

The Standard Bearer

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine

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PREACHING *in the* GREAT CONGREGATION

I have preached righteousness in the great congregation:
lo, I have not refrained my lips, O LORD, thou knowest.
I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have
declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have not
concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the
great congregation. **Psalm 40:9, 10**



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Meditation

Rev. Marinus Schipper (1906-1985) served four PR congregations (Grand Haven, MI; Second-Wyoming, MI [later SW, which he also served later]; South Holland, IL; and Southeast-Grand Rapids) from 1937 to 1978. He was also a steady contributor to the *SB*, writing for several rubrics including meditations. This one dates from December 1, 1964 (Vol. 41, No. 5) and is reprinted with minor edits.

Knowing the joyful sound

Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O LORD, in the light of thy countenance.

Psalm 89:15

The sound! The joyful sound!

As the psalmist knew it, it was the sound of the trumpets.

Those silver trumpets, which Moses already commanded the children of Israel to make at the very beginning of their wilderness journey. Two of them. Made whole of one piece. Which the sons of Aaron were to blow, for the calling of assemblies and for the journeying of the camp.

Trumpets to sound the alarm. For when the enemy approached, the people were to be warned of threatening danger. It was the call to arms!

Trumpets for the calling of assemblies. When the congregation must come to sacrifice and to worship. At morning and at evening, at the time when in holy convocation the offerings were brought. And on feast days—the Passover, Unleavened Bread, The First Fruits, Pentecost, Tabernacles, Lights, and the Great Day of Atonement.

Throughout their generations, and always at the appointed time were these sons of Aaron to blow on these silver trumpets. So it had been throughout the long wilderness journey to the time of David, when Israel carried the tabernacle. And so it was at the time of Solomon and Rehoboam, when the temple had been constructed. And no different was it at the time of the poet, who was probably Ethan the Ezrahite, one of the generations of Aaron, of the family of Merari. Him had David appointed, along with the sons of Kohath and Gershom to have charge of the music. Surely he would know the sound of the trumpet and its significance!

The joyful sound!

No matter how you looked at it, the sound was joyful!

Whether it was the sound of warning, of alarm, then it was a symbol of the fact that Jehovah guarded His people. He had called them to war His warfare. And no one could deny that that sound was indeed joyful to the faithful in Israel.

Or, whether that sound called the people of God to

holy convocations, then it was always the symbol of the call of Jehovah to His people to come unto Him and to be partaker of the blessings the feast day prefigured. And who of the guileless children of God would not count that joyful?

O, indeed, it was a joyful sound! For the significance of that sound lay, first of all, in the fact that God was calling His people. Jehovah, the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God! And secondly, the significance of that sound lay in the symbolism of that which the people were called to partake, namely, of the sure mercies of David!

Of this beautiful symbolism we have the fulfillment!

We hear that joyful sound in the gospel!

The days of the shadows have ended in fulfillment, in reality! The temple at Jerusalem lies in heaps. The altar has ceased to send up its sweet incense. The mantle of Aaron's sons was torn forever in the attire of Caiaphas, the high priest. The sound of the silver trumpets no longer is heard.

Yet, the very essence of the shadows remained, and appeared in much more glorious beauty! There is still the holy temple of the Lord, not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens. There is still the High Priest, now no longer of the order of Aaron, but in the order of Melchizedek. Now the lamb and the priest are one, in the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, Jesus, the Great High Priest, who made the atonement for our sins, and ever liveth to make intercession for us. And still the sound significantly rings in our ears: I am Jehovah your covenant God. In Christ Jesus, My Son, Anointed Servant, I am reconciling the world unto Myself!

O glorious, beautiful, joyful sound! Which comes to us every Sabbath in the preaching of the gospel! Through God-appointed ministers, who have no other business than to sound the joyful sound! Divinely ordained means of grace! For such is the preaching of the gospel, without which the sacraments have no significance.

The contents of that Word is always joyous. For it speaks of salvation from misery and death. It speaks

of life out of death. It gives light in our sin-darkened world. It is the promise of the covenant God to His covenant people. It is a savor of life unto them, while it is a savor of death unto the wicked.

Joyous that sound is in distinction from many other sounds! Many other sounds there are in the world: the sounds of misery and war, the sounds of feasting and merry-making. But the distinguishing element of them all is the ground tone in them all, namely, death.

But in the midst of all these sounds is the joyful one! It is unique and melodious, because it is heavenly. It is as different as eternity is to time, as light to darkness, as life to death, as heaven to hell. The one, unique, living Word of God it is, which speaks to us of atonement, which declares a righteousness wherewith we may appear before God, which proclaims a peace that surpasseth understanding, which tells of mercies of the Lord.

There is a people! A people who know that joyful sound!

The psalmist does not speak of himself, or of an individual. Though surely he, too, and perhaps most of all, knew the joyfulness of that sound. But he does not speak here of his own knowledge or blessedness. Nor does he say, "Blessed is the *man* who knows the joyful sound." But he speaks of a *people*! He points to an organism, a commonwealth, a united whole. A people that is characterized by one tongue, with one aim and purpose. A people having a common origin and a common destiny. Hence, a very particular people! Chosen of God and precious! To whom God in sovereign mercy condescends, and calls them "My people," and that people respond: "Our God!"

To them only is the sound joyful!

O, certainly, the sound is directed to more than this people. When the silver trumpets blasted from before the sanctuary in the wilderness, and from the temple hill, all who were in and about the city of God heard the sound of the trumpet. Syrians and Greeks, Edomites and Moabites, Romans and Barbarians, they all heard the sound if they were in proximity to the tabernacle or temple. They all knew in a measure what the sound meant. They knew it meant that the God of Israel was calling His people to worship. So, too, today, the sound of the gospel goes out to all to whom God in His good pleasure sends it. And these include many more than the people of God.

But the sound of the gospel is not joyful to all! Nor do all know, in the strict sense of the word, the joyful sound! To many the very sound is repulsive. Many would silence that sound. Nor does that sound of the gospel efficaciously call all men into the blessed fellowship of the covenant God, but it efficaciously works in the hearts of

many who hear it hardness and rebellion. The Word of God has a twofold effect: it hardens those who reject it and evokes wrath and bitterness in them; while it mellows those whom it efficaciously calls. It evokes in them a hunger and a thirst after righteousness. It places in their hearts and on their lips paeans of praise. They know the sound, and to them it is joyful! Not only do they hear it, but they know it. There may be many children who hear the voice of a father calling his child, but really only the child hears and knows the voice of his father. Also there may be the sounds of many voices that fall upon the ear of the child, but the voice of his father he distinguishes because he knows it and to him it is joyful. So, too, there are many who hear the sound of the gospel, but it is only the child of God who knows it. And there may be many sounds that fall on the ear of the child of God, but there is one he distinguishes from them all as the voice of Jesus, calling him to come unto Him for rest.

Blessed is that people!

The psalmist is enthralled with their blessedness!

Verily he says: O, the blessedness of that people knowing the joyful sound! And he turns, as it were, to the God of that people, and says unto Him, "O Lord, they shall walk in the light of Thy countenance!"

You see, that people is not blessed apart from their God. All their blessedness is from Him. It was He who loved that people, and therefore chose them in sovereign grace. There was nothing in them that moved God to love and choose them. One time they were not a people of God. They were children of darkness and of wrath. They were like the children of this world, depraved in nature, haters of God and of one another. Incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all evil they were. Dead they were in trespasses and sins. Their mouth was an open sepulcher. Their feet were swift to shed blood. The way of peace they did not know. And the Lord God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them had gone back: they were altogether filthy. There was none who did any good, no, not one.

But God loved them, and He purposed to bless them, and make them blessed as He is blessed. So He came in the Person of His Son into their nature and redeemed them. He bore the burden of His own wrath to mitigate and atone for their sin and guilt. He merited righteousness for them and imputed that righteousness unto them. He gave unto them the Spirit of His Son our Lord Jesus Christ. He raised them from their spiritual death, renewing their hearts with the Spirit of regeneration. He justified them in their own consciences, and removed all bitterness and enmity, so giving to them His peace. He forgave all their sins, and laid in their hearts the Spirit

of adoption, so that now they could respond, saying, “Abba Father!” And He called them efficaciously out of darkness into His marvelous light. So they came to know the joyful sound that calls them, keeps on calling them, until they come to stand and to walk before His face, and bathe in the light of His countenance!

O, indeed, that people is blessed, because their God has blessed them with all the riches of grace. To be blessed, is to be full, to lack nothing. This people lacks nothing. They are filled with all the fullness of grace in Christ Jesus!

No wonder the psalmist turns not to that people, but to their God!

Not they are to be thanked because they know the joyful sound. Not they are to be praised because they respond to that sound, and turn their faces once more in the direction of their God. Not they are to be lauded because they will walk in the light of God’s countenance.

But to God, Jehovah, their covenant God, be the praise and the thanksgiving, because He it is, and He alone, who makes that people to come and to walk in His presence!

Blessed God is the God of that people who is so blessed that they shall walk eternally before His face!

Blessed is the people now in principle, according to the measure that they know the joyful sound. For, according to that principle, they walk already in the light of God’s countenance. For they taste His favor. They enjoy His fellowship. They walk with Him and talk with Him, and they are not consumed.

The light of Jehovah’s face is terrible, it is a consuming fire over against all the workers of iniquity. Yea, our God is a consuming fire! But, behold, this people walk in His presence and are not consumed. In His presence they live! In that presence they behold all the radiation of His virtues.

Presently they shall experience this blessedness in eternal perfection! Then they shall know, even as they are known. Then they shall see His face perfectly, which now they see as in a darkened glass. When He shall appear, then they shall be like Him, for they shall see Him as He is.

Blessed God!

Blessed people!

