics.

Until recently, attention was devoted specifically to the sermon's *text*. But now people think the focus needs to shift in the direction of the *listener*. Many prefer, then, to view the sermon as an elliptical event whose two foci are the Bible text and the listener.

Formerly, people proceeded on the assumption that the truth of God was contained in the Bible text. A proper interpretation of the text, along with some application to the pew sitters, guaranteed a successful sermon. But nowadays this simple formula won't do the job. Due in part to the rise of the social sciences, we have received insight concerning inter-personal verbal and non-verbal processes of communication. We have learned to focus attention on the communicative structure of interpersonal relationships. Listeners and preachers live in their own social structure, and each contact during the sermon involves many communicative processes that are at work in the energy field between listener and preacher. So inevitably this focus on the listener leads to the need to test the sermon's communicative value.

That brings us to a *third* observation: preaching is viewed as a *communicational medium* and evaluated as such. The result of that evaluation is not particularly encouraging for the traditional, classical sermon. Analysis teaches us that this preaching has only a very limited function as a means of communication. Two chief problems are identified in this connection.

The first problem alleged is that preaching brings the world of the Bible to the listeners, but that world is not today's world. The second problem alleged is that preaching represents a form of verbal communication that is obviously non-dialogical and, as such, disregards the sophistication of modern man. Preaching is in continual danger of taking on the airs of an authoritarian, patriarchal, or even feudal communication model.

It is worth pausing to consider at length these stout claims. We would therefore make the following comments and remarks.

Regarding the first alleged problem with preaching—namely, that preaching brings the world of the Bible to the listeners but that world is not today’s world—as we said, formerly people viewed the sermon preeminently in terms of the preaching *text*. This text was a Bible text and was thought to contain eternal truth for the people of God in every land and every age. After all, it has been the conviction of many generations that the Bible is the literally inspired Word of God himself. But since this belief has now been unmasked as a particular human *perspective* about the Bible, a perspective that can hardly survive in the face of overwhelming scholarly criticism, we will also need to evaluate the *text* behind the sermon in a different way than before. For so many people today, that different evaluation comes down to this: the Bible can be respected as an authentic, first-generation document describing for us the faith-experience of earlier generations of believers. The Bible text constitutes the report of *that* experience. Taking this Bible text as your starting point for the sermon is meaningful only if you don’t look for more than you may expect to find in that text. That text may serve as an inspiring example and creative stimulus for our faith-experience today and for communicating this experience to each other. However, if someone wishes to proclaim the conceptual world of the text as normative truth for today, then he will commit a fatal mistake and cause a short circuit to occur in the communication process.

To do something like this in one’s sermon is to commit the same egregious error as the person who spent his energies praising the gas lamp after the electric light had been invented. Put another way: a preacher who devotes his labors to unfolding the conceptual content of the Bible’s text is like someone who gives away coupons whose expiration date has passed. He is pawning off yesterday’s manna and thus becomes a purveyor of decayed and damaged goods. For all those grand concepts of the Bible, like the ones summarized in the Apostles’ Creed, have had their day. Anyone who remains stuck there is like the mourner who cannot get back to living because he cannot leave the cemetery.

Certainly these Bible books have their *documentary* and their *emotional* value. But at the same time, we must acknowledge—so it is argued—that they have lost their *informative* value. In this regard, there is no difference between the Bible and an old newspaper. “News” quickly becomes “old,” since information starts showing signs of age after one day. There is no reason why the Bible should be an exception to this rule. This text, like all ancient texts, has no inherent power to jump the yawning chasm between *then* and *now*. Only by way of the creative reinterpretation of the modern preacher can that ancient text enter our lives. Little wonder that we who are people of the twentieth century will often need to leave the Bible behind!¹

Concerning the second alleged problem with preaching—namely, that preaching represents a form of verbal communication that is obviously non-dialogical and, as such, disregards the sophistication of modern man—it is undeniable that preaching displays a verbal communicational structure, one that is monologic in character. These two observable features give rise to the claim that we should not use the sermonic form exclusively. For there are more and (this is the point) better means of communication.

Here we are really tasting the fruit of communication ideologies prevalent in our day.² One feature of those ideologies significant for our discussion is the premise that genuine communication means *cooperation*. And the sermon is not cooperative communication; it lacks the feature of partnership that marks genuine *conversation*.

Here we have stumbled upon one of the favorite metaphors of our culture. For conversation is thought to be the medium most suited to the sophistication of modern man.

Sermonic communication has room for but one speaker and many passive participants. But in conversation, nobody dominates; there you find the partnership and participation of

¹The examples are taken in large part from H.-D. Bastian, *Kommunikation. Wie christlicher Glaube funktioniert* (Stuttgart-Berlin, 1972).

²For a more extensive discussion of this, see my *Communicatie en ambtelijke dienst* (Groningen, 1976).

people who guide each another along the pathway to the truth. So people today prefer the “*sacrament of conversation*.”³

In this context we should not forget that our age does still acknowledge one form of proclamation, one that functions as an alternative to the sermon. That is the proclamation of the *deed*. The desire today is that the church be active wherever there is injustice, poverty, nuclear armament, and discrimination in society. At those points the church should be demonstrating by her action that the Christian faith implies a specific attitude toward those realities. Following Jesus then obtains concrete form in deeds of love and protest, in actions of hope and help. This pantomime of redemption communicates far more effectively than any form of verbal speech.⁴ Consequently, we are not surprised when we observe at a given moment that the church herself has become the Word of God for modern man.⁵

When we take all these arguments together, we can understand why many today conclude that we need to break with the “myth” of proclamation. They insist that we need to see Luther’s rediscovery of preaching in its historical relativity. After all, the man was preaching in a time when most people could neither read nor write. In addition, there was no daily newspaper, to say nothing about other information media. In that kind of cultural situation preaching could radiate more informative power than it can in our contemporary world. As a form of communication, preaching is purely a cultural phenomenon. A different culture will yield a different means. Even an appeal to Romans 10:17 cannot rescue the sermon from this trend, for when the apostle says that faith comes from hearing, and hearing

³It is striking that Hendrikus Berkhof breaks with the concept of sacrament while at the same time pleading for recognizing the “sacramental” character of conversation. See his *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 348, 358-362. G. Heitink has followed him at this point; cf. his *Pastoraat als hulpverlening. Inleiding in de pastorale theologie en psychologie* (Kampen, 1977), 181-182.

