

# THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL:

Luther and Calvin on the Nature of Preaching

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## Introduction

IN CLASSICAL REFORMED understanding there is a rather high conception of preaching. Indeed preaching plays a prominent and conspicuous role in the life of the church. In this tradition, the preacher is expected to work hard and reverently with the biblical text—explaining words, deciphering phrases, unraveling cultural obscurities—while trying to expose the truth in its startling simplicity and eye-popping profundity. According to this time-honored heritage, a close relationship can be discerned between Scripture and preaching. Preaching itself is understood as the proclamation of God’s Word. As such, preaching bears an immediate and temporal character. This means that preaching is the proclamation of God’s Word to a given set of people at a given time, with explication and application being equally important (part of a package), and it is discharged by a man called and authorized to do it. Sermons therefore ought to be *aimed at* and *shaped for* the congregation (or assembly) they address. As an inevitability, sermons also ought to be *dated*. What is more, according to the classical Reformed tradition, the preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> Or to state it more

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<sup>1</sup>In the words of the *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter 1, under the subtitle THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD: “Wherefore when this Word of God [the Scriptures] is now preached in the church by

accurately, preaching, when accompanied by the Spirit's presence and power, is Christ's living voice to the church and world today. Christ is really present in the preaching of the gospel.

That statement, however, begs for analysis. How should we construe Christ's presence in the preaching of the Word of God? Can Christ be "really" or "truly" present in the preaching of the gospel? In attempting to examine such questions the views of Martin Luther and John Calvin offer themselves for analysis, for Luther and Calvin each addressed this issue. Moreover, their respective theologies of preaching have challenged the understanding and practice of reformation churches for generations. Given the weakened concept of preaching in many contemporary churches, what can we learn from Luther and Calvin's theology of preaching, particularly with respect to Christ's presence in the preaching of the gospel?

## Luther's Theology of Christ's Presence in Preaching

The language of the "real presence" is usually associated with Luther's doctrine of the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. For Luther, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is real or true—that is, Christ is truly present. In affirming that, however, Luther did not go the way of transubstantiation. In fact, he rejected "the theory of transubstantiation which had been used to explain the manner of that presence"<sup>2</sup>—meaning, Luther did not view

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preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be feigned nor to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; who, although he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God abides true and good."—*Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd ed., ed. John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 133. The subtitle comes from Bullinger's short table of contents for the Confession, *Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*.

<sup>2</sup>David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (1986; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 73. The secondary literature on Luther's 'real presence' doctrine is immense. See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 69-76; Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 375-403; Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ*,

Christ's presence in the Eucharist as consisting somehow in a transformation of the substance of the elements. Rather, Luther saw the presence of Christ as consisting "in, with, and under" the elements of bread and wine.

In a similar fashion, Luther affirmed the presence of Christ in the preaching of the Word. Again, Christ is truly present. Thus Luther had an additional doctrine of the 'real presence'—namely, "the real presence of Christ in proclamation...." This means, according to Fred W. Meuser, "In the sermon one actually encounters God."<sup>3</sup> However, instead of receiving Christ through eating and drinking, we receive him through speaking and listening. What is common in both cases is that the receiving is through physical acts. Likewise, both are means of grace and involve the presence of Christ himself. Yet the Word, for Luther, remains the one indispensable thing. The sacrament is nothing without the Word, for the sacrament is a form in which the Word comes to us.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, God would not have the Word work alone. The sacrament is substantial but the sermon is central. Roland Bainton has summed it up well: "The Reformation gave centrality to the sermon. The pulpit was higher than the altar, for Luther held that salvation is through the Word and without the Word the elements are devoid of sacramental quality, but the Word is sterile unless it is spoken."<sup>5</sup>

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trans. Edwin H. Robinson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 195-240; and Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation (1521-1532)*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 293-334.

<sup>3</sup>Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 13.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, *Concerning the Ministry* [1523] in *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry II*, vol. 40, ed. Conrad Bergendoff, gen. ed., Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 21, 23; *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* [1521] in *Luther's Works*: vol. 32, ed. George W. Forell, gen. ed., Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, revised by George W. Forell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 15. All further references from *Luther's Works* will be in abbreviated form (*LW*), and without mention of translators and editors.

<sup>5</sup>Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950; reprint, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 272.

It is this last phrase—“the Word is sterile unless it is spoken”—that we wish to explore, for it accents the importance Luther assigned to preaching and his conception of Christ’s presence in it.

*The Power of God in the Power of the Word*

Luther gloried in exalting the power of the Word, in particular the power of God in the preached Word. Luther argues that one thing, and only one thing, is necessary for the believer to live a righteous life, the Word of God.

Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing....

On the other hand, there is no more terrible disaster with which the wrath of God can afflict men than a famine of the hearing of his Word, as he says in Amos [8:11].<sup>6</sup>

Luther continues:

To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching.<sup>7</sup>

Not just the printed Word but the preaching of that Word is cardinal to the divine work of salvation, for preaching fits into the scheme of salvation itself. That is why Luther refuses to minimize the importance of the Word of God. “Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times,” Luther writes, “it would all be vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you,

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<sup>6</sup>*The Freedom of a Christian* [1520], *LW*, vol. 31, 345, 346.

<sup>7</sup>*The Freedom of a Christian* [1520], *LW*, vol. 31, 346.

take what is yours.”<sup>8</sup> God works his grace through his Word, particularly the *preached* Word. For the written Word “is not as fruitful and powerful as it is through a public preacher whom God has ordained to say and preach this.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus in the preaching of the gospel God deals with sinners in a twofold way. There is an outward and an inward manifestation of grace. The outward manifestation of grace is first the spoken Word, God’s oral communication of the gospel; alongside of the spoken Word and secondly are the material signs, that is, Baptism and the Eucharist. The inward manifestation of grace refers to God’s action through the Holy Spirit, the imparting of faith, and other gifts he bestows. But, for Luther, the outward must precede the inward working of grace. In other words, the internal working of grace follows and is effected by the external working of grace.

God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him, as he says in Luke 16[29]: ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ Accordingly Paul can call baptism a ‘washing of regeneration’ wherein God ‘richly pours out the Holy Spirit’ [Titus 3:5]. And the oral gospel ‘is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith’ (Rom. 1[16]).<sup>10</sup>

As there is a twofold dimension in the operation of grace, so there is a twofold dimension in the work of divine forgiveness. Luther would have us consider on the one hand how forgiveness is “achieved and won,” and on the other how it is “distributed and given to us.” The work of forgiveness is achieved by Christ

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<sup>8</sup>*Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Manner of Images and Sacraments* [1525], *LW*, vol. 40, 213.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted from Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 108. Sermon of 21 July 1532, Jaroslav Pelikan, “Luther the Expositor,” *Luther’s Works*, Companion Volume (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 64n. 66.

<sup>10</sup>*Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Manner of Images and Sacraments* [1525], *LW*, vol. 40, 146.

on the cross. But this gives rise to the question how forgiveness is imparted and distributed to believers. The work of the cross does not, as such, impart the grace accomplished there. Nor is the work of forgiveness achieved through our participation in the sacraments. Rather, Christ distributes and imparts this accomplished work “through the Word”—that is, through the preaching of the gospel. “He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word....”<sup>11</sup> This means that, for Luther, the preaching and teaching of the Word is a key element in the divine work of redemption and thus, not surprisingly, the most important element of divine worship.<sup>12</sup>

Luther was concerned, however, to stress the connection between God’s Word given to us in Scripture and the church’s proclamation of the Word—that is, its oral communication. Or more specifically, the priority of importance is upon the *preaching* of the written Word. “Since Christ is the Lord of the past, the present, and the future, his proclamation continues in his body, the church. Thus the proclamation of God’s Word is a means of grace which calls, gathers, and redeems the people of God....” The consequence is that “Luther insisted that the church ought to be ‘a mouth-house’ rather than a ‘pen-house’.”<sup>13</sup>

The foremost reason the Word figures so prominently in Luther’s thinking is because he held to such a high view of Christ’s presence in human preaching. In fact he draws a parallel, as we noted earlier, between the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the gospel. “The body which you receive [in the Lord’s Supper], the Word which you hear [in the preaching of the gospel], are the body and Word of him who holds the whole

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<sup>11</sup>*Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Manner of Images and Sacraments* [1525], LW, vol. 40, 214.

<sup>12</sup>*The German Mass and Order of Service* [1526], LW, vol. 53, 68.

<sup>13</sup>Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester*, 97-98.

world in his hand and who inhabits it from beginning to end.”<sup>14</sup> Preaching is not merely a spoken word *about* Christ; rather, it is “an *offering* and *presentation* of Christ,” according to God’s pure mercy.<sup>15</sup>

*The Speech of God in Human Speech*

If Christ Himself is present in the preaching of the gospel, preaching may not be conceived as a merely human enterprise. God is at work. Even more, in Luther’s conception, God himself speaks! Luther treasures preaching most highly precisely because in the words spoken by the preacher God speaks his own Word. Indeed, “preaching,” says Luther, “is not a work of man.”<sup>16</sup>

Would to God that we would gradually train our hearts to believe that the preacher’s words are God’s Word and that the man addressing us is a scholar and a king. As a matter of fact, it is not an angel or a hundred thousand angels but the Divine Majesty Himself that is preaching there. To be sure, I do not hear this with my ears or see it with my eyes; all I hear is the voice of the preacher, or of my brother or father, and I behold only a man before me. But I view the picture correctly if I add that the voice and words of father or pastor are not his own words and doctrine but those of our Lord and God. It is not a prince, a king, or an archangel whom I hear; it is He who declares that He is able to dispense the water of eternal life. If we could believe this we would be content indeed. However, a fault which is manifest throughout the world and also in us is that we fail to recognize the gift and its Giver... Flesh and blood are an impediment. They merely behold the person of the pastor and brother and hear only the voice of the father.... They refuse to regard the oral Word and the ministry as a treasure costlier and better than heaven and earth. People generally think: “If I had an opportunity to hear God speak in person, I would run my feet bloody.”... But you now have the Word of God

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<sup>14</sup>*The Adoration of the Sacrament* [1523], *LW*, vol. 36, 298.

<sup>15</sup>*Answer to the HyperChristian Book* [1521], *LW*, vol. 39, 183; *italics added*.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted from Bainton, *Here I Stand*: 273. *Tischreden* in Weimar Ausgabe, 2606a-b.

in church ... and this is God's Word as surely as if God Himself were speaking to you.<sup>17</sup>

This means that when a faithful preacher proclaims the Word of God, God himself labors through his words, takes them as his own, and uses them according to his purpose. For this reason every faithful preacher needs to understand the momentous nature of the preaching event itself. In practical terms this means that after a devoted preacher has preached the gospel, he should not ask God to forgive his preaching, as if it were his own. Instead, "with St. Paul and all other apostles and prophets [he should] say firmly, *Haec dixit dominus*, 'God himself has said this [1 Cor. 1:10]." Again: "it is unnecessary, even bad, to pray for forgiveness of sins, as if one had not taught truly, for it is God's word and not my word, and God ought not and cannot forgive it, but only confirm, praise, and crown it, saying, 'You have taught truly, for I have spoken through you and the word is mine.'" <sup>18</sup> Luther saw the preaching of the gospel as nothing less than divine activity. The essence of preaching is not a preacher's ruminations upon a text of Scripture. Neither does it consist of human reflections about God and the human struggle. It cannot be defined in terms of personal religious insight and intuition so that the preacher can offer some kind of contemporary message he thinks will help people. In short, preaching is not conjured up according to human autonomy. Rather, as Meuser states, summing up Luther's view: "Christian preaching—when it is faithful to the word of God in the Scriptures about our need and God's response to it—is God speaking.... It is God's very own audible address to all who hear it, just as surely as if Christ himself had spoken it."<sup>19</sup> For this reason, both the labor of the preacher and the receiving of the sermon by the listener makes preaching "saving business" and "dangerous business."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, LW, vol. 22, 526-527.

<sup>18</sup>*Against Hanswurst* [1541], LW, vol. 41, 216.

<sup>19</sup>Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 12.

<sup>20</sup>As Meuser states, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 13: "That makes preaching—and hearing—a most dangerous business."

