

CHAPTER 6.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL

Questions about liturgy often become controversial. Churchgoers tend to be passionate about what happens within a worship service. Some feel comfortable with a traditional liturgy. Others are yearning for some change, any change. Some regard liturgical innovation as a sign that a certain church has a healthy vitality. Others consider that new liturgical directions may well lead to drifting away from a rich heritage, or perhaps even from orthodoxy itself.

How do we answer questions about what should be included in our worship services or how it should happen? Does it all boil down subjectively to the tastes of individuals or groups? Or is there some standard that we can use? Are there principles to work with? Much like church government (see chapter 4 of this volume), liturgy is a distinct area of study that could easily fill an entire book. However, there are some principles that we can explore here, especially the tight connection between the means of grace and the shape of Christian liturgy.

For starters, a look back in history will help. In the early church it was common to divide the public worship service into two main parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Upper Room, which included a celebration of the Lord's Supper. To be sure, there were a number of different liturgical actions within those broader categories. For example, the worshippers sang songs, gave Christian alms, offered up prayers, and received the Lord's blessing. However, the two key focal points of

worship services in the early church lined up directly with the means of grace: the Word and then the sacraments. In this way the ordinary tools that the Holy Spirit employs to cultivate faith were in constant use each Lord's Day again. Weak sinners needed that kind of regular strengthening.

That last point also remains true today. We, too, are weak sinners who need the same kind of Spirit-driven, faith-cultivating work as the first generations of Christians did. This is where the doctrine of the means of grace, which might sound rather technical, becomes so very practical. How will we arrange our worship services today? What will be included? What will be the focal point(s), and what else will be included but not be necessarily so prominent? Most importantly, on what basis will these decisions be made? These are big questions, and there is more than one facet to the answers. With the means of grace, though, we have a solid, scriptural starting point. Just as God's people did in the early church, so we will wisely make the preaching of the Word the main focal point of the worship service, with the sacraments supplying a significant supporting role. In this chapter we will look more closely at the role of the Word as a means of grace, and in the next three chapters we will look at the sacraments.

PREACHING THE WORD: BIBLICAL BASIS

To be precise, when we speak of the Word as a means of grace, we mean particularly the preaching of God's Word by an ordained minister. Of course, we interact with the Holy Scriptures in other ways, and we are greatly blessed in doing so. For example, you can think of personal Bible study, communal Bible study, reading books about the Bible, or even surfing good Internet resources about the Bible. In this respect the Canons of Dort also speak highly of reading God's Word and meditating upon it (CoD 5.14). Yet when we survey the Bible carefully, we find that the Lord has assigned a special role to the official preaching of his Word.

It all began in the Garden of Eden. The good news of salvation was needed immediately after Adam and Eve disobeyed the LORD and fell into sin. Yet no sooner did that happen and the gospel was there right

away; the LORD delivered it personally. The two sinners were off hiding in the bushes of Paradise, but soon “the LORD God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen 3:9). Notice that it began with a voice, the LORD’S voice, calling out to man. The LORD did not ignore his sinful creatures. He also did not just destroy them in his wrath, though he could have justly done so. No, instead, he used his voice. True, that voice probed (“Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” [Gen 3:11]), and it punished (“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing” [Gen 3:16]), but it also promised the so-called *protoevangelium*, the first gospel. This was the message: the offspring of the woman will deal a mighty blow to the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). This is where preaching began, in the Garden of Eden, and the Preacher was the LORD God himself!

The LORD also continued to appear at critical moments and personally proclaim his message to his people. The voice of the LORD came to Abram, calling him from Ur of the Chaldeans and out of his old, idol-worshipping habits (Josh 24:2–3). He said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Sometime later, the Word of the LORD came to Abram again, saying, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen 15:1). These words from the LORD were not just intriguing messages from heaven. They were *redemptive* words, words by which Abram was called out of spiritual darkness and into God’s wonderful light (1 Pet 2:9).

At the same time, the LORD did not always come to bring his Word personally. In fact, more often than not, the LORD chose someone as an ambassador to deliver his proclamation. For instance, from the New Testament we know that Noah was a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5). On behalf of God, he warned the people of his day that they needed to turn from their evil ways, drastically and immediately. Sadly, they did not listen to God’s preacher, but the preacher was still there, proclaiming God’s Word.