Editor’s notes

To apply the words of Psalm 40 to Christ in His earthly ministry, He came and “preached righteousness in the great congregation” (v. 9), and spoke to His Father, saying, “I have not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the great congregation” (v. 10). By His Spirit and through His ordained gospel preachers, Jesus still speaks today, not only in great congregations, each one organized into a church institute, but to the ends of the earth in mission work. Therefore, the apostle Paul taught the Ephesian Christians that Christ, who had never been to Ephesus, “came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh” (Eph. 2:17). It is truly a wonder of God’s covenant that Jesus Christ is with us and speaks to us through preaching, whether we are in established congregations or hearing the gospel on the mission field.

The topic for this special fall issue of the *Standard Bearer* is preaching. We have a wide variety of articles expounding the theme that graces the front cover. In keeping with our retro cover and commemorative volume, we take our opening meditation from the *SB* archives. It is a lovely piece written by Rev. Marinus Schipper on the joyful sound of preaching. Prof. Griess contributes a guest editorial that traces our convictions and practices regarding preaching back to the great Ref-

ormation, and he does that by introducing us to a relatively unknown Reformer through whom God restored heavenly preaching to His church. With the intriguing title, “God’s Folly,” Prof. Cammenga addresses the nature of preaching as the wisdom of God. Essential to faithful preaching is the issuing of the call of the gospel, and so Rev. Engelsma addresses this often controversial subject with what is a clear and helpful treatment. Drawing from years of experience on the mission field, particularly on the island of Jamaica, Rev. Bruinsma helps us appreciate the different dynamics of bringing the gospel outside of the walls of our home congregation. I am confident you will be blessed to read three contributions from the pew. We heartily thank Mr. Howard Pastoor, who writes as a ruling elder, Mr. Dan Van Dyke, a school teacher, and Mrs. Alyssa Pastoor, a wife and mother, for their willingness to contribute. The undersigned concludes the issue with an article on “Johnny,” addressing the relation between technology and preaching today.

We pray that this special issue rekindles in every Reformed believer an appreciation for the wonder of preaching in the great congregation.

Prof. B. Huizinga



Editorial

Prof. Cory Griess, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Andreas Hyperius: Reformer of preaching

The Reformation's return to faithful preaching

On the inside cover of my Bible is a short quotation that I penned there as a young man from a speech Prof. H. Hanko once gave. It reads, "Preaching is heavenly, that is why the Devil always tries to destroy it." Besides instilling in me both wonder and fear as I contemplated the ministry, the statement succinctly captured the reality Prof. Hanko was expressing in the whole of his speech. From biblical times to today, there is an attempt to destroy faithful preaching, and behind the attempt is always the Devil himself. The Devil is no fool; he knows what faithful preaching is and how God uses it. Destroy faithful preaching, destroy the heavenly kingdom in this world.

There is a myriad of ways to attempt to cut off the golden tongue of heavenly preaching. In the medieval period the Devil's tactic was to push the church down the road of trusting in herself above the Word of God. Sometimes we have the impression that there simply was no preaching in the medieval period, but that is a misconception. There was *less* preaching to be sure, especially as the mass became the center of worship. But more than that, the problem was that the preaching that was there was not founded upon the Word of God. A medieval preacher could make as the text of his 'sermon' an implication of a scripture passage (but not the passage itself), a quotation from one of the church fathers, an aspect of church tradition, or even a quote from a philosopher! Preaching was no longer heavenly.

The sixteenth-century Reformers understood that preaching into which God infuses heavenly power is preaching that is an explanation and application of the heavenly Word of God come down to us on the earth. Thus, the formal principle of the Reformation, *sola scriptura*, came to greatest expression in the preaching of the Reformers. Powerful sermons rang throughout Europe, expounding God's Word, unleashing a pure gospel, and bringing heads, hearts, and hands into submission to God's heavenly rule. As the Reformers marched through passage after passage of Scripture, unfolding rich truths phrase by phrase, the gates of hell were not allowed to prevail against the heavenly church.

Andreas Hyperius and his preaching book

Yet, surprisingly, none of the Reformers whose names you know ever wrote a book teaching preachers how to preach—not Luther, not Calvin, not Zwingli.¹ The first man to do so was a Reformer whom you have probably never heard of, Andreas Hyperius (1511-1564). Hyperius produced a textbook titled, *The Practice of Preaching*,² which was used of God (and still is being used of God) to ensure that the preaching of the church remained heavenly.

Andreas Hyperius was born in Dutch West Flanders in 1511, two years after the birth of John Calvin.³ The two reformers lived and worked contemporaneously, dying only three months apart in 1564. Although he spent most of his working days in Lutheran lands, Hyperius loved the biblical doctrine of predestination that Calvin taught. Consequently, Hyperius himself taught Calvinistic doctrine as professor of historical, systematic, and practical theology in Marburg. Like Calvin, Hyperius was constrained to stay in a place through which he had only intended to pass. After stopping in Marburg on his way to Strasburg (where he intended to visit Bucer), he was prevailed upon to stay and assist the Reformation movement in that city. Hyperius spent his entire career in Marburg. Though not as well known as he should be, Hyperius was a brilliant theologian. Calvin himself highly commended him and his work. Beza praised him for his theological acumen and especially for his

1 They wrote about preaching and commented on aspects of how to preach in various places in their writings, but did not write a textbook for teaching preachers. Melancthon wrote a number of books on rhetoric that were applied to preaching, but among these was no true homiletics textbook.

2 Andreas Hyperius, *The Practise of Preaching, Otherwise Called the Pathway to the Pulpit Conteyning an Excellent Method how to Frame Divine Sermons, & to Interpret the Holy Scriptures According to the Capacitie of the Vulgar People. First written in Latin by the Learned Pastor of Christes Church, D. Andreas Hyperius: and Now Lately (to the profit of the same Church) Englished by John Ludham, Vicar of Wethersfeld. 1577* (London: Thomas East, 1577).

3 Gerhard Rau, "Hyperius, Andreas," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 299-300.

contributions to Reformation preaching. According to Achelis, Hyperius’s “efforts in...the homiletic department are almost epoch-making, and become the basis of Evangelical [Protestant] sermon formation.”⁴

Hyperius’s six important contributions

In the remainder of this article, let’s look at six important contributions Hyperius made that encouraged heavenly preaching then, and still encourages it now.

First, Hyperius codified in a textbook the Reformation commitment to preaching and applying Scripture alone. For Hyperius, the Word of God alone has the heavenly power to “conduce to the salvation and reconciliation of man to God.”⁵ The minister must therefore “produce out of the fountains of the Scriptures” the content of the sermon, and then apply it “to the present state of things and matters incident.”⁶ How important in our day that the ministry retain this conviction! In the evangelical world, movie clips, skits, and more take the place of the preaching of the Word, as though these things will be the power to save and preserve God’s people—another front of the Devil’s attack on heavenly preaching. May there never be such a lack of conviction regarding the power of the proclamation of heaven’s Word among us! The result would soon be a famine of the same.

Second, Hyperius taught future ministers that the Word of God must be preached with “plain and perspicuous [clear] speech.”⁷ Preaching is heavenly when the sermon allows the Word of God to come through to the people of God clearly and powerfully. There is always a temptation for ministers to use the pulpit to show off their intelligence and ability to discuss complex matters. In fact, shortly after Calvin’s death in Geneva, there was a complaint there that ministers trained in Geneva were preaching above the people’s heads. They would make their text one word from the Bible so that they could show off how much they could say about it. The sermon would quote philosophers and poets, so that finally sermons “distanced themselves in every way from the solid simplicity of the Scriptures...turning the presentation of the Word of God into futile gibberish.”⁸ The solution

for the masters in Geneva was to teach preaching by use of Hyperius’ textbook!

Third, Hyperius helpfully applied *sola scriptura* not only to the *content* of preaching, but also to the *form* of preaching. For preaching to be heavenly, Hyperius believed the Bible ought to tell us not only *what* to preach, but also *how* to preach it. Hyperius observed that many of the sermons recorded in the Bible had a central theme to them so that one main point was made. Likewise, the parables of Jesus and the epistles of Paul. Based on this scriptural observation, Hyperius taught ministers to have a theme for their sermons. The theme should be “a brief sum of the whole matter, whereof a man purposeth to speak, and even the argument and fountain of the whole oration.”⁹ He then said, in order to make the whole sermon a unity around that theme, the preacher must divide his sermon into [normally three] divisions that logically explain the theme. I would imagine this sounds familiar! But this was quite revolutionary for Protestant churches at the time. Calvin and the other Reformers did not have a theme and divisions for their sermons. Consequently, their sermons often did not have a unity to them. They could often be a collection of diverse thoughts with no harmonizing point. The fact that PRC preachers and many other preachers use a theme and divisions, in contrast to Calvin in this sense, is a direct result of the influence of Hyperius.

Fourth, Hyperius called for blood, sweat, and tears from the preacher, as he prepared his sermons for preaching and prepared himself to preach his sermons. Hyperius said the minister must “with great industry apply himself” to sermon making, since it is the heaven-sent food for the souls of God’s people.¹⁰ Indeed, Hyperius noted, there “is nothing more unseemly” than a minister who did not do the work necessary to produce faithful and edifying sermons.¹¹ But even after the sermon manuscript is finished, Hyperius said the minister must not stop working. He is not yet ready to *preach* the sermon he made. The preacher must prepare his own heart and mind to bring the Word of God. He must do this, Hyperius taught, by applying the passage to himself, praying the text, imagining the situation of God’s people in his own mind, and offering “fervent prayers” that the Spirit use the word that would soon be preached to bind God’s people to their Savior.¹² These things will prepare the preacher to speak as though life and death are in the balance (which they are). How

4 E.C. Achelis, “Hyperius (Gerhard), Andreas,” in Philip Schaff, *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library. https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/encyc05/encyc05/Page_432.html.

5 Hyperius, *The Practice of Preaching*, 9a.

6 *The Practice of Preaching*, 139b. I have modernized the English in the quotations.

7 *The Practice of Preaching*, 15b.