The working assumption behind this high theology of preaching is the close relationship that must exist between God's Word in Holy Scripture and the Word proclaimed. Luther insisted that preaching, *all preaching*, "be normed by Holy Scripture," for Scripture alone is the uniquely inspired Word of God.<sup>21</sup> This was a recurrent theme among all the Reformers. Luther understood preaching as conveying the content of the Bible to one's audience; the preacher explains Scripture and exhorts according to its message. This, of course, could be a difficult task in practice. Many hazards stand in the way—from exegetical ineptitude on the part of the preacher, to stubborn propensities that taint both the giving and receiving of the proclaimed message. Luther is fully cognizant that preachers may fail to preach God's Word. If that is the case the verdict is swift and direct. "For whatever departs from the word of God (which is the only way, as Christ says, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' [John 14:6]), however well and beautifully it may glitter, is without question error, lie, and death. It is without the word of God, that is, without the way, the truth, and the life. And what need would we have of the word if we could find ways for ourselves without it?"<sup>22</sup>

Preachers must be servants of the Word for Jesus' sake. Their role is one of subservience to Christ. "Whoever, therefore, does not know or preach the gospel is not only no priest or bishop, but he is a kind of pest to the church, who under the false title of priest or bishop, or dressed in sheep's clothing, actually does violence to the gospel and plays the wolf [Matt. 7:15] in the church."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand when God's Word is faithfully proclaimed, all are under necessity to hear it, heed it, and be healed by it. Nobody is a believer apart from the Word—that is, apart from God's speaking, apart from the Word God Himself speaks.

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<sup>21</sup>Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester*, 98.

<sup>22</sup>*Against Hanswurst* [1541], *LW*, vol. 41, 215.

<sup>23</sup>*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* [1520], *LW*, vol. 36, 116.

He [Christ] declares, as it were, that whoever would be a member of Christendom and be called a member or disciple of Christ must simply hear God Himself. And how do I hear Him? How am I instructed by Him? ... [I]o be taught by God Himself means to heed the Word of Christ, to learn from Him, and then to feel convinced that it is God's Word. This is hearing God Himself. And even though You were to hear an ass speaking, as Balaam did (Num. 22:28), it would nonetheless be God's Word. Thus when you hear a sermon by St. Paul or by me, you hear God the Father Himself. And yet you do not become my pupil but the Father's, for it is not I who is speaking; it is the Father. Nor am I your schoolmaster; but we both, you and I, have one Schoolmaster and Teacher, the Father, who instructs us. We both, pastor and listener, are only pupils; there is only this difference, that God is speaking to you through me. That is the glorious power of the divine Word, through which God Himself deals with us and speaks to us, and in which we hear God Himself.<sup>24</sup>

Luther was jealous to defend the priesthood of all believers, and to insist that "every Christian is anointed and sanctified both in body and soul with the oil of the Holy Spirit."<sup>25</sup> All believers, likewise, are "equally priests" and have "the same power" *vis-à-vis* the Word and the sacraments. But if one would preach the gospel, he may not take this privilege and calling upon himself; he must have the "consent of the community" of believers. "For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called."<sup>26</sup> Ordination certifies one's call to the ministry—that is, the ministry *of the Word*. For Luther, only in this official capacity could one preach God's Word with divine authority and sanction. Preachers must be sent. "In a sermon on the Easter Gospel, [Luther] said that like the angel who announced the resurrection, preachers must be *sent from heaven*. 'So the pastor must be sure that God speaks through his mouth. Otherwise it is time for him to be quiet.' 'Yes, I hear the sermon; but who is speaking? The minister? No, indeed! You do not hear

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<sup>24</sup>*Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, LW*, vol. 23, 97-98.

<sup>25</sup>*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* [1520], *LW*, vol. 36, 115.

<sup>26</sup>*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* [1520], *LW*, vol. 36, 116.

the minister. True the voice is his; but my God is speaking the word which he preaches or speaks.”<sup>27</sup>

*The Keys of the Kingdom*

Luther’s high conception of the Word of God, and the preaching of the Word of God, is particularly evident when he addresses the question of the keys of the kingdom. In his understanding, the keys of the kingdom consist in the power to forgive or retain sins. The key that binds is the power or office to punish the unrepentant sinner unto eternal death. The key that loosens is the power or office to absolve the sinner who repents and is converted from sins unto eternal life. What is central for Luther, however, is that this power is exercised *through the Word of God*. Preaching belongs to the keys of the kingdom. “*Through this office of preaching ... souls are resurrected here from sins and from death, and confidently await also the resurrection of the body and life everlasting through the same Holy Spirit who has now begun this in the soul.*”<sup>28</sup> Thus Luther bids us to “rely on the words of Christ” and in this way find assurance that “God has no other way to forgive sins than through the spoken Word, as he commanded us.” For “if you do not look for forgiveness through the Word, you will gape toward heaven in vain for grace, or (as they say), for a sense of inner forgiveness.”<sup>29</sup>

The forgiveness of sins is not dependent upon the believer’s good work of repentance or inherent worthiness. “On the contrary our repentance and work, our disposition and all we are, should be built on the keys. We are to depend on them with as daring confidence as on God’s Word itself. You must never doubt what the keys say and give you, at the risk of losing both body and soul. It is as certain as if God himself were saying so, which indeed he does. It is his own Word and command. But if

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<sup>27</sup>Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 12; *italics added*.

<sup>28</sup>*The Adoration of the Sacrament* [1523], *LW*, vol. 36, 299; *italics added*.

<sup>29</sup>*The Keys* [1530], *LW*, vol. 40, 366.

you doubt the same you make God a liar. You pervert his order and base his keys on your own repentance and worthiness.”<sup>30</sup>

Christ binds and joins himself to our exercise of the keys. This means that only one set of keys exist in heaven and on earth. There is no such thing as a double set—a *heavenly* set and an *earthly* set—“as if [Christ] had different keys in heaven above from those we have below on earth.” Heaven’s keys are the keys the church uses—one set of keys for binding and loosing on earth and in heaven.

The reason that many conceive of the keys of the kingdom as consisting of two sets is rooted in a mistaken notion regarding God’s Word—namely, that God’s Word is *not* his Word. Luther explains: “Because it [God’s Word] is spoken through men it is regarded as the word of men. And God is thought of as way up there in heaven, very, very far removed from his Word here below. So we stand there and with open mouth stare heavenward and invent still other keys.”<sup>31</sup> But, in fact, the keys of the Kingdom of heaven have been bestowed to the church here below. We must not gaze heavenward for them, for they are on earth, in Peter’s mouth. Indeed, Christ means to say in effect: “Peter’s mouth is my mouth, and his tongue is my key case. His office is my office, his binding and loosing are my binding and loosing. His keys are my keys, and I have no others, nor do I know of any others.”<sup>32</sup>

The consequence of all this for Luther is that the believer finds his or her assurance in the Word of the Lord. What the keys declare to be so—namely, the forgiveness or the retention of sins—is not to be doubted. “For one ought and must believe God’s Word with all seriousness and confidence. He who does not believe should leave the keys alone.” Luther elaborates:

Again, he who believes or would gladly believe that the keys are doing their work effectively, let him rejoice and use them with confidence. The greatest honor you can bestow on God and his

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<sup>30</sup>*The Keys* [1530], *LW*, vol. 40, 364.

<sup>31</sup>*The Keys* [1530], *LW*, vol. 40, 365.

<sup>32</sup>*The Keys* [1530], *LW*, vol. 40, 365-366.

keys is to trust in them. It is for that reason we teach our people that he who is bound or loosed by means of the key, let him rather die ten deaths than doubt their efficacy. No greater dishonor can be done to God's Word and judgment than lack of faith in the same. For this means as much as to say: God, you are a liar. It is not true what you say. I do not believe it. Hence God must be a prevaricator.<sup>33</sup>

The forgiveness of sins is appropriated through the Word of God. To be sure, not all who hear the Word obtain forgiveness. But any person who is to obtain the forgiveness of sins can and must obtain it nowhere else than through and with God's Word.

Thus in Luther's theology of preaching, we would be mistaken if we tried to 'cut away' the human property of the sermon in order to obtain its divinity, without anything human mixed with it. Such an effort presumes that God is better found or grasped in a realm beyond the human. But, as Luther says, "the true God lies in the straw of the manger. From human mouths are heard the voice and tones of God, 'not the voice that speaks from heaven above, but that which is down in the midst of men'."<sup>34</sup>

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Luther's conception of the presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel may be depicted in the following summary statements:

- The Word of God is the soul's life source; there is no life apart from God's Word.
- The preaching of the Word of God is more profitable and useful than mere Bible reading.

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<sup>33</sup>*The Keys* [1530], *LW*, vol. 40, 368.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted from Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*, trans. Victor C. Pogue (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 27. See Luther, *WA* 17(I), 224.5-7.

- The outward work of grace is the voice of the minister in proclamation; the inward work of grace is the work of the Holy Spirit in imparting faith.
- The work of the cross is effectuated in or applied to believers through the proclamation of the gospel; Christ imparts his accomplished work “through the Word.”
- The Word—faithfully preached—is Christ’s Word or voice, and an offering or presentation of Christ himself.
- Preaching therefore is not a merely human enterprise; God is at work in preaching.
- Preaching of the Word must be rooted and grounded in Sacred Scripture.
- Preaching that fails the test of fidelity to Scripture fails to qualify as preaching and must be rejected as an imposter.
- Only those ordained to the preaching office may rightly and authoritatively “minister the Word.”
- Preaching is a key of the Kingdom and a source of the believers assurance of divine forgiveness, for that forgiveness is declared, in the way of faith, through biblical preaching.

### Calvin’s Theology of Christ’s Presence in Preaching

When we come to John Calvin and his doctrine of preaching, we discover that he, like Luther, articulated an extremely high theology of the preaching of the Word. Calvin also gives us a doctrine of Christ’s real presence in gospel proclamation. His doctrine, however, has features and accents all its own—corresponding in many respects to his distinct doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Like Luther, Calvin had a doctrine of the real or true presence of Christ in the sacrament. But whereas Luther’s conception depended upon a doctrine of ubiquity, Calvin appealed to the “spiritual” presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He would have nothing to do with a “fictitious transubstantiation,” but neither would he allow believers to reduce the Supper to a “memorial.” For Calvin, believers actually partake of Christ in the sacrament. “Our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine

keep and sustain physical life.”<sup>35</sup> “Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh ... penetrates to us, so it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Christ “feeds his people with his own body, the communion of which he bestows upon them by the power of his Spirit.”<sup>37</sup>

What this means is that Calvin adhered to a strict doctrine of the real presence; he was not suggesting that Christ is present only in our imagination or that Christ is present in the way the Spirit is always present with the believer. Calvin was saying that *Christ himself* communes with his people in the Supper. The Holy Spirit makes this communion efficacious, but the communion is with none other than the risen Lord of glory. In rejecting consubstantiation and transubstantiation Calvin did not dilute or diminish Christ’s presence, he simply sought another avenue along which this presence may rightly be conceived. Thus whereas there is a great deal of continuity between Calvin’s and

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<sup>35</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.10. All references to Calvin’s *Institutes* are from the translation by Ford Lewis Battles. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). All references to Calvin’s Old Testament commentaries are from the Calvin Translation Society edition, reprinted by Baker Book House Company; *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vols. 1-15 (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979). All references to Calvin’s New Testament commentaries are from the edition edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols., edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959-1972). References to Calvin’s sermons and treatises will be indicated individually.

<sup>36</sup>*Institutes* 4.17.10.

<sup>37</sup>*Institutes* 4.17.18. The secondary literature on Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is extensive. For an initial orientation, see Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 211-228; François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (1963; reprint, Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1987), 312-318, 329-355; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (1953; reprint, Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1982), 133-174, 197-253. B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Luther's views, there are also distinctives that may be noted. With this background, we proceed to examine Calvin's doctrine of the presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel.

*The Preached Word as a Sacramental Word*<sup>38</sup>

According to John H. Leith, "Calvin thought of preaching as the primary means by which God's presence becomes actual to us and by which God's work is accomplished in individual life and in the community."<sup>39</sup> Leith quotes Stauffer,<sup>40</sup> who "suggests that preaching for Calvin was not only a moment of worship, not only a task of the church, but also something of a divine epiphany. 'When the Gospel is preached in the name of God, it is as if God himself spoke in person [Third Sermon on Jacob & Esau].'"<sup>41</sup> Ronald S. Wallace offers a similar description of Calvin's view: "Usually when he [God] had a word to speak He spoke it through the medium of a prophet, whose speech, however, in the act of speaking, God so closely identified with His own Word that it may be said that the mouth of the prophet

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<sup>38</sup>Throughout this article "sacramental" is used to express the reality of God's presence through human instrumentation or divine activity through human labor. God is agent; humans are instruments. Although the notion of a sacramental *word* might more immediately be associated with the "word character" of the sacraments, as when Augustine calls a sacrament "a visible word," this phrase refers to the *sacramental* character of the Word itself—that is to say, it refers to the presence of Christ in, with, and through the Word proclaimed. The sacramental character of the Word means that God's Word genuinely belongs to God, that it is *from* God and *of* God; it is *his* speech. Therefore *God*, through the Holy Spirit, is speaking and is the agent of grace. "Sacramental Word," therefore, has no sacerdotal connotations. God does not transfer his work to humans or cloth human beings (or a human institution) with his power to dispense grace *ex opere operato*.

