How Preachers Hear the Word: Doctrine, Doxology, and Devotion in the Process of Preaching

by Cameron James Pollock[1]

Where Are the Worship Leaders?

The title of this introduction may lead you to think of music. The fact that many Christians often think of the term *worship leader* in terms of music and not in terms of preaching points to a current problem in orthodox American Christianity.[2] We rarely consider the sermon, or the preacher, as leading in worship. But if "the heart of Christian worship is the authentic preaching of the word of God," then we need to consider what is wrong with the prevailing modern mindset toward preaching.[3]

I am convinced that preaching will never be viewed as worship in the pew if it is not first viewed as worship in the pulpit. The late homiletics professor Haddon Robinson often said, "A mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew."[4] We usually take this insight to mean preachers should give themselves to the process of expositional preaching through careful exegesis and study, through unfolding what the text says, and Robinson would agree.[5]

But Robinson did not stop there. He proceeded to describe how the act of expositional preaching takes place, and second only to faithful exposition is the fact that "the concept is applied to the expositor."[6] The truth must first affect the preacher's heart before he can faithfully apply it to his congregation. This is where Robinson reproduced and popularized Phillips Brooks's famous dictum, "Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching."[7] The Word of God must be poured over the preacher, flowing in and through his life, for it to become a living, vibrant message. The preacher must first hear the Word and worship.

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[2] R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Expository Preaching: Center of Christian Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2011), 107–9.

[3] Ibid. See also question and answer 155 in the Larger Catechism of *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851).

[4] Steve Mathewson, "Prince among Preachers: My Tribute to Haddon Robinson (1931–2017)," The Gospel Coalition, accessed July 27, 2017, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/prince-among-preachers-my-tribute-to-haddon-robinson/.

[5] Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 20–25.

[6] Ibid., 25–27.

[7] Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (Edinburgh: Turnbull & Spears, 1871), 9.

What Does It Mean to "Hear the Word"?

When I use the verb "hear," I am not simply describing a passive use of one of the natural senses. Instead, I mean "hearing" in the fullest biblical sense of the Hebrew word שׁמע, which often carries the connotation of hearing with attentiveness, understanding, and the intent to obey.[8] In fact, the term itself is often translated simply as "obey" in modern translations. "To hear is to obey," the old saying goes, and this is the kind of hearing our Lord called for in the phrase, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35) in line with the prophets (cf. Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2).[9] Commenting on this phrase in Luke 8:8, Joel B. Green concludes,

> That genuine "hearing" is the principal theme of this narrative section is evident from the melody that weaves its way through the sometimes disparate material: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (v 8); "so that . . . listening they may not understand" (v 10); "those who hear" (in various forms, vv 12, 13, 14, 15); "pay attention to how you listen" (v 18); and "those who hear the word of God" (v 21). Throughout this section, Jesus' point is not only to counsel "hearing" but also to specify the nature of "appropriate" (and "inappropriate") hearing. For this purpose, a number of qualifiers are used, especially: hear + "believe" (vv 12–13), hear + "choked" (v 14), hear + produce fruit (vv 14–15), hear + hold fast . . . with patience (v 15), and hear plus do (v 21). *In all of these cases, hearing is associated with response, accentuating the necessity of acting on the basis of and consistent with what is "heard."*[10]

Therefore, while this study inevitably touches on the act of preaching to others, it is primarily concerned with the responsibility of the preacher to give diligent attention to the Word of God in his sermon preparation and delivery, to understand its implications for his personal life, and to live accordingly. Then, and only then, do we find our grounds to preach to others. "How dare we speak if God has not spoken? By ourselves we have nothing to say. . . . Once we are persuaded that God has spoken, however, then we too must speak. A compulsion rests upon us. Nothing and nobody will be able to silence us."[11]

Three Themes for How Preachers Hear the Word

How can we truly grasp what it means to hear the Word? Does Scripture give any direction in organizing a biblical theology of how preachers hear the Word? It does. It begins with *doctrine,* climaxes in *doxology,* and results in *devotion.* The macrostructure of many of Paul's major epistles in the NT reflects this theological template for my study. These major epistles call for an understanding

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[8] *HALOT*, s.v. "שׁמע"; BDB, s.v. "שׁמע."