⁴Cf. J.C. Hoekendijk, *De kerk binnenste buiten* (Amsterdam, 1964), 75.

⁵M. Wester, *Konkrete Verkündigung* (Stuttgart-Berlin, 1974), 36.

from the Word of Christ, that conviction of Paul is just as much determined by the culture of his time.⁶

We twentieth century people need to break this word-monopoly, for we can employ all sorts of symbolic systems: let the church “preach” by means of conversation and action, image and example, music and dance, drama and ritual!

The “Belief-*ability*” and “Belief-*value*” of the Sermon⁷

We have considered several dominant themes that nurture the disrepute under which the preaching of Reformational churches suffers. Now we take up the task of bringing to light, in contrast to this discrediting, the source and basis of the “belief-ability” of preaching also in our cultural situation.⁸

Our claim is that as the public proclamation of God’s redemption, preaching is not a product of any particular culture. Its roots reach deeper and its origin lies far earlier than our culture. We dare to make this claim about preaching because we are convinced that this claim proceeds directly from the knowledge of God which the Holy Spirit has been pleased to bestow upon us and upon many generations before us.

By faith we know our God as the living God. He manifests himself as the living God specifically by his speaking, in his creation and salvation of this world. Speaking and summoning, he created his world. With the very same voice God sought man and found him, set him in place and put him to work, enlisting and directing him toward God’s future. For it was by means of God’s creating word that the covenant between God and man came into being and continued. Neither the chasm of sin nor the distance of generations could render God’s covenantal actions

⁶H.-D. Bastian, *Kommunikation*, 36-38.

⁷*Translator’s note:* The original phrase, “De ‘geloof-waardigheid’ van de preek,” contains a double entendre, referring to the sermon’s “believability” and its “belief value.”

⁸In this connection we are explicitly excluding *homiletical* aspects from our consideration. The form of the sermon is definitely culturally determined, and for that nobody needs to apologize. Quite the contrary!

powerless. He overcame both impediments by his almighty word. The history of God's consociation with Abraham documents this truth definitively (cf. Rom. 4).

Therefore, God's salvation was revealed on earth through God's speaking. All revelation is primarily word-revelation. And since God's revelation by definition is not the product of any culture, this speaking of God is no culturally bound phenomenon. Such creaturely fantasizing is the height of folly. This God has willed that his speaking would be the center of the life and the worship of his people. This explains the (absolutely anti-cultural!) prohibition against image worship in the Decalogue with all its immense consequences for the life and liturgy of Israel (e.g., cf. Deut. 4, Ex. 32, 1 Kings 13).

In the old covenant God provided his people a variety of assurances to cling to in the world of visible and tangible things. But the core of their religion was the spoken word, the promises and commands of the Lord that were heard and codified. Without those words the sacrifices and other ceremonies would have become meaningless rituals. In contrast to beholding mysteries or having a mystical vision of the deity, in contrast to the speculation of philosophy or the squealing and muttering of sorcerers and necromancers (cf. Deut. 18:9-22, 30:11-14, Isa. 8:19-20), serving God consisted in listening to the clear language of the God of the covenant. Also the appearances of God, the so-called theophanies, occurred in the form of the spoken word (e.g., Exod. 33:11) or served to introduce the sending of a prophet (e.g., Isa. 6, Ezek. 1).

"Hear, O Israel" (Deut. 6:4) is, by divine design, the life principle for the people of the covenant.

In the New Testament we see the same emphasis on the speaking of God. As the Son of God, Christ himself is the Word of God. Therefore in him was life, and this life is the light of men (John 1:1-4). This Christ appeared to mankind as the speaking Son of God (cf. John 1:18, Luke 4:16-22) and his deeds followed his words in order to confirm these words.

Whenever people express doubts about proclamation as the route *par excellence* of God's salvation, then we are convinced that

such doubts ultimately jeopardize the doctrine of God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Anyone who posits proclamation as a cultural product can do so only by denying the divine origin of Christ, so that the Rescuer of God’s world arises ultimately from the world of man himself. But the illegitimacy of this train of thought is clear: “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:22-23). Indeed, these are serious words. But they serve essentially to safeguard this great joy: “. . .what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1 John 1:1-4).

At the same time this truth makes it clear that the narrative of Christ is republished down through the generations only along the route of apostolic proclamation. On this point the New Testament is absolutely clear. Anyone who wants to meet Christ, the Son of God, can meet him only in the proclamation.

The Scriptural evidence is so abundant that a small selection must suffice. Consider the following:

- “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).
- Jesus said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47).
- “Jesus said to him, ‘Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed’” (John 20:29). Until Christ’s ascension, there was much to see, since Jesus appeared among the people. That seeing was determined and limited redemptive-historically (compare

these words to those in Luke 10:23-24). The rule of John 20:29 is related to the dispensation that began at Christ's ascension and this rule continues in force until his return.

- Throughout this dispensation, we find *kerygma* (message) and *euangelion* (good news), and the word *akoē*, literally, "that which is heard" serving as "technical" terms for *preaching*. We find this latter word, for example, loaded with meaning in Galatians 3:2, 5 (cf. also 1 Thess. 2:13 and Heb. 4:2). "Hearing" is the preeminent characteristic of this entire dispensation, the dispensation of "faith" (Gal. 3:23-25). And that faith stands in contrast to the work of the law (Gal. 3:2).
- In this same line we find Scripture speaking about the "obedience of faith" (e.g., at the beginning and conclusion of Paul's epistle to the Romans, 1:5, 16:26; cf. also 6:17). This helps explain why the apostle Peter sees church members as being characterized by obedience (1 Pet. 1:14; cf. 1:2).
- The remarkable self-presentation of the apostle in the epistle to Titus is also loaded with meaning (1:2-3). His apostleship stands in service to the faith of the elect congregation and in service to the knowledge of the truth that comports with piety. In addition, this apostolate rests upon the expectation, functioning as hope for eternal life, which God himself has aroused by publicly revealing his Son. The apostle understands that in this way, his entire life's work is devoted to serving the gospel's fulfillment, as he performs his labor against the background of the Old Testament dispensation of promise.