<sup>39</sup>John H. Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research," *Review and Expositor*, 86 (Winter 1989): 29.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Stauffer, "Les discours à la première personne dans les sermons de Calvin," in *Regards contemporains sur Jean Calvin* (Paris, 1965).

<sup>41</sup>Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research," *Review and Expositor*, 86 (Winter 1989): 31.

was the mouth of God Himself. In this case man's speech can really become God's Word in the event of its being communicated to those who are intended to hear it."<sup>42</sup> Preaching, then, is part of God's saving presence; even more, it is *the vehicle* of that saving presence!

Calvin reminds us that when the sheep hear the Good Shepherd's voice, it is unmistakably *his voice* they hear in the preaching of the Word.<sup>43</sup> If we should perhaps take offense that God's Word is dragged down and its authority debased by the Lord employing mere human beings as his instruments to teach and preach the gospel, Calvin sees it otherwise. "For, among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them."<sup>44</sup>

In this connection some scholars believe that there is a link between Calvin's conception of the divine presence in preaching and his understanding of that presence in the sacraments. "In preaching, the Holy Spirit uses the words of the preacher as an occasion for the presence of God in grace and in mercy. In this sense, the actual words of the sermon are comparable to the element in the Sacraments."<sup>45</sup> In harmony with this, B. A. Gerrish sees two poles operative in Calvin's theology as a whole: the mystical and the cognitive. Gerrish, however, cautions us not to identify Calvin's theology of the Eucharist with the mystical pole and his theology of the Word with the cognitive pole. Under close scrutiny this does not bear up. On the contrary, we discover "a two-sidedness" in Calvin's theology of the Word.<sup>46</sup> While it is true to identify the Word of God as conveying information about God, it is not simply the conduit of theological data. The Word

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<sup>42</sup>Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 82.

<sup>43</sup>Comm. on John 10:4.

<sup>44</sup>*Institutes* 4.1.5.

<sup>45</sup>Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research," *Review and Expositor*, 86 (Winter 1989): 31.

<sup>46</sup>B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 76.

of God is also “the instrument through which union with Christ is effected and his grace is imparted. The word of God ... assumes the function that medieval theology ascribed to the sacraments. In this sense, it is sacramental word.”<sup>47</sup> Thus the Word, as Calvin conceives of it, is both doctrinal and sacramental. It both conveys theological information but also conveys, with this information, the presence of Christ himself—that is to say, Christ is acting in the words of the preacher. Indeed God “ordained his word as the instrument by which Jesus Christ, with all his graces, is dispensed to us.”<sup>48</sup> The gospel is not merely an “invitation to fellowship with Christ,” it is a vehicle by which Christ is communicated to us.<sup>49</sup> That is to say, it is the instrument through which Christ is offered to us, with all of his “heavenly benefits,” his merits, righteousness, wisdom, and grace—all these “without exception.”<sup>50</sup> Christ’s ministers preach the Word, and in this way Christ “gives His sacramental presence in the midst of His Church, imparts to men the grace which the Word promises, and establishes His Kingdom over the hearts of His hearers.”<sup>51</sup>

If modern scholarship is correct about Calvin’s sacramental conception of the preaching of the gospel, we are enabled on the one hand to conceive of preaching as a very human labor, and on the other to view it (simultaneously) as the work of God. The sermon is a divine-human work. Calvin portrays this divine-human connection in many places.

A large part of the world perversely assesses the Gospel according to human worth and therefore disparages it when it is carried by a

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<sup>47</sup>Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 76. In saying that the Word of God assumes the function that medieval theology ascribed to the sacraments, we distinguish that function in a twofold way: the doctrine of *ex opere operato*, and the doctrine of a real divine presence or activity through earthly elements. The analogy made here is with this latter aspect of the medieval doctrine, not the former.

<sup>48</sup>John Calvin, “Short Treatise on the Supper of Our Lord,” *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (1849; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 166.

<sup>49</sup>Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 84.

<sup>50</sup>*Institutes* 3.5.5.

<sup>51</sup>Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 84.

humble and mean sort of man.... But God has determined to rule His Church by the ministry of men, and indeed chooses the ministers of His Word from the low off-scourings of the people.... It is therefore a notable commendation of the outward ministry when Christ declares that any honour and reverence paid to the preaching of men (granting it be faithful preaching), God acknowledges as paid to Himself. Moreover, this commendation is useful in two ways. There is nothing that should stir us up to embrace the teaching of the Gospel more than to learn that the pre-eminent worship of God, the sacrifice of a sweet odour, is to hear Him speaking by the mouth of men and to submit ourselves to His Word as it is brought by men no less than if He himself had come down from heaven or had revealed His purpose by an angel. And secondly, trust is confirmed and doubting removed when we hear that the witness to our salvation is no less when declared by men sent of God than if His voice sounded from heaven. On the other hand, to warn us of contempt of the Gospel, He adds the strong threat that those who refuse to hear ministers, however humble, are not insulting men but Himself and God the Father. Here Christ splendidly extols the dignity of pastors who exercise their ministry sincerely and faithfully.<sup>52</sup>

Calvin, like Luther, recognized the union that exists between the work of God and the work of man in biblical preaching. He saw no reason to be squeamish about this union; rather, he believed that believers should be humbled by it. Indeed, what would we do if God's voice thundered from heaven to us, as at Sinai? Who could bear it? Instead, knowing our frailty, God mercifully speaks to his people through human instrumentality. He ministers his words to us in the ministry of the Word—that is, he ministers through the ministry of men, which involves a faithful exposition and application of Holy Scripture.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Comm. on Luke 10:16.

<sup>53</sup>Calvin does not deny that God could have ministered his Word directly; instead, God resolved to minister his Word through the mediation of men. "God might Himself have performed this work [i.e., the work of ministry], if He had chosen; but He has delegated it to the ministry of men. ...such is the Will of God"—Comm. on Eph. 4:12. Hence, too, Calvin's remarks in Sermon Twenty on 2 Samuel 7:1-13: "It is true that he could certainly thunder from

Preaching finds its sanction not because it is the most effective means to educate or reform the church; rather, it finds its sanction in the will of God itself. God wants to build his church by this means.<sup>54</sup> Thus nothing may be substituted for it, even if other means would prove to be more popular or useful. The preacher, Calvin dared to say, was the mouth of God, “for God does not wish to be heard but by the voice of his ministers”<sup>55</sup> Preaching therefore should be undertaken, and the preacher’s words should be heard, as Christ making himself present with the gospel; in this way the recipients of the sermon come to hear his voice through the voice of the minister.<sup>56</sup>

The human activity of preaching the gospel is taken up by God as his own activity. Ministers are “like His hand, but He is the one author of the book.”<sup>57</sup> Preaching is therefore human in its instrumentality but divine in its efficacy. When God’s Word is proclaimed, the air does not echo with empty sounds. Such a conception is a grave mistake. It is something “alive,” something “full of hidden power.” It leaves nothing “untouched” in us. Hebrews 4:12 describes the Word as living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating to the depths of man, judging the thoughts and attitudes of his heart. For Calvin, this Word is living and active in its proclamation: “The sum of all this,” he notes, “is that as soon as God opened His sacred mouth all our senses ought to be opened to received His Word, because it is not His will [through the public preaching of the gospel] to scatter His words in vain either to fade away or to fall neglected

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the sky. He could also send his angels ... so that God could make them exercise this office toward us, and we could be taught without inferior earthly means. But he has not so willed and in that way he has shown his overflowing paternal goodness to us, for if he spoke according to his greatness, it is certain that we would be totally lost.” Also see Sermon Fourteen on Deut. 5:23-27 (*John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 256-257, 259.

<sup>54</sup>See Calvin’s commentary on Isaiah 55:11.

<sup>55</sup>Comm. on Isa. 50:10. See Leith, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research,” *Review and Expositor*, 86 (Winter 1989): 31.

<sup>56</sup>See Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 83.

<sup>57</sup>Comm. on Matt. 13:37.

to the ground, but effectively to challenge the consciences of men, so as to bring them under His rule. He has therefore endued His Word with this power, to search every part of the soul, to scrutinize the thoughts, to decide between the affections, and indeed to show itself as the judge.”<sup>58</sup>

Calvin is insistent that our salvation subsists in Christ alone. This means that it is Christ who is active in the administration of his Word, even when it is mere men who minister it. In just this way, however, Christ accomplishes his own functions through them. Although Christ is the only teacher appointed by the Father, he has nonetheless set pastors “in His place to speak as if out of His mouth. Thus the authority remains entirely with Him, and He is heard nevertheless in His ministers.”<sup>59</sup>

If the preached Word is endued with divine power as God’s Word, it is also endued with divine authority. The proclamation of the gospel must be rooted in the Scriptures (as we shall see), and in this way it possesses a *derivative* authority. Numerous quotations can be adduced which demonstrate that Calvin conceived of such scripturally derived preaching as bearing an *immediate* authority, since the message given is nothing less than the Word of God. In other words, “the authoritativeness [of biblical sermons] consists in the fact that God is present to declare his will; it is not simply an authoritative message from one remote.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the authority resides in the message not the messenger. The human vessel merely conveys the message.

Sometimes Calvin simply identifies human preaching with divine speech. For example, Commentary on Isaiah 11:4: “When the Prophet says, *by the breath of his lips*, this must not be limited to the person of Christ; for it refers to the word which is preached by his ministers. Christ acts by them in such a manner that he wishes their *mouth* to be reckoned as his *mouth*, and their *lips* as his *lips*; that is, when they speak from his mouth, and faithfully

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<sup>58</sup>Comm. on Hebrews 4:12.

<sup>59</sup>Comm. on Acts 13:47.

<sup>60</sup>T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 42.

declared his word (Luke x. 16).<sup>61</sup> Sermon Twenty-eight on Gal. 4:15-20: “[L]et us pray God to give us access to his word. And seeing that all our lusts, our sinful vanities, and our froward affections are as bars, gates, and such other things cast in the way, to the intent that God’s word should not pass: let us fight against them, let it not only enter in unto us as at a crevice, but let it find the gate wide open, and whensoever *God speaketh*, let us give good ear and open our hearts and minds, to receive the doctrine rightly and roundly....”<sup>62</sup> Sermon One on Titus 1:1-4: “In sum, let us learn to be attentive hearers of the teaching that is presented to us in the name of God and to hear it with such humility that when we know that it is *God who is speaking* to us (although he uses men as his means, even men contemptible according to the flesh) we do not fail to be submissive and to show that we are truly his sheep, since he is pleased to be our Shepherd.”<sup>63</sup>

More often he uses qualifying phrases to describe this divine-human labor. For example, Sermon Twenty-five on Eph. 4:11-12: “[I]f our Lord is so good to us as to have his doctrine still preached to us, we have by that a sure and infallible sign that he is near at hand to us, that he seeks our salvation, that he calls us to himself *as though* he spoke with open mouth, and that we see him personally before us.” Also: “[W]e must learn to be humble learners in receiving the doctrine of the gospel and in hearkening to the pastors that are sent to us, *as if* Jesus Christ spoke to us himself in his own person....”<sup>64</sup> Sermon One on Gal. 1:1-5: “[I]t becometh us to suffer ourselves to be taught in his name, and [to understand] that although the word which is preached unto us proceed out of the mouth of men, yet notwithstanding it is by the authority of God, and our salvation must be grounded thereupon, as well *as though* heaven opened an hundred thousand

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<sup>61</sup>Comm. on Isa. 11:4.

<sup>62</sup>John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians by John Calvin* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1995 [First English Publication, c. 1574]), 601-602; *italics* added.

<sup>63</sup>Quoted from Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 44; *italics* added.

<sup>64</sup>John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, revised from the translation by Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1973), 368; 374; *italics* added.

times to show us the glory of God.”<sup>65</sup> Sermon Fifteen on Gal. 3:1-3: “Have we God’s word? at leastwise have we it preached purely? Then is Jesus Christ *as it were* in the midst of us, and showeth himself *as it were* hanging upon the Cross, witnessing what he did for us, when he suffered death to reconcile us to God his father.”<sup>66</sup> Sermon Sixteen on 2 Sam. 6:1-7: “When we have access to the preached Word, God speaks in a common and ordinary fashion to us. It is an illustration of his condescension. Hence, the preaching of the Gospel is *like* God descending to earth in order to seek us. We must not abuse this simplicity of the Word of God by disdaining it. Rather, we must receive it all the more, recognising that he indeed deigns to transfigure himself, *so to speak*, that we might approach him.”<sup>67</sup> Sermon Fourteen on Deut. 5:23-27: “Thus let us learn to be content when God employs that order among us by which his Word is preached to us by men. And let us receive it *as if* we are seeing his majesty face-to-face.” And: “[W]e must put our obedience to the test by proclaiming the Word of God with such confidence and force *as if* he were speaking in us.”<sup>68</sup>

Parker discusses Calvin’s frequent use of such qualifiers. While it is true, remarks Parker, that Calvin oftentimes qualifies human preaching with a phrase like *as if*, “what is being tacitly denied by the qualification is not the presence or the activity of God but only any sort of visible or audible perception of that presence or activity. Just as Christ is present at the Supper spiritually, that is, by the working of the Spirit, so he is present in the preaching spiritually—by the working of the Spirit.”<sup>69</sup> The parallel between Christ’s presence in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and his presence in the preaching of the gospel demonstrates that both are means of grace wherein earthly signs

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<sup>65</sup>Page 23; *italics* added.