[9] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 432. Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

[10] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 322–23 (emphasis added).

[11] John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (1982; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 94–96.

of the Word by beginning with right doctrine (Rom 1–11; Eph 1–3; Phil 1); they call for worship over the Word by climaxing in doxologies of praise (Rom 11:33–36; Eph 3:14–21; Phil 2:1–11); and they call for a response to the Word of utmost devotion (Rom 12–16; Eph 4–6; Phil 2:12ff). This NT-derived pattern provides a useful biblical-theological framework for preaching.[12] True worship over the Word leads to transformed preachers who seek to apply the Word and live by it.

Doctrine, Doxology, and Devotion in Ezra's Life

For a biblical example, let us consider how this pattern proves true in the life of Ezra. Ezra the priest is a prime example of how doctrine, doxology, and devotion should function in a preacher's life.[13]

Consider Ezra's Context

Ezra preached an impactful sermon to the third wave of exiles who returned to Jerusalem in 445 BC (Neh 8). [14] But long before Ezra preached this sermon, God was at work preparing his servant to be an instrument of spiritual revival. Thirteen years before the sermon, "this Ezra went up from Babylonia" to Jerusalem with the second wave of exiles in 458 (Ezra 7:6a).[15] This return was the second

[12] For the purposes of this paper, I am not focusing on doctrinal concepts related to sermon preparation and hermeneutics that inform proper exegesis. They are assumed as a proper foundation for doctrine in this study (see standard works on hermeneutics, sermon construction, and homiletics).

[13] In the biblical-theological portion of my broader project, I prove that the priestly role of Jesus Christ can legitimately be applied to the role of the modern-day preacher who preaches in Christ's stead. Of course, the parallels are not direct, but there is a biblical-theological basis for using Ezra's example to call preachers to commit to doctrine, doxology, and devotion as they hear the Word. For more fruitful connections along these lines, see David C. Deuel, "An Old Testament Pattern for Expository Preaching," *Masters Seminary Journal* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 125–38.

[14] The scholarly discussion regarding the dates of Ezra's and Nehemiah's return is extensive and long-standing. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra–Nehemiah, Volume 16,* WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), xxxix–xliv. Williamson supports the idea that Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 BC and then ministered for only one year with no overlap with Nehemiah. Over and against his proposal that Ezra and Nehemiah had no overlap, see Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), 146–58; Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 42–46; F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 5–9; Derek W. H. Thomas, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, REC (Phillipsburg: P&R), 110–11, 201–2. In the final analysis, I agree with Fensham: "Although admittedly certain problems remain with the traditional view, it is by far the more satisfactory solution because the text as transmitted is kept intact and the sequence of the different chapters is accepted as a reliable guide to the chronology" (9). For the purposes of this paper, then, we will assume the traditional view that Ezra returned in 458 with the second wave of exiles and that Nehemiah returned with the third wave in 445 under the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–423). Williamson, xlviii, 275–76. Williamson himself points out that those who differ on chronology can still agree that the most important element is the literary structure of the book and its intended message.

[15] Commentators are divided on the authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some suggest that an unknown compiler later assembled accounts by Ezra and Nehemiah. Williamson, xxiii–xxxv. Fensham suggests that Ezra and Nehemiah were combined by the Chronicler to form a united whole with Chronicles, an idea Williamson emphatically rejects. Fensham, 1–4; Williamson, xxxiii. Still others suggest that Nehemiah, but more likely Ezra, may have compiled the final form. See Kidner, 136–39; Breneman, 37–41. It seems probable that Ezra compiled the final arrangement of the books, but one cannot be dogmatic.

wave of "everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:5b).

