



Ordained Servant

April 2023

Public Aid?

Ordained Servant Online

A Journal for Church Officers

E-ISSN 1931-7115

CURRENT ISSUE: PUBLIC AID?

April 2023

From the Editor

Questions about the nature of the relationship between the church and the state are perennial. Mediaeval history is riddled with the story of the struggle between these two essential institutions. With the growth of the administrative state in The United States, these questions are of great practical importance for Christians, churches, and pastors. David VanDrunen capably tackles this question regarding the subject of public aid in “Christians, Churches, and Public Aid, Part 1.”

I present Chapter 3 of my book *The Voice of the Good Shepherd*. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the primacy of preaching. Chapter 3 presents a biblical overview. Next month I will look at the primacy of preaching in church history. In a day that diminishes the importance of preaching, Christians and their leaders need to be encouraged to highly value preaching, particularly the regular preaching in the local church.

Alan D. Strange continues his “Commentary on the Book of Discipline of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” with Chapter 4B dealing with the rules of evidence in the trail of judicial case.

An Older Elder presents us with another letter to a younger ruling elder. “Prayer Work” expands on last month’s letter on the importance of a healthy devotional life, by focusing on prayer. These letters would be worth reading aloud at session meetings or shared in print with younger elders.

T. David Gordon’s review article, “Can Biblical Exposition Be Beautiful and Powerful?” looks at an important new book *The Beauty & Power of Biblical Exposition: Preaching the Literary Artistry & Genres of the Bible* by Douglas Sean O’Donnell and Leland Ryken. Artistry and the Bible are often treated as if they have nothing to do with each other. This book proves otherwise.

Christopher Chelpka reviews *Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect* by Jim L. Wilson, in which the importance of illustrating sermons well is wisely explored.

A Treasury of Holy Week Poetry: Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Poems by Leland Ryken is reviewed by Mark Green. Ryken is a master anthologist with an encyclopedic knowledge of devotional poetry and literature. Now he hones in on the literature of holy week. This anthology is a rich Easter feast designed to contemplate and meditate on the wonders of the resurrection.

Our poem this month is “Death Is but a Comma.” It was inspired by John Donne’s Holy Sonnet #10 as interpreted in the movie *Wit* by Professor Vivien Bearing (Emma Thompson), who is an expert in Donne’s poetry, especially the Holy Sonnets. She lacks compassion, being cold and calculating with her students, until she learns the true meaning of Donne’s poem as she faces her own death by ovarian cancer. Now she struggles to find compassion. She taught that the last line of Donne’s sonnet has a comma and not a semicolon after “And Death shall be no more” and “Death, thou shalt die.” Helen Gardner’s edition of the Holy Sonnets returns to the original Westmoreland manuscript of 1610 in

which there is a comma, instead of a semicolon, which was added by later editors. A comma, unlike a semicolon, is but a breathe, and so is death.

Death be not proud . . .
And death shall be no more, [comma]
Death, thou shalt die.

Vivian dies at the end of the film, with her voiceover reciting, “death be not proud.”

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

ServantLiving

Christians, Churches, and Public Aid, Part 1

by David VanDrunen

I write this article at the request of the OPC's Committee on Ministerial Care (CMC). I note this for a couple of reasons. For one thing, this article is meant to address practical issues in the church pertinent to the work of the CMC and the OPC Committee on Diaconal Ministries, as well as to diaconal work at the local and presbyterial levels. For another thing, readers should know that I do not write this out of any interest in advancing a personal agenda or to persuade others of my personal convictions. My goal, instead, per the CMC request, is to help church officers and other Christians think through the multiple and often complicated questions raised by the matters before us. I hope that readers who disagree with some of the conclusions below will still benefit from my attempt to clarify the issues at stake. The CMC did not ask me to take particular positions, nor has it officially endorsed my conclusions.

The main issue is the propriety of Christians accepting public aid and of the church encouraging or discouraging its members (including ministers) from accepting public aid. I use "public aid" generally to refer to government assistance to the needy. Reformed Christians clearly do not share a unanimous view on this issue. There are many relevant exegetical, ecclesiological, ethical, and political factors that might shape a person's view, so it is wise for us not to be prematurely dogmatic, especially since the ramifications of our answers for individuals, families, and churches can be quite serious.

Among the factors relevant to resolving the issue are the obligation of individuals and families to provide for themselves, the responsibility of the church to care for its needy members and especially for its ministers, the concern that the church not be unnecessarily burdened, the proper authority of civil government, and Christians' participation in civil government when they believe it has overstepped its proper authority. Some examples of concrete cases are the following: Is enrolling in Medicaid permissible or advisable for, say, a retired minister and his wife with little savings, for a family of limited means with a child having disabilities requiring speech or physical therapy, or for a family of limited means with a parent/grandparent having serious memory care issues and in need of constant supervision? Or is the church obligated to provide all the necessary financial and personal support in such cases? Is utilizing public school resources permissible or advisable for a family having a child with disabilities, when that family is committed to Christian or home schooling, but the latter have no resources to help the child? Or, is it permissible for a church of modest means to call a pastor with a promise to keep him free of worldly care when that promise depends upon access to a state program that will provide free healthcare to the pastor's children?

Rather than focusing on concrete examples, this article works through a number of foundational issues and offers some general conclusions, with the hope that this will equip Christians and churches to work through specific cases on their own. To approach

our topic in an orderly way, I first address whether there is a Christian view of the proper scope of government responsibilities. Then, I address whether Christians may or should accept public aid, considering this first from the perspective of individuals and families and then from the perspective of churches. Finally, I address the distinctive issues that arise for ministers accepting public aid, in light of the church's special obligations toward them. I generally assume political conditions in the United States and trust that readers elsewhere can make appropriate application to their own contexts.

The Proper Scope of Government Responsibility

The question of what civil government properly does is obviously controversial, but it is an unavoidable aspect of our broader topic. Readers who support a more activist government may find it puzzling that anyone would question the propriety of needy Christians accepting public aid. In contrast, readers who are deeply skeptical of government assistance programs may be instinctively troubled at the idea of Christians doing so. Hence, it would be helpful at the outset to clear the air on the scope of government authority as much as possible. Is there a distinctively Christian view of this subject? Or is this a matter of judgment, about which Christians may hold well-informed opinions, but which they should not impose upon fellow believers?

It may be helpful to distinguish between different types of possible government functions. One way to do so is the distinction among so-called *protectionist*, *perfectionist*, and *service-providing* activities.¹ *Protectionist* functions aim to protect people from being harmed by others and to provide remedies and punishments when such harm occurs. These include administering a judicial system, a police force, and a military. *Perfectionist* functions aim to make citizens better people or at least stave off the worst vices. Examples include prohibiting gambling, prostitution, or narcotics (negatively), and establishing public libraries (positively). *Service-providing* functions, as the name suggests, aim to provide a variety of goods and services to the public. Among many examples are building roads, running municipal sports facilities, and funding or administering health care. It is not always obvious how to categorize a given government program, but this basic distinction at least provides some initial conceptual clarity.

Only a few New Testament texts address what responsibilities civil government has. Romans 13 says that God has “instituted” and “appointed” magistrates (13:1–2) such that they are his “servant[s]” and “ministers” (13:4, 6).² The purpose of this appointment is to “bear the sword” and to carry out “God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” 1 Peter 2:14 puts it more briefly but similarly. God has “sent” civil magistrates “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” 1 Timothy 2:1–2 does not say directly what magistrates should do, but it tells Christians to pray for them, “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life.” This arguably implies that civil government ought to keep the peace.

¹ I have used this threefold distinction to examine similar issues in a recent book, which readers may consult for a more detailed discussion: David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 329–48. Other writers have distinguished government functions differently. For example, George Klosko makes a sevenfold distinction in *Political Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24–40.

² Scripture quotations are from The ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The first two texts and likely the third speak of government responsibilities in *protectionist* terms: government should do what is just by punishing wrongdoers and maintaining social order. It is debatable whether the commission to punish those who do wrong includes perfectionist functions, but I say nothing more about this, since it is beyond the scope of this article. Any mention of service-providing functions, however, is clearly absent from these texts.