In this connection we should be impressed by the fact that in Titus 1:3, the apostle describes the historical reality of the revelation of grace in Christ as a "*bringing to light of God's Word in the proclamation.*" That comes about by a clear divine ordaining. The salvation of God in Christ comes to the world in this mode, even as Christ's resurrection is brought to light through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10). Whoever desires to find Christ must and can

find him in the proclamation! That is the redemptive-historical specification of New Testament preaching!⁹

In view of this Scriptural evidence, we cannot possibly characterize the preaching of Christ's person and work as a cultural phenomenon or a cultural product. The entire life story of the apostle demonstrates how much his preaching was both a protest against and a medicine for the culture of his day. God was seeking that culture and seeks every culture as the God who speaks. That reality transcends human cultures, even though it is also involved in the life of those cultures.

God has come to us in creation and in redemption as the *speaking* God. For that reason, the primary posture of his people ought to be the posture of *listening*. That is the continuing force of the apostle's words in Romans 10:13-16.

Along with K. Runia we would say that Christ's church is both constituted and continued through preaching.¹⁰ In this perspective we understand the sixteenth century Reformation as a restoration of authentic "*aural* religion." God commanded his people to practice neither a *visual* religion nor a *deed* religion, but an *aural* religion; such listening was taught to us once again by the Reformation. For the Word must "get into full swing," as Luther used to say. Where the Word is, there comes hearing. Where hearing is, there comes faith in the word of promise. And where faith is, there grace reigns.

Sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia—these three are one. Therefore the church of Christ exists wherever the pure preaching of the gospel is found (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

The Sermon as Communication

We wish to turn our attention to the complaints about the inadequate communicational structure of preaching. Central to

⁹For the Scriptural evidence from the epistle to the Hebrews, the study of C. Veenhof, *Het Woord Gods in den brief aan de Hebreëën* (Terneuzen, 1946) remains valuable.

¹⁰K. Runia, *Heeft preken nog zijn?* (Kampen, 1981), 36.

these criticisms is the objection that monologue denigrates people's sophistication.

This objection involves more than the mere form of communication. The background is deeper and the intention broader than a desire simply to give the sermon the kind of rhetorical structure that focuses more on the listener than is customary. Rather, this criticism insists that we should judge the entire "preaching event" in terms of its communicational value. In that connection, therefore, we wish to make these three comments.

1. We may not *isolate the sermon from God's covenant with his people*. Those who do so are in fact isolating one aspect of the sermon (the communicational aspect) from the full living context within which this aspect functions. When that happens, we end up speaking about abstractions; and we are hindered from seeing the real issue clearly.

The sermon is an act that God himself accomplishes in his love. God himself first revealed his promise in paradise (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 19). Only then could man speak in response. That he was able to speak in response is due to the goodness of God, who desired to enlist men as intermediaries between himself and his people. Exactly this feature is the supreme blessing God bestowed in the mediation of the gospel through the offices given to the church, something about which Calvin was so intensely amazed (cf. *Institutes*, 4.1.5).

Therefore, we want to focus attention first of all on this reality: in every sermon, as a human proclamation of God's promises and precepts, God manifests his goodness and lovingkindness. Behind every sermon lies a massive history of God's coming near in his Son and his Spirit.¹¹

¹¹"Condescension" is what our forefathers called this love of God. With this word they meant to describe God's descending to our level and being involved in our lives with love and patience. This word has less to do with the notion of *patronizing*, which emphasizes the elements of distance and haughtiness, than with the notion embedded in the word's Latin derivation from *com + de + scandere*, to *climb down with*. This latter emphasis highlights God's love and patience with his people down through the ages. God's

The reality that the good news of eternal life can and may be proclaimed through human lips, and that you can listen to that proclamation in your own language spoken by another human being, is a stupendous miracle of communication between God and man.

2. We may not *isolate the sermon from the entire liturgy*. The liturgy or order of worship is two-sided, “dialogic,” if you will. Nowhere does man come more fully into his own than right here. In the liturgy man functions fully as a human being. When you glorify and thank the Creator of heaven and earth as God, you rediscover your life context. If you refuse to glorify and thank the Creator of heaven and earth as God, then you surrender to corruption (Rom. 1:21-23).

There are moments in that liturgy when God speaks and people listen. Such listening is not passive. It is the “exercise” of “faith-listening.” However, in this activity a person is indeed receptive. The sophisticated person who cannot listen and receive is not really very sophisticated. For sophistication before God begins by confessing the truth. And “confessing” is always responsive. The lips cannot declare what the ear has not heard (Rom. 10:14, 17).

That we may learn throughout our lives to listen is a wonderful privilege. For us to enjoy times and places in life where we meet the speaking God is indescribable bliss. At such times he has something to say to us. He desires to grant us a share in Christ’s redemption and to show us the path of genuine life. His speech is not an opening for dialogue, or an introduction to a discussion, or the start of a conversation. His speech is announcement, good and grand news, the proclamation of a love and grace far surpassing human comprehension. His speech is the grand bestowal of the release of sinners through the blood of Christ. Such news is incredible and yet very believable, and as we listen with the ear of faith *we* are privileged to appropriate it.

condescension has more to do with climbing-down-among than with coming-down-to.

Afterwards we may speak, in praise, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer.

In our view, not isolating the sermon from the entire liturgy means also that we do not need “children’s church.”

We take our children along to worship because the Lord of the congregation wants to meet his *people*, and thus wants to see the children too. He is “served” by seeing those children. The church is not an association for retirees or a club for adults. The characteristic function of worship is that the entire people of God gather to praise him and listen to him. The children “who have not known” (Deut. 31:13) must also learn to listen to the voice of their God—together with their parents and the other members of the congregation. Naturally, they will understand only a small part of the sermon. The sermon cannot be so simplified that a five-year old child, a ten-year old girl, and a fifteen-year old lad will be able to comprehend everything. But this goes for all the members of the congregation. There is a legitimate form of “selective listening”; especially the aged members of the congregation will practice this selectivity involuntarily.

So children learn in church that they still have much to learn.

Moreover, most children have parents, who may be expected to explain to their children the heart of the sermon. There are also large parts of the worship service in which the children can participate fully. Therefore, it is a liturgical monstrosity to separate all the children of a certain age from the assembled worshipers for the duration of the sermon.

It is another question altogether whether we might be better able to involve children more actively in worship by means of a choir. But that is first of all a liturgical matter, and so we will leave that discussion for another time.