Consider Ezra's Challenge

Ezra's arrival was an extremely important moment, for the spiritual needs were great in Israel. Though by this point the temple had been rebuilt, the narrative makes clear the Israelites had begun falling back into the sinful ways of their predecessors through mixed marriages with foreign nations (Ezra 9:1–4). As the covenant people of God who were called to maintain national holiness and personal purity, this compromise threatened to reintroduce the idol worship that had caused the nation to go into exile in the first place. "This was a crucial point in the history of the Jewish people. Unchecked assimilation would have meant the end of the community."[16] Ezra had a burden for his people to know God through his law and love him by obeying it.[17]

> The Jews in Jerusalem were neglecting the Scriptures. A new generation, whose grandparents and great-grandparents had built the second temple, now occupied the city. These fifth-century Jews were in need of a preacher, someone who would proclaim the Word of God with personal application to the conscience. They were in need of relearning the gravity of sin, and this they could do only by being reacquainted with the demands of God's law—in all its particulars. They did not need someone to salve their consciences with smooth words, and lull them to sleep in the assurance that all was well. They needed someone who could put the "fear of God" into their souls and awaken them to the peril of presumptive religion. And for this urgent task, God raised up Ezra.[18]

Consider Ezra's Qualifications

Ezra's particular role as an official in the service of the Persian king Artaxerxes I enabled him to serve a dual role as representative for the king and a priestly teacher for God's people. The significance of this role should not be underestimated—the extended genealogical introduction in Ezra 7:1–4 sets us up to expect a priest of considerable qualifications and importance, "and indeed it was he, more than any other man, who stamped Israel with its lasting character as a people of the book."[19] "More than that, he appears in this book almost as a second Moses: a lawgiver and teacher establishing the contours of 'one nation under God.'"[20]

This "second Moses" role of Ezra becomes immediately apparent in the narrative, for we are told, "He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given" (Ezra 7:6b). The Hebrew word מָהִיר carries the connotation of "quick," and reflects the skill, ease, and clarity with

[16] Breneman, 52.

[17] Thomas, 112.

[18] Thomas, 113.

[19] Kidner, 62.

[20] Thomas, 115.

which a scribe well-versed in the law could navigate complicated theological truths in the text.[21] This kind of theological deftness was only possible through years of diligent study and commitment (as will be seen in v. 10). Many have considered Ezra "the founder of the Jewish exegesis on the method of the *midrash halakha*. *He was thus an interpreter par excellence.*"[22] And yet, with all Ezra's skill and credentials, both priestly and political, the text points the reader away from Ezra and toward "the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given" (Ezra 7:6b). This shift in focus is intentional, reflecting the disposition and humility of a scribe, or interpreter, whose task was not to present his own ideas, but to faithfully unfold the Word of the Lord. This term *LORD,* יְהוָה, is the personal name of God in his covenantal relationship with his people Israel. It marks Ezra as a servant of Yahweh and a faithful interpreter of the law of Moses.

Consider Ezra's Opportunity

The Lord was now at work to care for his covenant people, as Ezra 7:6c makes clear: "and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him." This final phrase, "for the hand of the LORD his God was on him," strikes a crucial theme that runs through the heart of Ezra and Nehemiah—the sovereignty of God in the salvation of his people (see Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh 2:8, 18). God clearly shows his power over the foreign kings of the earth by moving the hearts of both Cyrus and Artaxerxes to allow the people to return.[23]

Yet the cosmic theme of God's sovereignty, as stunning as it is, is not the climax of this narrative. Instead, the cosmic dimension prepares the reader for the personal theme of God's sovereignty expressed in the life of one faithful servant—Ezra.

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[21] What is the "the Book of the Law of Moses" referred to here and throughout Ezra and Nehemiah? Commentators generally outline four different views, though three of these views are driven by the revisionist tendencies of skeptical liberal scholarship that fail to accept the meaning of the text at face value. Conservative scholars point out that a straightforward reading of the text leads us to believe Ezra read and taught from the Pentateuch. See especially Kidner, who comments on the revisionist approach, "To accept this view is to conclude, however charitably one may express it, that Ezra committed a pious fraud that day, passing off his improved version as the original which had been called for; not only 'mending the oracles of God' but reading aloud their repeated warnings (Dt. 4:2; 12:32) against doing such a thing." Kidner, 104 (cf. 158–64). For further discussion, see Deuel, 131n18; Breneman, 47–48; Williamson, xxxxvii–xxxix, 92.