Does the Old Testament add anything to these observations? The Noahic covenant commissions human society in general to enforce justice in response to intra-human violence (Gen. 9:6). This does not establish civil government directly, although it does describe protectionist responsibilities that, according to texts such as Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, civil government rightly administers. In the rest of the Old Testament, we observe many Gentile governments conducting protectionist responsibilities, which reflect God's common-grace governance of the world under the Noahic covenant. The Old Testament occasionally condemns Gentile rulers or societies for their sins. These texts usually focus on hubris, excessive brutality (such as slave-trading or ripping open pregnant women in Amos 1), and mistreatment of Israel.³ Some of these sins, especially those involving misconduct in war, could be interpreted as perversions of legitimate protectionist activities. But no text I am aware of condemns these nations or their rulers for failure to provide government services. (Of course, the Mosaic law and much else in the Old Testament speak about the responsibilities of theocratic Israel's kings and judges, but this provides no direct evidence of the rightful competence of contemporary civil governments, which are not in covenant with God through Sinai. But for those who might think it relevant, I note that the Mosaic law did not give service-providing responsibilities to Israel's kings and judges.)

What can we conclude from this biblical evidence? One sound theological conclusion is that civil government is divinely authorized to exercise protectionist functions in pursuit of intra-human justice. This is the prime rightful function of government. Another conclusion is that Scripture says nothing directly about government service-provision. This latter point suggests some further conclusions, but we need to step carefully. Reformed Christians recognize the regulative principle of *worship* but not a regulative principle of *government functions*. That is, while we insist that the church should worship only in ways Scripture commands, we do not insist that civil government may only do things Scripture commands government to do. Thus, it would be hasty to conclude that governments should not provide services because Scripture never says that they should. At this point, we can merely say that providing services is, at best, a secondary function of government.

Are there other general moral or theological considerations that shed light on the legitimacy of government service-provision? One argument in favor of supporting some service-providing functions is that if human societies are going to accomplish certain good and important things, certain other goods are necessary that private parties cannot provide, or at least not without great difficulty. A classic example is roads, which are required for many worthwhile activities that almost everyone wishes to pursue. While private parties can build and maintain roads on a small scale, developing an extensive system of roads is virtually impossible to imagine without government oversight and

³ For extensive discussion of this, see David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), ch. 4.

funding. So it seems reasonable to say that there is a stronger case for government services regarding goods that are less easily provided privately than regarding goods more easily provided privately. But the lines between these things are blurry, and thus we again fall short of being able to affirm or condemn government service-provision absolutely.

What about government assistance for the needy, the service-provision function of special concern to this article? In terms of the previous paragraph, assistance for the needy is something that private parties can and often do provide. Thus (at least in most cases), it cannot be justified on grounds that government must provide it or it cannot happen. There are also many weighty reasons to prefer private to public assistance (again, at least in general): In comparison to public aid, private assistance is better able to personalize help to match distinctive circumstances, to hold recipients accountable, to avoid creating unnecessary dependence, and to use resources efficiently. It also permits people to be genuinely charitable to the needy rather than simply enforcing contributions through taxation. Related to these factors, public aid programs display a tendency to swell over time.⁴ Yet Christian proponents of public aid (even if only a modest safety net) raise other moral and theological considerations in response. Reformed Christians profess that people are deeply sinful and thus often are not very generous with their resources toward the needy. Hence, keeping assistance purely in private hands is likely to leave many genuine needs unaddressed. Some contend that societies do not show adequate concern for the needy if they merely protect them from violence, since their needs run much deeper. Others argue that government is in some sense an extension of the family and thus serves as an important backstop for needy people who lack ordinary family support or that earthly kings rightly imitate God the heavenly king who provides for the poor.⁵

Where does this leave us? I suggest that it is impossible to insist upon a clear *Christian* view of exactly what kinds of services and how much of them civil governments should provide. To be sure, Christians may make strong and well-informed judgments about the propriety and effectiveness of particular sorts of public aid. But since Scripture never commands or prohibits governments to provide services, including aid to the needy, believers should refrain from characterizing their own views as binding Christian doctrine. I myself am quite skeptical about the wisdom and effectiveness of most public aid programs, and I have made a political-theological argument elsewhere that public aid “stands on the outskirts of legitimate state authority.”⁶ But I could not draw that conclusion (even vague as it is) as a matter of dogmatic Christian conviction.

⁴ See e.g. John F. Cogan, *The High Cost of Good Intentions: A History of U.S. Federal Entitlement Programs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Among recent Reformed writers who utilize some of these arguments in defense of modest government assistance to the needy, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 824–25; and Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age, 2000), 174–79.

⁶ VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom*, 341–48.

Christian Acceptance of Public Aid

If the conclusion of the previous section is sound, the church itself should not label public aid either as an evil or a good, as a cause either to support or oppose. The church can merely regard public aid as arguably within the bounds of legitimate government authority. And to the extent public aid is legitimate, it seems to follow that needy Christians may accept it. As a general principle, Christians rightly participate in divinely-instituted political structures (as evident in Rom. 13:1–7) and rightly claim legal benefits of their own political system (as evident in Paul’s appeals to his Roman citizenship in Acts 16 and 22).

But there are potentially complicating factors with respect to public aid. One is that Scripture requires Christians, on an individual and family level, to strive to support themselves through hard work (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:11–12; 2 Thess. 3:6–12). Another is on the ecclesiastical level: the church has a solemn responsibility to care for its own needy members (e.g., Acts 6:1–6; 2 Cor. 8–9). Let us now consider the morality of Christians’ acceptance of public aid with respect to these two potential complications.

Public Aid and Individual/Familial Responsibilities

Christians ought to work hard (e.g., Col. 3:23; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:6–12). The wise person takes care of his property, lives within his means, and saves for the future (e.g., Prov. 10:5; 13:22; 24:27; 27:23–27). One of the goals of such industriousness is to avoid financial dependency (1 Thess. 4:12). These principles apply to individuals but also extend to families: family members should care for each other (1 Tim. 5:4, 8, 16). Paul took such concerns so seriously that he issued the stern judgment that the person unwilling to work should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10). Paul also suggests that unnecessary dependence tends to be morally degrading (1 Tim. 5:13).

Such texts make clear that Christians should aspire not to rely on public aid. They should not only avoid idleness and financial profligacy but also beware of life choices that make such dependence likely. Even to the extent public aid falls within legitimate government jurisdiction, Christians must never view it as a backstop for their own laziness or irresponsibility.

But laziness and irresponsibility are not the only source of financial need. Many people who work hard and make reasonable financial decisions fall into want. “Time and chance happen” to us all (Eccl. 9:11). Accident, injury, famine, pandemic, war, economic crash, and other events beyond our control or foresight bring hard times for Christians. The mere fact that Scripture so often praises care for the poor demonstrates that while those *unwilling* to work should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10), others who lack life’s necessities properly accept help from those better off. God has made us part of communities, and communities exist in part so we can care for each other in our inevitable times of need.

Such considerations alert us to *two* potential temptations. One is that Christians become idle and irresponsible. The other is that Christians become proud and deny their inherent neediness. Christians should not want to be financially dependent on others and rightly make effort to avoid it. But one of the ways God disciplines his children through suffering is by allowing them to fall into want. There is no shame in poverty *per se* or in accepting help from others. (Here I speak in general, without thinking specifically about private or public aid.) God provides for his people, but ordinarily does so through fellow humans. To refuse help in time of genuine need may be a symptom of pride, for only God

is truly independent. Such pride is bad enough if only the proud person himself suffers because of it. But it is considerably worse if it enhances the suffering of others too. I think, for example, of cases in which proud parents turn down help that would offer relief to their needy children.

These initial considerations indicate that Christians' responsibility to work hard and care for themselves, in and of itself, does not constitute a moral barrier to accepting public aid. Insofar as public aid falls within the possible legitimate authority of civil government, the obligation of industriousness and self-care is not itself a sufficient reason for Christians to refuse assistance from state sources. In fact, refusing it could be the result of pride that scorns help God has seen fit to provide.