3. We may not *isolate the sermon from personal pastoral care*. Obviously a personal conversation represents a more intimate form of communication than a public sermon. That is not a twentieth century discovery. People living in earlier times understood this too, as, for example, when the law was given at

Sinai or when Peter preached his sermon on Pentecost or when the apostle Paul addressed crowds. For that reason the kerygma was always supplemented with instruction and admonition (*didache* and *paraklesis*), where not only groups but also individuals were addressed. The confession of the Reformation does not exclude this form; on the contrary, the Reformation expressly permits it. Following the line of Luther, Calvin, and Bucer, we read in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 31, about “proclaiming and openly witnessing, according to the command of Christ, to believers, *one and all*. . . .”¹²

People were properly aware of the fact that “doctrine” generated and demanded these “private admonitions” if the message was to hit home. Seen from this perspective, the sermon must be supplemented with catechism instruction, pastoral conversation, and personal encouragement and admonition.

Even as these matters may not be isolated from one another in the exercise of office, so too they may not be isolated from one another when we consider communication between pastors and church members.

But by saying this, we have not yet rebutted the objection about the *monologic* character of preaching. To that task we now devote separate attention.

The Monologic Sermon as Public Means of Grace

At the outset of our consideration of the monologic character of the sermon, we assert that we will not be using the concept of “information.” Anyone using this prevalent modern notion to characterize preaching has already distorted things from the start.

With the passing of (much or any) time, “information” loses its newsworthiness. And since that is its only strength, it loses all its value. Information media change as technological developments put more functional capacities at our disposal.

¹²Concerning this, see my *Media vita. De betekenis van de gereformeerde ambtsleer voor de “humaniteit” in de kerkelijke zielszorg* (Groningen, 1981), 17ff.; also H. Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melanchthon* (Göttingen, 1962), 106.

If you evaluate the church's preaching from this viewpoint, it is understandable that you might consider this information medium obsolete. After all, why all this Sunday busyness in an age of electronic news flashes? Nevertheless, it is precisely this viewpoint that creates a kind of self-imprisonment and causes serious shortsightedness.

For preaching involves the message of the release of sinners before God. That message is always "news," because it is always new. Sure, we "know" it, with our understanding. Yet, it must always be declared to us again. Before God sin is an ever-relevant matter. And "believing" is not simply "knowing once and for all." Faith is a matter of repeatedly appropriating the promise of the gospel, a matter of repeatedly surrendering to the God of the promise.

This is why the Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 84, speaks of proclaiming that believers one and all have forgiveness of sins "*whenever* they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith." God's grace is not a substance. That is why you cannot "store up" God's grace, not even in the sacraments. We cannot lay aside a "supply" of God's grace. For grace is the good favor of the living God upon our lives. And this favor is designed to be renewed each day. Therefore such grace is declared to us anew again and again. This is how the gospel is a power of salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). Were this proclamation to disappear, then God's grace would disappear from us and the assurance of faith would slip away.

This leads to the following consideration in this connection. When we investigate the context within which the Reformed confessions discuss preaching, we are struck by the close connection between preaching and the doctrine of justification. Only along this route (of preaching) does God's grace reach our lives. The significant Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) discusses justification in Article 4. We hear the heartbeat of the Reformation:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works,

or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.¹³

Closely connected is Article 5:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word¹⁴ of the Gospel.

This confessional declaration from the early time of the Reformation is of fundamental significance. From it we are made to understand what the church in 1530 believed with regard to preaching and office, and what this preaching and exercise of office meant to her.

- The ministry of the church has been instituted by God. That is a unique and distinct act of God. That fact eliminates any trace of arbitrariness or historical-cultural relativity.
- This ministry is exercised primarily in the proclamation of the gospel.
- This ministry has been instituted with a view to that redemptive faith whereby we are righteous before God and can appear before him.

¹³This and subsequent citations of the Augsburg Confession are taken from *Creeeds of the Churches*, 3rd ed., ed. John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 69.

¹⁴Literally, “leiblich wort,” rendered by the Latin “verbum externum.” This refers to the word spoken to man from outside of him, in Scripture, preaching, and the sacraments.

- Preaching is the instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit to create that faith. God gives to the church not only the Bible and the sacraments. He desires the Word to be administered and the sacraments dispensed as gospel. Along that route the Holy Spirit can perform his great work according to the unique good pleasure of God.

Clearly the ministry of preaching is closely related to the content of preaching, namely, righteousness through faith in Christ. Only in this way can a sinful person appear before God as righteous. And therein the good pleasure of God will be praised! The deepest content of the gospel requires this ministry of preaching. That is the route God travels toward people. So the monologic character of the sermon is evidently closely related to the sermon's content. The monologue gives expression to the "by faith *alone*." Precisely because the sermon is monologic can it function as means of *grace*.

When we open the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), we notice strong parallels between its arrangement and that of the Augsburg Confession. What the Augsburg treats in Article 5, the Heidelberg discusses in Lord's Day 25.¹⁵

In discussing the doctrine of man's salvation, confession is made regarding the person of the mediator (Lord's Days 5 and 6). It is the *gospel* that makes him and his work known (Lord's Day 6).

Faith is directed to the promise of that gospel (Lord's Day 7), and the content of that promise, along with that faith, is unfolded in the treatment of the Apostles' Creed (Lord's Days 8-22). Then follows two additional questions. The first concerns the "*profit*,"

¹⁵Preaching is discussed in many more places in the Heidelberg Catechism. We would mention Answers 1 (the assurance of eternal life), 21 (in connection with the source of faith), 51 (preaching as one of the heavenly gifts Christ has bestowed through the Holy Spirit), 54 (the preached Word as means of gathering the church), 83-84 (preaching as a key of the kingdom), 98 (in contrast to idol worship), 103 (in connection with the Fourth Commandment and the sabbath), and 115 (in connection with preaching the law). In Ursinus' Large Catechism a separate section is devoted to preaching (Questions and Answers 264-273).

or the redemptive benefit of that faith, while the second leads us to reflect on the *source* of that faith (Lord’s Day 23, Question 59, and Lord’s Day 25, Question 65). The first question discusses justification, to which is coupled the confession about the work of the Holy Spirit in proclamation and in the administration of the sacraments (Answer 65), in response to the second question.

Thus we see that here, too, preaching is assigned its place in the doctrine of man’s salvation. It is a necessary instrument, maintained by God himself to lead man to indispensable faith in Christ and to preserve him in that faith.

At the conclusion of its explanation of salvation, the Heidelberg Catechism returns once more to this subject. In Lord’s Day 31, Answer 84, this confession strongly emphasizes the “proclaiming and openly witnessing” the gospel of the forgiveness of sins for all who believe. That activity is the primary exercise of the power of the keys (cf. Augsburg Confession, art. 28). Where public proclamation of the gospel is found, there is the workshop of the Holy Spirit, the earthly location of salvation and the “power” of the official ministry.