Similarly and significantly, the LORD also picked Moses to go to the Israelites in Egypt and announce that their Redeemer was about to release them from their bondage (Exod 3). Moses would also need to bring the word of the LORD to Pharaoh with such a high level of authority that the LORD said to him, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Exod 7:1). Certainly Moses was not God, as some of his later actions made abundantly clear (Num 20:10–13). Yet, when he spoke to Pharaoh it was, for all intents and purposes, as if the LORD had personally appeared to Pharaoh and told him directly, “Let my people go!”

Some time later, even Aaron and his sister Miriam became jealous and asked, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num 12:2) However, the LORD was displeased with Aaron and Miriam for challenging the position that he had given to his humble servant Moses (Num 12:3), and he even afflicted Miriam with leprosy temporarily (Num 12:9–15). Obviously, Moses was the LORD’S chosen mouthpiece, and God’s people were to respect the role the LORD gave to him.

Furthermore, this proclamation of God’s Word not only brought the people of Israel up out of Egypt, but it continued to guide, encourage, and admonish them throughout their entire journey to the Promised Land and, indeed, throughout all their history in the Promised Land. It is striking that in the historical books such as 1 and 2 Kings so much attention is given to the work of prophets like Elijah and Elisha. Added to that, a large section of the Old Testament is devoted to prophets, both major, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as minor, such as Joel and Amos. In fact, about 115 times in the Old Testament we hear this phrase, “And the word of the LORD came to . . .” In turn, these prophets proclaimed the LORD’S word to his people, leading them to trust him and admonishing them when they fell back into unbelief. God was mercifully leading them forward by his means of grace, the proclamation of his Word. In addition to this, the priests from the tribe of Levi had an important local role to play in ensuring that the families of each village, town, and city

knew the Word of the Lord. Moses made this clear to the tribe of Levi in his final blessing to them (Deut 33:10).

This work of leading and gathering, by means of the proclaimed Word, continued and even intensified in the New Testament. John the Baptist came preaching and teaching the Word (Matt 3:1). Shortly thereafter Jesus did the same, travelling about from town to town (Matt 4:23). In fact, he was the Good Shepherd using his voice to call his own sheep together and lead them out into the green pastures of his abundant salvation (John 10:3–5). Likewise Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:11) and the apostles Peter and John (Acts 8:25) were dedicated to preaching so that God might cultivate faith in the hearts of his people. In this way the church continued to grow through the proclamation of the Word, or as the Holy Spirit himself says numerous times in the book of Acts, “the Word of God continued to increase” (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20).

This use of the preaching of the Word continued throughout the apostle Paul’s missionary work as well. He explained to the church of Rome that in order to believe in Christ, someone must first hear about him, and in order for someone to hear about him, someone must preach the gospel, and in order for someone to preach, he must be sent out by God (Rom 10:14–15). Indeed, as the prophet Isaiah says, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news” (Isa 52:7). When the church in Corinth was looking for something more spectacular, such as a miraculous sign or sophisticated wisdom (1 Cor 1:22), then the apostle still went ahead preaching “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

Indeed, the letters to the seven churches in the final book of the Bible centre on the Word of Christ, as each letter begins with the same phrase, “The words of him who . . .,” followed by some symbolic description of who Christ is or what he does. Moreover, each one of those letters ends with these words: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2–3). Clearly this survey of Scripture, albeit brief, indicates that from the Garden of Eden straight through to the Apocalypse of John, the preaching of God’s Word has been the means by which

God brings fallen human beings to faith, includes them among his people, guides them through the challenges and obstacles of this life, and finally ushers them into eternal glory.

PREACHING: GOD'S WORD OR MAN'S WORD?

At the same time, the preaching of God's Word is done by men—sinful, fallible, and at times ill-intentioned men. Now the Bible was also inspired through sinful and fallible men, but at least men such as Moses and Paul were inspired by the Holy Spirit in order to ensure that the words they wrote were, in fact, the Word of God (1 Thess 2:13).¹ Unlike Moses and Paul, though, the ordained preacher today is not inspired. Therefore the question presses upon us with even more intensity: is the sermon that we hear on the Lord's Day the Word of God or the word of man? After all, if it is the word of a *man*, how can it truly be a means of *God's* grace?

One Reformed confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, has an answer to this question that is as famous as it is definite. The first chapter of this confession states:

The Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Wherefore when this word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe the very word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful.