But an objection may arise at this point. Christians do not have biblical grounds for condemning public aid altogether, but they may have grave moral reservations about their particular society's public-aid system, perhaps because of how bloated it has become, how wasteful it is with tax revenue, or how it promotes or condones anti-Christian values. Christians who may not oppose accepting public aid might theoretically still feel conscientious unease about benefiting from a corrupt system. How should we think about this?

There certainly may come times when a political system becomes so evil that Christians should refuse to participate in it. But no Christian should be hasty in concluding that his own government has sunk to this level. The infamous Nero was likely emperor when Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 were written, yet the apostles still regarded Roman magistrates as legitimate and commanded Christians to honor, obey, and pay taxes to them. Apparently, governments can fall into many terrible wrongs without triggering Christian obligation to disengage from them.

The New Testament provides an interesting concrete example of Christian participation in a sinful government structure: Paul's experience with the Roman judicial system in Acts. On many occasions, judges or other officials acted rather reasonably (16:38–39; 18:14–16; 19:35–41; 22:25–29; 23:16–35; 27:42–43), although at other times Acts describes them allowing or perpetrating injustices (e.g., 12:1–5; 16:19–24; 18:17; 24:26). Despite their shortcomings, Paul treated Roman civil officials with respect and participated in the system by defending himself in court and appealing to his legal rights (e.g., 16:37; 22:25–28; 24–26). His appeals to his rights are especially noteworthy. It is difficult to condone Roman policy toward non-citizens. They *could* be “beaten publicly” when “uncondemned” (16:37) and be “examined by flogging” (22:24).⁷ But that systemic injustice (as people might call it today) did not prevent Paul from taking advantage of the benefits the system gave him. To put it differently, Paul did not turn down benefits on account of objection to evils in the system.

I imagine that most Christians tempted to refuse public aid on account of problems in the public-aid system do not apply the same principle to their participation in protectionist government functions. Many Christians have concerns about the conduct of their local police departments. Some Christians regard their police as too aggressive in trying to combat crime, while others regard them as not aggressive enough. Many believers object to police-officer biases that compromise equal justice. Yet, most Christians do not feel obliged to refuse all benefits they might derive from their police.

⁷ See e.g. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3246–48; and C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 1047.

They are willing to call the police when threatened by imminent danger and to report crimes they witness. They act similarly toward their judicial system. Thoughtful Christians can recognize many injustices in their courts, but that does not prevent them from serving on juries or participating in lawsuits. One way to put it is that most Christians, when dealing with protectionist government functions, act as Paul did.

It is difficult to see why the same principle should not apply with respect to service-providing government functions. If participating in and receiving benefits from the police or civil courts is legitimate for Christians, despite corruptions within them, the reality of corruptions in a public-aid system is not a sufficient reason to prohibit Christians from participating in and receiving benefits from it.

This analogy might raise an objection from some readers. What if someone contemplating a certain public-aid benefit objects to the very idea of the government providing such a benefit? That is, it is one thing to continue utilizing the local police, despite objection to some of its practices, when a person believes that the government should provide police protection. But it is another thing for a person to accept a public-aid benefit if he believes the government should not provide that benefit at all.

This scenario does require further thought. A person finding himself in such a situation presumably has the freedom to choose to forgo the benefit and endure the consequences, at least if this decision does not hinder his ability to fulfill his God-given vocations or impose serious deprivation on others, such as his dependents. But I believe there are good reasons to conclude that this person is not morally obligated to forgo the benefit.

The reasons I have in mind pertain to our place and responsibilities within corporate bodies. Participation in corporate bodies is part of ordinary human experience. Christianity highly values each person as an individual yet also affirms that we are meant to live and work in communities. God made each individual in his image (Gen. 1:26; 9:6) yet also made and redeems us as communities of image-bearers (Gen. 1:27; Rom. 8:29). While we might envision a pre-fallen or eschatological community in which all its members are in perfect agreement about everything, that is decidedly not our experience in any community of this fallen world. Corporate bodies need to make corporate decisions, and their individual members often oppose and regret those decisions. But it is simply not the case that individuals are obligated to refuse participation in the consequences of decisions they oppose and regret. In fact, humility and charity ordinarily require us to acquiesce in corporate decisions and to share in their burdens and benefits, even when we have lost the vote.

To use a personal example, I have been a member of a presbytery and of a seminary faculty for more than two decades. I concur with most of their corporate decisions, but on occasion I do not, and on some of these occasions I disagree strongly. What is the right course in the latter situations? I regard it as my responsibility to submit to these decisions and to live with their consequences. I am free to regret the decisions and to propose future measures to reverse or mitigate them, but I am not free to pick and choose which I participate in. In most cases, I will not have a choice anyway about whether to share in their burdens, since that will be required of me. And it is not hypocritical of me to share also in their benefits, even if I could turn them down. I remember a particular decision of my faculty many years ago from which I strongly dissented. It entailed a burden (extra work) but also provided a benefit (extra compensation). I had to accept the former, and I

did not refuse the latter. As I shared the burden as a member of the body, I also rightfully shared in the benefit.

God has called each one of us to live within another corporate body: political community. As considered above, political communities are divinely ordained and have legitimate authority structures. Few if any of us participate in the corporate decision-making of our political communities as intimately as I do in my presbytery and faculty meetings, although most readers live in political systems that grant rights to vote and to free expression. But in any case, we all must live within political communities that inevitably make many corporate decisions of which we disapprove, in some cases strongly. We cannot simply pick and choose which legislative, executive, and judicial decisions we will participate in. With respect to disagreeable policies about public aid, we seldom have a choice about whether to share in the burdens: our income will be taxed to fund them. And if so, we rightfully also share in their benefits. It is not hypocritical to accept the benefits as a just exchange for the exacted burdens, even if one objected to the exchange in the first place.

Of course, this conclusion requires nuances and exceptions. Christians should never acquiesce in a corporate body's decision that requires doing something inherently sinful. And corporate bodies sometimes make decisions that compromise or nullify that body's entire justification for existence (in the case of my personal examples, a presbytery or faculty decision to embrace a heretical doctrine would qualify). In such cases, active resistance to the decision or even withdrawing from the body may be required. But it seems unlikely that accepting basic public-aid benefits would entail doing something inherently sinful or that any of the policies behind these benefits compromise or nullify the government's entire justification for existence.

I conclude, therefore, that although a Christian is generally free to refuse public-aid benefits he believes should not be available, he is not obligated to refuse them because of such belief. In fact, accepting the benefits is a rightful exchange for the burdens imposed. And if refusing the benefit hinders a person's pursuit of his lawful vocations or deprives one's dependents of genuine goods, that person should seriously reconsider his refusal. He should at least ask whether this is a stubborn insistence on getting his own way that detracts from his responsibilities toward God and neighbor.

Church and pastor will be covered in Part 2 in May.

David VanDrunen is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the Robert B. Strimple professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, California.

Servant Word

The Voice of the Good Shepherd: The Primacy of Preaching: A Biblical Overview, Chapter 3¹

By Gregory Edward Reynolds

If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. . . . Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

—Jeremiah 20:9; 23:28–29

And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

—Acts 2:2–4

Faith comes from hearing . . .

ἄρα ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς,

—The Apostle Paul, Romans 10:17

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, his word is the principal means by which God communicates with his people and the world. At the outset we encounter God speaking all of creation into existence by the word of his power. The entire creation continues to communicate the attributes of God to his image bearers.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. (Ps. 19:1–6)

¹ This chapter is based on Gregory E. Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 314–23.

The entire created cosmos is a continual sermon. The Psalmist continues from verses 7 through 14 to extol the virtues of the written Word. The very existence of Scripture implies the centrality of the Word, written and preached, in the life of the church in all ages. Scripture calls the church to cultivate an ecology of preaching, a stewardship of God's Word.

