

The Spirit-Animated Event of Preaching

Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery

Preaching is risky business. It is risky because, frankly, its divine aims are impossible to achieve, humanly speaking. There is no set of rules any of us can follow, no book we can read (this one included), that guarantees that when you step up to a pulpit and open your mouth, the words that reach listeners will be a word that is God's own. We can speak with consummate rhetorical skill of things theological, but only God's animating Spirit makes our preaching a life-transforming, world-changing message.

As the chapters of this book hope to show, the skill sets that preaching requires can be learned because preaching is both theological *and* rhetorical. Yet we offer this technical toolkit, recognizing that skill alone can't account for what happens in preaching. The human act of preaching participates in a divine act

of new creation that we preachers cannot fully comprehend, let alone predict, produce, or control. Ordinary human voices speaking ordinary human words are taken up into God's project of interrupting humanity's mad dash toward self-destruction. Christian preaching is both news of God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ and the means by which it has an impact upon us, transferring us, as one prayer puts it, "out of darkness into light, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life."¹

**The Church and Its Preaching:
Open-Ended Events in the Power of the Spirit**

There are many ways to begin a book about preaching. We choose to begin by reflecting on preaching from both *theological* and *rhetorical* points of view. Theologically, we see preaching as anchored in an *event*—one that was set in motion two thousand years ago and still continues today: the God-instigated, yet utterly human "event" known as the church of Jesus Christ in the world. This starting point captures for us something essential: both the church and its preaching are best understood as *Spirit-animated, dynamic events* rather than static concepts. From their inception to the present, the church and its preaching have been *more verb than noun*.

According to the New Testament, the outpouring of God's Spirit on the first Pentecost festival after Jesus' resurrection brought the church and its most characteristic public practice, the preaching of the good news of Jesus, into being. In the Gospel of John, Jesus commissions his followers as a community of living witness in word and action to the ways of God (14:15-17; 15:16, 26). To that end, says Jesus, God will send the Holy Spirit upon them (14:26, 15:26). In a post-resurrection account unique to John, Jesus tells his disciples

1. *Book of Common Prayer*, The Episcopal Church, U.S.A. (New York: Church, 1978).

not to be afraid and breathes upon them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22).

More familiar to many of us is Luke’s account. Luke ends the Gospel that bears his name with Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit (“I am sending you what my Father promised,” 24:49a). Jesus tells his followers to wait in Jerusalem “until you are clothed with power from on high” (24:49b). This fusion of divine and human agency will be crucial for the mission ahead: that “repentance and forgiveness . . . be proclaimed . . . to all nations” in the name of Jesus (24:47).

The title of Luke’s second volume, the “Acts” of the Apostles, indicates that to speak of the church is to speak of action—specifically, acts of “co-agency,” human and divine, rhetorical and theological. The Acts of the Apostles explicitly connects the agency of the Spirit with the effective witness of the church three times in its first eight verses (1:2, 5, 8). After Jesus’ ascension (1:9–10), his followers do as instructed: they stay together in Jerusalem, actively waiting and praying for the promised divine Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:14).

According to Acts 2, the church is born *not as an institution but as a preaching event*. The Spirit bursts onto the scene in the city of Jerusalem fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, laying claim to the human bodies and tongues of Jesus’ followers with the explosive force of a cyclone. Preachers with tongues set on fire by the Spirit pour into the highways and byways of Jerusalem, their tumultuous, multilingual resurrection proclamation filling the city with new-creation sound. The remaining twenty-six chapters of Acts record the beginnings of the unstoppable, Spirit-driven event of the expanding church—an event that continues even now.

The community that witnesses to God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ is first and foremost a Spirit-driven *doing*, both human and divine: a *proclaiming* and a *testifying* that leaves no heart, no place, no power structure within its reach untouched by its saving

disruption. Preaching is a non-optional component of the action-event that is Christ's church. In death-defying Word and life-giving deed, God *does* new creation amid the structure of the old order through Spirit-driven communities speaking and acting in Jesus' name. The lowly are raised up and the powerful humbled. Captives to abusive power are set free. Hungers—for hope, for bread, for justice—are satisfied in the wake of what the Spirit is doing to make all things new.

Christian preachers who have stepped to the pulpit in days of spiritual famine as well as feast, out of utter human weariness rather than strength, can testify that the life- and world-saving effects of the word event cannot be accounted for in terms of human wordcraft and performance alone, though there are rhetorical dimensions to it. This saving event of Christian proclamation depends upon the dynamism of the Spirit for both preacher and hearers. The human tongue speaks (rhetoric) and the life-giving promise of God sounds (theology). The church and its preaching remain *more verb than noun*, God's power turned loose in the world to disrupt the ways of death and to bring forth life.