Two comments may help to shed light on this strong statement. In the first place, in addition to being lawfully called and ordained, a preacher must also be faithful in his task. In other words, he must be ever so aware that when he preaches God's Word, then that is exactly what he is called to deliver: *God's* Word. Naturally, he will explain and apply God's Word using his own words. However, he is not bringing *his own* content, ideas, or message to the people in front of him. In fact, if he begins to deliver his own ideas, all the while making it sound as if they are God's revelation, then he has betrayed his trust and is no longer acting as a faithful preacher. He needs to mend his attitude and his ways.

1. See *Growing in the Gospel*, Volume 1, Chapter 3.

Secondly, the other side of this truth is that if a preacher is faithfully expounding the Word of God, then it would be disrespectful to the divine Source of this message to shine the spotlight on the preacher and regard the sermon as the word of man. That is simply not true to reality. No matter how poorly a high school teacher may lecture about Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it is still Shakespeare's famous work. Conversely, regardless of how well a teacher explains *Romeo and Juliet*, we never promote the teacher to become the author of that drama. It is still Shakespeare's play. Likewise, it is still God's Word, whether it is proclaimed eloquently or inarticulately. Indeed, the apostle Paul placed himself in the inarticulate category (1 Cor 2:1–5).

This is also what the Belgic Confession means when it speaks about pure preaching. We spoke of this earlier in chapter 3, but, by way of a brief reminder, pure preaching is not the same as perfect preaching. Perfect preaching, or something even close to it, will not be found in this fallen world. However, the descriptive word *pure* speaks about the content of the preaching. Faithful preaching cannot be a hybrid of God's revelation and human opinion. Rather, to the best of his ability, each preacher must proclaim the unadulterated Word of God.

In Scripture it was a loyal herald who conveyed a pure, direct message. Heralds, also translated as *preachers* at times, are mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments (Isa 40:9; 41:27; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11; 2 Pet 2:5). We often think of heralds as the ancient equivalents of today's couriers. However, the heralds of yesteryear were much more than employees of modern companies such as Fed-Ex or Purolator. A herald was normally an official within a royal court. He was part of the king's inner circle of trusted advisors. Particularly in times of war or festival, it was his duty to announce a royal victory, bestow a royal blessing on an event, or proclaim a royal decree. Whatever the message may have been, though, and whether the herald announced it enthusiastically or half-heartedly, the key thing on everyone's mind was this: here is a message from *our king*. After all, the herald was part of the *royal* court, and the king had specifically sent him out to deliver a *royal* message.

Therefore the king was definitely in the spotlight, even though the herald was the one standing in front of the crowd.

Precisely the same is true of the lawfully ordained preacher. He is standing front and centre in the church building. All the eyes and ears of the congregation are focused on him. Yet, strange though it may seem, he is not the centre of attention, for he is a herald, or ambassador, sent from God's royal court (2 Cor 5:19–20). The Great King has entrusted him with a royal message of reconciliation. True, the King is making his appeal to us *through* his ambassadors, but, to paraphrase the Helvetic Confession, the very word of the King, not of the preacher, is proclaimed.

At the same time, there is another side to this truth. To resist the Word that is faithfully preached is also to resist God himself (Acts 7:51). In connection with this, the preaching of the gospel is not only listed as one of the means of grace (LD 25) but also as one of the keys of the kingdom (LD 31). This all underlines the serious nature of preaching. As the Canons of Dort say, “What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and under the new dispensation” (3/4.6).

THE GOSPEL IS THE POWER OF GOD UNTO SALVATION

Since pure preaching is the means of conveying God's Word, and since God is powerful, the proclamation of his Word is powerful as well. The apostle Paul highlights this when he declares, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). Nor should anyone suppose that this power is somehow limited to the New Testament or to the post-Pentecost era. Already in the Old Testament, through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD declared that his Word “shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11).

Since the gospel is the power unto salvation, the Lord is using it to accomplish truly remarkable, even eternal, things. Looking back to Genesis 1, though, we should not be so surprised. Before sin entered the world, God spoke. Indeed, repeatedly in the first chapter of the Bible we read, “And God said” The phrase is so familiar we might easily skip over it thoughtlessly. Yet just below the surface of its simplicity lies a profound truth. To state the obvious, when God speaks he uses words. These divine words are sufficiently powerful to bring galaxies and oceans into existence. That is no small, verbal feat! In addition, these words, in the plural, find their ultimate fulfilment in the Word, in the singular. This Word is the Mighty Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of this is confirmed by the apostle John, who writes in the opening chapter of his gospel: “All things were made through him [the Word], and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). Since the Word was sufficiently powerful to bring all things in heaven and on earth into existence, surely this Word is also strong enough to create saints out of sinners. What is more, the Word has the ability to call forth new life in those who are dead in their transgressions (Eph 2:1). For this reason the Holy Spirit told Cornelius, a centurion living in Caesarea, to wait for a message, or word, by which he and his entire household would be saved (Acts 11:14). Obviously, the proclamation of the Word not only has power, but it has saving power!