8 Quotation of the Genevan Company of Pastors found in Karin Maag, “Preaching Practice: Reformed Students’ Sermons,” in *Nederlandsch Archief Voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 85, no. 1 (2005), 141.

9 *The Practice of Preaching*, 21a.

10 *The Practice of Preaching*, 41a.

11 *The Practice of Preaching*, 16b.

12 Hyperius, *The Practice of Preaching*, 43a.

important, coming out of an age of lazy priests! Yet, still today, may Hyperius be used to spare us from idle ministers who do not seem to understand the import of what they are called to do.

Fifth, Hyperius reminded preachers of the necessity of good applications. Hyperius believed sermons should be doctrinal, but at the same time they should drive the people of God to where that doctrine would lead them. He saw in II Timothy 3:16 the main kinds of applications that ought to be in sermons: calling people to hold to truth and reject what is false, calling God's people to a godly life and warning them of an ungodly life, and granting comfort to the flock. In all these a minister ought to use repetition, gestures, silence, raising the voice, questions, hyperbole, and more to move God's people at the level of mind and heart (should the Spirit be working) toward faith and hope and love.¹³

13 *The Practice of Preaching*, 49a.

Faith...in Christ. Hope...in Christ. Love...for Christ, first of all. Because, sixth, Hyperius called for sermons that preached Christ as the great treasure of God's church. Preaching Christ, or failing to do so, was what made or broke a sermon for Hyperius. A preacher could be less gifted than another, but if he preached "doctrine that is sound," and if he "preached Christ," "all is well, and God is to be thanked."¹⁴ Even if we think it could be better, such preaching is heavenly, and thus powerful in the hands of the Spirit of Christ.

Hyperius taught true and faithful Reformation preaching in his textbook—the kind of preaching that will come under attack in various ways in every age. May there be in our day such heavenly preaching that is worth the Devil's time to attack! For such preaching alone is used of God now as then to build and preserve His eternal and heavenly kingdom in this earth.

14 *The Practice of Preaching*, 5a.



Prof. Ronald Cammenga, rector and professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

God's folly

Most junior high students know what "Seward's Folly" was. Appointed Secretary of State by Abraham Lincoln, Seward negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia during the presidency of Andrew Johnson. Most citizens thought that the purchase price of 7.2 million dollars was a waste of taxpayers' money and dubbed the deal "Seward's Folly." That "folly" proved itself over time to be a very wise investment, full of bounty, from oil to animal skins and from fish to forestry. It also proved to be militarily strategic in World War II.

The Bible speaks of another folly, a folly that is also in fact wisdom—wisdom extraordinaire. That is the way in which the apostle Paul refers to the preaching of the gospel in I Corinthians 1:18, where he says that "the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." And he adds in verse 21 that "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." Preaching is God's folly.

The Reformation's recovery of preaching

One of the greatest achievements of the Reformation was its restoration to the church of the pure preaching of the gospel. By the time of the Reformation, preaching had fallen into neglect. The church did not busy herself in the preaching of the gospel, and the clergy did not give themselves to making and delivering edifying sermons. Neither did the people come to worship services to hear carefully worked out expositions of God's Word.

Rather than to busy themselves in preaching the gospel, most of the leaders of the church either isolated themselves from God's people in monasteries or were preoccupied in worldly pursuits. Rather than laboring with the Word, clergymen whiled away their time in idleness, drunkenness, and debauchery. And rather than hearing God's Word regularly expounded on the Lord's Day, the members of the church contented themselves to attend mass, genuflect before images, visit holy shrines and relic collections, or trapse off on pilgrimages.

The Reformers changed all that. Being themselves preachers, the Reformers made a conscious effort to restore preaching to the church. It was by preaching that the Reformation began and by preaching that it spread. This was certainly true of Martin Luther. A. Skevington Wood says of Luther that “[h]e liberated the sermon from its medieval graveclothes, and made it once again a means of grace to sinners.”¹ Luther emphasized the centrality of preaching in worship, in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, which elevated the sacrifice of the mass above the preaching.

In his writings, Luther repeatedly insisted that the congregation is not to gather for worship unless the Word is preached. In a treatise entitled, “Concerning the Order of Public Worship” (1523), he complained of the serious abuses that had crept into divine worship. “The first,” he says, “is that God’s Word has been silenced, and only reading [of liturgy] and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst misuse.”² A little later in the same work he writes, “Now in order to do away with these misuses, it is necessary to know, first of all, that the Christian congregation never should assemble unless God’s Word is preached...no matter for how brief a time this may be. Therefore where God’s Word is not preached, it is better that one neither sing, nor read, nor even come together.” In his work on “The German Mass and Order of Service” (1526), Luther laid down the fundamental principle that “among Christians the whole service should center in the Word.”³

Salvation by means of preaching

No one who is in the least acquainted with Scripture can doubt that it is the will of God to work and to preserve faith in His people by means of the preaching of the gospel. In the Old Testament, preaching was the outstanding work of the prophets, in which they were assisted by the priests who lived in cities scattered throughout the twelve tribes of Israel. John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus were preachers. At the commencement of His public ministry, Jesus, according to Mark, came “preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14). The book of Acts demonstrates the commitment of the apostles to preaching and the use that God made of their preaching in gathering the early New Testament church. Of his own ministry Paul says in I Corinthians 1:17 that “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” He was

deeply conscious of the will of God that the preaching of the gospel is God’s means for the salvation of His elect people out of the nations of the world.

In addition to I Corinthians 1, the apostle teaches in Romans 1:16 that the preaching of the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.” Later in the epistle, in chapter 10, Paul concludes: “So then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” To Titus, his “own son after the common faith,” Paul says that God “hath in due times manifested his word through preaching” (Titus 1:3). The concluding section of II Timothy 3 contains the apostle’s classic defense of the Bible’s divine inspiration. We might expect that chapter 4 would commence with the admonition, “Read the Holy Scriptures.” Since the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, God is pleased to use the reading of Scripture for the salvation of His people. In fact, the apostle’s admonition to the young pastor Timothy is, “*Preach* the word!” Not first of all is the reading of Scripture God’s means of salvation, but hearing of the Scriptures as they are preached by faithful ministers of the gospel is the God-ordained means of salvation.

Preaching: God’s wisdom unto salvation

The question is, “Why?” Why is God pleased to elevate the preaching of the gospel to such an extent that it is the outstanding means unto salvation?

More than one answer can be given to this question. I will point out two reasons on account of which God has chosen the preaching of the Word as the chief means of grace.

The first reason has to do with the truth that God is a covenant God. As a covenant God, He is a speaking God, a God of friendship and fellowship. Friends speak to each other and delight in speaking with each other. Those who are at odds with each other stop speaking to one another, whether that is husband and wife in marriage, brothers in the church, or next-door neighbors. The outstanding expression of love is fellowship—fellowship that takes place by speaking. Within His own divine being, God is a speaking God. At the very dawn of history, God showed Himself to be a speaking God. He did not think the world into existence, or only will it into existence; rather, He spoke all things into being: “And God *said*, Let there be light: and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). Consistent with His covenantal being and in harmony with Himself as a speaking God, God uses the public proclamation of His Word for the salvation of His elect people. Because He is a speaking God, it “pleases God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (I Cor. 1:21).

1 A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 92.

2 *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*. Ulrich S. Leupold, ed. American ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 7.

3 *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53, p. 51.

There is a second reason on account of which God is pleased to use the preaching of the gospel as the means of salvation. God is pleased to use the weakness and foolishness of preaching to save sinners in order that the glory for their salvation may be His and His alone. Exactly because of the foolishness of preaching, God has chosen it as the means to work faith and preserve in faith.

God's folly—that certainly is sinful man's assessment of the preaching of the gospel. Sinful man disparages the preaching of the gospel and scoffs at the preaching as foolish. That, too, has been the testimony of history, both in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament they rejected, railed at, persecuted, and killed God's faithful prophets. That was also the experience of the Lord Jesus and the apostles.

Contempt for preaching continues today, even in the churches. Rome's rejection of the centrality of the preaching in worship at the time of the Reformation is far and away the attitude of the Protestant churches today. It is one significant measure of the apostasy of the church. The churches devalue preaching, more and more shortening the time given for the sermon in public worship. Often the second service is eliminated or, where there is a second service, the preaching is replaced by musical groups, personal testimonies, panel discussions, liturgical dancing, drama, and all kinds of other rubbish that is supposed to attract the people, especially the young people. The churches have lost confidence in the wisdom of God in the preaching of the gospel. They regard the preaching as foolish.

God's folly is God's wisdom

And, indeed, preaching is foolishness, as every preacher must acknowledge on Monday morning when he is filing away yesterday's sermons and beginning to work on his new sermons for the week. How foolish and how weak! He cannot help but shake his head and wonder, if he is honest with himself, how God could use his preaching as wisdom and power to save anyone. *His* sermons as the power to save? The elderly saint who asked that penetrating question, inadvertently pointed out a weakness in yesterday morning's sermon. The wife and mother who wondered about the missing application to her pointed out a failure in the evening sermon. "Why didn't I see that weakness in the sermon? How could I have missed that obvious application or point of exegesis?" Even though he worked hard at making his sermons, the preacher is humbled by what he realizes were shortcomings in the sermons that he preached to the congregation.

That points to the second reason on account of which

preaching, as foolish and weak as it is, is the wisdom and power of God. True, preaching appears to be an utterly foolish means to save sinners. It is the word spoken by a mere man who is himself a sinner. Even if the preacher is considered to be a fine orator. Even if the preacher is able to keep his listeners on the edge of their seats—few are. Even when the preacher is considered to be the best of his day—for men are wont to make such comparisons. And even when he is considered to be the prince of preachers, or the preacher with a golden tongue. Even then preaching remains the word of a feeble and fallen sinner—a vessel of clay.

Preaching as a means to salvation might be compared to throwing a hammer to a drowning man, trusting that the hammer will be the means to save him. Or, exhorting a person on the tenth floor of a burning building to jump into a garbage can, assuring him that the garbage can will be the means to save his life. Or, giving a heart-attack victim a sugar cube, expecting that it will alleviate his angina and open up his clogged arteries. How foolish, you say. Similarly foolish, it would seem, is the power of the preaching of the gospel to save lost sinners.

But the power of God stands behind the weakness of the preaching and the preacher. And behind the power of God is the will of God. And behind the will of God, God's determination to be glorified in the salvation of sinners. That God is pleased to use the weak and foolish means of preaching to save sinners is due to the overriding will of God that He and He alone should receive the glory for the salvation of sinners—every sinner! That God would use such a weak, powerless, imperfect, and utterly foolish means as preaching to save is due to His unwavering resolution to receive *all* the glory for Himself. He is a jealous God! That God is pleased to use such a weak means is His wisdom to ensure that He alone receives the glory. Not the preacher. Not the church. Certainly not the sinner himself. That such a weak means is powerful in the hand of God to save makes abundantly clear that the sinner's salvation is due to Him and His almighty power. Preaching is the means in His hand.

For, you see, God's weakness is mightier than the mightiest man. And God's folly is wiser than the wisest man. "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (I Cor. 1:27) in order that now and into the ages of eternity, He might be glorified.



Rev. Joshua Engelsma, pastor of Crete PRC in Crete, Illinois

Preaching the call of the gospel

A necessary element of biblical, Reformed preaching is the issuing of the call of the gospel. That call is the command to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Savior from sin.

We ought to have a proper understanding of the place of the call of the gospel in the preaching on account of the history of the Protestant Reformed churches. Our origins as a denomination nearly one hundred years ago lie in a denial of the teaching that makes the call of the gospel into a well-meant offer. While opposing that teaching, we have been regularly charged with falling into the opposite error of promoting hyper-Calvinism. To avoid both of these errors we must understand and appreciate the nature and necessity of the gospel call.

Refute

To begin, let's sketch out the two errors that we reject. Doing so will help clarify what we mean when we talk about the call of the gospel.

On the one hand, the church is threatened by the error of the well-meant offer of the gospel. The teaching of the well-meant offer is, briefly, that in the preaching God offers salvation to all who hear, expressing a certain kind of grace and love for them and a desire for them to be saved. According to the proponents of the well-meant offer, the only way in which the command to repent and believe can be preached with any urgency and fervor is if there is a certain desire of God for all who hear to be saved.

The PRC has consistently rejected the teaching of the well-meant offer of the gospel. In summary, we reject the well-meant offer for the following main reasons:

- 1) it is based on the idea of a universal, resistible grace of God to all who hear;
- 2) it implies that salvation is dependent upon the free will of natural man and his acceptance of the offered salvation;
- 3) it conflicts with the truth of God's eternal, unconditional election and His eternal desire to save only the elect;
- 4) it implies that Christ's death on the cross made

salvation possible for all, even though some for whom He died will not ultimately be saved.

Obviously, what we set forth positively regarding the call of the gospel must be distinguished clearly from the well-meant offer of the gospel. At the same time, it is important for our witness against the well-meant offer in the broader church world that we maintain and practice the serious call of the gospel. Failing to do so gives occasion for the proponents of the well-meant offer to shrug off our objections merely by branding us as "hyper-Calvinists."

Hyper-Calvinism is the other outstanding error the church must be on guard against. The word "hyper" indicates something being above and beyond, so that hyper-Calvinism refers to someone who is going beyond Calvinism in his theology. Specifically, hyper-Calvinism is the error that maintains that the church ought not proclaim the call to repent and believe to all who hear. Rather, the call of the gospel may only be addressed to those whom we are reasonably sure are regenerated and, therefore, elect.

In the history of the church there have been genuine hyper-Calvinists. Usually the names of the English theologians Joseph Hussey, Lewis Wayman, John Brine, and John Gill are listed as proponents of hyper-Calvinism. In America, one example is Mrs. Anne Hutchinson, who was involved in the antinomian controversy in New England in the 1600s. She denied the gospel call by saying that "all commands in the word are Law, and are not a way of life, and the command of faith is a Law, and therefore killeth."¹

As much as we are opposed to the error of the well-meant offer of the gospel, so opposed are we to the error of hyper-Calvinism. As much as we warn against the error of the well-meant offer of the gospel, so ought we to warn against the error of hyper-Calvinism. Neither one is genuinely Reformed.

¹ Quoted in David J. Engelsma and Herman Hanko, *Be Ye Holy: The Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification* (Ballymena, NI: British Reformed Fellowship, 2016), 79.

Prove

Over against hyper-Calvinism, faithful preaching must include the promiscuous proclamation of the call of the gospel.

The fact that the call of the gospel must be an aspect of faithful preaching is clearly taught in the New Testament. At the close of the Old Testament and the dawning of the New Testament, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Messiah by preaching the call of the gospel: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2).

Jesus Christ Himself preached the call of the gospel during His earthly ministry. Matthew 4:17 summarizes the content of His preaching this way: “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He preached the gospel (“the kingdom of heaven is at hand”), and with that He issued the command (“repent”). In the parallel passage in Mark 1:15, there is the added reference to Jesus’ preaching the call to faith: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.” In the well-known words of Matthew 11:28, Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” and it is plain that by “come” He meant “believe” (cf. His identification of “coming” with “believing” in John 6:35).

Jesus taught the necessity of preaching the call of the gospel in a significant parable in Matthew 22. He likened the kingdom of heaven to a king who had prepared a wedding feast at the occasion of the wedding of his son. The king commanded his servants to go forth calling men to the feast: “Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my failings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage” (v. 4). The parable concludes with the commentary: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (v. 14). It is plain that in the parable God is the king and Jesus Christ is the son. The servants are ministers, who are charged with proclaiming that the wedding feast is prepared and issuing the command to all to come. While many are called to the feast, only few come because only few are chosen.

Having been taught by Jesus’ word and example as to how they were to preach, the apostles also issued the call to faith and repentance.

They preached the call to *repentance*. When Jesus sent the disciples out two-by-two to preach, they preached repentance: “And they went out, and preached that men should repent” (Mark 6:12). Peter called the crowd assembled in Jerusalem at Pentecost to repent (Acts 2:38), preached the same thing shortly after to the crowd in the temple after he healed the lame man (Acts 3:19),

and called Simon the sorcerer to repent (Acts 8:22). Paul preached the call to repentance when he was in Athens on his second missionary journey: “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30).

The apostles also preached the call to *faith* in Christ. When Paul was in Antioch of Pisidia on his first missionary journey, he clearly implied the call to believe: “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). When the Philippian jailer asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:30-31).

When Paul summarized his preaching among the Ephesians, he mentions both elements of faith and repentance: “Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

Summarizing this biblical evidence, the Canons of Dordt (II.5) say, “Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.”² Similarly, Q&A 84 of the Heidelberg Catechism says regarding preaching, “Thus, when according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ’s merits; and on the contrary, when it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted; according

2 Likewise, the Westminster Confession of Faith (15.1) says: “Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.” In summarizing the teaching of the Reformed confessions, the Protestant Reformed Churches’ “Declaration of Principles” says, “The Canons in II, 5 speak of the preaching of the promise. It presents the promise, not as general, but as particular, that is, for believers, and, therefore, for the elect. This *preaching* of the particular promise is promiscuous to all that hear the gospel, with the *command*, not a condition, to repent and believe.” Later it says, “And we maintain...that the preaching comes to all; and that God seriously commands to faith and repentance; and that to all those who come and believe He promises life and peace.”

to which testimony of the gospel God will judge them, both in this life and in the life to come.” By subscribing to the Reformed confessions, ministers are bound to proclaim the call of the gospel to both believers and unbelievers: “Repent and believe!”

Explain

Having seen the biblical mandate to preach the call of the gospel, we ought to understand something about the practice and theology of the gospel call.

How is the call of the gospel to be preached?

First, the preaching must expose sin. There is a place here for the preaching of the law (in the context of the gospel). One of the functions of the law is that it serves to bring sinners under the conviction of their sins and show them that there is no hope of salvation in themselves and their keeping of the law.

Second, the preaching must set forth the gospel of salvation in Christ crucified alone. The law may not be preached as an end in itself so that sinners are merely left under the crushing weight of the law’s condemnation. The law must show sinners their hopeless condition, and then the gospel must set forth Jesus Christ as the only hope for sinners. For preaching to be preaching, it must proclaim the gospel. Its emphasis must be on the Lord Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, and His righteousness.

Third, the preaching will declare that faith is the sole means of salvation, the sole means by which sinners receive and enjoy the benefits of salvation in Christ. This faith is not something of which any may boast, for it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29).

Fourth, the preaching must proclaim a particular promise, that is, a promise only for believers. That promise is: “whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:15, 16). This is not a general promise to all men, but a particular promise to believers (and those who believe are the elect).

Fifth, the preaching of the particular promise must be proclaimed promiscuously. It is not God’s will that the gospel be heard by all men; there have been many throughout history who have lived and died without ever hearing the gospel. But this fact may not keep the church from seeking to proclaim that gospel far and wide. And when the gospel is preached, there is no attempt to try to discern whether the hearers are elect and reprobate, for the Lord alone knows the hearts of men. The particular promise is proclaimed to both believers and unbelievers, elect and reprobate.

Sixth, as the particular gospel promise is proclaimed, there is proclaimed with it the command to repent and believe. This serious command is set before all. It is pro-

claimed not only on the mission field, but also in the established congregation. While the way in which we view the church institute is that she is the gathering of believers and their seed, we know that hypocrites may be found among her. All must be confronted with the gospel call. This call must often be proclaimed explicitly; but in every sermon where Jesus Christ is proclaimed the gospel call is at least clearly implied.

The fact that the command to repent and believe is set before all men without distinction does not imply the ability of the natural man to repent and believe. This is a fallacious line of thinking. God seriously commands men to repent and believe, but no natural man has the ability to repent and believe. “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44).

What then is God’s purpose with the gospel call? While the one proclaiming the gospel call does not know who are elect and who are reprobate, God has a purpose with the gospel call for both.

On the one hand, God has a purpose with the gospel call for the reprobate. His purpose in setting before them the gospel of Jesus Christ and the call to repent and believe serves to harden them in their unbelief and impenitence, and thus leaves them further without excuse in the judgment day.

On the other hand, God has a purpose with the gospel call for the elect. His purpose is to save them through it. As they hear the gospel proclaimed and hear the call of the gospel, God works in the hearts of His elect faith in Jesus Christ and sorrow over their sins. What He commands, He gives to the elect. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

It is in this connection that we ought to note the distinction made in Reformed theology between the external and internal aspects of the gospel call. The *external* aspect of the calling refers to the outward preaching of the gospel alone, without the inner work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who hear. Those who receive the external call consist of both elect and reprobate (cf. Matt. 22:14). The *internal* aspect of the calling refers to that inner, saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the elect as they come under the external call of the gospel. This is sometimes referred to as the “effectual calling” or the “saving call,” and is reserved only for God’s elect. The Bible often has this aspect in view when it refers to the calling (for example, Rom. 8:30; I Pet. 2:9).

Apply

The necessity of the gospel call is an important reminder for us as members of the PRC. We ought not be nervous

when the minister proclaims the gospel call, or become suspicious that his doing so is somehow sub-Reformed or Arminian. Many years ago Prof. David Engelsma warned the churches against the spirit of hyper-Calvinism, and those warnings are as fitting today as they were then:

Another betrayal of the spirit of hyper-Calvinism is embarrassment and hesitation, that is, fear, over giving the call “Repent! Believe!” and over declaring the promise, “Whosoever believes shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” This language is not suspect. It is not the language of Arminian free-willism. It is pure, sound, biblical language. It is as much a part of the Reformed heritage as is the statement of divine, double predestination.

When hyper-Calvinism has developed somewhat, there is a failure, even a refusal, to preach the admonitions and exhortations of the scriptures to the saints on the

ground that good gospel preachers should not tell God’s people what to do. At the very least, the admonitions and exhortations are not proclaimed with the sharpness, urgency, boldness, and freedom that obtain in the scriptures.³

The necessity of the gospel call is also an important reminder for ministers of the gospel. We ministers ought not be hesitant or ashamed to preach the serious call of the gospel. It is biblical. It is truly Reformed. It ought not be a rare thing that our people hear us say: “Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ! Whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life!”

³ David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel: An Examination of the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2014), 193-95.



Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, pastor of Pittsburgh PRC in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Preaching in missions

Rather than addressing the subject of preaching on the mission field from an abstract point of view, I intend in this article to exemplify what I write by using some of my experiences on the mission field both in a foreign country and in the United States. Though I have preached in several third world countries (Ghana, India, and the Philippines), I can best draw from my labors for several years on the island of Jamaica. Likewise, though I have preached in several different cities in the U.S., I draw from my labors especially in Pittsburgh.

Preaching is the power and wisdom of God unto salvation to those who are called. Not only to those who are called of the Jews, that is, those within the church, but also of the Greeks, those outside of the church (I Cor. 1:24). The preaching is used by God to call unto faith and repentance us and our children, but also the many who are afar off (Acts 2:39). The church, therefore, is mandated by the King of the church to preach the gospel to all creatures, discipling the nations. This calling stands behind the need to preach the gospel on the mission field. Neither may this calling of the church be viewed as secondary to preaching within the church.

Only a self-absorbed church will ignore the necessity of preaching outside the sphere of the established church.

Preaching, whether within the church institute or on the mission field, is the official proclamation of God’s Word through the ordained office of pastor and teacher. Men, therefore, are called and sent forth by the church to preach the Word on the mission field. Such preaching to those outside of the confines of the church is no different than that of the preaching to established churches. It consists in the faithful exposition of God’s Word. The missionary is not a social worker. His purpose is not to enter the pulpit with pious platitudes, moral homilies, or religious concessions with the purpose of drawing people into the church. He must preach the gospel. He must preach sin, issue the call to repentance, and administer the good news of salvation found in the cross of Jesus Christ alone. He must preach the Word in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (II Tim. 4:2). Preaching must always be preaching in the truest sense of the word.

Simple

When on a mission field, however, the missionary must take into account those to whom he preaches the Word. Can you imagine a missionary preaching a sermon that we hear in a Protestant Reformed church to people in the back hills of Jamaica whose understanding of the Scripture is minimal and half of whom are illiterate? It did not take me more than one sermon to realize that what I had preached did not touch one heart. The blank looks on their faces together with the increased amount of “amens” was a clear indication that the listeners did not understand a word I said. (I found that the more the saints in Jamaica took an interest in what I was preaching the less were their shouts of “amen.”) Preaching on a mission field must always take into account those addressed. In a couple of the churches in Jamaica I covered a piece of plywood with chalk board paint and hung it behind the pulpit in front of the church. When I preached, I would at times draw pictures in an attempt to make clear the concepts of the passage on which I spoke—something that in our own churches we might consider a prop and therefore taboo. Common sense, however, dictated what was needed to teach God’s people in this foreign country through the preaching.

Even in home missions, however, the preaching must be kept simple enough for those to understand who are not familiar with the Reformed faith. Those who have been born and raised in the PRC have been catechized in the Reformed faith already while yet young. We have heard Heidelberg Catechism preaching from earliest childhood. Now, imagine sitting in a mission where the preacher is talking about righteousness, or predestination, or the image of God, having never heard of these concepts, or if having heard them never had them explained to them. Preaching on a mission field may not assume a knowledge of the concepts that often is assumed when preaching in an established church. This is not to say that the Word of God must be so watered down that as a result it is not expounded. But what Paul writes to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 3:2 must be kept in mind: “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat, for hitherto ye were not able to bear it.” Although I have always made it a practice to preach through the Catechism on the home mission field in order to teach those of the mission that they are a part of a work of a confessional church, nevertheless additional sermons often were needed to explain each Lord’s Day.

Contextual

It is often thought that preaching on the mission field must always call people out of the darkness of sin and

unbelief and to faith in Jesus Christ. Every sermon, therefore, must issue the call to repent and turn from sin, as if the people sitting in the mission are yet lost in unbelief and must be turned to faith through the preaching. It is true, that the preaching in a mission setting must call sinners to repent of their sins, but the same is true of preaching in the established church. In that way, preaching on a mission field does not differ from that of preaching in the established church.

Preaching on a mission field, however, must be “contextual.” The preaching must address the conditions in which the members of the mission find themselves. The preaching does that in our own churches. When the churches are affected, for example, by external circumstances such as covid or the death of a member, the preaching will address that. If there is doctrinal error or sin prevalent in the church, sermons will address these. The same is true on a mission field. The people in the hills of Jamaica were strongly influenced by voodooism or shamanism. Because of the mysticism involved in these pagan beliefs, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements made deep inroads into the hills of Jamaica. The preaching therefore warned against such error and directed God’s people to the need to follow after the objective truth contained in the Scriptures alone.

The people in Jamaica lived for the most part in a matriarchal society. Fornication abounded, men took no responsibility for children, life and the churches in the hills depended on the leading of mothers. When instructing in one of the churches on the need for men to be officebearers in the church, one woman asked, “But what if there are no men to serve as officebearers?” Those who attended the churches in Jamaica had no knowledge of God’s covenant and what that entailed. Much of the focus of the preaching centered in the covenant established in the line of the generations of good godly homes and families. Young people were admonished to abstain from fornication. Young men were taught that God required of them to find a wife and to be faithful to her and to bring forth children unto the Lord.

The point is, preaching on a mission field must take into account the circumstances or conditions surrounding the people to whom the gospel is preached all the while calling to faith and repentance.

The Protestant Reformed Churches are found in suburban neighborhoods and are made up for the most part of suburbanites. That is the particular culture of the people of our churches. Although it is slowly changing, many of our members are of a Dutch background. All that has to do with the way we think and view the world around us. Over half the congregation in Pittsburgh

came out of Roman Catholicism or Pentecostalism and are of varied ethnic backgrounds. That certainly gives a unique character to the congregation here. There is a beautiful blend of people who come from various backgrounds and yet stand together in unity with one another. But it took time and the preaching of the gospel to bring about the blessed cohesion we experience now as a congregation. What unites us is the truth of God's Word that has been administered through the years. But that truth had to address the various misconceptions the saints had in what they at one time believed as well as the way they had at one time lived. The preaching had to be contextual. All these things are necessary when preaching and laboring in missions.

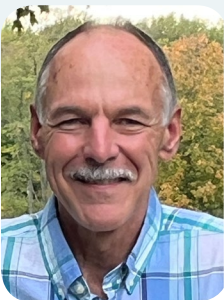
What is perhaps most glaring on a mission field is what Jesus teaches us in the Parable of the Sower. I realize this parable applies to the established church as well, but what it teaches can especially be evidenced on a mission field. We learn in this parable that seed sowed by a farmer falls into four types of soil. Three of the types of soil are bad and one is good. Some of the scattered seed, first of all, falls into the wayside soil and birds quickly devour the seed so it does not take root. Especially in home missions there is a steady trickle of visitors each Sunday that come to hear the preaching. Most do not return. Some may have been curious, but most hear the gospel and, since it does not appeal to the flesh, they determine never to return.

Others, however, do return for a time to sit under the preaching—some shorter and some longer. Some come with genuine excitement but after a time grow discouraged and, though much time, labor, and love have been

bestowed upon them, they leave. One reason is that they would like to compromise with others in order that the membership in the mission might grow. When they find that the preaching and the truth maintained in the mission will not be compromised, they become bitter and leave. They are as seed that falls into stony places. Others are as seed that falls among thorns. They seem to flourish for a time but the disciplined life of the church is too rigid for them. As time progresses, the preaching no longer is a joy but becomes a burden and they too leave the mission.

These reactions to the gospel preached happen over and over and over again. Preaching on the mission field, though a joy because of the seed that falls into good soil, can become discouraging. What lightens the hearts of the preacher and the saints who gladly hear the preaching from week to week is that God is accomplishing His will and good pleasure in calling His people through the Word preached and by the Spirit of our risen Lord. How true is the reminder that we learn in Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." The Word preached is a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish. What a great privilege it is to preach the Word!

May the church go forth in the power of our risen Lord and continue to preach the gospel in season and out of season. May she not grow weary in preaching the gospel through the work of missions.



Mr. Howard Pastoor, an elder and member of Zion PRC in Jenison, Michigan

The elder's blessed calling to oversee the gospel preaching

The elders are called by God to rule and oversee the church of Jesus Christ. This oversight also includes the calling to preach the gospel faithfully in the church and on the mission field.

The elders are accountable to God Himself for what is preached, how it is preached, and for what is not

preached on the pulpit. This calling has eternal significance that ought to bring all faithful officebearers to their knees, confessing with the apostle Paul, "And who is sufficient for these things?" (II Cor. 2:16). God's grace is sufficient for those who humble themselves before Him and ask in faith (James 4:6).

Of necessity, the oversight of the preaching includes the oversight of the preacher. He must be one who fears God and who loves Him and His sheep, for out of the heart of man are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). He must be one who trembles before the Word of God and in whom God dwells, and also has a humble and contrite spirit. The words of Isaiah 57:15 should be etched into his heart. This indwelling of God is none other than the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ who empowers the preacher and gives power to his preaching.

In the supervision of the preaching, the elders must insist that the pastor's priority is preaching the Word, and that includes allocating sufficient time to prepare sermons. Detailed monthly pastor reports to the consistory may be one of the ways for elders to make this determination.

The preaching must only be from the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures and as taught by our Reformed confessions, the Three Forms of Unity. The Heidelberg Catechism must also be preached so that all the doctrines of Scripture are taught on a regular basis.

We must be reminded that preaching is worship, for the center of our worship is the preaching of the gospel. The glory and greatness of God must always be at the forefront in the preaching; it must always be Christ-centered.

The preaching, being Christ-centered, is the gospel of grace, the good news to those who believe, the elect. This gospel must be preached as both John the Baptist and Jesus preached: Repent and believe for the kingdom of God is at hand (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15), in the established church and on the mission field.

Even though the pastor may address the flock as the beloved, they still must be called to repent; the necessity of reading the law every Sunday underscores this. The beloved must still be called to believe. Yes, believers as well as unbelievers must be called to believe. The believers must continue to believe, continue to be persuaded to embrace and to confess the promises of God (Mark 9:24; Heb. 3:12, 13; 11:13), lest they harden their hearts through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13) and fall into unbelief (Heb. 3:19).

The oversight of a young pastor and his preaching is especially significant. The elders must have the heart of a father to nurture and mold the inexperienced pastor so that he may develop and grow as a servant of Christ to preach with wisdom, humility, and confidence. It is a horrible mistake for the elders to assume that their young pastor, who has a great deal of education and training, can immediately take on all the responsibilities of the ministry as if he were a seasoned minister. This assumption is a neglect of

the duty of the elders to supervise and can cause great harm to the congregation and crush the inexperienced pastor.

Great care must be taken to oversee the pastor's workload, the priorities in his work, to encourage him, and also give constructive, helpful criticism where needed. The elders, however, must avoid micromanagement as a 'helicopter' parent over their child. It may be wise and beneficial to have a line item on the monthly consistory agenda to discuss his workload and preaching, and properly to assess all aspects of his ministry. The elders should develop a close working relationship with their young pastor to promote free and open discussion. There must be an environment of mutual trust, respect, honesty, transparency, and love among the brethren. The cause of God's kingdom is advanced when the pastor and elders share the common goal: the glory of God and the salvation and spiritual growth of God's people through the lively preaching of the Word.

In the oversight of the preaching, the elders must also lead by example and instruction. The congregation must know to be mindful and patient; their inexperienced young pastor will not become a seasoned preacher overnight. By God's grace and with the elders' help he will grow in the Word, in wisdom, and preaching skills. The congregation must be patient and understanding and the fruit of this patience will be joy when they see their pastor develop and flourish.

The elders should admonish those who are publicly impatient with the speed of their pastor's growth and development, and firmly deal with those who continue to harp and criticize. Allowing this atmosphere to continue and fester will severely damage the unity and witness of the church and also break the spirit of their pastor.

Preaching is a God-ordained way, a living, powerful way, to address the needs of God's people; nothing is more effective. "For the word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

In order to address the needs of the congregation, the pastor must know his flock. The elders, with the help of their wives, are a valuable resource for the pastor to know those needs. Many of the elders may have been lifelong members of the congregation and be very familiar with the peculiar dynamics of the church and personalities, know the families, extended families, and history.

The Reformed churches also have a wonderful, personal tool to help the pastor and elders know the

members of the church. It is called family visitation, a very profitable practice we should continue. Family visitation gives an occasion for the elders and pastor to see the home and setting of the family, and in a very personal and loving way ask questions—leading questions—that may open the door to know of circumstances, trials, and even weaknesses and sins that were unknown before. They may discover wounded hearts, overburdened mothers, or anxious teenagers who need the healing balm of God’s Word. As elders and pastors work together, I believe it would be beneficial to have a standing line item in the consistory agenda to discuss the known needs of the congregation and how to address these needs in the preaching.

How wonderful it is when Christ, by the power of His Holy Spirit, speaks to His bride through the preaching, which in essence is a personal encounter with Christ. Thus, knowing the flock of Christ, the preacher is able to bring the Word of God to bear on all their needs and cares, for God’s Word is sufficient (II Tim. 3:14-17; Ps. 9:7). So sufficient and powerful is that Word, it is able to revive the broken and contrite heart, to bring life even as Jesus brought the dead to life and said, “Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43). The preaching of the Word is sufficient for all facets of life and can be applied to every situation. It is sufficient to effectively exhort (encourage), exalt (praise God), admonish (warn and teach), bless, comfort, give hope, and forgive but also to judge.

Through faithful preaching and application, God is glorified through His Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that in essence is true worship. The pastor, by the preaching, proclaims to the bride of Christ, “Behold your God” (Is. 40:9), and the bride responds in adoration and praise saying, “Amen.”

The heart of the pastor and elders must always be one of love and care for the souls entrusted to them by God. By the preaching of the gospel of grace, they lead the flock of Christ to the green pastures and still waters so that they may be gathered from the four corners of the world to partake of the true meat and drink, Jesus Christ, in this life and the life to come.

In the oversight of the preaching, the elders, of course, must guard against all false doctrine and heresy. In order to be faithful in this aspect, the elders must first be men of the Word, who know it, meditate on it, and love it. Their understanding of the Scriptures must be aligned with the Three Forms of Unity, which they have vowed to defend. The elders must also see to it that their pastor warns against all false doctrine and heresy. Even as the pastor battles hard against false

doctrine and the lie, he must always preach the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

Consider how Jesus dealt with the Samaritan woman, a sinner who worshiped a god she knew not of. In compassion and love, Jesus brought the Word of Life to her, to save her from her wicked life and false knowledge of God. However, the words of Christ were very severe against the self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees, Sadducees, and the doctors of the law.

The elders may never allow the preaching to be hijacked by an activist with an agenda to coerce and drive the sheep instead of gently leading them. The preacher must say, “Thus saith the Lord.” He is purely an ambassador of King Jesus, to speak His words. There is no place on the pulpit for personal opinions and preferences, ever.

The elders must also have zero tolerance for anyone who preaches Christ out of envy, strife, or contention (Phil. 1:15). This type of ‘preaching’ is not of the Holy Spirit, but of the spirit of darkness: it blasphemes God’s name, His church, and destroys the witness of the church in the Christian community and in the world. This type of ‘preaching’ in the church also creates a toxic environment of self-righteousness, pride, and arrogance and gives birth to overzealous, hyper-vigilant disciples who love to hate and divide, all in the name of Jesus. May God spare the church of any of this wickedness.

The elders must also have oversight of the preaching as pertaining to the practical applications of God’s Word in our daily life. There is much latitude here, nonetheless, great care, wisdom, and prayer are needed.

An example of misapplying the truth of God is found in the book of Job. The three friends of Job had much advice to give; they spoke much of God, of His righteousness, sovereignty, and power. Even though they spoke many things that were true, God calls them words of folly (Job 42:8). Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were guilty of misapplying God’s Word and in doing so they brought not comfort and encouragement to their friend but only more pain, so much so that Job was brought to despair of his life. This was not just a small mistake; it was a sin of such magnitude that God’s wrath was kindled against them and He commanded them to make an offering for their sin and told Job to pray for them (Job 42:7-9).

May God give grace to the elders of the church to be faithful, wise, and humble in their labors for His glory.



Mr. Dan VanDyke, member of Faith PRC in Jenison, Michigan and teacher in Heritage Christian School, Hudsonville, Michigan

When the weak come to worship

For the sincere child of God, one of the most terrifying passages in all of Scripture must be James 1:22: “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” Such a clear command with such a dire consequence for disobedience. Those who hear the Word and walk away unchanged are in dreadful danger of falling into self-deception: believing themselves to be faithful followers of Christ and yet continuing in their sins. God’s Word simply *must* change us, and not just every once in a while, but regularly. If it does not, we have reason for concern that we are fooling ourselves regarding our spiritual health.

The very fact that the Word must change us is already astounding to contemplate. That He draws us to worship Him through listening to a simple man speaking should only deepen our awe of His wondrous grace. Think of all the modern means of communication: podcasts, radio programs, videos, and more. God could have chosen any means to communicate with us. He could have implanted video screens in the palms of our hands or audio receptors in our ears to hear His voice directly. He chose the written Word. This means it is the best way for us humans to fellowship with our Father. Graciously knowing our weaknesses, He also granted messengers to speak to us, to explain to us that written Word and to call us to obey the voice of our Lord. What a precious gift our preachers are! We would expect that those who say they love Christ would eagerly listen to anyone talking about Him or explaining His Word. However, sin has trampled on the beauty of the fellowship that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden. We may want to commune with our Lord, but we stumble even as we come together to listen to Him speak a Word of love to us.

We all must confess that truly listening to sermons, in contrast to merely hearing them, is often a most difficult task. Sometimes the Spirit works mightily in us and in the preacher so that the Word falls on prepared and eager ears, but more frequently than we care to admit, attending with our heart, mind, and soul to a sermon takes strenuous, prolonged effort for several reasons.

First, the human mind is a weak instrument, especially when compared to the mind of the One from whom the sermon originates. Recent brain research shows that the mind can maintain attention to the spoken word for around 20 minutes. After that, an attention refocus is most helpful in maintaining concentration. The practice of breaking the sermon into two or three points helps us renew our attention. Even then, we need to recognize that intentional tracking of this transition is necessary on our part. Too often we accept our weak attention spans as if there is nothing we can do about it. Strategies abound to help us with this. In education we talk about the SLANT method of listening: *Sit* up, *Lean* forward, *Ask and Answer* questions (yes, you can do this in your mind while listening to a sermon), *Nod* your head, and *Track* the speaker. We call this “active listening.” There are many other strategies like note-taking or actively evaluating yourself and applying truths as you hear them. The main point is that as the minister works faithfully to deliver God’s Word, so we also must give diligence to our task of heeding his words.

A second reason we struggle is that we do not love and delight in God as we should. We come to worship with so little emotion. This is not to say that we need to display emotions as we listen, but we should be emotionally invested. Can we even call it “worship” if we feel nothing? Imagine going on a date with someone you love very much. Because your heart is emotionally invested, your mind is eager to hear what your loved one will say. Do we make a practice of disciplining our emotions so that we delight to hear our precious Savior and Friend speaking to us? Too often we act as if emotions are out of our control, and therefore, we cannot choose to delight in the Word of God. We know this to be folly if we have ever been intentional about loving a spouse, a parent, or a sibling. We hear all the time that love is a command, so we *must* show our love for God by choosing daily to delight in His Word. “I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word” (Ps. 119:16).

Of course, the most obvious difficulty is our spiritual weakness. Sin still works mightily in the most devout

saint. What are the greatest challenges to sermon listening? Is it not often the selfish wandering of the mind down paths of earthly delights: the unfinished project, the upcoming vacation, or the unending chattering monologue in our mind that loves to entice us with the most trivial tidbits. As Ken Ramey notes in his excellent book, *Expository Listening*, these sorts of distractions are not just lazy listening—they are sin.¹ We must be more fervent in our hatred of our own distracted minds. “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17).

Praise be to God, our weaknesses do not have the final word. God has ordained the means of speaking to us, and He *will* bless us by that means. God is faithful, and He has promised in II Timothy 3:16-17 to feed us through the preaching. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” This is the wondrous grace of God in giving us sermons to listen to: that He might complete His work in us as we are drawn to worship His beauty while we are being chastised for our sins, led to His law, and taught for our holiness. What a wonder!

Ramey captures the astonishing phenomenon of preaching when he states, “Nothing creates a more explosive, electrifying, life-changing atmosphere than when the lightning bolts from a Spirit-empowered preacher hit the lightning rods of a Spirit-illuminated

listener.”² Meditate on that wonder, people of God. Our wise Father works the miracle of life-changing sanctification through preaching. He turns hearts and lifestyles and even personalities to Himself through our heeding His Word and truly changing our behavior according to what we are told by the preacher in the pulpit. The irritable become agreeable, the cross become kind, and the wicked become righteous. And the wonder of this is that we are moved to obey Him more and more, not out of a sense of duty or obligation, for this is no obedience at all, but out of a delight to know Him more and love Him better. Our very obedience is itself an act of worship.

In the parable of the sower, we often think of the three poor soils as being various types of unbelievers, and that is accurate. However, we should remember that because the old man of unbelief still wars within us, we fight the tendencies of these poor soils in ourselves. We have a rocky heart that pays no attention to God’s Word at times. Often our souls are only shallow, and we soon forget the glorious message that we heard in Sunday’s sermon, sometimes as soon as we exit the sanctuary. Frequently the thorns and weeds of earthly concerns choke out our resolves to be a doer of His Word. Be diligent, therefore, to plow the soil of your heart so that you are not only a willing worshiper as you listen to the Word, but a doer also.

1 The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2012.

2 Ramey, *Expository Listening*, 4.



Mrs. Alyssa Pastoor, wife, mother, and member of Zion PRC in Jenison, Michigan

Prepare your hearts and minds

We have all experienced those harried Sunday mornings following a busy activity-filled week at one point or another. “Where’s my shoes, mom?” “Hurry up and eat your breakfast!” “Did you remember to get cash for collection?” “Is my shirt ironed?”...and then we all sit down 10-15 minutes before the service begins

in a muddled and frustrated mess. We have arrived physically, but we have forgotten, once again, to prepare our hearts and minds to hear the One who has safely brought us there in the first place. Your pastor has been laboring all week to bring the Word of God to you. What have you been doing to prepare your own heart

to receive it? What have you been doing as a parent to prepare the hearts of your children to receive it? Are we ready to worship our God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24)? I ask this question not only to the reader, but to myself also.

Weekly preparation for Sunday cannot be reserved for our pastors alone. We are active members in the body of Christ with a duty to be in the Word and in prayer ourselves and with our children throughout the week, so that when we arrive at church Sunday morning our hearts have freshly turned soil for the Word to be deeply rooted (Matt. 13). What we are watching, listening to, reading, scrolling through, speaking about, and doing throughout the week—it all has an impact on how we and our children are going to receive the Word of God Sunday morning. In the same way that we cannot expect to become physically fit and healthy after eating a quality meal and working out one day a week, so also we cannot expect to be filled with the Spirit and prepared to fight the battles that lie ahead throughout our week if the only time we are getting a full ‘meal’ is on Sunday.

More specifically, as parents in the home we have the privilege and high calling of instructing our children in the ways of the Lord daily (Deut. 6). As a parent, I need to stop and ask myself, “Am I actively praying for the hearts of my children to hear the Word of God and grow in their desire to be in the Word”? Or am I going along in life forgetting that their hearts are fully dependent on Him as much as my heart is to desire His Word above all else?

Do your children see you regularly in the Word and in prayer? Are our homes a place where talk of God and His ways is as natural as breathing? Or is it only a place where we have our family devotions quickly after dinner before rushing off to the next event? Even in the discipline of our children, are they hearing the Word in their correction in love, or is it a quick behavior correction that misses the heart of the matter? What kind of conversations are being carried on in the car rides to and from sporting events or family outings? When God’s Word is spoken of regularly in the home so that it becomes as natural as breathing, hearts will be more readily prepared to hear the Word of the Lord come Sunday morning, even at a young age. Do not doubt the power of God to transform the youngest of hearts! They are listening, even as they first begin to say understandable words (who has not heard a little voice say “Amen” in echo to a pastor’s prayer or following the end of a sermon?).

Although we are all in different seasons of life, our preparations must all include a saturation of the Word

of God. In the age in which we live, the options are endless in infusing the Word into our hearts no matter our ages so we are really without excuse. It can be sung through praise music, taught through podcasts and recent sermons, or read aloud word for word on various apps. Our time belongs to the Lord (Eph. 5:15, 16). If I have two hours to scroll mindlessly through social media, or spend two hours or more watching a sport/shopping event, should I not also have two hours (even broken up through the day) to spend communicating to the One who gave me life, read His Word, and write it on my heart through memorization? This is only an example, and there is nothing inherently wrong with the simple pleasures God has given us in this life!

I Timothy 6:17 reminds those who are rich in material goods not to be proud or trust in these riches, but to trust “in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy”—sports, social media, and shopping included! The question is, what is their priority in my life? If they have hijacked my time with God, I have made them an idol. I no longer am living in the fear of the Lord. In the end, what it really comes down to is examining my personal relationship with Jesus and evaluating it according to His Word. Is our communication with Him rich and vibrant, or is it dull or non-existent?

Practically speaking, preparation for our hearts needs to begin Saturday evening. Get the bags and outfits ready the night before, know what will be made for breakfast and even pre-make it if possible. Read good literature to the kids or listen to good music to pre-set your mind to what Sunday will bring, and get quality sleep. Sunday mornings should not be a rush, should not be difficult to wake up to, and should not be spent fretting on how we look. Another idea to help with the Sunday morning atmosphere that I personally recommend would be to have relaxing praise and worship music playing as you enjoy the process of preparing your heart to receive the Word. It will help reorient the hearts of everyone for worship that morning.

In writing this, I have been convicted of my own shortcomings in this area of preparing the hearts of my children to receive the Word Sunday mornings. I may be able to spend much time in the Word myself, but that does not get the Word into them unless it is encouraged and prayed for by myself and the desire worked in them by the Holy Spirit. Such a life style will not be easy. It will take discipline, commitment, and time but it is possible because of who lives in us (Gal. 5:16-18, 25; Eph. 6:10). Let us not only come prepared as adults for the Word of God, but let us bring our children ready to listen as well, for of such is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:14).



Prof. Brian Huizinga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Grandville PRC in Grandville, Michigan

Keep reading, Johnny, keep reading!

Preaching and technology

We live in an age of rapidly accelerating technological innovation, and that has an impact—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse—upon every sphere of life, including preaching in the great congregation. For example, it is very common for churches to upload their sermons to SermonAudio, or their entire worship service to YouTube. Such massive libraries of audio and/or visual content give believers anywhere in the world easy access to a treasure trove of biblical exposition so that they can grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, as part of their evangelistic efforts, churches are able to take sermons preached within their own walls, upload them, and reach others from the remotest regions of the earth. Regrettably, however, a pastor can easily misuse such tools and do damage to the congregation. Knowing his sermons will be posted for anyone to hear, he might prepare his sermons by making the target audience he keeps in his mind the wider internet crowd he wants to please and not the great congregation that God called him to feed. Or, instead of using these tools for soul-edification, a troublemaker might employ them to try to dig up some dirt that he can use to criticize or condemn a certain pastor or church he dislikes.

Another common use of modern, advanced technology in relation to preaching is the livestreaming of worship services. This proved to be a powerful tool for good during the covid pandemic. It can also be beneficial for shut-ins who by God's providence are kept from His house on Sunday, but can still enjoy something of a shared experience with the assembled congregation. On the other hand, this opportunity can be abused by some who are able to attend the worship services but stay home and "livestream." Worse yet, believers might be conditioned to think that church membership entails nothing more than catching two sermons a week, instead of bringing worship to God and having meaningful relationships with and serving others in the body of Christ.

There are many points of intersection between technology and preaching, and how the former impacts the

latter. However, I want to focus on our children's increasing use of image-based electronic devices, at the potential expense of reading, and the consequences this may have years down the road for preaching. In this article, I am relying upon a little book you may have heard of, or even read. It is called *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, and was written in 2009 by T. David Gordon.¹ Drawing from the book, I will use the generic proper name Johnny to represent every child in the church, and in particular, the boys. The typical Johnny these days probably spends hours a day using smartphones, tablets, laptops, or other gadgets, and for much more than homework assignments. But is Johnny still reading books?

The point of this article is to encourage reading by demonstrating the vital connection between Johnny reading books in his youth, and Johnny being able to preach (and, I might add, *listen* to preaching) when he is older. If the name of God will be preached in the great congregation today, we need our children—particularly our boys—to be reading. What will happen to *preaching*, and, consequently, *the great congregation*, if Johnny does not read? Keep reading, Johnny, keep reading!

Why Johnny can't preach

The reader does not soon forget the aforementioned book by T. David Gordon, for his main contention is as thought-provoking as his title is memorable. Gordon taught at a conservative evangelical seminary, has moved in Reformed circles for decades, and has been a member in various conservative Presbyterian congregations. He argues that many ordained ministers today simply cannot preach. Johnny can't preach! Gordon explains that since the middle of the last century, the average Christian family, in the average pew, in the average church, on the average Sunday, is not getting good preaching. A *good* sermon has a point so that everyone knows what the sermon is about; it is expounded directly

¹ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2009).

from the text so that everyone can see the basis for what is said; and it makes legitimate and relevant applications. On the other hand, *bad* preaching is an uninspiring, disorganized, listless ramble that has no discernable point or relevance. Then to make the bad sermon worse, it goes way too long on the clock so that even the most energetic and conscientious listener struggles to stay with the preacher and finally fades away. Gordon contends that there is way too much of the latter today—bad preaching (pp. 12-31).

Why? Johnny cannot preach because he does not read (and write); he watches. Gordon does not attribute the bad preaching to failures at seminaries, but to something bigger and deeper in the broader culture. The problem is the condition of Johnny when he arrives at seminary. Johnny has been shaped by a culture that is no longer dominated by language (reading and writing). When Johnny comes to seminary, he has not been reading texts (written pieces of literature). He does not read for pleasure. He does not read looking for significance. He does not read texts *closely*, looking at *what* is written, as well as *how* it is written. When he does read, it is only speed-reading for information, and then he can train his mind to ignore all the important little words like articles, prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs.

Instead of reading, Johnny has been looking at images. Our society has moved from language-based media to image-based, electronic media. Johnny grows up with pictures and videos. He sees images—vivid and fast-moving—but often superficial and insignificant. He is acclimated to distraction, not concentration, contemplation, and reflection. He gives his attention to many things at once, while rarely devoting the attention of his entire soul to anything. He is often out of touch with the weighty. While reading can cultivate a patient, lengthy attention span, image-based electronic media can make Johnny impatient (pp. 32-43).

As a consequence, Johnny's literary sensibilities, which are essential to good expository preaching, have been altered and dulled so that Johnny can't preach. The problem is not technology as such. Personal technological devices have many wonderful uses, and we all integrate them more and more into our life and strive to use them wisely. Besides, technology has not destroyed our attention spans, for people today can still listen to an energetically delivered, well-organized message that they believe is important. The problem is that too many Johnnys are not reading books in their youth but spending too much time fixed on images of the trivial. Then when Johnny grows up, goes to seminary, and tries to preach, his sermons are trifling, thoughtless, uninspiring, mundane, and simplistic. The congregation receives moralis-

tic lessons and pop psychology, rather than the serious realities of the majesty, mercy, and wrath of the Most High and Eternal God. Gordon illustrates with two Bible passages, John 3:16 and Romans 5:8, how Johnny's sermons are about Christian truth in general. Each verse teaches the love of God, but the two are very different. Johnny preaches the same sermon from both passages because he does not identify and accentuate the distinctive elements of each text. For the congregation, it is the same thing every time Johnny gets in the pulpit (pp. 43-60).

Whether you fully agree with Gordon's presentation and conclusions (and you will have to read the book for yourself to hear him out), we should all acknowledge the importance of training our children to read, especially in today's image-based culture.² If Gordon were to write today, he would probably express even greater urgency, for he was writing fourteen years ago! The personal electronic devices of 2009 almost put us close to the Stone Age of technology as we look out over the new terrain and behold innovation like artificial intelligence. But Gordon is not alone. Many have expressed similar concerns. Another author put it this way:

Despite the benefits of recent technological tools, we are also experiencing a phenomenon that should be of grave concern to pastors and Christian leaders. Many people, especially millennials (people born between 1981 and 1995) are eager to learn but appear resistant to reading. They are "on the verge," in the prophetic words of Neil Postman, "of amusing themselves to death." They may eagerly listen to a podcast or watch a YouTube video, but a growing number of people pass when it comes to the written page. They are quick to listen but slow to read. Thus, we stand at the crossroads. We have a wealth of information at our fingertips but many resist the challenge to read books. Pastors should be especially concerned as they seek to train and equip the next generation of Christian leaders, who are in many cases, reluctant to read.³

Read, Johnny!

I urge myself and all of you, from parents and teachers, to grandparents and friends, to be very intentional in promoting reading and even incentivizing it with rewards. Let's challenge each other, set goals, and maintain accountability. Let's redouble our efforts lest we have an ecclesiastical catastrophe in which our Johnnys come to seminary utterly devoid of literary sensibilities and unable to preach gospel sermons because they have

² Gordon also argues that Johnny can't write (pp. 61-68).

³ Dr. David S. Steele, "A Christian Reading Manifesto," *Veritas et Lux*, May 18, 2020, <https://davidsteele.blog/2020/05/18/a-christian-reading-manifesto>.

spent an inordinate amount of time watching images on screens, and rarely, if ever, cracking a book. Although all children are different in their interests, abilities, and upbringing, I know the average Johnny among us in the circles in which I move has been reading and has been trained very well to read, so I say: *Keep* reading, Johnny, *keep* reading!

Let's keep reading *to* Johnny. Plenty of studies have demonstrated that reading aloud to children at a young age gives enormous emotional, psychological, and educational benefits. Let's make a concerted effort to read more books to our children. I cannot recall meeting anyone recently who said that their home life is slow. Life is busy. But we would all do well to evaluate how we spend our time and what could be eliminated to free up time for dad to read aloud to his children, and for mom also, so that she does not feel so bone-weary that she just has to set Johnny before a screen. And who does not remember with fondness the grade school teacher who took the time and energy to read a chapter or two from a story book every afternoon, even changing the inflection of his or her voice to match the different characters of the story. Let's not stop now. Keep reading *to* Johnny!

Let's take advantage of the time we already devote to reading. Every Christian family takes time for family worship. Perhaps we could put in the hand of every family member their own Bible from which to read, so that everyone can follow along. As we discuss the passage, everyone can examine the passage looking for the

main point and how to answer questions regarding a particularly striking and applicable verse.

Let's give thanks for and encourage those who devote time to promoting and creating children's literature. I think of "Book Reviews" typically found in the back pages of the *Perspectives in Covenant Education* magazine, the RFPA's recent creation of a children's book division, and then the relatively new children's magazine, *Ignited by the Word*. Or, think of all those who staff, stock, and support our school libraries. Do not grow weary in well doing! Moreover, let's give thanks for Christian schools where our children are not only taught the basics of reading, but our young people can take foreign languages and are taught how to analyze carefully an original source in history class or a piece of poetry in literature class.

We need our God, the power of His grace, and His blessing in Christ to resist the manifold efforts that the deceptive Devil may use to attempt to destroy preaching, and thus the great congregation. May God fill our hearts with love for Him and His church, direct our footsteps in His ways, and preserve reading among us. He has given to us many homes and schools where reading is still highly valued and practiced. He has given to our seminary and churches men who can think deeply, analyze carefully, evaluate critically, communicate effectively, and press those abilities into the service of the preaching of the holy gospel. In that way He has blessed the great congregation. We beseech Him to continue.

And now, Johnny, keep reading!

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Kalamazoo PRC express our Christian sympathy to Terri and Steven DeVries, Erika and Bryan Kiel and children, and Matt and Kalista DeVries and children in the death of **James Hettinger**, a father, grandfather, and great grandfather. Psalm 48:14: "For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.

Rev. D. Lee, President
Tom Verbeek, Clerk

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

- November 5—Israel Transgresses God's Covenant
Hosea 6:7
- November 12—Jehovah Does What Pleases Him
Psalm 135:5, 6
- November 19—Prayer for Restored Joy
Psalm 51:10-12
- November 26—The Goodness of God's House
Psalm 65:4