We have asked ourselves the question why within the Reformational tradition so much emphasis has been put on public proclamation. We have also wondered whether this emphasis has fallen prey to changes occasioned by the historical distance between our age and the sixteenth century. Should we not take into account at this point the cultural difference, evident in the limited communication possibilities of that time? Now that we have clarified the background of the Reformational confession regarding the public proclamation of the gospel, the way is open for us to offer a definitive response to the issue. In this context, then, we would offer the following concluding remarks.

1. The public proclamation of the gospel accentuates the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ goes out into the whole world. This proclamation is the witness about the facts of the salvation God has established in Christ. That testimony must be preached to all nations throughout the whole world, in terms of the order

God has established for the history of his redemption on earth (Matt. 24:14, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46-48, Rom. 1:14, Rom. 3:21-26, 2 Tim. 4:1-5, Rev. 14:6, and elsewhere).

Sin extends to all men, with the result that everybody lies bound in its grip of death (Rom. 5:12). Now the proclamation of righteousness in Christ must sound throughout the whole earth. By virtue of the nature of God's redemptive work, the gospel cannot remain confined to a group, no matter what criteria account for the group's existence: social status, level of intelligence, mystical orientation, readiness for action, religious experience, consensus based on agreement in character or life situations, and the like.

2. Should anyone nevertheless still try to restrict the public proclamation of the gospel, and shift the emphasis to the *group*, then what is at stake is not merely a communication method (e.g., preference for discussion), but just as seriously, the content of the sermon itself.

In our day we see a strong tendency toward group activity. Think of the numerous support groups and various public response groups (they can range from sermon discussion groups¹⁶ to political action committees), cell groups, weekend retreats, and the like. The "message" that keeps coming out of all these groups is this continual question: How should the church live in this world filled with needs, fears, and threatening

¹⁶The sermon discussion group deserves a separate treatment. The idea is strongly defended by J. Thomas in his *Homiletische bulplijnen. Aanwijzingen bij de preekvoorbereiding* ('s Gravenhage, 1976), and in *Het luistert naar. Het gesprek over de preek tussen gemeente en predikant* (Kampen, 1978). Nevertheless, the sermon discussion group provides no curative for the unhealthy situation where a preacher fails to maintain regular pastoral contact with the congregation. On this point we agree entirely with R. Bijlsma, who has written soberly about this matter. "Pastoral care and preaching need one another. Faced with an understandable desire for specialization in the work of the church, we must guard against separating these two arenas of labor. The complaint that a preacher today needs five or more legs to keep up with all the work, is legitimate. And using co-workers for specific segments of the workload can benefit the congregation. But the preacher must continue to walk with the two legs of pastoral care and preaching" (*De preek* [Kampen, 1977], 40).

prospects of destruction? The reply we receive is that we must join in solidarity with the world, in terms of the example of the man from Nazareth. We have to follow him.

Truly remarkable is the fact that people continually talk about the church's ministry to the world, but we never hear anything about the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the church. Are we to assume that the church has everything in hand? Or is it not rather the case that the treasure of Christ is continually being extended to the church? This shift of accent illustrates how priority has been transferred from the proclamation of the gospel to the law of following Christ.

We need to formulate the matter still more strongly. For a law that does not proceed from the proclamation of the gospel of Christ as mediator and reconciler, cannot be the law of Jesus. This shift of accent, therefore, involves an exchange. The gospel of God's grace in Christ is exchanged for the law of solidarity with humanity according to the example of Jesus. The Reformation is being exchanged for a Bible-tinted humanism.

3. Finally, this analysis is confirmed from history. The contrast is not between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries, but between grace and human effort in both periods. Recall the deep and irreconcilable conflict between Luther and Erasmus. The very nature of the gospel was at stake in this conflict. That conflict ranged across the entire field of the Christian faith and life. In this context we would highlight one point: Luther emphasized, in his struggle against Erasmus, the public character of preaching. Erasmus did not want to set forth matters of faith and of the church before everybody; these matters were reserved for those who could reflect upon them amid intellectual tranquility. He hated the popular movement that had been set in motion by Luther's public preaching.

Here we encounter a typical theme of humanism, one that gives rise to a moralist-elitist group consciousness. The Bible is a book that can nurture those who possess the sophistication and capacity for biblical-ethical habits and attitudes. Public preaching is not an indispensable matter. For man has the innate capacity to

reach the level of ethical righteousness. Against this human pride Luther directed his sharp polemic. Specifically in his opposition to Erasmus' tract about free will, Luther emphasized the need for public proclamation.¹⁷

That was not a difference of opinion regarding the method, nature, or context of communication. It was a conflict about the essence of God's redemptive work. If we share Luther's perspective, then we who live in the twentieth century need not be ashamed of the monologic character of the public announcement that proclaims release to sinners.

Preaching as the Spirit's Administering¹⁸

When we reflect on the confession of the Reformation regarding preaching, we are impressed by the heavy emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings Christ's salvation to people with and through preaching. Limiting ourselves to the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25, Question and Answer 65, we would point out something anyone can read for himself, namely, that the Holy Spirit is the acting Subject in preaching. Whereas everybody realizes and experiences that a man is preaching—in human language, with a human voice, and with human capacities—we confess that God himself is acting in and through this human activity. God is the one who through Christ establishes salvation in the world, and God is the one who through the Holy Spirit makes man share in that salvation. This leads to the confessional formulation that faith comes from the Holy Spirit who *works* that faith in our hearts by the *preaching* of the holy gospel. This formulation emphasizes both the activity of God and the instrumental function of human preaching.

¹⁷Cf. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), and A. Niebergall, "Luthers Auffassung von der Predigt nach De servo Arbitrio," *Reformation und Gegenwart*, ed. by H. Grass and W.G. Kümmel (Marburg, 1968), 83ff.

¹⁸*Translator's note:* The original employs the word *bediening*, which, according to *van Dale Handwoordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, can mean "service," "operation," "office," or "administration." In our translation we will render the original with the words "administering" and "ministry" used synonymously.

