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“Faith Comes From What Is Heard”: The Reformers on the Ministry of the Word and the Holy Spirit

KEITH D. STANGLIN

In basic continuity with other reformist movements within the medieval church, the Protestant Reformation was characterized and propagated by the vibrant proclamation of the word of God, the gospel. However, unlike its attitude toward other preaching movements given the pope’s explicit blessing (for example, the Franciscans), the church did not approve of the Protestant gospel.

From the Protestant point of view, the feeling was mutual. “The pope, with his bishops and priests, ... [preach] their own law, canon law, and nothing but human teaching—consecrated salt, water, vigils, masses, and whatever other tomfoolery like this you can name.”¹ This announcement from the pen of Martin Luther in 1521 demonstrates his disdain for the conventional preaching in the late medieval Roman Catholic Church and sets the stage for a positive Protestant theology of preaching.

For the magisterial reformers, all of whom grew up as good Roman Catholics, the ritual, sacrificial Mass with which they were familiar no longer would no longer be the focus of the liturgy. Instead, they would stress the proclamation of the Word, which gives meaning and efficacy to the sacraments. For the reformers, the word of God not only was never to be removed from the sacraments but the effective word of God also was never unaccompanied by the Spirit of God.

It is this relationship between the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the Word that I will explore in the thought of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. By tracking their comments on Rom 10:17, we will see how the responsibility of the preacher and the task of the Holy Spirit come together in their minds in the proclamation of God’s Word.

MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546)

When Luther posted his famous 95 theses for disputation in 1517, he never intended to undermine papal authority or begin the movement later known as the Protestant Reformation. Yet when the Roman Church refused to accept his teachings, Luther never looked back. As indicated above, part of Luther’s protest was connected with what he perceived as a lack of gospel preaching in Roman Catholicism. For Luther, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, God’s righteousness being applied to his people by means of the Holy Spirit.

However, in keeping with his reading of Paul, Luther and other first-generation reformers wonder how anyone can hear the gospel without someone to proclaim it (Rom 10:14). Paul’s answer is that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Whereas the Roman Catholics, from Luther’s perspective, were shouting that no good will come from the preaching of the gospel,² Luther insisted that saving faith—as opposed to Roman Catholic “implicit faith” in what the Church believed—comes *via* the Word of God.

Thus, Luther highlights the significance of the preacher’s responsibility. In contrast to the Roman Church, Luther asserts the priesthood of all believers. The preaching office is open to all Christians. Moreover, if a man were unwilling to engage in the proclamation of God’s word, a woman could and should

accept the preaching responsibility.³ In addition to this common priesthood, there is a legitimate role and vocation (calling) for the preacher whose primary task is “to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments.”⁴

Luther recognizes certain qualifications for this person: “The person who wishes to preach needs to have a good voice, good eloquence, a good memory and other *natural* gifts; whoever does not have these should properly keep still and let somebody else speak.”⁵ The priesthood of all believers means that all Christians have access to Scripture and to God himself through the high priest Jesus Christ. It does not mean that just anyone should assume the preaching office. The preacher should be someone who has both natural abilities and a divine calling.

The fact that preaching is not optional for the church is seen in the mediation of the Holy Spirit through the Word. God “could have illuminated men’s hearts inwardly through the Holy Spirit and forgiven their sins without the ministry of the Word and of ministers. But it was not His will to do so.”⁶ For Luther, there is a joining of Word and sacrament along with the benefits of Christ through the Spirit. If the Word is not present, the sacrament is mere bread; but the added Word brings to the sacrament that of which it speaks.

Likewise, Christ, through the Spirit, enters one’s heart through voice, and each person who hears the sermon and accepts it takes the whole Christ into his or her heart. This mediated presence through preaching is “as great a miracle as here in the sacrament.”⁷ Therefore, the Word preached is sacramental in nature, and serves as the basis for the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both the Word and the sacrament proclaim the gospel, Christ crucified and raised for us.

What the Holy Spirit achieves through the preached Word is nothing less than the work of salvation. Our salvation begins not with any work of our own but by hearing the Word of life. Through the hearing of the Word, the Holy Spirit is given. After citing Rom 10:17 (“faith comes from what is heard”), Luther observes that faith does not come to all who hear, but only to whom God wills. The “Spirit blows where *He* wills, not where we will.”⁸

Faith is not for everyone who hears, but hearing is a necessary condition for those who are given faith. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin through his messengers. “It is not [the messengers] who do so; it is the Holy Spirit, at whose order and in whose office they are preaching.”⁹ For Luther, preaching is the normative means by which the Spirit comes to a person.