Yet what effect does this power have in the reality of daily life? We must acknowledge that, despite its indisputable strength, the preached Word does not always result in saved sinners. We can all think of people, perhaps even those who are close to us, who have heard the Word but yet refused to believe. In his Parable of the Sower, Jesus Christ warned that this would happen (Matt 13:1–23). Still, we cannot help but wonder: is the power of the Word nullified by the stubbornness of sinners? At the very least, does the Word become powerless sometimes, in certain circumstances, with certain people? In order to answer this important question, several things need to be said.

First of all, the power of the Word is a *promissory* power. It is a power that is worked out through promise, not through predication. Perhaps a concrete example will clarify this point. On Pentecost Day, Peter preached the gospel and said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Was Peter predicting that every single person who gathered around to hear him speak would receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit? Clearly not. To be sure, three thousand were added to their number that day, which is a truly astonishing number of converts for a single day (Acts 2:41). Even so, those three thousand were “those who received his word,” which also means that there were those who did not accept his message (see Acts 2:13). Properly understood, then, Peter promised forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit to all those who believed in Christ and humbled themselves in repentance. It was a promise packed with divine power, but it was also divine power packaged within a promise.

Second, the power of the Word cuts in two different directions. It can generate new life, but it can also bring someone down to condemnation. As the apostle Paul says, the aroma of Christ is the fragrance of life to some but the smell of death to others (2 Cor 2:16). Although our natural tendency is to think about God’s Word only as the power unto salvation, we must reckon with the scriptural truth that the Lord also uses preaching to harden people in their own unbelief. For example, consider the shocking commission that the LORD gave to Isaiah. The LORD said to him, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes” (Isa 6:9–10). Later on, Jesus Christ referred to these verses as he explained why he taught the crowds in parables (Matt 13:10–17). Clearly, Christ’s purpose was that some would come to faith while others would be left in their sinful stupor. In the end, the Word of God cuts two ways, and it is God’s sovereign decision as to which way it cuts in each particular situation.

Finally, the Word proclaimed is not an automatic, salvation-dispensing machine. It does not mechanically deposit eternal salvation in the heart

of everyone whose eardrums are set vibrating by the voice of a faithful preacher. Rather, as the Canons of Dort remind us, God sends out his gospel to whomever he wishes “together with the command to repent and believe” (CoD 2.5). This is another way of saying that salvation is by true faith (John 3:16), not by mere hearing—although hearing the gospel is one of the tools that the Holy Spirit uses in order to work faith in our hearts (Rom 10:14).

To turn to a different point, it might seem as if the power of God’s Word has been diminished because we live in such a different time and culture than the one in which God first revealed his message of salvation through men such as David and Peter. Has the passage of time left the Word of God past its “best before” date? Not at all! Not only is the word which is preached “living” but it is also “abiding,” and the apostle Peter even goes so far as to assert that it “remains forever” (1 Pet 1:23–25). This, too, is not entirely surprising, since the King who speaks the message is an eternal King (1 Tim 1:17). Thus, an eternal Word is entirely fitting for an eternal King.

Sadly, something else remains constant through the ages. Although language, culture, and technology all change, the reality of sin does not. A transgressor in the first century is hardly different from a sinner in the tenth or twenty-first century. Precisely because the gospel is the good news for sinners, it has a timeless relevance that never fades or expires. This truth applies not only chronologically but also geographically. No one will deny that people living in the heart of Africa lead a different life than those dwelling in a Manhattan apartment building. Yet the temptations that they face are all subtle variations on the same sad and sinful theme. Thus, the gospel speaks to both communities with equal redemptive strength.

PREACHING LAW AND GOSPEL

Jesus travelled throughout Galilee preaching the gospel (Matt 4:23). The apostle Paul refers to his “priestly service” of proclaiming the gospel (Rom 15:16). In fact, the combination of *preaching* and *gospel* occurs some seventy-five times in the New Testament. Yet the law was

an important part of Christ's teaching as well. In fact, Jesus himself declared, "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt 5:18). The apostle James also spoke positively of the law as royal law of liberty (Jas 2:8, 12). At the same time, we know that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by works of the law (Rom 3:28). So, how does all of this fit together? Do the means of grace include preaching the gospel, or preaching the law, or both?