<sup>66</sup>Page 321; *italics* added.

<sup>67</sup>John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 235; *italics* added.

<sup>68</sup>John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 259; 261; *italics* added.

<sup>69</sup>Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 42. Parker refers to Calvin’s sermons on Deut. 1:43, 2 Tim. 1:2, and Eph. 4:11-12.

and seals—bread and wine for example—as well as human words become vehicles for divine action. Wallace describes it this way: “In the event of God’s ‘connecting Himself’ thus with the preacher, to make his act of speaking the effective Word of the Lord, a relationship is set up between the human act of the preacher and the divine action of grace which we may call a sacramental union.” This means that “when God graciously comes to give His presence and power along with the human word, there is the closest identity between the divine and human actions.”<sup>70</sup> Christ is pleased to honor pastors by making them dispensers of “the incomparable treasure of the faith.”<sup>71</sup>

### *Preaching as Ministry of the Written Word*

In order to grasp how Calvin conceived of preaching as the word or voice of God, we must understand the centrality of Scripture in the entire preaching event. Calvin affirms the divine status of the preached Word. However, preaching derives or borrows its status as “Word of God” *from Scripture*. “[Preaching] is the Word of God inasmuch as it delivers the Biblical message, which is God’s message or Word. But ‘God’s Word’ means, for Calvin, that which is spoken by God; not simply in its first giving but in its every repetition. It does not somehow become weakened by repetition so as to become less and less God’s Word.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 90-91.

<sup>71</sup>Comm. on 1 Cor. 3:5.

<sup>72</sup>Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 23-24. Parker argues that Heinrich Bullinger, Calvin’s contemporary at Zürich, left a “theological loose end” concerning the relation between Scripture and its exposition. The issue is whether the preaching of the Scripture is the Word of God. In the source Parker cites, namely, Bullinger’s *Decades*, ambiguity is certainly present. In view of Bullinger’s authorship of the *Second Helvetic Confession*, wherein he explicitly confesses that the preached Word *is* God’s Word, it is difficult to reconcile that confession with the position he articulates in his *Decades*—a theological loose end, indeed! Parker also presents the views of Richard Hooker, the Anglican opponent of Puritanism, on this question. Hooker argued for the supremacy of Scripture as the Word of God over against the human proclamation of that Scripture, which remains the word of man. Hooker

“God, while giving to the Church the written Word to be the source of its life and wisdom, gives also to the Church a ministry through whose act of interpreting and expounding the Scripture, the Word of God finds its true place at the heart of the Church and exercises its true function of ruling the thought and life of the Church.”<sup>73</sup> Thus it is the Word of God *proclaimed* that must find priority in the life of the church, for it is “the normal mode which the Lord has appointed for imparting His Word (*ordinaria ratio dispensandi*).” While it is true that God operates to impart a knowledge of himself among people beyond the path of gospel proclamation, nonetheless preaching remains “the ordinary dispensation of God (*ordinarium Dei dispensandi*)” for imparting his Word.<sup>74</sup>

Calvin fully recognizes that the words spoken in the sermon are the words of the preacher; sermons therefore consist of human words. But if the message conveyed by those words is the message of the gospel, then God speaks as though he himself was audibly present. “For God wanted His Word to be always received from the mouth of men no less than as if He had Himself openly appeared from heaven.”<sup>75</sup> God, according to his goodness, still has the doctrine of the gospel preached to his people. And this proclamation serves as a “sure and infallible

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writes, “Wherefore when we read or recite the Scripture, we then deliver to the people *properly* the word of God. As for our sermons, be they never so sound and perfect, his word they are not as the sermons of the prophets were; no, they are but ambiguously termed his word, because his word is commonly the subject whereof they treat, and must be the rule whereby they are framed.” See Richard Hooker’s *Ecclesiastical Polity*, V.xxii.10, quoted from Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 21. Parker also offers this observation: “It is not just coincidence that those who held a ‘Zwinglian’ view of the Sacraments held also the view of preaching which we have been expounding, for preaching and Sacraments are the two parts of the one action; a ‘low’ view of either must result in a ‘low’ view of the other” (p. 22). Also see Paul D. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 85-90; 93-94; and Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 112-120.

<sup>73</sup>Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 115.

<sup>74</sup>See Comm. on Romans 10:14.

<sup>75</sup>Comm. on 1 John 4:1.

sign” that God is “near at hand to us, ... that he seeks our salvation, that he calls us to himself as though he spoke with open mouth, and that we see him personally before us.” In the act of preaching, “Jesus Christ calls us to himself”; he, as it were, “holds out his arms to receive us” and in this way believers find assurance in knowing that through public gospel proclamation “God offers himself to us in the person of his only Son,” for “he sends us pastors and teachers.”<sup>76</sup>

For Calvin, the preacher’s primary task rests in the exposition of Sacred Scripture. It is only along this path that God speaks. This means that the sermon must be a *biblical* sermon if the voice of God is to be heard. As Wingren observes: “The Reformation principle for preaching was very clear and simple: ‘to preach’ means to convey the content of the Scriptures to listeners, to say that which the Bible itself is saying. God speaks in the Bible, and when the Bible is proclaimed God speaks to me from the pulpit.”<sup>77</sup> Servants of the Word have no choice but to faithfully convey the Word as laid down in Scripture. God governs his church in just this way. Consequently, preachers may not announce “what seems good to them, but they must be faithful stewards of God’s Word.”<sup>78</sup>

As we saw with Luther, so with Calvin, the ministry of the Word has an importance that ranks above private Bible reading. Preaching is a necessity—a duty incumbent upon the church—that is able to do more than the believer’s personal reading and meditation upon the Scriptures. “It isn’t enough for us [simply] to read the holy Scripture....” More is required; in fact, more is imperative. Believers must diligently seek out the preaching of the Word and humbly heed the words of “those who are ordained as ministers,” for it is their task to exposit the Word for our understanding.<sup>79</sup> When the apostle calls pastors stewards of

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<sup>76</sup>Sermon Twenty-five on Eph. 4:11-12.

<sup>77</sup>Wingren, *The Living Word*, 19.

<sup>78</sup>Sermon Fourteen on Deut. 5:23-27; quoted from *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 268-269.

<sup>79</sup>Calvin, Sermon Thirteen on Deut. 5:22; quoted from *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 252-253.

the mysteries of God, “he thereby shows that it is insufficient for us to possess the holy Scripture [and] each read it in his own home, rather it is necessary for it to be preached to us, for us to possess this order wherein we are taught by men, for there to be pastors through whom God is served in order that when we listen to them we might increasingly benefit in the doctrine of salvation.”<sup>80</sup> Preachers must therefore rightly divide the Word (2 Tim. 2:15). Scripture reading alone will not adequately serve God’s people (whether done in public or in private), for the apostle “assigns to teachers the duty of carving or dividing the Word, like a father dividing the bread into small pieces to feed his children. [Thus Paul] advises Timothy to ‘divide aright’ lest, like men without skill, he succeeds only in cutting the surface and leaves the inmost pith and marrow untouched.”<sup>81</sup> This means that the gospel must be preached in a manner that is adapted to and thus profitable for those who hear it.

In accenting the importance of preaching, Calvin did not discount the propriety of reading the Scriptures, for all wisdom is contained in them. But preaching may not be neglected. “Let us remember that the fact that the reading of the Scripture is recommended to all does not annul the ministry of pastors, so that believers should learn to profit both by reading and by hearing, since God has not ordained either in vain.” Indeed, the person who “ignores the help of the living voice and is content with silent Scripture will find how wrong it is to disregard a way of learning enjoined by *God* and *Christ*.”<sup>82</sup>

Public proclamation also has the advantage of refuting and thwarting error. “If there be no public teaching of the Gospel, and no godly ministers who by their preaching rescue the truth from darkness and oblivion, [then] falsehoods, errors, impostures, superstitions and corruption of every kind will

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<sup>80</sup>Calvin, Sermon Thirteen on Deut. 5:22; quoted from *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 251-252.

<sup>81</sup>Comm. on 2 Tim. 2:15.

<sup>82</sup>Comm. on 2 Tim. 4:1. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, p. 82, remarks that, for Calvin, preaching is “the most potent form of the outward word.” Also see *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, Qq. 300-5, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid, 130-131.

immediately seize control. In short, silence in the Church means the departure and suppression of the truth.”<sup>83</sup> The church is rightly called the pillar of the truth “because by its ministry the truth is preserved and spread.”<sup>84</sup>

The other side of this is that preachers themselves are subject to error, or can be propagators of falsehood. Calvin was well aware of the pitfalls that threaten the faithful proclamation of the gospel. “Some mutilate it, some dismember it, some distort it, some break it in pieces, some ... keep to the outside and never come to the heart of the matter.”<sup>85</sup> It is for this reason that preachers must rightly divide the Word, which entails an exposition that is true to Scripture and “adapted to edify.” Those who teach the Word may not fail to “do anything else but faithfully to deliver into the hands of others the doctrine they have received from God.”<sup>86</sup> Consequently, the Word of God is not heard merely because the preacher preaches. What is preached is of foremost significance. Speaking or announcing whatever doctrine one pleases does not qualify as the word of God; pastors must proclaim the doctrine of Scripture. Thus, although God has entrusted his Word to the ministry of men, and they should not be despised, believers must also test the spirits in order that “we may not hear without picking out all who are pretending to be ministers of Christ.”<sup>87</sup>

### *The Holy Spirit as the Internal Minister of the Word*

Calvin’s doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel finds its fullest explanation in the activity of the Holy Spirit who serves as the internal minister of the Word. In his *Summary of Doctrine Concerning the Ministry of the Word*

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<sup>83</sup>Comm. on 1 Tim. 3:15.

<sup>84</sup>Comm. on 1 Tim. 3:15.

<sup>85</sup>Comm. on 2 Tim. 2:15.

<sup>86</sup>Comm. on 1 Peter 4:11.

<sup>87</sup>Comm. on Acts 10:5.

*and the Sacraments*,<sup>88</sup> Calvin details in nine succinct articles his conception of Word and sacrament and the Holy Spirit's role in both. After stating the end or goal of the preaching of the gospel—namely, to communicate Christ to sin-ruined people and apply the heavenly treasures to them—Calvin explains that this communication of Christ is “mystical,” “incomprehensible,” and “spiritual.” The Holy Spirit is the agent of this communion, powerfully and truly joining believers to Christ. For “Christ does not otherwise dwell in us than through his Spirit, nor in any other way communicates himself to us than through the same Spirit.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, “To effect this union, the Holy Spirit uses a double instrument, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.”<sup>90</sup> Calvin explains that the Holy Spirit uses the external minister as his instrument, the Holy Spirit himself is the internal minister. “The external minister administers the vocal word.... But the internal minister, who is the Holy Spirit, freely works internally, while by his secret virtue he effects in the hearts of whomsoever he will their union with Christ through one faith. This union is a thing internal, heavenly and indestructible.”<sup>91</sup> Thus when the gospel is vocalized, being preached by the human instrument, words are heard by the physical ear. However, the Holy Spirit, the internal minister, “truly communicates the thing proclaimed through the Word, that is Christ, to the souls of all who will, so that it is not necessary that Christ or for that matter his Word be received through the organs of the body, but the Holy Spirit effects this union by his secret virtue, by creating faith in us, by which he makes us living members of Christ, true God and true man.”<sup>92</sup>

Throughout his writings Calvin accents the central role of the Holy Spirit in the work of redemption, including the redemptive work of preaching. He makes effectual the human labor of gospel

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<sup>88</sup>Calvin: “Summary of Doctrine concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments,” *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 171-177.

<sup>89</sup>Calvin, “Summary of Doctrine,” Article 3.

<sup>90</sup>Calvin, “Summary of Doctrine,” Article 4.

<sup>91</sup>Calvin, “Summary of Doctrine,” Article 5.