ULRICH ZWINGLI (1484–1531)

Zwingli, like Luther, did not leave the world a systematic discussion of theological topics, so his thoughts must be gathered and organized. Although Zwingli’s theology has been known to leave the “impression of disjointedness and disproportion,” the importance of his thought cannot be denied in light of its value in the subsequent history of doctrine.¹⁰

From Zürich, Zwingli spread Reformed influence throughout the Swiss cantons and served as a dialogue partner and occasional opponent of Luther. Though his specific emphases are different, Zwingli’s general sentiments regarding the proclamation of the Word are very similar to Luther’s concerns.

Zwingli’s treatise on the education of youth was published while he was reorganizing the Minster school, which consisted of a theological seminary for the purpose of disseminating Reformed thought and training Reformed pastors.¹¹ In this treatise, Zwingli is focused on the areas of practical training in the classical curriculum, which would apply to the humanist and pastor alike.

For example, Zwingli gives advice on the craft of public speaking and cautions against the common pitfalls including a rate of speaking that is too fast or too slow; too low, high, weak, or strong tone; monotonous style; hackneyed gestures; or gestures inappropriate to the content.¹² Zwingli stresses the importance of proper training for anyone who would be preaching God’s word. Preachers have the responsibility to polish their own skills.

Moreover, the presuppositions of Zwingli the Renaissance humanist are unmistakable. Against the Anabaptists, who claimed that correct biblical interpretation is dependent on the Spirit rather than one's skill in languages, Zwingli argued that knowledge of the original biblical languages is essential for the preacher.¹³ In sum, as the Renaissance rediscovered from the classical sources, the public speaker's linguistic and rhetorical ability to persuade (*persuasio*) is every bit as vital as his logical acumen.

Nevertheless, Zwingli does not place his confidence in human *persuasio*. He declares that it is beyond human ability to bring anyone to faith. Romans 10:17 does not mean that much can be accomplished "by the preaching of the external word apart from the internal address and compulsion of the Spirit." As a preacher, pray that God will illuminate by his Spirit those whom we instruct in the Word.¹⁴ The preaching of the Word by the world's most able orator would be useless apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Elsewhere, Zwingli appears to go further than Luther by bringing language of causation into his discussion of Romans 10:17, thus making his point more precise. Although he does not line out Aristotle's fourfold causality, Zwingli affirms that Paul "attributes in the same way to the nearer cause that is better known to us what belongs only to the Spirit, not to external preaching."¹⁵ In other words, Paul says that faith comes from what is heard because it is a more proximate cause, but we all know that faith ultimately comes from the Holy Spirit.

"When we attribute anything to the nearer instrument or cause, it really comes from these [instruments], if you look at the matter closely, no more than the harvest [comes] from the husbandman." So the preaching of the Word is a "necessary" tool or instrument by which God gives faith.¹⁶ As with Luther, Zwingli declares that faith is not for everyone who hears. However, Zwingli's treatment of secondary causality is more explicit than Luther's. The preaching of the Word is necessary, but it is merely the instrument of God for working faith by the Holy Spirit.

Even though Zwingli asserts that the preaching of the Word is necessary for faith, the main difference between Zwingli as compared with Luther (and later, Calvin) is the force of this "necessity." For Zwingli, the preaching of the gospel is the ordinary—but not the only possible—means of the Spirit's work for salvation. God's sovereign election is completely free, and nothing prevents God from choosing heathens who will honor him and be united with him eternally.¹⁷

Zwingli therefore seems more eager than Luther to speculate about the salvation of those the gospel did not reach, whether because of chronological or geographical restraints. Zwingli is more confident of the divine election of Socrates and Seneca than of the pope, and along with his list of the eternally saved from both testaments, he adds such pagan names as Antigonus, Camillus, the Catos, and even Hercules.¹⁸ However, that Luther and Zwingli agreed on the broad point of this matter is evident from the eighth article of the Marburg Colloquy of 1529, a gathering that otherwise was not known for its points of agreement between the two reformers. The article, whose conspicuous adverb "ordinarily" leaves room for both Luther and Zwingli, states that

the Holy Spirit, ordinarily, gives such faith or his gift to no one without preaching or the oral word or the gospel of Christ preceding, but that through and by means of such oral word he effects and creates faith where and in whom it pleases him (Rom 10).