In this connection, we would plead for the restoration and recovery of the word “*administer*” (as in the phrase: “preaching is *administering* the Word of God”). We believe that in our century this word has unfortunately lost its currency and value. At least two features warrant our recommendation for recovering our use of this term: (1) the word “*administer*” opens up possibilities for clarifying the *specific place* of preaching *in the history of redemption*; and (2) the term “*administer*” implies that *being attuned to the listener* is characteristic of preaching. Let’s consider each of these in turn.¹⁹

In the first place, the word “*administer*” opens up possibilities for defining the place of preaching. For in 2 Corinthians 3:8 the Bible speaks of New Testament preaching as the “administration of the Spirit” (*hē diakonia tou pneumatos*; “the ministration of the spirit,” KJV; “the ministry of the Spirit,” NASB, NIV, NKJV). This ministry is further described as a ministry “*with glory*.” The following verse explains this rapturous expression: in this preaching *righteousness* is bestowed.

In this way the New Testament *administering* stands in contrast to the Old Testament announcement of the law, called “the ministry of death” (2 Cor. 3:7) or a ministry that brings condemnation (2 Cor. 3:9). A bit later in this epistle, the apostle terms this same phenomenon “the ministry of reconciliation,” emphatically assuring his readers that this ministry had been given to him and his fellow apostles (2 Cor. 4:1, 5:18-19). This shows us that in preaching, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ is collected and transmitted (2 Cor. 4:4-6).

But what, then, is “*administering*” the Word?

The phrase calls to mind a meal, specifically the moment when food and drink are set on the table (cf. Acts 6:4, coming after Acts 6:2).

Now, daily experience teaches that “*administering*” is a culminating activity, the last in a long series of actions. As soon

¹⁹A third feature could be that the concept of “*administering*” counters the Barthian notion of “ministry *to* the Word” and the resulting idea of “creative reinterpretation” or “re-presentation” of the Word in preaching. In view of the design and aim of this current essay, we will leave this argument aside.

as we step back to ponder the steps that led to the final one, whole vistas open before our eyes.

If you have been served a cup of coffee with sugar, you can imagine how many steps led up to this final act of “administering” or serving up the sugared coffee. The sugar has come, through a series of processes, from sugar beets. Consider the farmer who faces many challenges and choices. Planting and harvesting, and everything in between, went into that sugar. Sugar production involves investments in technology and chemical processes, product transport and marketing, wholesale and retail businesses—all these were indispensable steps in the long series leading from the farmer’s field to your coffee cup. The full story is still more complicated than the portrait we have just sketched. Just think of the source of the coffee. Now we are looking at international market factors, oceanic transport, and share prices in the futures market. All of these have preceded the simple “service” in the restaurant. Similar descriptions would apply to tea, oranges, potatoes, vegetables, fruits, bread, and snacks. Our point is obvious: whole worlds of activity lie behind the simple act that we call “service.”

The *administering* of the Spirit reaches us in preaching. But behind that culminating step lies

- the impenetrable pleasure and plan of God
- the centuries-long work of God in sending his Son
- the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost
- the coming of the Bible, through a centuries-long process
- the commissioning of gospel preachers and the indescribable story of missions and church history: the joy and suffering, the weakness and strength of many preceding generations
- our own life story: our birth in *this* country, to *these* parents, in *this* century.

All of these and many more factors lay behind the very first sermon we ever heard in our lives.

The Holy Spirit is the real Agent in that preaching activity. He is busy bringing God's salvation home to us, setting it before us and laying it upon our hearts. In addition, he teaches us to feed upon that salvation and to enjoy it. This is how God's redemptive plan is accomplished.

This is the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit, in which the preaching of the faith inaugurates the last phase. Ultimately it is God who began this phase. That is the glory of this ministry in the dispensation of fulfillment.

The Holy Spirit is the great Subject who *administers* the ministry of the Word. But at the same time, man is privileged to be a subject too. "*Administering*" or serving up the Word is a human activity, an activity entrusted to people. For the Spirit desires to work faith by means of the *preaching* of the gospel. This Spirit enlists human subjectivity. In the *administering* of the Word called preaching, he reactivates and mobilizes every capacity that he has given to man.

This is how the churches of the Reformation have acknowledged the procedure used by the Holy Spirit. In so doing, they contended against two foes. In the first place, this specification of the place of preaching constituted a rejection of the *objectivism* of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome taught that we meet the Holy Spirit in the teaching office and the priestly office held by the church's consecrated officebearers. The church's infallible teaching authority and her sacramental authority to re-present the body and blood of Christ are the Spirit-given objective channels of salvation. To benefit from these, preaching is a preparatory act, pointing beyond to the sacramental celebration.

In the second place, the Reformational confession about preaching was explicitly aimed against the *subjectivism* of the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century—a colorful group!—represented in many respects a spiritualistic way of thinking. "Spiritualism" means that people emphasized the work of the Spirit (Latin, *Spiritus*) in a particular way. Basically this involved a view that minimized the Holy Spirit's work within the structures provided at creation. Attention to the work of the

Holy Spirit was thought to draw us away from creation structures. The Spirit led us, as it were, to turn our backs to our creatureliness. In terms of the matter at hand, this spiritualism meant that the Holy Spirit did not accomplish his work by means of men's official service. The Holy Spirit performs his divine work in the human heart immediately (without means) and directly. As mediating factors in the process of salvation, the written word of the Bible and the administration of the Word by the officebearer fall by the wayside.

This opposition to the Anabaptist mindset runs throughout the Reformational confessions, beginning with Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession, cited earlier. The deep Reformational conviction was that the divine work of the Spirit on earth occurred in a specific workshop and thus at a demonstrable location, namely, where the gospel of Christ is preached. This is how God operates: he works salvation through serving up the Word. That working of salvation is not a self-regulating or automatic process, as if the administration of the Word itself possesses magical power. The Holy Spirit is God himself and he governs the course of the Word as well as the entrance of that Word into human hearts.²⁰

We would not want to replace the subjectivism of the Anabaptist mentality with a kind of word-objectivism, as if the Holy Spirit himself were stored inside the Word like an impersonal power similar to the energy stored in a battery. This accounts for the alternating word usage in the Reformational confessions: the Holy Spirit works *by means of* the Word, and he works *together with* the Word. Behind the second expression lies the desire to respect the independent, personal activity of the Spirit, whereas the former expression formulates sharply our opposition to the Anabaptist mentality.²¹

²⁰Cf. the familiar language of the Augsburg Confession in Art. 5, concerning "when and where [the Spirit] pleases."

²¹Cf. K. Runia, "Prediking, prediker en Heilige Geest," *Kerk en Theologie*, 33 (1982): 104-116, and my essay, "Is de prediking 'uiterlijk?'" in the *Festschrift* for J. Kamphuis, *Bezield verband* (Kampen, 1984), 220-230.