[22] Fensham, 99. According to Breneman, Ezra also served as a precursor to scribes of the NT (127–28).

[23] Breneman traces the theme to its fullest. "It was God who was responsible for the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1, 'The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus'). He also secured the permission for construction to continue (Ezra 5:5, 'The eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews'; 6:14, 'They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel'; and 6:22, 'The Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria') and for Ezra and his group to come to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27, 'The God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the Lord'). He even protected them on the way (Ezra 8:22, 'The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him'). It was God who secured Nehemiah's appointment as governor (Neh 2:8, 'Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests') and guided in all the details of the construction of the wall (Neh 4:14, 'Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome,' and 4:20, 'Our God will fight for us!'). God frustrated the plans of the Jews' enemies and preserved this community. Just as we find throughout the prophetic books and the whole Bible, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah interpreted history in terms of God's actions" (50–51).

Consider Ezra's Commitment

It is significant that the story waits to reveal the full extent of Ezra's dedication until now. This passage is far more than a stereotypical description of Ezra's role as a scribe.[24] Verses 9–10 of chapter 7 pick up the theme of God's sovereignty and apply it to Ezra and his Word-centered ministry in particular: "For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, *for the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel*" (emphasis added). The connection between verse 6 and verses 9–10 must not be missed:

> The Bible clearly states that the king permitted Ezra to go assist his people in their homeland and even gave him the qualified help and needed financial support "because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him" (Ezra 7:6). But God's hand was upon Ezra singularly, "because (כִּי [*kî*]) Ezra had set his heart to study the law of YHWH, to practice, and to teach statute and ordinance in Israel" (7:10).[25]

The Lord poured out his cosmic blessing upon his covenant people by means of the Word-centered ministry of a faithful man of God, Ezra the priest. The Hebrew word לֵבָב reflects the totality of one's being and demonstrates Ezra's wholehearted dedication to the Word of God.

> The Hebrew text of Ezra 7:10 begins with an emphatic explanation of why God's hand was upon Ezra: "*For* [i.e., *because*] Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord." God prospered the initiative *because* it was a good one. Ezra, like David, had a heart after God. His love was for God's Word and God's ways, not his own. He did not "go west" because he believed there would be a better life there. His ambition was not for personal gain and financial improvement; he wanted to see the Lord's people return to a way of life that gave God honor. His focus was the glory of God.
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> The very expression "set his heart" is full of the most intense meaning. It is rendered "devoted" in some translations, a perfectly adequate translation, but it fails to bring to the surface that the issue involves "the heart" and therefore the core of one's being. This was not merely an intellectual exercise in national reform, a political campaign to bring a better way of life to the citizens of Jerusalem. Ezra had a heart for God and a mind for truth.[26]

In other words, Ezra was not just committed to sound doctrine. He was committed to doxology—to worshipping God as he studied the text and gave God the glory he deserved. The two are inseparably connected and feed one another—one cannot truly know God without being compelled to worship

[24] A suggestion of Williamson, who comments, "Thus the expression has evidently become stereotyped as a term of approval for a scribe in whatever capacity he functioned (cf. McKane, *Prophets,* 29–36), and it is intended as such here too" (92).

[25] Deuel, 130. Fensham also comments, "The conjunction *kî* connects this verse to the immediately preceding phrase, 'for the favor of his God was with him.' The favor of God was with him because he set his heart on the study of the law, etc" (101).

[26] Thomas, 117.

him. Doctrine, doxology, and devotion are not isolated qualities in preaching but interlocking pieces that mutually strengthen each other. I compare them to the "threefold cord . . . not quickly broken" in Ecclesiastes 4:9–12. Doctrine, doxology, and devotion are the preacher's friends that strengthen his ministry and make it effective. While an overemphasis or exclusion of one or more elements can lead to ministry neglect or even harm, the proper balance of all three greatly strengthens a preacher's ministry.