Three essential, or natural, forms of media interact in the life of the church: the written, the oral, and the visual, as I have discussed in Chapter 2.² The written Word is *foundational* in the life and worship of the church. The Scriptures, the history of their interpretation and their confessional expression, form the constitutional basis of the church's life and worship. The written Word informs both the oral Word and the visual Word. The oral is *central* in the life and worship of the church. Liturgy in the ancient church was designed so that the Word would be memorable. The "more liturgical the church, the more oral patterns will recur in worship, in part because orality and literacy were closely connected in the general preliterate time period of the early church."³ Preaching is the primary means of grace and thus takes center stage as the living voice of the church's Savior and Lord—the great and good Shepherd. The visual dimension signifies and seals the written and preached word through the sacraments. Each of the three is never present alone. Preaching is an exposition and application of the written Word and is visual in the person and gestures of the preacher, but the oral predominates. Preaching is the burden of this chapter.

The striking images of *hammer* and *fire* are used by Jeremiah to indicate the inner pressure which the Word of God exerts on the heart of the true preacher and the awesome effects that Word has in history. The hammer is a symbol of judgment, as Sisera found out at the hands of Jael (Judges 4:21; 5:26). Babylon is described by Jeremiah as a hammer of judgment against unfaithful Judah (Jer. 50:23). In Jeremiah 23 the unfaithful shepherds of Israel are addressed as those who "destroy and scatter the sheep . . ." (v.1). Anticipating the coming of the Branch of Righteousness in the New Covenant, the LORD promises to replace them with shepherds who feed the flock (vs. 4ff). The prophet's lament for the unfaithfulness of the prophets of Jerusalem follows (vs. 9–24). The prophet's word is a hammer of judgment against the prophets of lies. In the New Covenant context Paul changes the metaphor to make the same point:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. (2 Cor. 2:15–17)

The image of *fire* is much more pervasive as a biblical metaphor. It is the LORD who causes the Word to be a fire in Jeremiah's heart and mouth: "Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts: 'Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them'" (Jer. 5:14). This, too, is a symbol of judgment, reflecting the holiness of God. Jeremiah is inwardly

² Gregory Edward Reynolds, "The Word of God Is a Multimedia Triad," in *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 191–203.

³ Dave McClellan with Karen McClellan, *Preaching by Ear: Speaking God's Truth from the Inside Out* (Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2014), 91.

constrained to preach judgment to his own people. It is an onerous task, but it poignantly teaches the covenant breaking people of their need of a Covenant Keeper.

Thus, in the New Covenant, the image of Paul is two-sided. The fire of judgment has been quenched by the covenant keeping Second Adam. The ritual purification of the burning of sacrifices on the altar of the Tabernacle and Temple are fulfilled in the work of the Great High Priest, who bears the sins of God's people. Thus, the final epoch of redemption opens with "tongues of fire" resting prophetically on the disciples at Pentecost, as the church announces God's victory over sin and death to the world—the beginning of a new creation. The preaching of Christ is "a fragrance from life to life" (2 Cor. 2:16) for those who are being saved. Who is adequate to be a herald of such a significant message? Only those called and equipped by God himself, who gives the preacher victory in Christ. God alone can prevent us from becoming "peddlers" of religion (2 Cor. 2:17), seeking our own profit, fame, power, and honor. He does so by teaching us the nature of our calling and our task. He does so by giving us "tongues of fire," tongues aflame with the purifying message of new life. In this and the next chapter we will explore the primacy of our task as preachers. This material is not meant to cover the traditional territory of homiletics but to supplement it in light of our electronic situation.

The Primacy of Preaching in the Biblical Text

The most cursory study of the Bible will lead the impartial reader, who is honest with the text, to acknowledge the primacy of the preached Word in the life and worship of God's people and in the evangelistic project of God's spokesmen.

God's spoken Word was necessary, even in the Paradise state, to provide the meaning of creation and the purpose of man's existence to his people, as they learned to listen to his Word and use their own words as expressions of thinking "God's thoughts after him."⁴ Thus, Adam communed with God and exercised dominion through the prophetic function of naming the animals (Gen. 2:19). God revealed his covenant to Adam by speaking to him the terms of obedience which tested his allegiance and loyalty to the LORD (Gen. 2:16–17). Because man is made in God's image—he *is* God's image—he needs the special revelation of God's Word as a creature, apart from the fact of sin.

The fall of Adam from Paradise involved the Serpent's insinuation of doubt as to the veracity of God's Word. In response to Adam's ensuing disobedience, God gave his Word of promise: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). All subsequent redemptive history is an outworking of this first divine promise.

Since the message of God's Word was relatively short in the Adamic and Patriarchal ages, and because memory is more keen and accurate in an oral culture, the *written* Word of God was not a necessity—as far as we can glean—until the Mosaic covenant was given. The sheer volume of communication that came from Mount Sinai demanded a written document. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

The Bible is *written* because it is a covenant document. It is clear, both by the existence of Scripture as well as by the early importance of writing as a means of preserving and communicating God's Word, that written communication is an essential aspect of man's

⁴ Cornelius Van Til, in many places in his writings.

fulfillment of his cultural calling. In this respect the Bible is similar to other covenant documents in common culture. Real estate ownership requires a written deed. Mortgages are written agreements. So are marriage licenses. *Important* documents are written to prevent the corruption of agreements and contracts in a fallen world. The more important an established relationship is the more critical is its being written. What John wrote at the end of *Revelation* applies to all inspired writings:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18–19; cf. Deut. 4:2; *WCF* I.1)

Meredith G. Kline has observed that “the formation of the Old Testament canon will be traced to its origins in the covenantal mission of Moses in the third quarter of the second millennium BC, providentially the classic age of treaty diplomacy in the ancient Near East.”⁵ Kline has thus properly asserted that “canon is inherent in covenant.”⁶

In his fallen state man especially needs God’s written Word. Without the Word of the covenant of grace he is hopelessly lost in sin and doomed to death. “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).⁷ Paul reminded Timothy that from his youth he had “been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

Our concern here, however, is with *the primacy of preaching*, i.e., the live communication of God’s Word by his chosen spokesman to his people. In arguing for the primacy of preaching, I am not in any way diminishing the importance of the written Word, the other means of grace, or the institution of the visible church. The primacy of preaching is only important and effective in its vital connection with the Bible, prayer, and the sacraments, and in the context of the visible church. Since this primacy is central to the means of grace and the visible church, when it is undermined, the integrity of these will also be seriously compromised.

It should be clearly noted at this point, therefore, that the primacy of preaching is not precisely the same as the primacy of Scripture. The primacy of preaching assumes the primacy of Scripture. As we shall see in the next section, the Reformed confessions are uniform in their assertion that the primary means of grace is not simply the Word of God, but the *preaching* of the Word of God. The message must have a flesh and blood spokesman. In the Old Testament era the need for men to communicate the Word prefigures the coming of the eternal Word incarnate, who is the Prophet of prophets and the Preacher of preachers. In the New Testament era the coming of the incarnate Word, the Prophet greater than Moses (Deut. 18:15–22), the final speech of God (Heb. 1:1–3), ushers in an epoch of worldwide preaching of which we are a continuing part until the consummation of history at the parousia of our Lord.

⁵ Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 43.

⁶ Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 43.

⁷ As we shall see in Chapter 6, τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος is best translated “the folly of preaching,” because the word for preaching in Greek refers to both the message and the form of the communication of the message.

The Old Covenant

Moses is the great preacher of the Old Covenant. Prior to him Enoch had prophesied against the worldly wisdom of his day (Jude 14); and Noah had been a “herald of righteousness,” warning his generation of the coming diluvial judgment of God (2 Pet. 2:5). The Patriarchs had been given the prophetic word which presaged the Mosaic era and the great redemptive act of God in the Exodus (Gen. 15:13). But Moses was given the nucleus of Old Testament revelation. As a prototype of the coming Prophet, he became God’s agent of the record and interpretation of the primary redemptive event of the Old Covenant. The Word which he was given interpreted the significance of the Exodus event for present and future generations. The remainder of the Old Covenant is an amplification and application of the Mosaic deposit; and like the pre-Mosaic revelation, it looks forward to an epoch of ultimate fulfillment surrounding the Prophet greater than Moses, who will in turn preach, act, and send preachers to explain his act to the world.