<sup>92</sup>Calvin, “Summary of Doctrine,” Article 6.

proclamation. The preacher is powerless in himself to give the increase to his planting and watering. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that his labor does not remain unproductive. Even more, our labors are “dead and useless, unless the Lord gives effective power to it by His Spirit.”<sup>93</sup> The gospel is preached by the outward voice but it is the inward voice that changes hearts. The conversion of Lydia is a fitting example. “We must note the expression that *the heart of Lydia was opened* so that she paid attention to the external voice of a teacher. For as preaching on its own is nothing else but a dead letter, so, on the other hand, we must beware lest a false imagination, or the semblance of secret illumination, leads us away from the Word upon which faith depends, and on which it rests.... If the mind of Lydia had not been opened, the preaching of Paul would have been mere words (*literalis*); yet God inspires her not only with mere revelations but with reverence for His Word, so that the voice of a man, which otherwise would have vanished into thin air, penetrates a mind that has received the gift of heavenly light.”<sup>94</sup>

This does not mean that God would just as well work without human instrumentality, for God is pleased to announce his work through ordained servants. Indeed, he does not send them forth as “dead instruments” or “play-actors,” rather, he sends them forth in order that he may “work powerfully with their assistance.” The effectiveness of their labors, however, remains with God himself.<sup>95</sup> Leith is correct in saying that “the power of preaching as the Word of God does not reside in the sound of the words themselves or even in their meaning. The power of preaching is the act of the Holy Spirit which makes the words, their sound and their meaning, the occasion of the voice of God.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Comm. on 1 Cor. 3:7. Calvin’s comments on John 14:25, 26 are explicit: “...outward preaching will be useless and vain unless the teaching of the Spirit is added to it.”

<sup>94</sup>Comm. on Acts 16:14.

<sup>95</sup>Comm. on Acts 26:18.

<sup>96</sup>Leith, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research,” *Review and Expositor*, 86 (Winter 1989): 31.

Romans 10:17 is a passage that clearly affirms the efficacy of preaching, “for Paul declares that faith is produced by preaching.” Although the apostle had earlier stated preaching is profitless by itself, nonetheless “*when the Lord is pleased to work*, it is the instrument of His power. Certainly the human voice cannot by its own power penetrate into the soul.... But all these things do not prevent God from acting effectually by the voice of man, so as to create faith in us by his ministry.”<sup>97</sup> When the Lord is pleased to work, preaching is an instrument of divine power. But, for Calvin, preaching is not a benefit *ex opere operato*, simply “by the work performed.” That is to say, the Spirit does not necessarily work salvation or blessing in the act of preaching itself. While it may be true to say that the Spirit is always active in preaching, that work will not as such be a labor of blessing. Yet it would not be inaccurate to say that the usual activity of the Spirit in connection with gospel preaching is to effect blessing. Thus, whereas *the grace of the Spirit is not always tied to the word of man*, nonetheless “Christ exercises His own power in the ministry which He instituted, in such a way that it is evident that it was not instituted in vain.... He is not separated from the minister, but rather His power is made known as efficacious in the minister.”<sup>98</sup>

As I have said, when the Gospel is preached in the name of God, this is as much as if he himself did speak in his own person: and yet all come not to Jesus Christ. There are a great many that go back the more when they have heard the Gospel: for then the devil kindleth them in such a rage, that they are more outrageous than ever before, and this cometh to pass, because there is a twofold hearing: the one is preaching: For the voice of a man will not enter into hearts of his hearers. I speak, but it behooveth that I hear myself being taught by the spirit of God: For otherwise the word which proceedeth from my mouth, should profit me no more than

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<sup>97</sup>Comm. on Rom. 10:17; *italics* added.

<sup>98</sup>Comm. on 1 Cor. 3:7. Note Calvin’s comments on John 14:25, 26: “So God has two ways of teaching. He sounds in our ears by the mouth of men; and He addresses us inwardly by His Spirit. These He does simultaneously or at different times, as He thinks fit.”

it doth all others, except it be given me from above, and not out of mine own head. Therefore the voice of man is nothing but a sound that vanisheth in the air, and notwithstanding it is the power of God to salvation to all believers (saith Saint Paul). When then God speaketh unto us, by the mouth of men, then he adjoineth the inward grace of his holy spirit, to the end, that the doctrine be not unprofitable, but that it may bring forth fruit. See then how we hear the heavenly father: that is to say: when he speaketh secretly unto us by his holy spirit: and then we come unto our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>99</sup>

In another place Calvin offers this instruction: “For what is the preaching of the Gospel? *It is the power of God to salvation to all believers* (saith Saint Paul:) and there he speaketh of that word which proceedeth from our mouth. What, the power of God? Why, it is nothing in itself. It is true: but it pleaseth God to display his power by the means of men, and would that his word should have such effect and power in the working, that it be as it were a key to open unto us the kingdom of heaven: as also he hath compared it to the keys of the kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>100</sup> Later he elaborates on this: “For faith cannot be without these two things: that is to say, without the word of God: I say as God hath set in order in his church: and after it cannot be without the gift of the spirit: For the word of God should be preached unto us both morning and evening, and we can profit nothing therein, unless God do open our ears and enlighten us, forasmuch as we are miserable blind ones. The Sun shall always shine upon us: but they that are blind discern not between the day and the night, to them both are alike. And even so is it with us: that if God illuminate us not within, when he sendeth his holy word, to show us the way, we should always remain as poor strays, or lost sheep.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup>The Third Sermon of Jacob and Esau, Gen. 25:21-22. Quoted from John Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1996 [Original English edition, 1579]), 63-64.

<sup>100</sup>The Eleventh Sermon on Jacob and Esau, Gen. 27:3-9, (p. 245).

<sup>101</sup>The Eleventh Sermon on Jacob and Esau, Gen. 27:3-9, (pp. 253-54).

Thus no blessing is accomplished in the life of sinners until the Spirit acts. The power of God does not reside in the words of God *ex opere operato*. “We must hold that this efficacy is not contained in the words themselves, but proceeds from the secret instinct of the Spirit.”<sup>102</sup> Yet the Spirit, as the internal minister, is pleased to work in, with, and through the labors of the external minister to bless and heal those whom God has chosen for eternal life.

This work of the Spirit, then, is joined with the word of God. But a distinction is made, that we may know that the external word is of no avail by itself, unless animated by the power of the Spirit. If anyone should object, that the word was useless, because not efficacious by itself, the solution is at hand, that if God takes this method of acting there is no reason why we should object to it. But we have a still clearer reply: since God always works in the hearts of men by the Spirit, yet his word is not without fruit; because, as God enlightens us by the sun, and yet he alone is the Father of Lights, and the splendour of the sun is profitless except as God uses it as an instrument, so we must conclude concerning his word, because the Holy Spirit penetrates our hearts, and thus enlightens our minds. All power of action, then, resides in the Spirit himself, and thus all praise ought to be entirely referred to God alone. Meanwhile, what objection is there to the Spirit of God using instruments? We hold, therefore, that when God speaks, he adds the efficacy of his Spirit, since his word without it would be fruitless; and yet the word is effectual, because the instrument ought to be united with the author of the action.<sup>103</sup>

In itself the external preaching of the Word is unproductive, but when the Holy Spirit, according to his secret grace, quickens

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<sup>102</sup>Comm. on Ezek. 2:2. Heiko A. Oberman’s remarks need to be qualified, if not contested, when he writes: “The Reformation had its own *ex opere operato* doctrine, not in connection with the sacraments, the visible Word, but with the audible word. The sermon . . . [is] the certain presence of the Word of God in the mouth of the preacher.” See his “The Preaching of the Word of God in the Reformation,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 25 (October 1960): 16.

<sup>103</sup>Comm. on Ezek. 2:2.

it, the gospel is made to bear fruit. “We must therefore pray Christ to put forth the same power of the Gospel in us.”<sup>104</sup>

In view of Calvin’s doctrine of the Spirit’s operation in the preaching of the gospel, it becomes clear that the divine presence, and more specifically Christ’s presence in the preaching event, is effectuated and communicated through the Holy Spirit. And this is not surprising since in Calvin’s soteriology “the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”<sup>105</sup> As in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, wherein Christ is *spiritually* but truly present, communing with his people, likewise in the preaching of the gospel: Christ is *spiritually* but truly present so that the human voice of the sermon is the voice of Christ himself, to admonish, console, instruct, correct, and edify his people. For this reason preaching is nothing less than a means of grace. Faith is born of the Word; and that Word is Christ’s Word.

### *The Preached Word as a Means of Grace*

Calvin conceives of the preaching of the gospel as a means of grace because it is the path along which God is pleased to operate in order to save sinners. God effects regeneration and sanctification by means of the Word preached. Christ himself is communicated to those whom the Spirit works an inward grace through the outward word—hence the sacramental character of preaching. Faith is wrought in sinners for their justification and renewal, for “faith arises from the Word of God.”<sup>106</sup> It is particularly through the preaching of the Word that God bestows the gift of faith upon those whom he has chosen for eternal life. Thus Calvin is bold to say, “take away the preaching of the

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<sup>104</sup>Comm. on John 1:43. Also note Calvin’s remarks on Luke 1:16: “I agree that, of itself and by itself, outward preaching can do nothing; but as it is an instrument of divine power for our salvation, and an instrument made efficacious through the Spirit, then what God has joined together, let us not put asunder.”

<sup>105</sup>*Institutes* 3.1.1.

<sup>106</sup>Comm. on Rom. 10:13.

Gospel, and no faith will remain.”<sup>107</sup> This means that “faith is born of hearing, because the outward preaching by men is the instrument by which God draws us to faith. Hence it follows that God is, strictly speaking, the Author of faith and men are the ministers by whom we believe...”<sup>108</sup> Faith is therefore linked with preaching and teaching. In fact, Calvin conceives of the relation between preaching and faith as like that between a mother and birth, “for the preaching is the mother who conceives and brings forth, and faith is the daughter who ought to be mindful of her origin.”<sup>109</sup> Such is the connection between the people’s faith and the minister’s preaching.

However this is not to say, as already demonstrated, that the external Word in itself has power to heal and bless. When God opens the door of faith, so that we are enabled to believe, that door does not swing open because the gospel is preached “by the outward voice” but because God effectually calls us to faith “by the illumination of the Spirit”; thus “the Kingdom of Heaven is indeed opened to us by the external preaching of the Gospel, but no one enters into it unless God reaches out His hand to him; no one draws near unless he is drawn inwardly by the Spirit.”<sup>110</sup>

To be sure, if he desired, God could use other means to bring people to faith and renew their lives. God could even choose to use no means whatsoever. He is free to work in an unmediated fashion. But he has chosen to use means in order to bless his people, and that is the ministry of the Word. Therefore we are obliged to attend to that ministry. As Calvin observes: “[I]here is nothing to hinder God from being able to implant faith in sleeping men, without their doing anything, if He so wished. But He has determined otherwise, viz., that faith is born of hearing. Therefore the person who is sure that he can come to faith by disregarding this means, acts just as if the farmers, giving up the plough, neglecting sowing and leaving all cultivation, were to open their mouths and expect food to fall into them from

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<sup>107</sup>Comm. on Acts 16:31, 32.

<sup>108</sup>Comm. on John 17:20.

<sup>109</sup>Comm. on 2 Cor. 13:5.

<sup>110</sup>Comm. on Acts 14:27.

heaven.”<sup>111</sup> As the preeminent means of grace—that is, as the vehicle through which God is pleased to nurture his people throughout their lives and bring them to maturity—preaching must occupy center stage in the church’s ministry. “[T]hose who neglect this means and yet hope to become perfect in Christ are mad. Such are the fanatics, who invent secret revelations of the Spirit for themselves, and the proud, who think that for them the private reading of the Scriptures is enough, and that they have no need of the common ministry of the Church.”<sup>112</sup>

Although preaching is a means of grace, not all who come under this ministry are brought to conversion. We have already noted that preaching does not effect blessing *ex opere operato*. Calvin distinguishes between the proper function (*proprium officium*) of the gospel and its accidental function (*ab accidentalī*). As the keys of the Kingdom have a double function—to loose and to bind, to remit and to retain—we do well to remember that Christ is the foundation stone who also is a stone of stumbling. Likewise, Christ is Savior and Judge. The preaching of the Word, however, finds its “proper function” in the salvation of sinners and the nourishment of God’s people. Its “accidental function” is the hardening of the willful who travel the way of death. Therefore “we should not be offended if the preaching of the Gospel does not result in the salvation of all who hear it, but should think it quite enough if it promotes God’s glory by bringing to the reprobate a just condemnation.”<sup>113</sup> “Whether the outcome be life or death, it is never preached in vain.”<sup>114</sup> We could say that whereas, for Calvin, the Word does not convey blessing *ex opere operato*, it inevitably does have some kind of effect—either for life or for death.

### *Practical Consequences*

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<sup>111</sup>Comm. on 1 Cor. 3:6.