So it was that the doctrine and doxology in Ezra's life led him to devotion, to living out his faith in God. Verse 10 of chapter 7 tells us, "Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it." Commentators are united in observing Ezra's unique ability to exposit the law of Moses and apply it to the contemporary problems of his day. Where did such insight come from? Undoubtedly from the Word of God as he studied it, but, more than that, his insight came from his commitment to obey the Word of God.[27] By experience in living out the law Ezra was prepared "to teach [the LORD's] statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10b).[28] The end goal was the successful transmission of the Word of God to the people, so that they too might comprehend the truth, worship God, and obey him. The path to this faithful delivery ran straight through the heart and life of the preacher. And though these three elements function like a threefold cord to mutually strengthen each other, this passage makes clear that they still follow a logical and necessary sequence.

> He is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness. [29]

From this foundation of doctrine, doxology, and devotion in the life of Ezra, the story of the returned exiles blossoms into blessing. The Lord had prepared a man of God to preach.[30]

Doctrine, Doxology, and Devotion from the Past to the Present

In addition to Ezra's life and preaching, I also have studied church history from the Patristics through the time of the Reformation through the lens of doctrine, doxology, and devotion.[31] Church

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[27] "But it is not only a question of study—he also practiced the law. It was not a dead letter, but a living reality to him (cf. also Jas. 1:22)." Fensham, 101.

[28] The terms "statutes and rules" are used "to refer to all the requirements of God's law." Breneman, 130.

[29] Kidner, 62. Breneman puts it this way: "Study, observe (obey), then teach is the correct order. God's revelation has for its purpose the ordering of his people's lives. There are no easy solutions or quick recipes to solve life's problems. God needs men and women who will devote their lives to this ministry. These three aspects of ministry are interdependent. One called by God to teach must also study and obey" (130).

[30] While Ezra's life provides a fitting, brief introduction to how to use this three-fold grid, Ezra's sermon in Nehemiah 8 provides a much deeper, substantial opportunity to exposit these themes. I make a fuller exposition of Ezra's sermon in my applied research project.

[31] Hughes Oliphant Old's authoritative work on the history of preaching served as my guide for finding original and secondary sources. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church,* 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2010). I consulted primarily volumes 1–4.

history has much to teach us here through its stunning real-life examples and its often-overlooked biblical emphases. For example, if we go back far enough in church history, we discover the devotion of preachers was more akin to the musical meditations of David than the cranial musings of academia. Ephrem of Nisibis (306–73), in the earliest days of the church, gave himself to meditating on Scripture.[32] Ephrem was a poet and musician, and like David he turned his biblical meditations into songs. Indeed, he even turned his songs into sermons![33] From Ephrem flowed a solid stream of preachers who meditated on the Word in poetry and song: Romanos the Melode (fl. ca. 540),[34] Peter Damian (1007–1072),[35] Martin Luther (1483–1646), and Philip Nicolai (1556–1608),[36] to name a few.

Some modern preachers also have much to offer us. After independently arriving at the three categories of doctrine, doxology, and devotion from my own study, I was pleased to discover that both Joel Beeke and John Piper had arrived at strikingly similar conclusions in their own works. While other prominent preachers focus on one or more of these elements, Beeke and Piper capture all three succinctly and in the same order.

Beeke puts it this way: "Biblical preaching must combine doctrinal, experiential, and practical elements."[37] A close reading of Beeke reveals these three elements closely resemble the categories of doctrine, doxology, and devotion in preaching. He quotes John Clayton, John Goode, and Thomas Scott for support and then later reveals Spurgeon as his original source.

> When Charles H. Spurgeon preached his first sermon in the Metropolitan Tabernacle (March 25, 1861), he chose as his text Acts 5:42: "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." Spurgeon said: "It appears that the one subject upon which men preached in the apostolic age was *Jesus Christ*. . . . I would propose that the subject of the ministry of this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ." Would this stricture limit

[32] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Volume 2: The Patristic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 249–68.

[33] Ibid., 249.

[34] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Volume 3: The Medieval Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 7–20. Romanos was a preacher and musician who composed hymnic sermons, much like Ephrem, and came from the same city of Nisibis. See Romanos, *The Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, trans. Marjorie Carpenter, 2 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1970).

[35] Old, *The Medieval Church*, 226–37. Though I am on the whole dissatisfied with the ascetic thrust of his ministry, it is interesting to note that Damian, as a poet and hymnwriter, was one of the few individuals in this generation of church history who was also known as an effective preacher.