A Stereoscopic Theology of Preaching as Spirit-Driven Event

Different traditions within Christianity provide us with distinctive theological descriptions of the rhetorical activity we call Christian preaching. Here, we draw on insights from each of our traditions, Reformed and Baptist-Pentecostal respectively, to build a more stereoscopic view of preaching than any single theological point of view can provide. Doing so signals our commitment to dialogue among Christian traditions as an essential feature of preparing for church leadership in the twenty-first century.² Readers of this book

2. The term "free church" refers to Christian traditions that have always existed independently of the institutions of government. These include Baptist and Anabaptist traditions (the latter

will have their own insights to contribute based on their own traditions and experiences, reminding us that preaching is not just one homogeneous thing. Preaching is many things, both theologically and rhetorically, but we, the authors, have our own inclinations, which will become clearer in what follows.

Reformed Theological Insights:
Three Dynamic Forms of the Word of God

The Reformed tradition has understood preaching as one of three basic “forms” of the divine word expressing itself amid the flux of human experience. In Reformed thought, the three forms of the word of God are interrelated and ordered as follows: first, the living (risen) person Jesus Christ; second, the word that comes through our engagement with the written witness to the living word, which is Scripture; and third, the divine word that addresses us in preaching that takes its point of departure in the interpretation of a biblical passage (or “text,” as we say).

This threefold theological map of the ways of God’s living word in the world has been helpful in many ways, holding together the coherence of the word as expressed in the incarnation, through Scripture, and through preaching. On the other hand, the language of “form” tends to imply a static structure and fails to capture the living eventfulness of God’s word in the world. In keeping with our view that, like the church, the word of God occurs more as an *event* that happens to us than a *thing* we can point to (more *verb* than noun), we suggest thinking in terms of a threefold *dynamic* of the word of God that *does* something to us.

including, for example, Moravians and Mennonites, to name just two), as well as Methodist, Christian Missionary Alliance, Church of God, and Pentecostal in addition to independently organized evangelical congregations and communities that identify with the charismatic renewal movement around the world.

The primary dynamic manifestation of the word of God in the world is God's Word incarnate in Jesus Christ. The amazing (and unsettling) claim of Christian faith is that the God we worship is not distant, passive, and unknowable. Called "the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us" by the Gospel of John (1:14), God entered into the ordinariness and tumult of human experience by way of a human being who acted and spoke, rejoiced and suffered, and was vulnerable to death. The first dynamic way of the divine Word in the world bore the name Jesus of Nazareth; he was nothing less than God-with-us ("Emmanuel," Matt. 1:22-23), a divine-human event.

The second dynamic of the word flows into the world through the Christian Scriptures, comprised of the first (or Old/Older) Testament and second (or New/Newer) Testament of the Bible. (Some Christian communions also include other books they consider authoritative for Christian living, the books of the Apocrypha.) Sometimes the Bible itself—a book we can hold in our hands—is referred to as "God's Word." Yet preachers do not simply reiterate the words on a page of Scripture; they interpret it (some say "apply") in ways relevant to the specific listeners they address. God's Word is living and dynamic; it is revealed through Scripture as a result of Spirit-assisted engagement with the text—reading, meditation, and interpretation. (More will be said of this in chapters 5 and 6 of this book.)

The third dynamic of the word of God moving into the world is Christian preaching. A central claim of Reformed churches' theology is that "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."³ Preaching is a here-and-now message aimed at a specific context of Christian worship and witness. Preaching flows out of an interpretive process in which the preacher has been prayerfully alert both to the diversities of her congregation and the prompting of the Spirit. As

3. Second Helvetic Confession 5.2, *The Book of Confessions*, The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999).

noted above, preaching is more than repeating the words on a page of the Bible. The preacher inhabits a lively dialogue between the world of the biblical text and the world of contemporary Christian life, trusting that, as a result of this back-and-forth process, the Spirit will guide him or her to speak a fresh and timely word for a particular time and place.⁴

To summarize, God's word enters historical time and space through three concrete actions: incarnation (the living Word, Jesus Christ), biblical interpretation (the "voice" of the word through Scripture), and public, context-specific proclamation (the "event" of divine address to a specific community through preaching). Thinking of God's word in the world as a living, active event can be unsettling. It is tempting to identify the word *only* with a past historical event (the life, death, and rising of Jesus) or with the words of the Bible, which—with enough effort—we imagine we might master. But this is not the nature of God's living word. The living word of the living God in the world—incarnate, flowing from Scripture, and proclaimed—is dynamic. In the power of the Spirit, these three dynamics of the word lay claim to the church as living witness to its risen Lord.