In all of these formulations our forefathers wished to do justice to the fact that the Person of the Holy Spirit executes God’s pleasure within the context of God’s covenant in a covenantal manner. “In a covenantal manner” means: in the form of preaching God’s promise of grace and God’s call to faith. To that end human mediation is enlisted and human responsibility is summoned. Thus, the eyes of our forefathers were opened to see again the great blessing God has entrusted to people in this ministry (1 Cor. 4:1, 2 Cor. 4:1-6, 5:18-19). Along this path the Spirit brings the redemptive Word of God close to man and within man. Only when you catch a vision of this matter of *administering* and understand this *administering* not simply from the perspective of officebearers, but primarily from the perspective of the method the Holy Spirit uses in his work, only then will you appreciate the great declaration of the Second Helvetic Confession: the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.

The Second Helvetic Confession was written in 1562 by Heinrich Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli, and published in 1566. It was warmly received by the Swiss churches.

In Article 1 we read, among other things, that Holy Scripture is the true Word of God. God also speaks through prophets and apostles (referring to 2 Tim. 3:16, 1 Thess. 2:13; cf. also Matt. 10:20, Luke 10:16, and John 13:20). Then follows the famous sentence: the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Then we read: “Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful; . . . and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches”²²

These lines seem to be aimed straight at the spiritualists. Human mediation takes nothing away from the character and power of the Word. The confession is not intending to declare that preaching and the Bible are identical, nor that human

²²*Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd ed., ed. John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 133.

speaking is infallible. This is the issue: that in preaching God is addressing us.

So much, then, for clarifying the *specific place* of preaching in the *history of redemption*. We turn now to the second aspect of the term “administration,” namely that preaching should be *attuned to the listeners and to their situation*.

Just as with serving up a meal, being attuned to the recipient is characteristic of *administering* the Word. The same ingredients are not given to everybody, and the same food is not served every day. Where preaching is not attuned to the listeners, *administering* the Word degenerates into reciting holy clichés. But abandoning this ritualized use of magical formulas is what characterizes the break with paganism. This was a characteristic of the Reformation as well, which replaced the excess of standardized liturgical formulas used in the mass with the administration of the Word.

At its deepest level, this being attuned to the listeners arises from the Bible itself. For the Bible is not a book full of sacred formulas and timeless propositions, but a story about God aimed at and tuned to the listeners. In the Bible God himself narrates his rich work of redemption, and he places that work right in the middle of the real flesh and blood life setting of his covenant people in both old and new dispensations. Through and through, the Bible is a historical book. But that historical character does not make the Bible a book whose contents have been determined and limited by history. For the Speaker of the Word is the God of the covenant; he has revealed his truth for many generations in a completely historical account. The fact that human philosophies cannot figure out the formulas for this kind of revelation does not matter. God is able to reveal himself in datable facts, and to disclose his Name in the course of mortal lives, binding his Name to those lives (Heb. 11:8-16). Therefore, the uniqueness of the living and abiding Word of God consists in the fact that now, in the “*administering*” by the Spirit, that Word is attuned to the congregation of the living God (cf. Rom. 15:4 and 2 Tim. 3:16).

All of us will agree that personal conversation and catechism instruction provide more opportunities to “fine tune” the Word than does public preaching aimed at numerous people simultaneously within the context of congregational worship. The congregation may well be one in faith and hope, but when we size up specific needs, intellectual capacities, ages, and circumstances, the congregation is quite heterogeneous. Even so, we may and must expect preaching to be attuned to the listeners if we wish preaching to *administer* the Word.

Preaching misses its goal if it exhausts the congregation with all kinds of abstractions. During sermon preparation, appreciating such abstractions can be legitimate and necessary, even though they should not be mentioned in preaching. In terms of content, delivery, and language, preaching should be digestible. To that end, each preacher must search for a reasonable middle ground among the wide variety of his listeners. Moreover, a minister of the Word must keep the situation(s) of his listeners in mind, appreciating the problems he sees in their lives. When public preaching is attuned to “everybody” this way, the preacher-pastor has a basis for “private admonition” in his pastoral care. This is how the sermon in its entirety functions as a tool of “application”—that is, as an instrument in the Holy Spirit’s work of application. It is precisely when we describe the administration of the Word in this way that we escape the sermonic grid that has been maintained for centuries, whereby a sermon is supposed to contain an objective part (exposition) and a subjective part (application). Using this grid, many have supposed that in the objective component, our understanding is directed to the Bible text, whereas in the subjective component, the Holy Spirit seeks our heart and spirit. In direct contrast to this construction, we want to emphasize that the Holy Spirit is involved and operative within the *entire* sermonic act, so that also in the expository section of the sermon he is addressing the congregation with the word of faith. This is how the Holy Spirit brings the redemption of Christ to the congregation. The exposition also belongs to the Spirit’s applicatory work.

We could discuss various important and interesting aspects of this need for preaching that is attuned to the listeners. We are thinking especially of questions relating to *the authority of preaching*. We would mention briefly the following points.

1. The authority of preaching lies entirely outside the preacher, because that authority is the authority of the Word of God. The office of minister does not grant authority to his preaching, but the Word of God grants authority to the office.

2. It is indisputable that the office has authority and the officebearer may require obedience (see Heb. 13:17 and 1 Pet 5:5). But all authority functions within a relationship, and assumes the texture of that relationship. In the sixteenth century, when people refused to obey the pope and other ecclesiastical officebearers, and gave to the congregation the right to evaluate officebearers, to call them, and if necessary, to dismiss them,²³ this all occurred in the name of God. This was not the manifestation of sophisticated, autonomous man proceeding in a spirit of revolution to establish democratic structures. The essence of their action consisted specifically in their deep desire to be subject to the Word of Christ.