[36] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Volume 4: The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 372.

[37] Joel R. Beeke, *Reformed Preaching: Proclaiming God's Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 32.

> preachers? No, Spurgeon said, for Christ is the most comprehensive of subjects: "If a man be found a preacher of Christ, he is doctrinal, experimental [experiential], and practical."[38]

While Beeke's definition of experiential preaching is quite expansive and therefore hard to grasp in one sentence, he narrows it down to this key definition. "Even more simply, we could say that the Reformed experiential preacher receives God's Word into his heart and then preaches it to the minds, hearts, and lives of his people."[39] In this way, Beeke echoes our call to embrace doctrine, doxology, and devotion in preaching.

Similarly, in *Expository Exultation* Piper states, "I conclude that the ultimate goal of all biblical truth, and therefore every text, is that God be glorified by our *seeing* and *savoring* and *showing* him as the greatest beauty and treasure in the universe."[40] This statement is a summary of the overarching thrust of Piper's book, which focuses on the fact that preaching is, at its heart, an act of worship. It is not hard to understand how Piper's "*seeing"* relates to doctrine, his "*savoring"* relates to doxology, and his "*showing"* relates to devotion. Though stated from different vantage points, a careful reading of both authors reveals that Beeke and Piper are striking at the same core themes of preaching.

It is clear, then, that church history and biblically faithful modern preachers only serve to strengthen my premise. As preachers feed the flock, God intends to feed preachers through doctrine, doxology, and devotion in their sermon preparation, delivery, and response. Let us consider a few final insights from the biblical data, church history, and modern preachers that enable preachers to better hear the Word in the process of preaching.

Grounded for Sermon Preparation

The intense demands and unique temptations of pastoral ministry will never pass away. It is of the essence, then, that pastors be equipped with as many tools as possible to address every kind of demand they may face. They need help to bear the weight of ministry well. Though I do not have the space to share the results here, in my research project I construct a comprehensive biblical theology from Genesis to Revelation of how preachers hear the Word. If preachers are to rightly hear the Word and preach it, they must understand that a biblical theology of pastoral preaching rests firmly on a Trinitarian, Christ-centered foundation. Based on my study, I define preaching this way: *Holy Spirit-empowered preaching takes place when the Spirit of God works through the man of God as that man reveals, worships, and responds to the Son of God by heralding the Word of God.* This definition of preaching and the biblical-theological doctrine conveyed in this study will equip preachers to navigate skillfully and efficiently the rich texts of the word of God like Ezra the scribe.[41]

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[38] Beeke, 401.

[39] Ibid., 41.

[40] John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 208.

[41] Appendix A of my project provides the teaching outlines I developed and used to relate these doctrinal truths. I taught three separate cohorts of pastors and gathered feedback from each cohort to evaluate and refine the material. Also, Appendix C provides outlines of two sermons I preached on the life and preaching of Ezra from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

For sharpening sermon-preparation skills, I believe the benefit of preaching cohorts cannot be underestimated. I have recently had the opportunity to attend a Charles Simeon Trust preaching seminar and found it immensely helpful for my own preaching-preparation process. The practice of getting feedback from fellow gifted preachers of the Word is biblical, time-tested, and sharpens our ability to hear the Word (Eph 4:1–16; 2 Tim 2:1–2).[42]

We rightfully devote much time to equipping preachers with the proper tools for exegesis and study. However, in our popcorn-paced culture, we must also help preachers embrace the importance of biblical reflection and meditation in the study. Sermons must be slow-cooked. This project prompted me to alter my sermon preparation process in one key way. After finishing my Sunday morning sermon by Thursday, I meditate on it over the weekend and prayerfully review my completed sermon manuscript on Saturday evening. This approach has been suggested by several preachers, and it allows me to carefully review my sermon without distraction and make any necessary changes. Then, on Sunday morning, I can give myself to dedicated prayer over the Word. This simple change has paid considerable dividends in enabling me to hear the Word better in sermon preparation.