Despite his hesitation, Moses responded to God’s call to preach to Pharaoh and to the people of Israel. Although Aaron acted as Moses’s press secretary, Moses is still the prophet. Significantly, the LORD did not send a document but insisted on sending a man. Similarly at Sinai, the LORD did not send tablets or the rest of the revelation which Moses wrote, but rather he sent Moses with his message. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, *which I have written for their instruction*’” (Exod. 24:12, emphasis added).

Moses is called first to learn God’s Word from God’s mouth (Exod. 4:12, 15) and then to teach that Word to Israel *in person* (Exod. 18:20). He is also to appoint elders to apply the Word to the lives of God’s people (Exod. 18:21, 22), and Levitical priests to teach the Word to the people (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 24:8). Apart from the advent of the school of the prophets during the monarchy, the Levitical priests were the ordinary God-appointed preachers of the Old Covenant period.

Samuel was the most notable prophet to arise in the post-Mosaic period. The school associated with him (1 Sam. 10) formed the basis for the proliferation of the Mosaic model throughout the periods of the monarchy, exile, and restoration. The initial phase of this development saw prophets who were given special occasional *oral* messages, especially calling kings to account in light of the Mosaic Law (1 Sam. 15:1ff; cf. 1 Chron. 10:13; 2 Sam. 12:25; 2 Chron. 10:15). These were always delivered *in person* by a man chosen and commissioned by the LORD to speak for the LORD.

The prophetic careers of Elijah and Elisha in the ninth century BC ushered in a new era of prophetic preaching and writing. Performing signs and wonders reminiscent of Moses, Elijah and Elisha challenged the corruption of the northern tribes and its kings. They laid the groundwork for an emerging prophetic portrait of a new era ushered in by the true King, the Servant of the Lord, the original Preacher.

Over the next four centuries, the great reversal of the Exodus, the Exile, formed the backdrop for an imposing body of prophetic writings. The promise of return, of a Second Exodus, centering in the person and work of the Messiah, draws the consciousness of Israel into a hopeful future. Again God calls men to communicate his message to his people and the world (Isa. 1:10; 8:20; 55:11; 66:5; Jer. 1:2; Eze. 1:3). The audience is noticeably enlarged to include the nations. Jonah was sent to call pagan Ninevah to repentance (Jonah

2:3), presaging the gracious message of the Great Commission. The foundation for the great era of preaching to the nations was being laid.

The final touch came at the end of the Old Testament prophetic era, which was as well the end of Old Testament written revelation, through the ministries of Ezra and Malachi. In re-establishing Jerusalem temple worship, Ezra fulfills his Levitical office and teaches the returned remnant “the Book of the Law of Moses, that the LORD had commanded Israel” (Neh. 8:1). Then Ezra and thirteen leaders with the Levites “read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). This was notably an *oral event* in the well-established biblical tradition of the Levitical priesthood’s teaching function (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 24:8). This became the central feature of synagogue worship which characterized the Diaspora during the four centuries prior to our Lord’s appearance. The centrality of preaching in the synagogue became the chief characteristic of the New Covenant community and its worship (cf. Luke 4:16ff.; Acts 13:14ff.).⁸

The Old Testament ends with the promise of the future coming of two preachers (messengers, מְלָאכִים; LXX ἄγγελος): one to prepare the way, after the model of Elijah, for the Messenger of the Covenant, and the other the Messenger himself (Mal. 3:1), the Sun of Righteousness who “shall rise with healing in his wings” (Mal. 4:2). It is the promise of the Messenger who will come with a message of salvation for whom the faithful remnant waits. And then the primacy of preaching will make its mark as never before.

Hughes Oliphant Old has written a convincing first volume of his monumental history of the reading and preaching of the Scriptures in the worship of the Christian church.⁹ In that volume he asserts and proves that the entire Old Covenant canon is essentially a preaching document, i.e., it is associated with the live reading and preaching of God’s Word to God’s people.

The New Covenant

It is with the coming of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, that the primacy of preaching comes into its own. Not only does the New Testament record the preaching of Jesus and the apostles, but it may also be said that the documents of the New Testament are themselves “the result of preaching.”¹⁰ In the New Testament there are “more than thirty verbs that denote the activity of preaching.”¹¹ It may truly be said that the New Testament is a book of preaching.¹²

The essence of the ministry of the forerunner, John the Baptizer, is summed up by Matthew: “In those days John the Baptist came *preaching* in the wilderness of Judea” (3:1, emphasis added). Then in a pivotal passage in Luke Jesus gives the gist of his earthly ministry by quoting from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me *to proclaim* good news to the poor. He has sent me to *proclaim* liberty to the captives and recovering of sight

⁸ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 1 - The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 102.

⁹ Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, vol. 1, 19–110.

¹⁰ Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988). S.v. “Preaching, Theology of,” by Klaas Runia.

¹¹ *New Dictionary of Theology*, S.v. “Preaching, Theology of.”

¹² Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, vol. 1, 111–250.

to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to *proclaim* the year of the Lord's favor." (4:18–19, emphases added)

There in his hometown synagogue Jesus proclaimed himself to be the Messiah (the Anointed One of Isaiah 61, the Servant of the LORD). The chief means by which he brings healing and restoration to Israel is through *preaching*. Later in that same chapter he said to his disciples, "I must *preach* the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43, emphasis added).

Jesus is *the* Prophet-Preacher, who not only *is* the message of the entire Bible, but who is also the eternal Second Person of the Trinity, the Word made flesh (John 1:1, ὁ λόγος). He is the Author of the Old Testament Scriptures and the One who spoke through all the writers of Scripture. Peter tells us that the Spirit of Christ spoke through the prophets of the salvation embodied in his own suffering and glory as the Messiah (1 Pet. 1:7–12). He preached through Noah (1 Pet. 3:18–20) and all who preached in the Old Covenant. Now he comes not only as the Preacher but also as the Redeemer whose work on the cross and subsequent resurrection on the third day form the core of the message he gave his disciples to spread among the nations. Even before the cross they are commissioned to preach: "And *proclaim* as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 10:7, emphasis added). After the accomplishment of redemption, the Great Commission is issued: "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be *proclaimed* in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47, emphasis added). The very denouement of history depends on the completion of the task of *proclaiming* the gospel to the nations. At the conclusion of the Olivet discourse, in which Jesus predicts the completion of redemptive history, he declares, "the gospel must first be *proclaimed* to all nations" (Mark 13:10, emphasis added). Preaching will usher in the end of history. This is all oral proclamation, as Walter Ong notes:

Christianity has its own especially deep oral roots. In the Christian dispensation, the central activity for spreading the faith is the *kerygma*, the preaching of Jesus the Christ by his followers. The written text of the New Testament itself is ordered to this oral activity. The oral textuality here is related to the fact that in the New Testament the Son of God incarnate, Jesus Christ is himself God's Word. And in thinking of the Son as the divine Word, the Christian is conceiving of the divine Word by analogy with the human spoken word.¹³

An essential feature of Jesus's preparation of the disciples for the cross in the Upper Room is his prophecy of the work of his Spirit in completing the revelation of the gospel.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. . . . But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. . . . And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. . . . When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:13)

¹³ Walter Ong, Review: *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (William A. Graham) in *America* (Mar. 4, 1989): 204.

Before this final deposit of covenantal revelation was inscripturated, it was a *preached* message. It is inscripturated so that it may, in turn, be preached to each new generation. Preaching is primary because God has made orality primary to all human communication.

“The apostles, commissioned by the risen Lord, preached this message as the very Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13).”¹⁴ When Paul refers to “the Word of God,” “the Word of the Lord,” or simply “the Word” in his letters, he is most often referring to the *preached* Word. This Word was so effective because it was the living message of God himself. “In the apostolic message (the emphasis being always on *the content*) the voice of the living God is being heard.”¹⁵

The entire Book of Acts is the story of preaching as the fundamental medium for building and edifying the church. Acts is *the* book of preaching. At Pentecost the foundational miracle of the Spirit is not speaking in tongues but the salvation of 3,000 people through the *preaching*, the *proclamation* of the gospel. Significantly, what was spoken miraculously in languages unknown to the speakers was the gospel, “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). The linguistic dispersion of the Tower of Babel was reversed. It was preaching that caused persecution: the leaders of the temple were “greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:2). Preaching was the chief activity of the Apostles: “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42). So important was preaching that no activity, however worthy, was to interfere with it. “And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2). Persecution, rather than silencing the preaching, fostered it: “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). The central activity in Paul’s ministry, from the very beginning of his Christian life, was preaching: “And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20). At the end of Acts we find him imprisoned but “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). The coming Prophet had come and would be present to the end of the age through the preaching of his Word to all the nations.