Free-Church/Pentecostal Theological Insight: Preaching as Spirit-Animated Dialogue

A lively understanding of the Spirit-driven nature of Christian life, worship, and public social witness goes a long way toward helping us avoid a static notion of the ways of God's living, eventful word in the world. Here, we draw upon insights arising from free-church traditions, particularly Pentecostal traditions.

The biblical witness declares that even to make the confession,

4. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 63–66.

“Jesus is Lord” is only possible when it is “Spirit speech,” human speech taken up by the animating presence of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).⁵ Without the Spirit’s co-agency along with the human preacher, no sermon no matter how rhetorically sophisticated would accomplish the redemptive work of judgment and grace that calls forth new life and leads us out of death into the life of God’s new creation.

The Spirit is the animating center of the embodied life of the church, including all the forms of speech and gesture by which it worships God and bears public witness to God’s ongoing, redemptive work. This is what makes congregations *more verbs than nouns*; they are social structures that host Spirit-animated action, not institutional hierarchies or brick-and-mortar structures. In fact, the governing structures and worship spaces of Christian communities around the globe differ greatly. What they have in common is that they are zones of Spirit-ed-inspired action. In worship, the Spirit inspires lament for all that is wrong in human lives and in the world, as well as praise for the God whose mercy and power addresses these realities and denies death the final word.⁶

Christian traditions that cultivate expectant openness to the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit in the church disabuse us of any notion that, with the right education or the right tools, we might become “masters” of God’s word. The word of God turned loose in the church and in the world is not ours to control or to predict. At the same time, these traditions emphasize that the Spirit is active in the *whole* congregation during the preaching event, not the preacher alone. The active presence of God’s Spirit in pew as well as pulpit produces dialogical forms of preaching in which the congregation

5. See Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009).

6. See Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

enters fully into the dynamic of the in-breaking word, participating through movement of the body and vocal response.

The outpouring of the Spirit in preaching is not for the church only, but for the world. The dynamic of the Spirit in worship is centrifugal—moving believers outward from the core experience of prayer, praise, and preaching into a world of deep hungers and deadly conflicts. The Spirit moves us to witness against all that is deathly in the world—the practices of sin, abuses of power that marginalize the weak, and socioeconomic or cultural structures designed to secure the flourishing of a few at the expense of the many. The Spirit enables believers to speak and enact genuine hope grounded in the love and justice of God. God’s transformative energy moves in the world through the bodies and voices, intellects and skills, of ordinary human beings who have been given “Spirit”-sight to discern the outlines of new creation amid the powers and structures of the “old age.”⁷ Preaching is a primary way that the Spirit provides believers with “corrective lenses” through which to see the world in light of God’s redemptive work.

To sum up, preaching is a Spirit-driven event that takes place within Spirit-created communities. Preaching is one of the dynamic forms of the living word of God in the world. Through preaching, God speaks a saving word for a particular time and place, a word derived from prayerful and disciplined study of Scripture. Along with every other practice of the worshiping, witnessing church, preaching bears witness to the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, crucified God-with-us and firstborn of God’s new creation.

7. James F. Kay, “The Word of the Cross at the Turn of the Ages,” *Interpretation* 53:1 (January 1999): 44–56.

**Preaching as a Rhetorical Task:
Exploring Your Rhetorical Understanding of Preaching**

Preaching depends on the animation of the Spirit; divine action is indispensable for preaching to happen. Yet, at the same time, preaching requires human effort and skill. Preaching is the dance of the divine and human, the theological and the rhetorical. Without God, there would be no preaching; but without a human preacher, there would be no preaching either! As divine–human event, as more verb than noun, preaching *does* something, and the doing is not just God’s doing or the Spirit’s doing; it is our doing, action, and skill. As such, preaching has rhetorical substance and uses human tools.

How we experience preaching, rhetorically, varies based on our life histories, particularly the preaching we have experienced. We discuss preaching as a *rhetorical* activity from the point of view of homiletics scholars both ancient and contemporary. As we do, we invite you to explore the rhetorical qualities of preaching as you have experienced it and the impact that has on what you expect from preaching—your own, and that of others. Your experience of preaching as a rhetorical event shapes the images you have of preachers and your expectations of the effects preaching has, or should have, on listeners.