<sup>112</sup>Comm. on Eph. 4:12.

<sup>113</sup>Comm. on 2 Cor. 2:15.

<sup>114</sup>Comm. on 2 Cor. 2:15.

Calvin's conception of the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel has practical consequences for believers in their daily walk of faith. For example, in the preaching of the gospel, "believers may be fully convinced that what they hear about the forgiveness of sins is ratified, and [they] may not think less of the reconciliation offered by men's voices than if God Himself had stretched out His hand from heaven." Calvin's point is made even clearer in the words that follow: "The Church daily receives the rich fruit of this teaching when she realizes that her pastors are divinely ordained to be sureties (*sponsors*) of eternal salvation and that the forgiveness of sins which is committed to them is not to be sought afar off. Nor should we think less highly of this incomparable treasure because it is exhibited in earthen vessels. We have cause to thank God who has conferred on men such an honour as to represent His person (*personam sustineant*) and His Son's in declaring the forgiveness of sins."<sup>115</sup> "Thus when God speaks through the mouth of the preacher offering forgiveness, those who hear the Word in faith are there and then really absolved from their sins, for the Word effects what it declares."<sup>116</sup> Christ exercises His power in the ministry that He Himself instituted for our benefit; and He does this "in such a way that it is evident that it was not instituted in vain.... For He is not separated from the minister, but rather His power is made known as efficacious in the minister."<sup>117</sup> What is more, Christ confers his grace upon whomever he please. Through his ministers "Christ enlightens men's minds, renews their hearts and wholly regenerates them."<sup>118</sup> The human instrument, duly ordained to the office of preaching and bringing the Word of God in gospel proclamation, is likewise the channel through which Christ rules our lives.

St. Paul shows that our Lord Jesus will reign over us, on the condition that his Word is always in men's mouths [Rom. 10:8]. He

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<sup>115</sup>Comm. on John 20:23.

<sup>116</sup>Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 88.

<sup>117</sup>Comm. on 1 Cor. 3:7.

<sup>118</sup>Comm. on 2 Cor. 3:6.

does not say that the angels will come to reveal to us what God will have us to know, but he says that we must understand God's will by means of them who have the responsibility and office to tell it us. For just as in the time of the law it was said that the priests were God's angels, and that men ought to enquire at their mouth, [Mal. 2:7], so now also God will not have us to flutter in the air after our own fancies, but go to the fountain which is open for us when we want to drink. If a man were to go looking for the source of a fountain (I mean as it is hidden in the earth) and were to scorn drinking until he found it, would not men regard him as stark raving mad? Most certainly they would. But see, God has provided for our infirmity, in that he will not have us make long detours to be taught his Word faithfully. For he makes the fountain come home to us, which was hidden and far off from us, I say, he makes it come home to us, as it were, by channels, so that we need do no more than open our mouths to receive it. Just as when there are fair channels that hold running water in abundance, men will come to draw at them as much as they need, so it was our Lord's will that his Word should be set forth to us, by his instituting men to be the instruments of his Spirit. Seeing, then, this is so, let us learn to keep to it if we wish to be taught of God; and let us receive the doctrine preached to us by the mouths of men.<sup>119</sup>

Believers should therefore turn to the preached Word for instruction and assurance. It is the fountain near and accessible to us. What is more, since forgiveness is declared from the pulpit, being embraced in the way of faith, we ought to take it as a "general rule" to look for assurance in the sermon sounding in our ears. Indeed if we fail to understand that God speaks by his servants and that the Word proclaimed bears divine authority, we will also fail to embrace the forgiveness of our sins and the restoration of life promised in that gospel; consequently, "all confidence in our salvation collapses."<sup>120</sup> This means that we must surrender ourselves to the means God has chosen by which he imparts his Word to us. "No one—not even a fanatical beast—ever existed who would tell us to close our ears to God. But in every age the prophets and godly teachers have had a

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<sup>119</sup>Sermon Twenty-five on Eph. 4:11-12 (pp. 369-370).

<sup>120</sup>Comm. on Matt. 8:10.

difficult struggle with the ungodly, who in their stubbornness can never submit to the yoke of being taught by human word and ministry.”<sup>121</sup>

Because *God* is active in the preaching of the gospel, it is the duty of believers to submit themselves to the *human* instrument in proclamation, just as they would submit themselves to God’s own presence. God joins his work to the workings of human vessels. When one receives the Word of God through the instrumentality of preaching he nonetheless receives the Word of God. We thus honor God when we honor his instrument.

So then, if we earnestly desire that God should be honoured and served, and that our Lord should have his royal seat among us peaceably, to reign in the midst of us, if we are his people and are under his protection, if we covet to be built up in him and to be joined to him, and to be steadfast in him to the end; to be short, if we desire our salvation, we must learn to be humble learners in receiving the doctrine of the gospel and in hearkening to the pastors that are sent to us, as if Jesus Christ spoke to us himself in his own person, assuring ourselves that he will acknowledge the obedience and submission of our faith when we listen to the mortal men to whom he has given that charge. Therefore let us show the zeal we have for God’s honour and also the desire and care we have for our own salvation and for the common welfare and edifying of the church, which will happen when all of us, both great and small, agree in this, that Jesus Christ has his instruments by which he speaks to us, and draws us to himself.<sup>122</sup>

Again, this is not to say that Calvin was unaware of the many perils to which preaching could succumb. He recognized that “the words of the sermon are at best frail, human words.” But he also recognized that these words—frail as they are—serve God’s purpose and are the occasion and means by which God is present, for God himself is active. Therefore believers may not despise gospel preaching; on the contrary, they ought to revere it. For “the Lord unites Him [the Spirit] with the external preaching

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<sup>121</sup>*Institutes* 4.1.5.

<sup>122</sup>Sermon Twenty-five on Ephesians 4:11-12 (pp. 374-75).

of the Gospel so as to keep us in reverence of His Word, and obviate the fatal fantasies in which fanatics entangle themselves, when they abandon the Word and invent some sort of vague and erratic spirit.”<sup>123</sup> In fact, the apostle views the preached gospel as God exerting his power for our salvation. “He is not speaking here of any secret revelation, but of preaching by word of mouth. It follows from this that those who withdraw themselves from hearing the Word preached are wilfully rejecting the power of God and repelling His hand of deliverance far from them.”<sup>124</sup>

As for ministers, they must apply themselves with all seriousness to the task of proclaiming the gospel purely and undiluted. No preacher “ought to be counted true and faithful, except those through whom God speaks, who invent nothing themselves, who teach not according to their own fancies, but faithfully deliver what God has committed to them.”<sup>125</sup> Where faithfulness to the written Word is wanting, preaching ceases to function as God’s Word. “The act [of preaching] may remain on a merely human level throughout, in which case the preacher with all his eloquence and skill and fervour will accomplish nothing.”<sup>126</sup> Our labors only bear fruit because of divine grace, which Calvin calls a “miracle”; “human industry” has nothing to do with it.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, a preacher must resist the temptation to depend upon his rhetorical skill in order to make effectual the Word he proclaims, as if he could usurp the Holy Spirit’s role on this account. Our preaching must honor God and give the preeminence to Christ. As Calvin exhorts: “I have told you heretofore, that if a man seek to be heard for his own skill, for his great and deep understanding, for his fair speech, or for his great eloquence: all those things are nothing but filthiness and dung, and that God only must have the authority and honor at our hands: and that forasmuch as it pleaseth God to speak to us by the mouth of his only son: only Jesus Christ must have the

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<sup>123</sup>Comm. on Acts 10:44.

<sup>124</sup>Comm. on Rom. 1:16.

<sup>125</sup>Comm. on Jer. 1:9.

<sup>126</sup>Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 90.

<sup>127</sup>Comm. on 1 Cor. 3:6.

preeminence to be the master and teacher of all his, and we likewise must become his flock to hear his voice.”<sup>128</sup> Thus “from one perspective the human work of the sermon is critically important. The sermon’s fidelity to Scripture, the skill of the syntax and rhetoric, the liveliness of the delivery are of a fundamental importance that ought not to be minimized. From another perspective a sermon is a work of the Spirit of God which may make a ‘poor’ sermon the occasion of God’s presence and a brilliant sermon barren of power.”<sup>129</sup>

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We offer the following summary statements regarding Calvin’s conception of the presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel:

- In the preaching of the gospel the sheep hear the Good Shepherd’s voice, not merely the voice of the pastor.
- God is pleased to accommodate himself to our human frailty and therefore he makes use of human instrumentality to declare his Word.
- The sermon is a divine-human work in that the instrument or messenger is human, the Word or message imparted is divine.
- Preaching of the Word must faithfully exposit and apply the Scriptures; in doing so it bears a derivative authority, but in just that way it also bears an immediate authority in our hearing of it.
- Christ is spiritually present in the preaching of the gospel through the operation of the Holy Spirit; hence preaching possesses a sacramental character—an outward vehicle for an inward grace.

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<sup>128</sup>Sermon Five on Gal. 1:11-12 (p. 99).

<sup>129</sup>Leith, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research,” *Review and Expositor*, 86 (Winter 1989): 31-32.

- Preaching serves to impart an understanding of Scripture, and therefore it must be preached in a manner adapted to and profitable for those who hear it.
- Preaching occupies a place of importance above private or public Bible reading.
- Preaching that is not faithful to Scripture is not preaching.
- The Holy Spirit is the internal minister of the Word who makes effectual the outward ministry of the Word, and who communicates Christ to us in a way that is mystical, incomprehensible, and spiritual.
- The preaching of the Word is the chief means of grace for producing faith in God's people and nurturing them in the way of faith.
- The proper function of the preaching of the Word is to heal and to bless unto the salvation of sinners.
- Believers can know the absolution of their sin in the preaching of the gospel; the sermon is therefore a source of assurance since Christ himself speaks to us concerning our forgiveness and reconciliation through his blood.
- Believers may not despise the human instrument God employs to impart his Word to us; rather, we must submit ourselves to their labors just as we would submit ourselves to God himself.
- Preaching does not depend on the rhetorical skill of the preacher for its efficacy, though preachers ought to apply themselves in all respects to faithfully explicate and communicate God's Word.

### The *Real Presence* Analyzed

In our survey of Luther and Calvin's views on the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel, we took note of the sacramental quality<sup>130</sup> that the preached Word embodies in their thinking. In the conception of each Reformer, preaching is part of God's redemptive work, a redemptive event

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<sup>130</sup>See n38.

itself, according to divine will and initiative. Moreover, preaching is the occasion for God's redemptive activity because the Holy Spirit, by this means, communicates Christ and all his benefits to believers. On one level—the merely external—preaching is little more than a tool or instrument for communicating the inscripturated Word; on another level—the internal—it constitutes Christ's voice, divine speech, the divine presence.

To be sure, Calvin is clearer than Luther in articulating for us not *that* this is so but *how* this is so. Calvin strongly accents the Spirit's role in seeking to explain the presence of the divine in the altogether human activity of preaching. What we must not miss, however, is that for Calvin, and no less for Luther, *Christ* is truly present in human proclamation. The Spirit works in, with, and through human preaching in such a way that *Christ* is truly present in the preaching of the gospel. Calvin goes no further in explaining the divine presence in human preaching than to conclude it is mysterious, incomprehensible, and spiritual. But this does not minimize its reality. Perhaps we can make an analogy between Calvin's doctrine of the real presence in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and his idea of Christ's presence in gospel preaching. For Calvin, Christ is not somehow less present in the sacrament because he is *spiritually* present. In other words, simply because Christ is not present in the sacrament through the miracle of transubstantiation or consubstantiation does not mean believers fail to actually commune with him or fail to partake of his body and blood. Likewise with respect to the preaching of the gospel: Christ is audibly present in the sermon through the Holy Spirit. Christ's voice is heard in the preaching of the gospel, though not because he appears visibly in the flesh and utters the words spoken. The spiritual presence of Christ in the preaching is therefore a real presence, not some kind of ruse or fiction.

T. H. L. Parker observes that where a Zwinglian conception of the Lord Supper prevails—which does not allow for a doctrine of the real presence—a similar conception of preaching prevails. That is to say, in the Zwinglian-like or non-sacramental model, while preaching is viewed as an exposition of the inscripturated

Word which God may use to bear fruit in the lives of believers, ultimately it is just information.<sup>131</sup> According to this conception, sermons have no sacramental quality. Sermons are not conveyers of the divine. In fact, sermons are not, in any sense, divine activity. Even when sermons are wholly faithful to Scripture as human expositions, they cannot be the Word of God. The sermon with its many words is like a piece of spiritual conduit through which “moments” of the Spirit-inspired Word (Scripture) flow. In this way human preaching may convey “the message of God,” provided it teaches the words of Scripture. In short, sermons impart information from the Bible, but they do not impart or communicate Christ himself and the benefits that belong to him.<sup>132</sup>

This conception of preaching, over against Luther and Calvin’s view, characterizes most Reformed and evangelical churches in North America today, and fits with the Zwinglianism that often reigns in these same churches on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper as well. We must understand that even the

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<sup>131</sup>Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 22. We do not use the phrase “Zwinglian-like” as a description of Zwingli’s doctrine of preaching; rather, the phrase is used analogously. Zwingli seems to deny a doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper and thereby adopts a rather weak understanding of the sacrament—meaning, Christ’s presence and activity in the Supper are denied. Likewise, by way of analogy to Zwingli, the same sort of conception comes to define the Word preached. Christ is neither present nor active.