In order to sort through this, theologians commonly refer to the three uses of the law. The first use of the law, described in Romans 2:14–15, is called the *civil use* of the law. Some basic commands of God's law, such as "Do not murder" and "Do not steal," are engraved on the human conscience, to the point that most people feel guilty if they commit such a crime. In this way, even if society is becoming increasingly ignorant about the Bible, God's moral requirements lay a restraint on the spread of evil in our communities.

In the second place, God uses the reading and preaching of the law in order to convict people of the full extent of their sinfulness. In so doing, he makes them aware that they need a saviour other than themselves. This is the *accusing or pedagogic use* of the law—accusing because it makes us aware of our sins, and pedagogic because it leads us to look outside of ourselves to Christ. The apostle Paul speaks about this use of the law in Romans 7 when he says, "Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (v. 7). Then he also highlights the pedagogic use in Galatians 3 where he writes, "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (v. 24).

Thirdly, there is the *didactic or normative use* of the law, in which the commandments of God guide us in our life of sanctification, teaching us to say "no" to the ungodliness of this world and "yes" to a life of service to God (Titus 2:12). The apostle James also refers to this when he describes the law as the royal law of liberty. Since the second and the

third uses of the law are the ones that pertain directly to believers, they are the ones that will have our focus in this section.

When it comes to the doctrine of salvation, and more specifically to the blessing of justification, there must be a radical disjunction between law and gospel. Romans 3:28 is clear: we are justified before God by faith in Christ and *not* by works of the law. This also means that in the context of justification the law certainly accuses and only the gospel saves. Muddying the waters on this point, even in subtle or implicit ways, would lead us back in the direction of the Roman Catholic Church, which tends to blend justification and sanctification together.²

Nonetheless, as we saw above, God uses his law for more than one thing. Not only does the law accuse us of sin and lead us to Christ, but it also serves as a guide for how believers should live a thankful life in response to the free gift of justification in Christ. In this way, preaching the law as the guide of gratitude is also part of the good news that we hear from our Saviour. If God's people do not hear God's law proclaimed and explained, it could very well happen that the deceitfulness of wealth, the lure of sensuality, or the power of greed could choke their spiritual growth (Matt 13:22). That would be bad news. By contrast consider how the apostle Paul urges us to love each other by following the law of God, which he describes by listing a number of the Ten Commandments (Rom 13:8–10). In other words, the law cannot save us, but those who are saved can, yes, must, keep the law by the power of the Spirit of Christ.

The Heidelberg Catechism has an excellent way of impressing these two distinct uses of the law upon our hearts, while at the same time addressing the concern that justification should never be infiltrated with the idea that we can contribute to our salvation. In Lord's Day 2 the Catechism mentions the law of God for the first time, presenting it as the means by which we become increasingly aware of our sins and misery. At this point, and helpfully so, the Catechism does not focus on the Ten Com-

2. For details see *Growing in the Gospel*, Volume 2, Chapter 10.

mandments per se, but rather on the summary of the law, in which Christ teaches us to love God and our neighbour. This, then, is the pedagogic use of the law. By shining the spotlight on the summary of the law, the Catechism does not leave us any room to surmise that we are not doing as badly as some might think. After all, who can honestly say that he loves the Lord with *all* his heart, *all* his soul, *all* his strength, and *all* his mind? Upon hearing that, every heart must be humbled and every mouth confess, “O God, have mercy on me, the worst of all sinners!” (Luke 18:13)

Next, when the Catechism comes to the doctrine of justification in Lord’s Days 23 and 24, it refers once again to the law, but this time it removes any notion that our obedience to the law could contribute even one iota toward our righteous standing before God. As Answer 62 puts it, “the righteousness which can stand before God’s judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the *law of God*, whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.”

But lest anyone think that the law no longer has a place in our lives, the third section of the Catechism—on *gratitude*, as must be duly noted—returns to the commandments of God, providing an extensive explanation of each commandment (LD 34–44). Moreover, this careful attention to the third, or normative, use of the law does not allow works-righteousness to re-enter through the back door. Instead, Lord’s Day 32 purposefully points out, from the very beginning of this section, that our thankful obedience to God’s law is all part of the work *of Christ*, who by his Spirit renews us in his image. Notice how the pedagogic use of the law is separated from the normative use by some thirty Lord’s Days. That should allow for enough time for this crucial distinction to settle firmly into our minds.