Rhetorical Experiences and Images of Preachers

As you sit in a wooden pew or cushioned chair each Sunday listening to a preacher, you may give little thought to the rhetorical shape and impact of the sermon and the images of preachers and preaching being formed within you because of that experience. Of course, your denominational connections and heritage shape the preaching you hear as does the architecture of the preaching space. A megachurch coliseum showing the preacher on a big screen is quite different from

the intimate environment of a storefront church in a shopping plaza. The preacher may use no notes and speak from a stool; or he may use an iPad with PowerPoint; or she may stand firmly in a pulpit with her full manuscript. Some preachers walk while they preach to emphasize points and to engage the audience in the event of preaching. Other preachers stand still behind the pulpit. Some use large hand gestures; others do not. Some sing the sermon, while some of you are very happy that your preacher does not! These choices are part of the varied rhetorical forms that preaching takes. The point here is not to say, “This way is better than the other,” but to appreciate how the rhetorical approaches we are used to have an impact on our experience of preaching, shaping our images of preachers.

Different rhetorical choices on the part of the preacher produce different rhetorical effects on listeners. On the basis of experience, one of us might expect preaching to be an intimate experience of very personal address, while another may expect preaching to be a dramatic, high-energy *tour de force* designed to energize an auditorium full of worshipers. Whatever rhetorical mode a preacher uses, the Spirit is at work, animating the life of the preacher and congregation toward a holy dialogue, ultimately with God.

Depending on the rhetorical styles of preaching we have experienced, we tend to have different images of the preacher. In the last few years, several scholars have explored various images of preachers; among these would be some you recognize and others you don't. Homiletician Kenyatta Gilbert suggests seven types of preachers.⁸ There is the “Evangelical-Moralist” who takes the biblical record seriously and puts a heavy emphasis on the hearer's need for a personal relationship with God. The “Social Activist” preacher stresses social change through ethical action and has a sociopolitical

8. Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 132–39.

lens on the gospel message. The “Entrepreneurial Agent” is a positive thinker and motivator who preaches to inspire the congregation toward new social and financial ventures. The “Clerico-Politician” is a preacher who leads a congregation but is also a skilled politician, whether elected, aspiring, or neither, and has great focus on civic engagement. The “Rancher-Pontiff” is a charismatic figure who is orally skillful and enjoys a mass following; he or she thrives through their brand of preaching (narrative, didactic, etc.) and tend to have loose, if any, denominational ties. The “Mystic-Spiritualist” is a preacher who focuses on spiritual encounter and uses the sermon to lead people to prayer or greater devotion. The “Social Poet-Technophile” is an innovative preacher who uses popular songs, movies, and technology, in conjunction with Scripture, to convey the gospel. These types—and the list is not exhaustive of all possibilities—are just that because they are not literal but *functional* rhetorical identities of preachers. They speak to what these preachers aim to *do*. Perhaps you know these preachers from experience and they have shaped what you think preaching should do. One must also acknowledge that no preacher is only one of these but most likely embodies a couple or even several of these or other tropes at once.

Still other images for preachers may resonate with your experiences: herald, witness, servant, hope-giver, lover, mystery steward, fool, fisher, host and guest, entrusted one, and one “out of your mind.”⁹ These rhetorical images may help you name what it is

9. See Robert Stephen Reid, ed., *Slow of Speech and Unclean Lips: Contemporary Images of Preaching Identity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010). In addition to these images, there are many contemporary preaching books that describe preaching as many things: “preaching as local theology and folk art,” “preaching as spiritual direction,” “preaching as testimony,” and “preaching as worship,” to name a few. See Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Kay Northcutt, *Kindling Desire for God: Preaching as Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Michael J. Quicke, *Preaching as Worship: An Integrative Approach to Formation in Your Church* (Baker Books, 2011).

you have experienced in weekly worship or picking up a sermon on YouTube.

It is important to reflect on how preaching has functioned for you (both positively and negatively) and the degree to which you value, or identify with, one or another image of the preacher. Our rhetorical experiences and images shape what we consider the rhetorical purposes of preaching to be and what any one of us hopes to accomplish as a preacher.

Rhetorical Purposes of Preaching

As already noted, preaching is both theological and rhetorical. Our understanding that preaching is more verb than noun implies that preaching does something to hearers and speakers not only theologically but rhetorically. Speech acts upon us; this is what we mean by the rhetorical effect, or function, of an event of spoken communication such as preaching.

In what is considered the earliest homiletical textbook, *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine teaches that preaching has three rhetorical aims—to teach, delight, and persuade. Preaching *does* these things. Augustine goes on to detail some of the linguistic and vocal choices a preacher will need to make to produce these rhetorical effects. Contemporary homiletician Jana Childers has edited a book of essays written by homileticians called *Purposes of Preaching*, and in it we find a range of ideas concerning what preaching is and does.¹⁰ The volume makes clear that there is not one way to name what preaching does or how it functions in the lives of hearers. The list below is suggestive, not exhaustive; but it may help you clarify your own thinking about different purposes in preaching and the varied rhetorical strategies that may best serve them. Keep in mind that we

10. See Jana Childers, ed., *Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004).