<sup>132</sup>This, I think, represents the view expressed by Peter Adam in his book, *Speaking God’s Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 120. Adam writes: “if we begin to understand any one sermon as a Word of God, we are beginning to treat human explanations and ideas as God’s words. This looks to me,” writes Adam, “like the beginning of Protestant tradition” (p. 115). Adam later states his own conception: “[T]o claim that Christ may be heard through preaching or that God makes his appeal through preaching is not to claim that the preaching itself is the Word of God” (p. 118). While Adam steers clear of a Barthian conception of preaching as a “form” of the Word of God, he also steers a course away from Luther and Calvin. Adam wishes to claim that Christ is heard through preaching, while denying that preaching is God’s Word. Adam’s claim, however, is too absolute. Although he appeals to Calvin for support of his view, he directly controverts Luther and Calvin’s position since, for them, preaching is the Word of God, at least in a derivative sense.

Zwinglian doctrine of the Lord's Supper possesses no sacramental quality. Consequently wherever a Zwinglian-like conception of preaching preponderates, there can be no meaningful talk of Christ's presence and activity in the human proclamation of the gospel.

The Zwinglian-like conception of preaching, at least as it pertains to the question of the real presence of Christ, artificially divides and separates Christ from his Word. If biblical sermons, for example, convey the message of the gospel, how can the sermon not be God's Word to the recipients of that Word? May we legitimately separate the Word *Incarnate*, from the Word *inscripturated*, from the Word *preached*?

We observe that Luther and Calvin did not call preaching the voice of God or the voice of Christ as a form of theological hyperbole, as if they were trying to puff up preaching with artificial importance. On the contrary, both men labored to capture the sacramental significance of preaching. They believed that only God rescues sinners; only God calls sinners to himself; only God speaks to sinners—repentant and unrepentant—the Word of blessing unto life or of curse unto death; only God is Savior and Judge. And God performs his redemptive work through his Word preached.

Again, while it is true that Christ is not visibly present in the preaching of the gospel and does not vocalize the words of the sermon through his own resurrected body, nonetheless, his presence is real and certain. It is visibly intangible but as real as the sounds of the sermon in our ears. Of course, apart from faith preaching is null and void; but by faith we have ears to hear and eyes to see. And what do we hear? Is it not the voice of Christ? What do we see? Is it not the ministry of our risen Lord? If Christ works *through his Spirit*, is the work not *his* nonetheless? If Christ is present in the preaching of the gospel *through his Spirit*, is *he* not present nonetheless? A spiritual presence of Christ in gospel proclamation does not render his presence less real or second-rate. On the contrary, the sacramental nature of preaching is an affirmation that the divine is present in the human, that Christ in his transcendent glory is somehow

immanent, that God is with us anew, that human words are taken up as divine speech.

This does not mean that God surrenders his incommunicable attributes; neither does it mean that he jettisons his divine nature as “totally other,” perpetually distinct from his creatures. The divine cannot be identified with the human. At best—as in the incarnation—the divine and the human form a union in preaching that is without confusion or blurring of boundaries, and without a transferring of distinct properties from God to man. At the same time, the divine and the human in preaching are inseparable. This analogy to christological distinctions is utilized guardedly, but such distinctions help us to conceptualize what is asserted and what is denied in averring the real presence of Christ in preaching. In affirming that preaching is God’s Word, it is not affirmed that the human preacher is God or God-like, even in the sermonic moment. Human preaching remains human. But God is pleased to unite himself with our words, take them up as his own, so that the preached Word conveys the message of God. Consequently, recipients of biblical preaching hear the human voice of the preacher but receive by faith, through the Spirit, the Word of God for their lives. *God speaks.*

To fully appreciate the power of Luther and Calvin’s claim about preaching as God speaking, we need to peel away certain misconceptions and false presuppositions which make us *misapply* the distinction between God’s divinity and our humanity. The difference that exists between creature and Creator is of course not to be minimized. In fact, that difference is precisely what necessitates preaching. As Calvin repeatedly points out, unless God accommodates himself to us through human vessels we would not be able to endure his Word in our ears. We, as creatures, are too frail to look upon his majesty and too frail to be taught by his thundering voice. One would therefore be mistaken if he tried to “cut away” the human character of Scripture in order to obtain its divine character. Such an effort betokens a mistaken notion regarding God and his creation. God in his “*God-ness*” or divinity can act in, with, and through his human creatures without compromising the divine character of

the action. Thus the proverbial kernel/husk distinction that is applied to Scripture from time to time is misinformed, and in many respects that type of distinction is wrongly applied to the preaching of God's Word.

It is simply wrong to think that divine speech cannot be conveyed by means of human words or that the presence of a human or earthly element destroys the purity of the divine. If that is so, then both inscripturation and incarnation are rendered impossible, and the sacraments become mere signs devoid of certified promises. The Lord's Supper in particular becomes a human exercise in "contemplation," truly and merely a memorial. It is also wrong to seek the divine apart from the means God himself has chosen—even if the particular means he has chosen is human speech. "Such an effort implies that God can be found and grasped beyond the human sphere whereas, as Luther says, the true God lives in the straw of the manger. From human mouths are heard the voice and tones of God, 'not the voice that speaks from heaven above, but that which is down in the midst of men'."<sup>133</sup> This is why preaching bears a sacramental character. God is pleased to work an inward grace via the outward word—or stated slightly differently: God is pleased to work invisible grace through the audible word. That is to say, through the internal ministry of the Holy Spirit the audible word is made to bear fruit. This fruit includes, particularly for Calvin, nothing less than the imparting of Christ himself.

### Further Questions and Clarifications

The crucial question we are addressing is whether preaching can be the Word of God. Modern perceptions of preaching seem inclined to answer that query in the negative. Especially in the mind of the common parishioner, Luther and Calvin's claims about preaching might seem presumptuous, perhaps even dangerous. The reason for this assessment or reaction may be due to the kind of preaching many parishioners hear from week

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<sup>133</sup>Wingren, *The Living Word*, 27.

to week. How does the reality of daily experience comport with the high claims Luther and Calvin make about preaching? The sermons many of us hear do not “grab us” as divine speech. Sometimes—maybe oftentimes—the sermons we hear strike us as dull and uninteresting or shallow and silly. Through such preaching, parishioners feel neither challenged to live their faith nor instructed in the way of their faith. If that is the experience parishioners have had with preaching, will not their assessment of the value and importance of preaching differ significantly from Luther and Calvin’s assessment? Sermons will be viewed as useless entities, for the sermons they hear leave them untouched, unharmed, and unhealed. As a result, Luther and Calvin’s high claim that preaching is the Word of God seems preposterous, if not simply ridiculous.

Other parishioners, however, have a different experience with preaching. They appreciate and even prize their pastor’s sermons. They are prepared to say that they are blessed by the preaching they hear from week to week. Such parishioners testify that the sermons are eye-opening and life-challenging. They hear the sermon and come away enriched, informed, encouraged—even changed. Sermons are an important part of their spiritual growth and wellbeing. Nonetheless, even for people with this assessment of preaching, the claim that preaching is the Word of God might seem a bit over the top.

The questions that come to mind are not uncommon: Isn’t the Bible alone the Word of God? Moreover, if we are serious about this claim regarding preaching, that sermons are the Word of God, shouldn’t they be penned down, scripted, and added to the Canon? What is more, if preaching is the Word of God doesn’t this imply the infallibility of the preacher? And in line with that, doesn’t the interrelationship constructed between the human being who preaches and God who speaks create an association that is dangerous? Isn’t such a relationship over inflated and grandiose? And won’t this, with respect to the preacher, open the way to demagoguery and megalomania? Won’t the preacher view himself as over-important, indispensable—even infallible—after all, his words are God’s

Word?<sup>134</sup> Also in this connection, but on a different note, how is this view to be distinguished from the position of Karl Barth, which tends to denigrate the divine character of Holy Scripture and render divine revelation an intermittent act?

These questions—which are not without merit—must be addressed.

First, the high view of preaching articulated by Luther and Calvin does not mean that the biblical sermon is the Word of God *in the same way* that Scripture is the Word of God. They are not saying that preachers are divinely inspired the way the human authors of the Bible were inspired. Not everything preachers say in biblical sermons is *the very words of God*; their sermons are not *God-breathed*. No, preaching is the Word of God in a derivative sense, as we have seen. It is an *administration of the Word*. But surely it is not inconceivable to hear the voice of Christ through the administration of the Word of Christ, is it? God has given us his written Word so that we may have his Word preached. And when that Word is properly (faithfully) preached, the Word of God is heard, not merely Rev. So-and-So's words. To be sure, when the preacher preaches, his words are not verbally inspired; his message is not infallible or inerrant. In fact, the preacher's message may have a number of errors and flaws or other shortcomings. That doesn't mean however that the voice of Christ doesn't come through or that Christ doesn't admonish his people in that sermon or instruct them or console them.

Second, the agent behind the power and efficacy of the sermon is the Holy Spirit. God has chosen preaching as a means of grace because it does what personal Bible reading often does not do—namely, apply the Word to specific, concrete circumstances. Moreover, faithful preaching opens the Word and clarifies the Word. The attribute of Scripture's clarity or

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<sup>134</sup>Fred W. Meuser raises these same sorts of questions in his study of Luther's preaching, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 16, "Won't preachers who think their words are God's words become arrogant and domineering? Won't they forget that 'God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and God's ways than our ways'? Aren't there already too many preachers who think too highly of their own preaching? Why accentuate a problem that is bound to exist in every sinful proclaimer: to think more highly of oneself than one ought to think?"

perspicuity does not mean that all parts of the Bible are clear and easy to understand. Hence the great need for preaching. When faithful preaching opens a text that was before obscure or misunderstood, are we going to say we haven't heard the voice of Christ? Haven't we, instead, finally heard the voice of Christ—his written Word being explained and applied?

Third, to call preaching the voice of Christ does not mean that God's Word inscripturated is incomplete or that Christ is adding new chapters to the Bible through the Sunday sermon. God's inscripturated Word is complete. Everything we need to know for our salvation has been given to us. However, although God's revelation is complete, the *administration* of that message written in the Bible is not complete. That is why Christ instituted preaching. Thus, the explanation and application of God's written revelation, the Bible, is ongoing. Christ is busy, through preaching, bringing his Word to bear in a concrete way to a specific people, in a specific place, at a specific time for their salvation and sanctification. Christ is the agent who builds his Church, not us! If Christ builds the Church, then by whose voice is the Church built? Surely, as Romans 10 shows us, it is by the voice of Christ himself. "And how can they believe in the one whom they have not heard" (v. 14b). This verse shows us that hearing is logically prior to believing. But we must also note what kind of hearing is required. The key phrase in this verse is often mistranslated "the one *of whom*." Normal grammatical usage, however, requires this phrase to be translated "the one whom" (*hou*) and so indicates the speaker rather than the message.<sup>135</sup> "In other words, [the recipients of the gospel] will not believe Christ

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<sup>135</sup>James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 38b: Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 620. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1979), p. 534, remarks: "The use of *οὗ* indicates that in the second and third questions [of verse 14] the thought is of their hearing Christ speaking in the message of the preachers. (To explain *οὗ οὐκ ἤκουσαν* as meaning 'about whom they have not heard' is not really feasible; for the use of *ἀκούειν* with the simple genitive of the person meaning 'to hear about (someone)' would be very unusual.)"

until they have heard *him speaking* through his messengers or ambassadors.”<sup>136</sup>

Fourth, we must admit that some preachers have misused and misapprehended the implications of this high theology of preaching and consequently have become egotistical and inflated with self-importance. Some unscrupulous individuals have succumbed to the sort of temptation described above. When this happens, preachers do come to view themselves as virtually infallible. In their minds, their preaching of God’s Word from the pulpit is not to be disputed or questioned in any capacity—only obeyed. Such an error, however, involves a confusion of one’s person and office, and denies the necessary distinction between the administration of the Word of God and the Word of God as inspired and inscripturated. While all the abuses committed in the name of a high theology of preaching need not be detailed here, neither need we view such abuses as inevitable. In fact, Luther and Calvin’s high conception of preaching prods preachers in a different direction. Since God is the agent and humans are the instrument, preachers must approach the task of preaching with humility, even fear, and a keen understanding of their duty to handle God’s written revelation responsibly and wisely. The preacher’s words must be faithful to and in concert with the Word of God recorded in the Scriptures. This is why Luther insisted that Christ alone was to be preached—Christ as Savior, God’s definitive Word to the world.<sup>137</sup> Eric W. Gritsch is correct in saying that “nothing is higher for Luther than the faithful proclamation of God’s Word, even if only a few—or indeed only one individual—proclaim it.”<sup>138</sup> The centrality of the preaching of

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<sup>136</sup>John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 286; *italics* added.