3. When the office of the ministry does not bring the Word of Christ to the congregation, it self-dissolves. God governs his church through the Word, and ecclesiastical office is designed to serve that Word, is to administer that Word, and is entitled to require submission to that Word. Ecclesiastical office is not primarily a matter of organizational structure, but is essentially the route God's Word travels in the covenant consociation between God and his people. Roman Catholic theology teaches that the authority of office is a property inhering in the officebearer. Through the sacrament of ordination the priest has

²³Cf. Martin Luther, "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture" [1523], *Luther's Works*, vol. 39, 305-314.

supposedly received the authority of consecration (think of consecrating the host), and he has been granted from his superiors the authority of jurisdiction. This official status bestows a monopoly of authority to officiate at the transubstantiation occurring in the mass. That authority is the essence and basis of every other exercise of authority. The Reformers, by contrast, have defined the authority of office as the authority to *administer* the Word of God to the congregation. There is where we find the authority of the officebearer, namely, wherever he is serving Christ’s congregation as the servant of Christ.²⁴

4. The congregation ought to submit to her spiritual leaders with an attitude of listening obedience or obedient listening, because her life lies in her submitting to Christ. The “over-against-ness” of the office is really the “over-against-ness” of the Word. At the same time, the congregation may evaluate her minister, and if necessary, dismiss him from the official ministry. Not because the congregation is his employer, but because she is the congregation of *Christ* and has a right to hear the Word of *Christ*. The Holy Spirit desires to dwell in her midst, and this Spirit has given the Word to more people than the officebearers. Officebearers must guard against lording it over the congregation’s faith. They must work with God’s people, for their joy (2 Cor. 1:24).

5. This respect for the congregation must be evident also in the orientation of the sermon to the listeners. If the preacher pretends that the outworking of the Word in the concrete lives of

²⁴Cf. the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), Art. 28, concerning Hebrews 13:17: “The verse demands that we obey the gospel, since the bishops have no other authority or power than the gospel; thus the bishops may establish no ordinance contrary to the gospel, nor interpret their ordinances contrary to the gospel. For if they do so, the gospel forbids us to obey them, as Paul says to the Galatians: ‘But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed’ (Gal. 1:8)” (*Bekennnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* [Göttingen, 1976], 402; translation mine, NDK). For similar expressions, see Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.9.4 and 12, and 4.11.1.

his listeners depends upon him, such a pretense would show little respect for the work of the Holy Spirit in those lives. The Holy Spirit's activity is not tied to the pulpit. He dwells in the congregation, and works in the homes and the hearts of believers. Children in the church have parents. Adults can read the Bible, pray, meditate, and decide issues of life. Church members themselves can digest the Word of God, and work with that Word in the many different situations they face. It is an extremely varied multitude that gets to hear the same sermon. Yet, it is the Holy Spirit who uses this spoken Word to accomplish everything he is pleased to do.

6. By the same token, the preacher must respect his own pulpit. This is the place God has reserved for *administering* his Word. Thus, the pulpit is not the place for commentary on the daily news. For that we have other means in our society. Even less is the pulpit the place where the preacher enjoys the privilege of venting his own opinion without fear of rebuttal. Neither is the pulpit the liturgical forum for the preacher to make his personal contribution to an ongoing debate or a never-ending discussion. Nor is it ever the preacher's calling to tell the congregation, with the help of assorted simplifications, how societies throughout the world—beginning with his own—should be governed politically, militarily, or socially.

In these and many more ways, a minister of the Word makes his office a joke. In so doing, his work is shameful before God, worthless for the congregation, and ridiculous to the world.

7. A minister of the Word should stick to his text, and with that Word—a “word of faith,” which means a word that requires believing acceptance—contribute to the joy of the congregation. In concretizing the message of the text, he should also show the congregation that it is good to serve the Lord. For the law of God preserves us in the gospel of Christ. Therefore, serving God is the fullness of life, and this service protects us against a world of corruption, unrighteousness, and despair.

8. Occasionally the preacher is called, in terms of his pastoral attention to the congregation, to put this service of God very concretely before the congregation. The gold of the gospel and of the law of Christ must be forged into currency that can be used in the marketplace of life. But no matter how specifically he describes practical living, the preacher's words must remain transparent as words that make the text's content and power visible. The congregation needs and has a right to such transparency.

We can also imagine situations involving hotly debated questions where a preacher is not called to offer a "yes" or a "no." On the contrary, he should help every member of the congregation place the question in a larger context, breaking through the narrowness that threatens to choke many debates. The apostle Paul himself had a strong conviction regarding the issue of whether food sacrificed to idols might be eaten. As minister of Christ he was able to make room for a twofold practice, and at the same time to place the question with the broader context of redemptive history as a warning to everyone (1 Cor. 10).

In any event, the congregation has a right to preaching she can understand and to preaching that makes her safely secure. For preaching is the face of Christ in the congregation, and the presence of the Holy Spirit among believers—in the here and now.

Summary: the Promissory Character of Salvation

We have been considering the matter of preaching from various angles, and in our study we have been the grateful students of our sixteenth century predecessors. We have seen the Reformation as the rediscovery of preaching as the primary instrument of God's grace. Such preaching reaches its goal not in the ecclesiastical administration of sacraments or in the human experience of meditation. Preaching is not a preparatory means that precedes the actual reception of grace or that stimulates reflection about grace. Grace itself comes to us in and by the

preached Word. For “grace” is the good favor of God who has loved us in Christ. In such words of love, God gives himself to us, he seeks our lives, and he binds himself to our lives. Does not love always give itself to another through speaking?

Man’s redemption lies in this love and its language. Romish sacramentalism and Anabaptist subjectivism come together in their evaluation of preaching: for both, the sermon represents nothing more than an inferior instrument of grace. In response to these views, the Reformers presented their insight about preaching as *the* means of God’s redemption.

Some express this great truth in a short phrase, speaking of the *promissory character of salvation*. Because this describes both preaching and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, we would explain this phrase as follows.

The word “promissory” describes the way God presents his salvation in our lives, and maintains that salvation against the attacks of our own conscience. The Lord does this by means of the promise, that is to say: by means of *the preaching of the gospel*. “Promissory” points not to the future, as if salvation always lies ahead of us. Rather, we must hear in the words “promissory” and “promise” not “prediction,” but “pledge,” with the emphasis on the spoken surety.

This means as well that this “diction” constitutes a summons to hear and believe. This speaking occurs in the context of the covenant, a relationship called into being and maintained through that speaking.

Finally, the expression “the promissory character of salvation” entails that God’s salvation is not a measurable “thing” within a pious person (e.g., his conversion), like some stored up capital in which a person may place his trust. Salvation comes to us afresh again and again from the mouth of the speaking God whom we meet in preaching.

That we may indeed conceive of God’s salvation this way is a precious gift. Our entire lives are formed by the privilege of hearing God addressing us in public preaching, which leads to our knowing God, to our assurance of faith, to searching for our future outside of ourselves, and to perpetually surrendering our

lives to God anew as the preached word repeatedly elicits our acceptance of that word through faith.