The priesthood of all believers means that all Christians have access to Scripture and to God himself through the high priest Jesus Christ. It does not mean that just anyone should assume the preaching office. The preacher should be someone who has both natural abilities and a divine calling.

These articles of agreement between the Lutheran and Reformed parties were signed by such influential early reformers as Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, Andreas Osiander, John Oecolampadius, Ulrich Zwingli, and Martin Bucer, among others.¹⁹

JOHN CALVIN (1509–1564)

With the Genevan reformer, John Calvin, we move into the second generation of the Protestant Reformation. “Second generation” means that Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries, as with most second-generation movements, inherited a tradition of largely reactionary theology that they began to systematize and codify into a positive dogmatic orthodoxy. Calvin, following in the steps of Melanchthon’s *Loci communes theologici* (*Common Theological Topics*) of 1521, assembled an array of theological topics into his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (last edition, 1559). This handbook for reading Scripture complements his other works, especially his commentaries on the Bible.

After surveying his works, many historians of theology have designated Calvin as a theologian of the Holy Spirit. B.B. Warfield once said that “the doctrine of the work of the Holy spirit is a gift from John Calvin to the Church of Christ.”²⁰ This statement is curious given that Calvin devotes neither a separate treatise nor a *locus* in his *Institutes* to the Holy Spirit.²¹ There are several possible reasons for this absence of pneumatology, but it surely does not imply a neglect of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit does in fact seem to be integrally involved in Calvin’s theological discussions.

How did Calvin envision the ministry of the Word and the role of the Holy Spirit? Like Luther, Calvin said the minister of the Word has two primary pastoral duties: to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.²² Furthermore, like his predecessors, Calvin stressed the importance of proper preparation for the preacher. Under his direction, the famous academy at Geneva trained, ordained, and sent all over Europe many Reformed pastors and theologians of the next generation.

Because we have a little more knowledge of Calvin’s preaching style and method than we do of his predecessors, his own preparation for the preaching and teaching ministry provides a window into his ideas. Although Calvin was not a trained theologian, he was an outstanding humanist scholar, learning theology by putting his mind to work. Like theology, his knowledge of Hebrew came by his own diligent study throughout the years. When he preached, he brought to the pulpit either his Hebrew Old Testament or Greek New Testament. Because he probably preached his hour-long sermons without notes, he had to rely on his memory.²³ Yet he reprimanded those who thought they could test God by entering the pulpit with no preparation. In his sermon on Deut 6:16 (“Do not put the Lord your God to the test”), Calvin says,

It is all one as if I should step into the pulpet, without vouchsafing to looke upon any book, and fondly imagine to say thus in my self: tush [well], when I come thither, god will give me ynough wherof to speake, and in the mean while I holde scorene to reade, or to study aforehand what I shal speake, and come hither without minding how to apply the holy scripture to the edifying of the people, by reason wherof I should play the presumptuous foole, and God also would put me to shame for mine overboldnesse.²⁴

In Calvin’s mind, extemporaneous speaking should only be attempted by someone who has mastery of the passage under consideration and has studied how it should be handled. Just as Jesus refused to test God’s ability to save him from a fall, Calvin’s assumption is that God will not normally save the unprepared preacher from falling. Conversely, preachers who adequately prepare can also expect God to work through their sermons. In these cases, preachers should be careful not to quench the Spirit by their personal style of preaching.

In a letter to Lord Somerset (Oct. 22, 1548), Calvin encourages the reform in England but worries that the preaching is not lively enough because most ministers read their sermons from a manuscript. Preaching ought not to be “lifeless but lively.” In a moment of concern for seeker-friendly services in English con-

gregations, and with reference to 1 Cor 14:24-25, Calvin wants the unbelievers who enter to be convicted by the preacher's words. "The Spirit of God ought to sound forth by their voice, so as to work with mighty energy."²⁵ Care must be taken not to stifle the efficacy which should accompany the preaching of the gospel.²⁶

According to Calvin, there exists an "inseparable relation between faith and the word."²⁷ By way of Rom 10:17, he acknowledges that faith is produced through preaching, which becomes the instrument of God's power. Although faith cannot be conveyed to another by any person, God works "effectually through the voice of man, so as to create faith in us through his ministry."²⁸