As we noted earlier, the structure of synagogue worship placed the reading and preaching of the Scriptures at the center of the service. Thus, as we saw in Luke 4, visiting preachers were often asked to expound the Scriptures. Paul, as well as Jesus, took full advantage of this fact and in so doing built the New Covenant church on the ruins of the old. Paul’s preaching, in Pisidian Antioch on the first missionary journey, reveals the pattern of his method and message (Acts 13:13ff.). He exemplified the primacy of preaching and used it as the primary means of addressing the synagogue with the message of the accomplishment of redemption in Jesus the Christ.

Paul gives us a model for adapting the message to the audience without changing the message itself. In the synagogue he assumed the authority of special revelation in the Scripture and sought to prove from it that Jesus was the Christ. In the pagan forum (Acts 17) he assumed the authority of general revelation and sought to prove that God calls all his creatures to repentance from sin and to faith in God. From the beginning of his ministry to the end, Paul is the preacher, *par excellence*.

¹⁴ Ong, Review: *Beyond the Written Word*, 204.

¹⁵ Ong, Review: *Beyond the Written Word*, 204.

The Epistles lay the groundwork for the continuing work of the church after the Apostolic Age, as it is built on the foundation of the inscripturated Word. Central to the continuing ministry of the church is the task of preaching. This is God's means of saving Jew and Gentile:

But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14–17)¹⁶

For Paul, the call to be a minister of the New Covenant is primarily a call to preach. "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16). This call *per se* is not essentially apostolic. The call to preach has a validity reaching far beyond the foundation-laying epoch of the twelve. Thus, we are not surprised at Paul's injunctions to Timothy and Titus near the end of his life: "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (1 Tim. 4:6, 11, 13; 2 Tim. 2:14, 4:1–2; Titus 2:1, 15). Even with the inscripturated Word (canon) complete, God still sends men with his message. It is incumbent upon that first ordinary post-apostolic generation of preachers to pass on that calling and office to each successive generation. The apostolic deposit is to be studied, believed, and passed on to faithful men who preach it: "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2; cf. 2 Tim. 2:15, 3:14–17). And:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Tim. 4:13–16)

All that Paul enjoins upon Timothy has to do with the *public* ministry of the Word.

In light of the overwhelming biblical evidence for the primacy of preaching it is no wonder that the subsequent history of the church reflects that emphasis.

Gregory E. Reynolds is pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

¹⁶ "And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" is better translated without the "of" from "him whom they have never heard" as we shall see.

Servant Work

Prayer Work

Letters to a Younger Ruling Elder, No. 4

By an Older Elder

Dear James,

It warmed the heart of an old man, especially on a frigid February morning, to see your letter in the mail. I was wondering how you were doing. What wonderful news that Jean is expecting again! Your family is growing. With that, so will your responsibilities. But I would remind you to meditate much upon the promise of James 4:6, that “he gives more grace.” Some translate it “greater grace.” Either way, you will find that grace grows in proportion to your need. Another very busy servant of the Lord found his grace to be more than sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9), and you will too.

You asked if I could write a little more about the prayer life of the ruling elder. My answer is: *not easily*. It is a painful subject because I sense a very deep and personal deficiency here. I wish I had the perspective on the prayer life of a ruling elder back when I began that I have now. If our regrets were permitted in heaven, no doubt prayer-regrets would haunt me there. But O the depth of the sufficiency of Christ’s death that has paid to the last farthing for every failure and every sin. Hell will be filled with regrets; but not one shall make it past the pearly gates of glory.

I say without hesitation that effective, fervent prayer is the most important and chief work of the ruling elder. Prayer is the duty of every Christian. It is doubly the duty of the elder. Your closet, *wherever that place of quiet solitude is that you have carved out for prayer*, is where the battle is lost or won. It is said of Jacob, “in his manhood, he strove with God (Hos. 12:4).” The ruling elder must be a prayer-man. Do you need wisdom? You will get it only by prayer. Do you need strength? Prayer is the pipeline to heavenly power. Whatever it is you stand in need of, may you say with Hannah, “for this child I prayed (1 Sam. 1:27).”

Prayer, you will find, ties all the duties of your work as an elder together. Do you need to get to know your sheep? One great way is to be praying for them and asking them how best you can pray for them. Do you see some of the wrinkles, spots, and blemishes of the flock that mark all God’s sheep in his pastures below? Prayer is the first weapon to begin to deal with them. Do they need to be nourished by the word of God, especially the preached word? Pray for your pastor and put his preaching ministry regularly before the throne of grace. And prayer blesses your soul, too. Prayer makes the heart larger, and a ruling elder desperately needs a great heart.

I mentioned already the need for wisdom, but let me emphasize that. Individually, and as a session, you will need an abundant supply of godly thinking. We must ask for this in prayer (James 1:5). Solomon was at his best when he asked for an understanding heart (1 Kings 3:9). Beware of making plans and decisions without consulting the Lord.

Let me bring these thoughts to a close with some practical advice. You need a plan. There is enough to be praying about, even in a small church, that you need a strategy and a system to do this work well. A disorganized prayer-life is as bad as a disorganized army. When it comes to prayer, elders often have great thoughts, but bad habits. How will you adequately and effectively pray for all the needs of every saint, let alone your own needs and those of others you know? I would not prescribe where God has not. You will need to find a plan that works for you. However, the Scriptures do teach that “without counsel, plans fail (Prov. 15:22).” So my counsel, for your consideration, is to divide up the members of your church like a calendar, with some allotted to each day. By this method you will pray particularly for each member at least monthly.

James, let me remind you as I close, that our Savior Jesus Christ was and is a praying man. Jesus prayed for his sheep, and he still intercedes for them today (Heb. 7:25). There is nothing in which your likeness to Christ is more needed than in prayer-likeness. Well said that godly evangelist George Whitefield, “O prayer! Prayer! It brings and keeps God and man together. It raises man up to God and brings God down to man. If you would therefore, O believer, keep up your walk with God, pray. Pray without ceasing.”¹

Your soul’s well-wisher,

An older elder

¹ Randall J. Pederson, ed., *Daily Readings: George Whitefield* February 11 (Ross-shire, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2010).

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Dear James,

It warmed the heart of an old man, especially on a frigid February morning, to see your letter in the mail. I was wondering how you were doing. What wonderful news that Jean is expecting again! Your family is growing. With that, so will your responsibilities. But I would remind you to meditate much upon the promise of James 4:6, that “he gives more grace.” Some translate it “greater grace.” Either way, you will find that grace grows in proportion to your need. Another very busy servant of the Lord found his grace to be more than sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9), and you will too.

You asked if I could write a little more about the prayer life of the ruling elder. My answer is: *not easily*. It is a painful subject because I sense a very deep and personal deficiency here. I wish I had the perspective on the prayer life of a ruling elder back when I began that I have now. If our regrets were permitted in heaven, no doubt prayer-regrets would haunt me there. But O the depth of the sufficiency of Christ’s death that has paid to the last farthing for every failure and every sin. Hell will be filled with regrets; but not one shall make it past the pearly gates of glory.

I say without hesitation that effective, fervent prayer is the most important and chief work of the ruling elder. Prayer is the duty of every Christian. It is doubly the duty of the elder. Your closet, *wherever that place of quiet solitude is that you have carved out for prayer*, is where the battle is lost or won. It is said of Jacob, “in his manhood, he strove with God (Hos. 12:4).” The ruling elder must be a prayer-man. Do you need wisdom? You will get it only by prayer. Do you need strength? Prayer is the pipeline to heavenly power. Whatever it is you stand in need of, may you say with Hannah, “for this child I prayed (1 Sam. 1:27).”