<sup>137</sup>As Meuser notes, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 16, “Luther’s answer to this was: *Nihil nisi Christus praedicantur*—‘Nothing except Christ is [to be] preached.’...When Christ is preached as good news, as the prophets and apostles present him, then ‘when the preacher speaks, God speaks,’ and the Holy Spirit produces faith, hope, love, and a joyful new life.”

<sup>138</sup>Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester*, 98. Gritsch offers this quote from Luther: “‘If I were the only one in the entire world to adhere to the Word,’ he told his students in a lecture on Gen. 7:17-24, ‘I alone would be the church

the Word is similarly expressed by Calvin. Preaching is a redemptive happening. Calvin thus insists that only the doctrine of the gospel may be proclaimed, nothing of human invention or personal fancy qualifies as preaching. Faithful preaching is not something in competition with the Bible; rather, it is a servant of the Bible. It administers the Bible. Precisely because it does that, it qualifies as the voice of Christ.

Fifth, we need to consider the alternatives to Luther and Calvin's view and where those alternatives lead. What are we to conclude about preaching if Christ's voice is not heard in gospel proclamation but only the voice of the Reverend So-and-So? If preaching is exclusively a human effort, and not a divine activity, is it worth our time? If the sermon is merely the *pastor's* sermon, how could it possibly effect blessing in the church? If Christ is not present in the proclamation of the gospel, isn't preaching for that reason an exercise in futility, an inevitable corruption or diminishment of the Word, a wholly human and fallible enterprise? Thus, doesn't preaching come to function as an obstacle to the Word of God itself, altogether unnecessary, since it places a person—namely the preacher—between the text of the Bible and the hearers or readers of that text?

We must be careful not to miss the passionate rationale Luther and Calvin each offer in support of their respective accents concerning the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel. To be sure, as a human endeavor, it is hard to safeguard preaching from error and numerous shortcomings. The hazards are plentiful: mistaken exegesis, misapplication, allegorical fancy, cheap moralism, failure to offer anything beyond a surface reading of the text, theological error, and outright false teaching. These hazards and mistakes are too commonplace. Some of them, like theological error and false teaching, render preaching vain and invalid. Erroneous preaching is not preaching! However, not all these shortcomings—at least not automatically—undermine preaching altogether. Sermons, with their shortcomings, can still qualify as God's speech or be

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and would properly judge about the rest of the world that it is not the church.”—*LW*, vol. 2, 102.

taken up as God's instrument to effect his powerful saving and sanctifying purpose.

If the conception that affirms Christ's presence and God's Word in human proclamation seems presumptuous, consider the alternative—namely, that preaching is only speech *about* God. Gustaf Wingren argues that “such a slip, once made, gradually alters the picture of God, so that he becomes the far-off deistic God who is remote from the preached word and is only spoken about as we speak about someone who is absent.”<sup>139</sup> If preaching is nothing more than biblical commentary about God, why all the fuss about ecclesiastical office and divine commissioning? In fact, in a literate society why bother with verbal proclamation at all? Would not flyers and bulletins, tracts and printed meditations adequately serve? Moreover, why consider preaching—as most Reformed Christians are ready to do—a means of grace? If Christian preaching is merely human speech about God, then it is on its way to the homiletic junkyard, for what distinguishes this human speech *about God* from other human speech about God and what accounts for its authoritative character? When Christ's presence in the preaching of the gospel is denied, preaching is defanged and de-clawed. It is ultimately a harmless thing, a hopeless endeavor, a human effort that, like most human efforts, is weak and uncertain. Preaching—without Christ—slips into a kind of work's righteousness.

In preaching (real preaching), however, we are not dealing merely with a man who stands in a pulpit on Sunday for some thirty minutes or so and offers his opinions (although that is what happens in false preaching). No, we are dealing with the Word of God, the Bible, administered. We are therefore dealing with Christ. God has chosen, in the foolishness of preaching, through fallible, flawed human agents, to open the Kingdom of heaven to believers and to close it to unbelievers. Preaching is indeed a *means of grace*, that is, the channel or vehicle through which God is pleased to effect his grace in the lives of his people.

Sixth, Luther and Calvin's doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel must also be distinguished

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<sup>139</sup>Wingren, *The Living Word*, 19.

from the view of Karl Barth. The difference between Luther and Calvin over against Barth really finds its target in the doctrine of Scripture. For Barth, the Bible is a “human witness” to the revelation-event in Jesus Christ—in this case, the human witness of the apostles. As a human witness it is subject to all the frailties of our humanity. It is therefore fallible and error prone, yet retains a uniqueness and priority as the witness of the apostles.<sup>140</sup> For Barth, revelation and the text of Scripture are not as such the same thing. This is because divine revelation is something beyond the Scripture—though Scripture, because of its apostolicity, is the occasion for divine revelation, particularly when it is preached.<sup>141</sup> Revelation is Word event—the incarnational life and work of Christ—whereas Scripture and preaching attest and proclaim that event.<sup>142</sup>

Barth’s doctrine of Scripture is clearly and significantly different from the doctrine Luther and Calvin espouse, wherein Scripture is reckoned as God’s speech, and therefore to be revered as if directly descended from heaven.<sup>143</sup> Given Barth’s view of Scripture as a (fallible) human witness to revelation, how does preaching serve to be a “form” of the Word of God, based as it is on this prior *human witness*? For Luther and Calvin, preaching is based on a prior and abiding *divine revelation*—that is, Scripture. Yet in Barth’s scheme, God’s freedom is most clearly manifest in making human witness the occasion for divine revelation. The preacher never controls the Word of God. The sermon therefore is never the Word of God on its own. Revelation is always dynamic, never static, always an event, a happening, and this at God’s privileged initiative, never captured

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<sup>140</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., 1936-1969), vol. I/2, 528-530.

<sup>141</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, 102-104; vol. I/2, 530-532.

<sup>142</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, 120.

<sup>143</sup>Luther distinguished the Word incarnate from the Word proclaimed as follows: Whereas the Incarnate Word is true God from the beginning, the preached Word is not. Whereas the Incarnate Word is in substance God; the preached Word is in its effect the power of God, but is not God in substance, for it has a man’s nature, whether it is spoken by Christ or by a minister (*LW* 54. 394f.). See Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6-9.

and encapsulated—as in a sacred book. The sermon *becomes* the Word of God when God is pleased for it to be the avenue for such. Thus it is through the human and fallible witness of preaching that God, according to his own sovereign mercy, chooses when, where, and how to reveal himself.<sup>144</sup> At that moment this human “witness *becomes* the Word of God for us and at that moment *is* the Word of God for us.”<sup>145</sup> In Barth’s theology, preaching and Scripture are really composed of the same stuff—both are fallible human witnesses to the revelation event in Jesus Christ and become God’s Word according to divine prerogative and impulse. Preaching, like Scripture, “is in itself nothing else than a human attempt to express in human words what the preacher has heard in the apostolic witness and to convey to his hearers the promise of God’s revelation, reconciliation and calling ... the sermon stands under God’s own promise that he will use human words to reveal himself. And then we find the same solution: where and when it pleases God to speak through these human words, his self-revelation takes place. At that moment the sermon is God’s Word for the hearer.”<sup>146</sup>

Insofar as Barth recognizes God’s freedom to act upon and bless the recipients of the preaching through the sermon, his view does not differ in any significant way from that of Luther and Calvin. Barth does not wish to see God in the stranglehold of ministers. God is free to act or not to act. Similarly, both Luther and Calvin affirm the vital role of the Holy Spirit to work in the preacher and the hearers to make effectual the divine Word that is preached. Accordingly, they deny that preaching imparts a blessing *ex opere operato*. However, for Luther and Calvin, a biblical sermon *is* the Word of God, whether the Holy Spirit chooses to make it effectual unto salvation or not. They therefore more strongly affirm the likelihood of gracious divine

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<sup>144</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2, 528-530.

<sup>145</sup>Klaas Runia, “What Is Preaching According to the New Testament?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 36-37.

<sup>146</sup>Runia, “What Is Preaching According to the New Testament?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 36-37.

action whenever the Scripture is faithfully preached. Moreover, for Luther and Calvin, the sermon that the Spirit uses to effect blessing is derived from Scripture, and in that way is an extension of God's inscripturated Word; it is derived from a prior and abiding *revelation of God*. By faithfully explicating and applying the Word to contemporary circumstances, preaching is God's Word, *derivatively*, in the present.

Barth, by way of contrast, leaves the recipients of preaching uncertain whether God will speak from Sunday to Sunday in the preaching of the gospel. Will God now decide to make the sermon, and even the Scripture for that matter, *become* the Word of God for us at this hour?<sup>147</sup> Will this human witness, perhaps with the unexpectedness of a hiccup, *become* revelation? Runia maintains that the New Testament knows nothing of "the Barthian distinction of 'indirect identity' which must become a 'direct identity' where and when it pleases God." Runia aligns himself with Luther and Calvin when he writes, in opposition to Barth's view, that God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ "is to be found in the preaching and writing of the apostles."<sup>148</sup> Which is to say, Scripture *is* the Word of God, not merely a witness to a former revelatory event or the occasion for a contemporary revelatory event. Scripture is divine speech. God is speaking. And this means that when the Scripture is faithfully proclaimed, the sermon is God speaking to his church today. Thus Barth is correct in recognizing the revelatory power of preaching, its potential for divine action and blessing, but he misconstrues the preaching event due to his misapprehension of the direct revelatory character of Scripture as God's Word.

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In this study we have sought to present the views of Luther and Calvin on the nature of preaching, particularly their shared convictions regarding the real presence of Christ in the preaching

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<sup>147</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2, 530-532..

<sup>148</sup>Runia, "What Is Preaching According to the New Testament?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 37.

of the gospel. We have also sought to analyze what the real presence of Christ means. The Protestant church today is, in our judgment, uncomfortable with the notion of the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel. The idea that Christ speaks in, with, and through the sermon—that preaching therefore exhibits a sacramental character—startles many believers. Could this be because the Protestant church today has capitulated to a different conception of preaching?

Although many believers are more than prepared to affirm the exalted nature of Scripture as the inspired Word of God, and rightly so, they fail to reckon with Scripture's own testimony regarding the necessity of preaching. Scripture, as divine revelation, emphatically ranks the public proclamation of the gospel above private Bible reading. The reading of Scripture certainly has its place, and sometimes the Holy Spirit is pleased to use it as the sole means to bring an individual to conversion. In fact, the reason for parishioners' disappointment with some sermons is rooted in the preacher's failure to open and apply the text in a manner superior to the ability of the parishioners themselves. In other words, the preacher *failed to do more than* a parishioner might have done reflecting on the text without the pastor's sermon. In any case, Scripture teaches that the preaching of the gospel occupies a more prominent and necessary place in the ministry of the church than personal Bible reading. Preaching possesses a priority, a higher rank of importance.

The priority of preaching is rooted in the power of preaching. Preaching is powerful because, as the living voice of Christ, as the Word of God, through the Holy Spirit, it addresses our current circumstances. The profitability of Scripture for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness is directly tied to its proclamation—the apostle bids Timothy to preach the Word (see 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:2). Preaching, as preaching of God's Word, possesses a contemporaneity that enables recipients of the Word to actually hear, see, and understand that Word *vis-à-vis* current circumstances. In other words, through the preaching of God's Word, the Word of God is actually heard and understood—sins are rebuked, errors refuted, misconceptions

and erroneous trends exposed, false ideas rebutted, and immediate questions addressed. The Good News is brought to bear on our contemporary circumstances. Preaching does this concretely and specifically. The message is *received*. For this reason, preaching, rather than being a diminishment of the Word, is an enhancement of the Word. The Holy Spirit is active; Christ is present; his voice is heard. Faithful preaching, then, does not compete with Scripture as the Word of God; rather, it serves Scripture as the Word of God. It ministers the Word—and what a powerful weapon in God’s hands, a weapon that kills us. In so doing, it also saves us.

As Luther and Calvin declare: Scripture must always remain the *fixed rule* for preaching; in this way we discover the *fixed promise* of the presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel.