

STUDY 11

The Ministry of the Word (1): The Good Shepherd Feeds His Flock

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When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things (Mark 6:34).¹

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Matt. 9:35–38).

This paper seeks to show that it is essential that the church understand that it is the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who continues to feed his flock and build his church through the ministry of the word. Jesus Christ *is* the Word of God. The 'word gifts' (Gk: *domata*) are his own speaking/action in the life of the church. It is essential that those entrusted with these gifts and responsibilities have a true apprehension of the necessity and shape of *unction* in the exercise of them.

JESUS, THE WORD OF GOD

To any person with even a passing knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, the opening to John's Gospel must immediately ring with familiarity as they echo the first words of the Bible: 'In the beginning . . .' In his prologue to the account of the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, John is pointing us to the fact that in Jesus Christ we have one who brings to completion all the purposes of God in creation, one who renews creation. John expands the account of the creation, enabled to do so for in Jesus Christ a clearer and fuller revelation of those first events has been given (cf. Heb. 1:1–2). Whereas the writer of Genesis tells us simply, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen. 1:1), John tells us more about this Creator:

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New International Version.

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:1–3).

In the Genesis account of creation, all was created through God's speech and command: 'Let there be . . . and it was so'. In John's expounding of these things in the light of Jesus Christ, we see that this word of God was not simply a power or force, but rather that there was one, the Word, in eternity² with God, no less than God, and distinct from God, through whom all things have come to be. Moreover, the Word is so close to God, *towards God* (Gk. *pros ton theon*), that he is a full revelation of God. In fact, John says later in the Prologue, 'We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only [or, the Only Begotten], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth', and 'No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [or, the Only Begotten], who is at the Father's side, has made him known' (John 1:14, 18). Later Jesus would say, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say "Show us the Father"? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?' (John 14:9–10). As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Heb. 1:3).

The Word of God had personhood alongside God and acted as the agent of the will of God. All of the purpose of God in creation is effected through this Word. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that this Word, who is the Son, was the one through whom God made the universe, and more, that he has been 'appointed heir of all things' and that he sustains all things by his powerful word. Creation is not only initiated by the Word of God, but in fact the destiny of all things is that they be inherited by the Word/Son and that between creation and final inheritance the Son is actually sustaining all things and this by his powerful word (Heb. 1:1–3). This Son who sustains all things and brings them to their great goal is the one who made purification for sins and then sat down at the Father's right hand. This must mean that the sustaining word in creation, the word that ensures that the purposes of God in creation are finally reached, is the word of the gospel.

In writing the above, I have a deep sense of the danger of trying to be cleverer than I am! And of speaking things too wonderful for me! Having said that, the reasons I say the above for the sake of this study are:

- God's intention in creation is that all things will come to fullness in Jesus Christ, His Son.
- That intention is effected through His Word, His speaking, and through *no other power or action*.
- Creation's destiny hangs on the powerful Word of God continuing to come to it, to sustain and to liberate through purification.
- All the work of God in Jesus Christ is essentially *powerful speech*.

As the Good Shepherd brings creation to the goal, and gathers and shepherds his flock to their great release in the resurrection, that ministry is by his *speaking*.

² In his fine commentary on the Gospel of John, Leon Morris says:

The verb 'was' is most naturally understood of the eternal existence of the Word: 'the Word continually was'. We should not press the tense unduly, but certainly the verb denotes neither a completed state, nor a coming into being. It is appropriate to eternal, unchanging being. John is affirming that the Word existed before creation, which makes it clear that the Word was not created (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, F. F. Bruce gen. ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984, pp. 73–4).

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After Jesus had been baptised, when he heard the word of the Father to him (Luke 3:21–22), and had triumphed against Satan in the temptations through speaking the word of God (Luke 4:1–13), he began his public ministry by teaching in the synagogues throughout the whole countryside (Luke 4:15). In Nazareth, his home town, he announced his kingdom program (given him by the Father) by reading a section of Isaiah’s prophecy and connecting it to himself. Essentially it was to be a ministry of proclamation:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (Luke 4:18–19).

In an age where words are a dime a dozen, and hardly any of those words are worthy of trust, Jesus’ speech was typified by *authority* (Luke 4:32, 36; 5:24; and especially 7:8). This authority was seen in that what he said, happened. His miracles were by and large effected through a word of command, or a rebuke (Luke 4:35, 39, 41; 5:13; 7:14–15; 8:24–25, 29; etc); he called his disciples with an authoritative word (no argumentation or promise, simply a summons—Luke 5:4, 10, 27–28); he brought forgiveness to the oppressed through a word (Luke 5:20; 7:48–50). Jesus then commissioned the Twelve to join with him in the proclamation of the kingdom, and gave them authority to also work these liberating works as the word was proclaimed (Luke 9:1–2). So also, the ‘seventy-two others’ in Luke 10:1ff. Any who were joined to him needed to know that they followed him for this reason: to proclaim the kingdom of God (Luke 9:57–62).

Finally, the act of purification, by which creation’s destiny would be secured, needed to be accomplished. All the power of the word of Christ rested upon the act of propitiatory sacrifice that culminated his ministry. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. In that sacrificial act, Christ himself is almost silent: ‘He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth’ (Isa. 53:7). The near silence of Christ marks the few things he does say with great importance. They are windows into the meaning of the events. His utter silence during the dark hours of abandonment (his cry of dereliction came only at the end of that time) gives space to hear the verdict of God. His silence is a deafening contradiction to the persistent and endless self-justifying whine of the human race. By his silence he speaks the great confession of God’s holiness and the sinfulness of humanity.

After his resurrection, the vindication of him by God against the condemning judgement of the human race, Jesus made himself known to his disciples through speech—the opening of Scriptures and the giving of thanks as he broke bread (Luke 24:25ff.; esp. v. 32, and 44ff.). And he commissioned his disciples (the Eleven and those with them) to be witnesses and proclaimers of the message of the gospel to all nations, after they had received the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit. He was then taken into heaven while he was blessing them, and so the church continues to live now under the raised hands of Jesus Christ. His living, dynamic, active presence is given to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit, in the opening of his word and in

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the breaking of bread. The church will not live on with the ever-dimming memory of Christ; he himself will be with us, speaking with us and so working in us all the power of the gospel.

THE CONTINUING SPEAKING OF CHRIST IN THE CHURCH

The *Domata* as Word Gifts

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

‘When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men.’

(What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph. 4:7–16).

Paul makes clear here that the various word gifts (*domata*) in the church are the gifts of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. Each of these ‘domatic’ ministries is actually the ministry of Christ himself: we do not supplement or substitute for the ministry of Christ; rather, through us Christ—the Apostle, Evangelist, Prophet, Pastor, and Teacher—exercises his ongoing ministry of the word of God and prepares the whole church for its service of the kingdom in the world. By that service the whole church (including the ministers of the word) is built up into maturity. There is an essential ‘feedback mechanism’ here: the apostles, evangelists, prophets, pastors and teachers all themselves need the ministry of those they prepare for ministry in order to reach maturity; the ministry of God’s word in the body is not a one-way flow.

All is with the intention that all members of the body together, in the unity of faith in Christ, attain to the whole measure of Christ’s own fullness. That is, the whole thrust of Christ’s continued ministry in these gifts is *the outworking of the plan of God in creation*; that finally there be a renewed heavens and earth, with a family holy and blameless in His presence in Christ, adopted in Christ as His sons and daughters, all to the universal praise of His grace (Eph. 1:4–6). In this we see that the word of God is powerfully in action, bringing about the ultimate intention of God. The Good Shepherd is, through his active ministry in the gifts given to the church, bringing the flock to the ultimate destination—we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The Ministry of Christ and Unction

It is essential in the ministry of the word given to those with the *domata* that the voice of Jesus Christ be heard clearly and that the word of God accomplish just what it is sent for. In proclamation the word of God is given a human channel in the mouth

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and life of a preacher, and yet maintains the quality of being the word of God. The hearing of Christ through the words of the speaker is identical with hearing the speaker discourse about Jesus Christ. Preaching is a revelatory event, and not simply the presentation of a set of logical propositions. When the word of God is preached, the living word of God speaks; believers hear the word of God and it will bring into their lives the freedom found in Jesus Christ. In the act of preaching, the revelatory act (or 'event') of God takes place and authoritatively speaks the word of God to the believer. The Christian minister of God's word must have more, not less, assurance than the Old Testament prophets in declaring for his speaking, 'Thus says the Lord!' and, 'Hear the word of the Lord!'

Because preaching is a revelatory event, it must be clear to the preacher of the word (in whatever form that declaration takes: teaching, proclamation, pastoral care, etc.) that the effect of the word is out of his hands: 'precisely because the point of the event of preaching is God's own speaking, there can be no question of our doing the revealing in any way'.³ This means then that the speaker of God's word must let the word itself do its own work, and not attempt to bolster that word. Thus, the preacher must not give reasons for why the word of God is true, or trying to convince people of the power of the word. In *Dogmatics*, Barth writes, 'preaching does not reflect, reasons, dispute, or academically instruct. It proclaims, summons, invites and commands.'⁴

This does not leave the speaker with a cool and detached relation to the word he brings, distantly waiting for the word to do its work 'out there'. As Karl Barth pointed out, only when preaching conforms to the revelation of God, is it really preaching and can it really have power.⁵ (As I understand Barth, he saw *conforming* as something like 'being part of the action of Christ's living revelation', not so much as 'being in doctrinal accordance with "revealed truths"'.) For such conforming, the preacher must have experienced the subjective reality of the word of God, and must have yielded to the word of God in faith and obedience. And when this conforming happens, then the minister of God's word will throw himself wholeheartedly into the act of proclamation, using and constraining all gifts and abilities in him for the free flow of God's word to the listeners.⁶

³ Attributed to Karl Barth by James Cox in an unknown source, in David Niblack, 'Karl Barth and Preaching', from <<http://www.davidniblack.com/articles/Karl%20Barth%20and%20Preaching.htm>> accessed on June 23, 2010.

⁴ Also attributed to Karl Barth, from his *Church Dogmatics*, but without references, by David Niblack in 'Karl Barth and Preaching'.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (tr. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991, p. 47), again quoted by Niblack.

⁶ An essential book, in my view, for those engaged in the ministry of the word is *Eccentric Preachers* by Charles Spurgeon (my copy—Pilgrim Publications, Pasadena, 1978). Spurgeon celebrates true eccentricity:

God grant that we may not be eccentric towards God, either as to holiness or truth, for that were fatal: but when fashion and custom mark out ill-proportioned imitations of the circle of perfection, or even dare to impose curves of their own, it may be grandly right to be eccentric, for an eccentric path all the saints have trodden as they have tracked the narrow way in the teeth of the many who pursue the downward road (pp. 16–17).

Have anything like originality, anything like genius, anything like a sparkle of wit, anything like natural whole-souled action, and you will be called eccentric directly by those who are used to the gospel of Hum-drum . . . Your regular man says nothing which can by any possibility offend anybody, and nothing which is likely to do anyone good (p. 25).

Amongst the causes of godly eccentricity (pp. 72ff.), Spurgeon lists:

- They have been *natural*; they have been themselves and not copies of others; what was in them they have not restrained, but have given full play to all their powers.
- They have been more *truthful* than their fellows; they do not believe in etiquettical lying, but speak the truth whether they offend or please.
- They are *really in earnest* and earnestness defies rules.
- They have a *wealth of poetry dwelling in their speech*.

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The preacher must work in the expectation, and with the desire, that Jesus Christ himself would actively work, through these human words, all his mighty work of salvation, bringing about, in the here-and-now, eternal effects which will stand at the last day. Essential to each of the ministry of each of the *domata* is *unction*. The best definition of unction is the certainty of the voice of Christ being heard with effect in the proclaimer's words. Many define unction in terms of the *saving power* of Christ being undeniable in the proclamation. I think the definition is a little narrow, unless it means (and rightly so) that the saving power of Christ is seen in his working blessing and judgement through his word. It necessarily would be true that Jesus Christ *always* spoke with unction, but that meant that at times his preaching so infuriated his hearers that they were driven to murderous rage (e.g. Luke 4:23ff.).

Certainly Paul's expectation was that when he came to preach it would be 'in the full measure of the blessing of Christ' (Rom. 15:29). He expected that Jesus Christ himself would be present in action in the proclamation of the word, wherever Paul was preaching. He boasted of what *Christ had accomplished* through him: the leading of the Gentiles to obey God through what he said and did, by the power of signs and wonders (which were the signs of authenticity of the apostles—2 Cor. 12:12) through the power of the Holy Spirit, in this way fully proclaiming the gospel of Christ (Rom. 15:17–19). He rejoiced over the Thessalonian congregation that when he proclaimed the gospel there, they received the message 'not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe' (1 Thess. 2:13).

This unction is the speaking of Jesus Christ, but it is worked in the preacher through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Spurgeon says:

[W]e depend entirely upon the Spirit of God to produce actual effect from the gospel, and at this effect we must always aim. We do not stand up in our pulpits to display our skill in spiritual sword play, but we come to actual fighting: our object is to drive the sword of the Spirit through men's hearts . . . Always aim at effect . . . Never aim at effect after the manner of the climax makers, poetry quoters, handkerchief manipulators, and bombast blowers. Far better for a man that he had never been born than that he should degrade a pulpit into a show box to exhibit himself in. Aim at the right sort of effect; the inspiring of saints to nobler things, the leading of Christians closer to their Master, the comforting of doubters till they rise out of their terrors, the repentance of sinners, and their exercise of immediate faith in Christ. Without these signs following, what is the use of our sermons? . . . Miracles of grace must be the seals of our ministry; who can bestow them but the Spirit of God.⁷

A Prayer for the Preaching

From the *New Creation Hymn Book*, number 142:

1. Come, Thou everlasting Spirit,
Bring to every thankful mind
All the Saviour's dying merit,
All His sufferings for mankind!

• They are men of *shrewd common sense*.
• They invest their preaching with the *vast amount of dramatic energy* with which they have been endowed. Spurgeon illustrates each of these points with anecdotes of such preachers in the history of the church.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1954, pp. 194–5.

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2. True Recorder of His passion,
Now the living faith impart,
Now reveal His great salvation,
Preach His gospel to our heart.
3. Come, Thou Witness of His dying;
Come, Remembrancer divine,
Let us feel Thy power, applying
Christ to every soul, and mine.⁸

⁸ Charles Wesley (1707–1788), in *New Creation Hymn Book*, 2nd ed., NCPI, Blackwood, 2010.