Prayer, you will find, ties all the duties of your work as an elder together. Do you need to get to know your sheep? One great way is to be praying for them and asking them how best you can pray for them. Do you see some of the wrinkles, spots, and blemishes of the flock that mark all God’s sheep in his pastures below? Prayer is the first weapon to begin to deal with them. Do they need to be nourished by the word of God, especially the preached word? Pray for your pastor and put his preaching ministry regularly before the throne of grace. And prayer blesses your soul, too. Prayer makes the heart larger, and a ruling elder desperately needs a great heart.

I mentioned already the need for wisdom, but let me emphasize that. Individually, and as a session, you will need an abundant supply of godly thinking. We must ask for this in prayer (James 1:5). Solomon was at his best when he asked for an understanding heart (1 Kings 3:9). Beware of making plans and decisions without consulting the Lord.

Let me bring these thoughts to a close with some practical advice. You need a plan. There is enough to be praying about, even in a small church, that you need a strategy and a system to do this work well. A disorganized prayer-life is as bad as a disorganized army. When it comes to prayer, elders often have great thoughts, but bad habits. How will you adequately and effectively pray for all the needs of every saint, let alone your own needs and those of others you know? I would not prescribe where God has not. You will need to find a plan that works for you. However, the Scriptures do teach that “without counsel, plans fail (Prov. 15:22).” So my counsel, for your consideration, is to divide up the members of your church like a calendar, with some allotted to each day. By this method you will pray particularly for each member at least monthly.

James, let me remind you as I close, that our Savior Jesus Christ was and is a praying man. Jesus prayed for his sheep, and he still intercedes for them today (Heb. 7:25). There is nothing in which your likeness to Christ is more needed than in prayer-likeness. Well said that godly evangelist George Whitefield, “O prayer! Prayer! It brings and keeps God and man together. It raises man up to God and brings God down to man. If you would therefore, O believer, keep up your walk with God, pray. Pray without ceasing.”¹

Your soul’s well-wisher,

An older elder

¹ Randall J. Pederson, ed., *Daily Readings: George Whitefield* February 11 (Ross-shire, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2010).

ServantReading

Can Biblical Exposition Be Beautiful and Powerful?

A Review Article

by T. David Gordon

The Beauty & Power of Biblical Exposition: Preaching the Literary Artistry & Genres of the Bible, by Douglas Sean O'Donnell and Leland Ryken. Crossway, 2022, 304 pages, \$23.99, paper.

Drs. O'Donnell and Ryken are particularly qualified to write a book such as this. Ryken not only taught English literature at Wheaton for many years, but he also has written a number of books about the Bible that focus on its literary qualities and has served as an advisor to the ESV translation committee. O'Donnell has two decades of pastoral experience and has written an interesting volume entitled *God's Lyrics: Rediscovering Worship through Old Testament Songs* (for which—full disclosure—I wrote the Foreword) about Old Testament songs outside of the Psalter, indicating his interest in matters of composition and style. O'Donnell primarily writes about the Bible, having written books on Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, Matthew, and the Johannine letters. Each of the co-authors has demonstrated both competence and interest in “the literary artistry and genres of the Bible.” O'Donnell has assumed the primary duty of writing the book, with frequent citations of Ryken's words as well. And those citations are, indeed, frequent: By my count (and I may have overlooked one or two), Ryken has written at least eleven books that pertain to the literary artistry and genres in the Bible.¹ To my knowledge, no author has devoted as much to the topic of the literary traits of Holy Scripture as Ryken. The shared commitment of the two authors to expository preaching is well-evidenced by the fact that they dedicated the book to R. Kent Hughes, widely recognized as one of the ablest expositors of our day.

The title of the book may suggest to the casual reader that this is another homiletics textbook, to compete with others in the field; and, indeed, the book demonstrates a

¹ Leland Ryken has written at least two books about Bible translations: *Choosing a Bible: Understanding Bible Translation Differences*; and *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation*. He has written four books that pertain to literary dimensions of the Bible: *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible*; *How to Read the Bible as Literature*; *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible*; and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. He has also written five books in the Reading the Bible as Literature Series: *Symbols and Reality: A Guided Study of Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Visionary Literature*; *Short Sentences Long Remembered: A Guided Study of Proverbs and Other Wisdom Literature*; *Sweeter Than Honey, Richer Than Gold: A Guided Study of Biblical Poetry*; *Jesus the Hero: A Guided Literary Study of the Gospels*; and *Letters of Grace and Beauty: A Guided Literary Study of New Testament Epistles*.

thorough acquaintance with the literature on homiletics written by authors both living and deceased. The subtitle, however, discloses what sets this volume apart from the more-typical homiletical textbooks, because the special concern of the volume is to include self-conscious reflection on the Bible's literary artistry and genres as an aspect of expository preaching. The subtitles of the six chapters disclose this interest: *Preaching Narrative, Preaching Parables, Preaching Epistles, Preaching Poetry, Preaching Proverbs, And Preaching Visionary Writings*. Each of the six chapters has two parts: how to *read* each specific genre in the Bible, and how to *preach* that genre. Their stated goals for the book are two: that "attentiveness to the literary dimensions of the Bible should be foregrounded in expository sermons," (23) and that readers would produce "sermons that are fresh, relevant, interesting, and accurate-to-the-authorial-intention," (23) including, of course, the biblical authors' intention to employ particular literary genres.

The interesting (and, to my knowledge, novel) thesis throughout the book is that the preacher should, when and where possible, reflect the biblical genre by the manner and structure of the sermon itself. Such a thesis needs to be discussed for a considerable time before the churches and/or their individual ministers embrace the thesis; but, at a minimum, the thesis demonstrates a very high regard for the Bible's own artistry and genres. At a minimum, it could not be wrong *per se* to employ in sermons, genres that exist in the Bible itself; however, for the thesis to be widely accepted, it might be proper to acknowledge that orality, as a medium, differs from writing, as a medium, a distinction that was very important in the twentieth century to those who proposed what became known as the Oral Formulaic Hypothesis, proposed by Milman Parry (1902–35),² and developed by Parry's student and protégé Albert Lord (1912–91),³ Eric A. Havelock (1903–88),⁴ and Walter Ong (1912–2003), who interacted substantively with Parry, Lord, and Havelock in his own *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.⁵ Those persuaded by the theory might suggest that literary genres have their own distinctive properties and that, therefore, they may not always "translate" well into an oral production such as a sermon; a literary genre, such as epistle, may not be a good model for an oral performance, such as a sermon. Repetition, for example, a common virtue in an oral performance (whether Parry's Croat traditional performers or preachers today), is tedious, if not objectionable, in a written product. And, unfortunately, even the records of oral performances in the Bible (such as prophetic judgment oracles or the public speaking of Jesus or his apostles) are themselves *written* records of *oral* performances; they are not recordings of those performances themselves. Proof of this is that the records of apostolic preaching in Acts are very brief and can ordinarily be read aloud in less than a minute (Peter, at Pentecost, might need two minutes). Yet we know Paul preached longer than this, so much so that the hapless Eutychus, wearied by Paul's sermon going until midnight, "fell down from the third story and was taken up dead" (Acts 20:9). The thesis, therefore, of O'Donnell and Ryken might need some fine tuning, but it need not be

² Because Parry died of a gunshot wound at such a young age, his influence was primarily through the lectures he gave at Harvard as an adjunct and through his protégé, Albert Lord, who travelled with Parry in his travels to observe the oral bards in Croatia.

³ Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁴ Especially Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) and *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁵ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982).

abandoned entirely, especially without some effort being made to attempt the thesis in practice.

Indeed, O'Donnell has done this very experiment in his own preaching, and he provides many examples from his own pulpit ministry of efforts to model the manner of his sermons by the genre of the biblical texts themselves; readers who are willing to entertain the thesis will find such examples to be very helpful, as examples of what the theory looks like in practice. I would even predict that many, who might initially be skeptical that the genres of the Bible should shape, in some ways, the production of the sermon, will find some of their skepticism waning as they reflect on the examples provided.