Zealous in Sermon Delivery

The main burden of this project is for preachers to understand and believe that preaching is an act of worship. Preachers are hungering for a theology that gives purpose to their preaching and infuses it with energy and zeal to the glory of God. They also need the encouragement and hope that this study provides for their preaching ministries; they want to believe that God can use their fledgling sermons to work his grace in their hearers and in themselves.

One great benefit of this study for the act of preaching, then, is how it strengthens the preacher's faith to believe in the Spirit's power to reveal Christ in preaching.[43] Preachers can lay hold of Christ by faith in a few practical ways. First, church history shows us how preachers can utilize a service order (or liturgy) to meditate on the Word they are about to preach.[44] Second, they can make careful,

[42] The Reformers saw this connection as well and, given their commitment to doctrine and doxology, gave themselves to training other men of God who could rightly divide the word of truth. Zwingli and Bullinger established "the first theological seminary of Reformed Protestantism . . . called the Prophezei, signaling the continuity between the Christian preacher and the ancient prophet." Beeke, 105. William Perkins observes that while ministers bear authority, they must recognize that "the power ministers of the gospel have comes directly from God and is above their own. So they themselves, as individuals, must submit to the powerful word of ministers, to be taught by it, and to be reconciled by means of it. They must learn to respect it, for even although it is a man who speaks, it is still the word of God." *The Art of Prophesying and The Calling of the Ministry* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 125.

[43] Preaching Christ clearly from the Word is exactly what the Holy Spirit delights to empower and bless, for the Spirit's work is to reveal Christ in the Word (Rom 8:9; John 16:13–14; Eph 3:16–19). "What does the Holy Spirit like best in a preacher? The Spirit most delights in the preaching of Christ." Beeke, 63–64.

[44] There are many examples of this practice from church history. In his series on the Psalms, Augustine interwove his preaching with the psalm-singing of the liturgy to mutually enhance the focus and intelligibility of the worship. Old, *The Patristic Age*, 358–60. The importance of preaching in the worship of the liturgy is also elevated in *The Directory for Public Worship of God*. In 1644 the Westminster Assembly in London crafted this liturgical manual to replace the Book of Common Prayer as their guide for worship. "Though the directory covers fifteen topics, more than a tenth of its substance is devoted to 'the Preaching of the Word.' Only the pastoral prayer before the sermon receives more attention, and that section consists of a lengthy sample prayer." Beeke, 192.

intentional use of the prayer of illumination before the sermon and the prayer of response after the sermon.[45] Third, hardly a sermon goes by when I do not practice a modified version of John Piper's APTAT paradigm for preaching. Piper uses this acronym meaning "Admit, Pray, Trust, Act, Thank" to help him prepare his heart in worship just before he steps into the pulpit to preach.[46] The high point of this process is the middle "T" for "Trust," when Piper seeks by faith to cling to a specific promise of God to him through his Word.

> This step is decisive. *Trust.* This is the link with Galatians 3:5 that we examined in chapter 6. . . . God supplies the Spirit and works miracles through our preaching by our "hearing with faith." The Spirit comes through our hearing one of God's blood-bought promises of help, and believing it. At this point, I think many of us miss out on the fullness of God's blessing by defaulting to vague generalities. Instead of focusing on very concrete, particular promises, we don't focus on any promise at all. We think generally about God's goodness or power. There is nothing wrong with this, but I think God is offering us something better. At least this has proven true for me.[47]

In this third step, Piper highlights the specific promises he meditates on from various passages of Scripture. I would suggest preachers adapt Piper's approach by making the central verse or verses of the text at hand the focus of the preacher's faith. By this method, the preacher makes his sermon text his source of meditation. My personal preaching process and spiritual growth have been transformed greatly as I have applied this adapted form of Piper's method to my own preaching.

Challenged to Sermon Response

Ezra's life and preaching ministry provide a sterling example of how growth in biblical application takes place. True wisdom is gleaned as the pastor seeks to simply obey the Word, like Ezra. Insight into biblical application cannot be had any other way, which is why seasoned, faithful pastors often have some of the best sermon applications. Ezra's life provides a good model and encouragement to preachers to look for every opportunity to obey and apply the Word. It is through obedience that application becomes plain.