God inspires us with faith through the instrumentality of the gospel. By the preaching of the gospel, he brings forth and unfolds faith. This is possible because God links his Holy Spirit with preaching. The Spirit is received by the hearing of faith.²⁹ In other words, the efficacy of preaching depends on the agency of the Holy Spirit. God, the primary cause, effects faith by the preaching of the gospel, the secondary cause.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

After our brief inquiry into this narrow aspect of the work of the Spirit and ministry, three common, interrelated themes emerge in the reformers. First, the reformers stress the importance of the preaching office. The preacher must be qualified for this magnificent task. These qualifications include natural abilities such as a strong voice and a good memory. In addition to natural talent, a classical education is vital, including training in rhetoric, logic, metaphysics, and ethics. In contrast to the Roman Catholic liturgy, Protestants would preach in the vernacular, though they would maintain a working knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Preparation for the sermon itself is crucial, based on careful biblical exegesis in the original languages. The sermon is designed to teach, move, and delight the auditors.³⁰

The indispensability of the preaching office is most clearly understood in its role as the instrument of the Holy Spirit. Zwingli and Calvin both use the language of causality and instrumentality when speaking of the relation of preaching and its effect, faith. Understood as a cause, the proclaimed Word plants faith in the hearer; understood as an instrument, the Word is a necessary means or tool of the Spirit. The strictly monergistic soteriology of these reformers does not imply that means are unnecessary. A deterministic soteriology does not mean that preaching is superfluous. Indeed, God saves whom he wills to save, but he ordinarily does this by means of contingent, secondary causes. Thus, preaching, which God has sovereignly chosen as his instrument for effecting faith, is not a mere means—but a necessary means for salvation.

The second theme is the mediation of the Holy Spirit through the Word. Against some Libertines and Anabaptist groups—who disparaged the reading of Scripture in favor of direct inspiration and new revelations from the Spirit—and against Roman Catholic implicit faith—which never required any interaction with God's Word—the reformers insisted that the Holy Spirit works through the hearing of the Word. A somewhat parallel situation occurred when—in response to popular American frontier religion in the 19th century that expected direct, private revelations and assurance from the Spirit—opponents maintained hearing to be the first step of one's salvation.

On one hand, the joining of Word and Spirit rules out many past and present forms of private, charismatic revelations. On the other hand, it is not an assertion that the Spirit works through the Bible only or that the Spirit's work is restricted to a book. In fact, for Calvin, the relation is mutual, for one's assurance of the divine origin and authority of God's Word is dependent ultimately on the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work of giving faith, joining one to Christ, sanctifying, and assuring believers is carried out in conjunction with God's Word.

Third, as has been mentioned, God's work through the Holy Spirit is the primary cause of a person's salvation. The practical implication is that after intense study, preparation, and execution of the sermon, the preacher must rely on the Spirit's work in the congregation. Again, the preparation is necessary, but part

of the preacher's preparation should include praying that the Holy Spirit will produce a miracle of faith in someone's heart by means of frail, human words.

Another implication of relying on the Spirit is that the preacher does not worry excessively about why someone does not respond to a carefully prepared and delivered sermon. Instead, when faith is manifested in the hearer, the glory is not the preacher's, but God's, who applies the saving benefits of Christ through his Spirit.

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, in *Luther's Works*, 26: 452.
- 3 Luther, *The Misuse of the Mass*, in *Luther's Works*, 36: 138-9, 152.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 159.
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- 10 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Zwingli and Bullinger*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 24 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 40.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 96-7.
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- 16 Zwingli, *On Providence*, 203-4.
- 17 See, e.g., Zwingli, *Refutation of the Tricks of the Baptists*, in *Selected Works*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 226-7.
- 18 Zwingli, *On Providence*, 201; *An Exposition of the Faith*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 275.
- 19 *The Marburg Articles*, in *Luther's Works*, 38: 87, 89.
- 20 Benjamin B. Warfield, "Introductory Note," in Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Funk and Wagnalis, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), xxxiii.
- 21 The closest thing to a separate topic would be *Institutes* I.vii, which discusses the Spirit's testimony of Scripture, or *Institutes* III.i, which deals with the Spirit's role in communicating the benefits of Christ to the elect.
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- 30 Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* IV.xii.27-28, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117-9.