In sum, preaching, as a means of grace, should include a proclamation of the gospel and the law. It is not a matter of either-or but rather both-and. Having said that, we need to maintain a proper relationship between law and gospel, discerning astutely the various uses of the law. Problems

inevitably develop when we toss both the pedagogic and normative use of the law into our mental blender and turn on the machine. In order to avoid such doctrinal purées, the structure and content of the Heidelberg Catechism are an invaluable aid.

PREACHING AND LITURGY

This brings us full circle, returning to the connection between the means of grace and the structure of our worship services. Considering the centrality of preaching in Scripture, as we discovered above, the proclamation of the gospel should also be central in our worship services. This is linked to the very nature of worship itself. Worship ought to be God-centred, and since God has chosen preaching to be the primary instrument by which he cultivates faith, it would be nothing less than arrogant on our part to act as if we are wiser than God by choosing a different focal point for our worship services (LD 35).

This does not mean that maintaining a focus on preaching will be easy. We live in a culture that prefers action over talk. Perhaps our culture needs to be reminded that our God certainly acts when he speaks (Isa 55:10–11). We also live in a day and age that gravitates toward video more than audio. Perhaps our age should be confronted with the words of Jesus who said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). Fully in line with this, we do well to remind our generation that faith comes from hearing, not seeing (Rom 8:24–25; 10:14).

To add to this, it is not uncommon to hear calls for more dialogue and less monologue. In many cases dialogue is excellent, for it promotes listening, which we should all be quick to do (Jas 1:19). However, when the King of kings and Lord of lords proclaims his royal decree of salvation through his Son, then we should be all ears, and attentive ears. What does the Preacher say? “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools” (Eccl 5:1). Moreover, since the special monologue called a sermon is packed full of good news and eternal blessings, who would not want to listen?

One final consideration is the impact of technology upon the centrality of preaching. Advances in technology have brought us many remarkable things, but they have also shortened our attention spans dramatically. For some people it is down to the 140 characters of a Twitter message. On a certain level, it is hard for a thirty-minute sermon to compete with that measure of brevity. Yet when people today are introduced to the immeasurably great riches of the height, depth, and breadth of Christ's love, then by God's grace, they may realize that it takes much more than 140 characters to unpack those redemptive treasures!

Are there present challenges to keeping the preaching of the gospel at the heart of our worship services? Undoubtedly there are. Is it worth meeting those challenges head on and keeping the correct focus on this precious means of God's grace? Certainly it is.

Suggested Readings: Isaiah 52:1–12; Romans 10:14–17

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Most people understand that no preacher is perfect. Yet when ordained preachers are proclaiming Christ out of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition rather than from good will, it is hard to understand how the apostle Paul can still rejoice that the gospel is being spread, as he writes in Philippians 1:15–18. How do we understand this?
2. In Ezekiel 37 the prophet of the LORD provides us with a fascinating insight into the power of God's Word. Read verses 1–10 of this chapter and comment on the power of prophecy. What is symbolized by the resurrection of dry bones? Does this apply only in the Old Testament or also in the New Testament? If so, how?
3. What does it mean that the gospel has *promissory* power? How would you use this truth to comfort a missionary who is faithful but sees little fruit from his labours?
4. What are the three uses of the law? In connection with the civil use of the law, how far do we go in applying the Ten Commandments in society? If we forbid murder (the sixth commandment) as a society,

should we also forbid blasphemy (the third commandment)? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Congregations like to hear sermons that contain concrete application. “Just tell me what I need to do on Monday” is a prevalent preference in the pew. Yet application often involves do’s and don’ts, which could lead to an emphasis on the law, which might also turn into a legalism that promotes salvation through works, even though this may not be the intention. How can we promote preaching that is applicable to daily life but also avoids the pitfall of legalism?
2. Faithful preaching cuts two ways: unto eternal salvation but also unto eternal condemnation. You can read about this in 2 Corinthians 2:14–17. For those who struggle with the assurance of their salvation, hearing sharp scriptural warnings from the pulpit can lead to deeper doubts. How do we encourage such brothers and sisters in the Lord to hear the good news in the gospel? Canons of Dort 1.16 may help.
3. The last part of this chapter described some of the challenges that we face in keeping the preaching of the gospel central in our worship services. They include a preference for video, a desire for dialogue, and a decrease in attention spans. Can you add more challenges to the list? For each challenge discuss ways in which we can address the problem in a proactive and edifying manner.

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