Richard Baxter (1615–91) was a pastor in Kidderminster, England, who planned to preach to his fellow pastors in the county of Worcestershire on December 4, 1655.[48] Baxter was unable to attend due to ill health, but he set his sermon to writing and published his address under the title *The Reformed*

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[45] This twin emphasis on the importance of preaching and the prayer before the sermon is not by accident. The prayers of illumination and response before and after the sermon, more than any other element of the liturgy, elevated the importance of preaching in the worship of the church. Old draws this out especially from the Strasbourg liturgy. *The Age of the Reformation*, 79–80.

[46] Piper, 109–19; cf. John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 50–53.

[47] Piper, *Expository Exultation*, 112.

[48] For historical information about Baxter, especially in relation to *The Reformed Pastor*, see the foreword by Chad Van Dixhoorn and the introduction by Tim Cooper in Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, updated and abridged ed., ed. Tim Cooper (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 9–30. For my primary source research I consulted Richard Baxter and William Orme, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), 14:45.

Pastor in 1656. Acts 20:28 was the key text from which Baxter called on his fellow ministers to "take heed" to themselves.

Baxter underscores a truth that I also highlight in my biblical theology of preaching. God's normal means of blessing his people is through faithful preachers of the Word. This is what Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:15–16, "Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." It may be a terrifying prospect, but pastors must realize their own personal faithfulness has a direct impact on their public fruitfulness. We simply cannot buy the lie that we can be one person in the pulpit and another person in our private lives and get away with it. Though ultimately God is sovereign to produce all the fruit we bear in ministry, we are still responsible.

How to Help Preachers Keep Hearing the Word

I would like to propose that we conduct more research into this highly fruitful field of study. For example, I did not have the space to consider how preachers heard the Word in church history after the time of the Reformation up to just before the modern era (1600s–1950s). Such a study would furnish more intriguing examples and unique insights into how preachers hear the Word.

Over the course of the study, I also realized just how deeply ingrained the theological themes and language of this research are embedded in the Bible. The Shema in Deuteronomy 6, Paul's sermon to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, and his exhortations regarding preaching in 1 Corinthians 2 and 1 Timothy 4 are crucial texts for understanding the place of doctrine, doxology, and devotion in preaching.[49] Whole sermon series could be produced on "How Preachers Hear the Word" from the lives of the prophets, then the priests, and then the kings of the OT. And, of course, further practical and pastoral insights could be refined and developed to help preachers grow in their own preaching process.

Conclusion

In light of the above considerations, I am making a sincere plea that we give more attention to this topic using the biblical framework of "Doctrine, Doxology, and Devotion." Preachers today need to hear the Word. This is the insight captured in a poem by George Herbert titled, "The Windows."[50] Herbert compares the preacher to stained-glass windows in a church. When God's light shines in and through weak and fallible preachers like brittle glass, the preacher's beauty compels and draws people

[49] No one makes a better case for the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching from 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 than D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In 1969 Lloyd-Jones gave a famous series of lectures on preaching at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The climax of his series was his final lecture on this passage, titled "'Demonstration of the Spirit and of the Power.'" See D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

[50] I am indebted to Dr. Bruce Rose, division chair of English Language and Literature in the College of Arts and Science at Bob Jones University for drawing my attention to this poem. I am using the updated edition from the Poetry Foundation. "The Windows," Poetry Foundation, accessed April 22, 2025, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50695/the-windows-56d22df68ff95.

to Christ. But when the preacher is not devoted to Christ in "doctrine and life," the Word preached appears "waterish, bleak, and thin."

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?
He is a brittle crazy glass;
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.

But when thou dost anneal[51] in glass thy story,
Making thy life to shine within
The holy preachers, then the light and glory
More reverend grows, and more doth win;
Which else shows waterish, bleak, and thin.

Doctrine and life, colors and light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and awe; but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
And in the ear, not conscience, ring.

May the church be blessed as Christ himself speaks through preachers who hear the Word in doctrine, doxology, and devotion by the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God.

[51] The word "anneal" refers to the heating and cooling process through which glass is softened and made less brittle.