While some readers may have reservations about *preaching* each genre in a manner that reflects that genre, no readers of *Ordained Servant* will question how this volume contributes to its other stated thesis about how to *read* each specific genre in the Bible. This part of each chapter is rich with references to other books on biblical interpretation and rich in examples from O'Donnell's preaching and from the preaching of others. Many readers will feel as I did, as though they have returned to seminary for a refresher course in biblical interpretation and Bible survey, with a special emphasis on preaching. This aspect of the book succeeds extremely well. I expect many homiletics will require this as a textbook in their courses on preaching, either as the principal text or as an augment to the principal text.

There are two ways readers might elect to read this book. First, and most obviously, one might read it in its entirety, as a general introduction (or refresher) to the importance of recognizing the Bible's art and genres as an aspect of biblical exposition. Second, one might elect to read the introduction and then reserve reading the subsequent chapters before preaching sermon series from each of the six major literary genres, so that the particular insights of each of those six chapters might be fresh before planning out the sermon series. Still others will do both, reading the book in its entirety, then referring back to it as they prepare sermon series from each of the six major genres in Scripture.

One of the most refreshing dimensions of this volume is that it is entirely free of fad-chasing. Its ideas and recommendations flow out of careful study of, and respect for, the Bible itself and could have been recommended to any generation in the post-apostolic church, something that cannot be said about every book on preaching, many of which are outdated within a decade or so of their appearance. Ironically, the acute attentiveness to the literary qualities and genres within the Bible, which might be regarded as a timeless reality, may make this volume especially timely for a generation that is increasingly illiterate. Indeed, nonpreachers would read the book with considerable benefit, because they would become much better Bible *readers* (one of the two stated goals of the book), even if they never preach a single sermon.

We, as readers, are always grateful when we have read a book that rewards our effort. But a special category of book also exists, the kind that, when we finish reading it, we look forward to rereading it in the not-too-distant future, out of our sense that we could not glean all of its benefits from a single reading. I regard *The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition* as such a book, and I believe I will discover even more beauty and more power the next time I read it.

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ServantReading

Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect, by Jim L. Wilson

by Christopher Chelpka

Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect, by Jim L. Wilson. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022, xv +184 pages, \$19.99, paper.

Sermon illustrations are important because they help explain and apply the truth, assuming they are done well. But how can a preacher improve this aspect of his preaching? One tool that has recently helped me is Jim L. Wilson's book *Illustrating Well: Preaching Sermons that Connect*. I would like to recommend it for several reasons.

First, Wilson shares the homiletical consensus on how to illustrate well. Having studied most of the books he cites, and a few he does not, I can attest that he reliably synthesizes what has been learned over the years. By pulling together the best advice from the majority, he saves the reader time. Moreover, Wilson shares thoughtful dissenting opinions, which provide nuance and guardrails for the good advice of the majority.

Second, Wilson categorizes sermon illustrations into eight types. He shares examples, necessary qualities, and best practices for each. For instance, one type is personal illustrations. Good personal illustrations should be authentic, ethical, proportionate, and suitable. Illustrations drawn from contemporary culture should be familiar to the listeners. Fictional illustrations are another type. These should rarely be used and never represented as true; turning them into a hypothetical illustration, a third type, is a good practice. One has to dig into the text to really benefit from the advice in this section; it is worth doing so. This section also helped me recognize which types I am over or under using.

Third, Wilson provides a tool for evaluating sermon illustrations no matter which type they are. Wilson argues that all worthy illustrations have four qualities. They must be familiar, clear, interesting, and appropriate. He explains each of these and provides a rubric for quick evaluation where each quality is given a green, yellow, or red light. These four qualities of a good illustration may seem obvious, but it is worth reading the section because the grading for each may not be what is expected. For example, one might assume that a green light on "interesting" means the illustration is very interesting. But it does not, because "it's not enough for an illustration to be interesting; it must create interest in the text." Also, if something is so interesting that it upstages the main point, it actually gets a red light, which means one must avoid or modify the illustration. In evaluating each quality, Wilson's rubric is insightful without being complicated and hard to use. In fact, with just a little bit of practice, I improved my evaluation skills quite a bit.

There are several other helpful tips in this book, like how illustrations function differently in deductive and inductive sermons, or how one should “secure permission to use illustrations that involve other people.” In one particularly insightful section, he uses the metaphors of bridges, windows, lights, and pictures to show the different things sermon illustrations are capable of doing in a sermon. In another place, he discusses secondary functions of illustrations. I think most preachers will find, as I did, that they have an overly narrow conception of what sermon illustrations are for.

Illustrating Well convinced me to use a wider range of sermon illustrations, showed me why, and told me how. Other preachers wanting to improve in this area of their preaching would benefit in similar ways.

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Poetry of Redemption: An Illustrated Treasury of Good Friday and Easter Poems, *by Leland Ryken*

by Mark A. Green

Poetry of Redemption: An Illustrated Treasury of Good Friday and Easter Poems, by Leland Ryken. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2023. \$17.99, paper.

Ryken's latest work, *Poetry of Redemption*, selects Psalms, hymns, and spiritual poems (Eph. 5.19) that invite the reader on a devotional journey. Beginning on Palm Sunday, the seven sections walk through the days of this extraordinary week, culminating in the resurrection of our Lord. Although the book's title mentions Easter, the selections can be used for any time frame. Meditating on the indicative works of Christ in this devotional collection of verse encourages us to apply the imperatives of Christ's glorious gospel every day of the year.

Sound theology is conveyed through the hymns Ryken has chosen. I recall early in my Christian life, gathering with fellow undergraduates in meetings organized by the Navigators at Michigan State University. Such gatherings always began with the exuberant singing of classic hymns, many of which are in this collection. Besides learning to sing together, we also learned theology, though none of us realized it at the time. All of us profited from singing the truth about Christ's work, as in this selection by Bernard of Clairvaux's *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*:

What language shall I borrow
To thank thee, dearest Friend,
For this thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever;
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to thee.

Readers benefit from Dr. Ryken's almost fifty years of studying and teaching literature at Wheaton College. With skill and craft, he orders the selections clearly and elegantly, providing his own insights. The helpful index at the beginning of the book offers a roadmap to help get the lay of the land before beginning the journey. Ryken provides some of the very best devotional poetry written. He includes two of the most famous of John Donne's works and four of George Herbert's finest, including "Love":

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Many readers will find Ryken's Holy Week architecture helpful as they prepare for Easter or anytime a reader longs to engage in a time of contemplation of the work of our Lord. This devotional approach is a strength of the volume.

While recognizing the usefulness of this volume, including the brilliant pieces of art selected to accompany the devotional verse, I have one caution.

The selection "Shall Grace Not Find Means?" from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) seems a curious choice for this volume. Milton wrote poetry as well as theology (e.g., *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1825), and it is well accepted that his most famous work, *Paradise Lost*, reflects his Arianism and supralapsarianism throughout. Although Dr. Ryken comments on this selection, referring to "intra-trinitarian dialogue," my interpretation of this Miltonian passage reflects a subordinated, unequal role for Jesus as the Son. *Paradise Lost* is deservedly one of the most revered poems in the English poetry canon, and I can understand wanting to include a passage by Milton. However, it seems theologically confusing in a book dedicated to the Easter-week work of the second person of our Trinitarian God.

Dr. Ryken has, once again, used his many talents and skills to give us another volume focused on helping us appreciate the beauty of poetic writing. Readers will find this both fruitful and delightful in a devotional format focused on the Holy Week in the Christian calendar.

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ServantPoetry

G. E. Reynolds (1949–)

Death Is but a Comma

Interpreting John Donne's Holy Sonnet X

Death is but a comma in the sentence
Of life, which is not a prison, O no!
Every hardship has its recompense,
And Death by far the greatest seed to sow.

Yes, the comma is a hook, and has
A sting so sharp it seems at first to win.
But in his pride Death minimized the pass
The Son of God did make to throttle sin.

From dust to dust, appearances deceive,
And make us think that this is all there is.
Earth swallows all its victims, us to bereave.
But one Man raised from Death do not dismiss.

Death, you are but a sleep from which I wake,
My faith, my life, my soul, you cannot take!