

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 9: WORSHIP

The Gathered Assembly Before the Living God

Lesson 27

THE CENTRALITY OF PREACHING IN WORSHIP

The Word of God as the Main Event of the Gathered Assembly

When the preacher opens the Scripture and proclaims its meaning, God speaks to His assembled people. The sermon is not a human commentary on a divine text — it is the divine text made audible, applied, and alive in the power of the Spirit to the specific people gathered before it.

*“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort,
with great patience and instruction.”*

2 Timothy 4:2, NASB 1995

Key Texts: 2 Timothy 4:1–5; Romans 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Nehemiah 8:1–12; Acts 20:7; 1 Timothy 4:13

*“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of
God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”*

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Of all the elements of corporate worship that the regulative principle prescribes, the one that stands at the center of the gathered assembly's encounter with the living God is the preached Word. This is the Reformation's most foundational and most consequential recovery: where the medieval Mass had placed the altar and the repeated sacrifice of Christ, the Protestant Reformation placed the pulpit and the proclaimed Word of God. The shift was not merely architectural; it was theological and ecclesiological at the deepest level. It was the recovery of the conviction that God addresses His covenant people primarily and normatively through the proclamation of His Word, that the risen Christ is present in His gathered assembly most characteristically through the Spirit-anointed preaching of the apostolic deposit preserved in Scripture.

The centrality of preaching in the gathered assembly is not the centrality of the preacher. It is the centrality of the text that the preacher proclaims. The preacher who stands before the gathered congregation is not the event; the Scripture he opens and expounds is the event. When the text is faithfully read, rightly divided, and applicably declared, the living God addresses His assembled people with the same authority and the same efficacy with which He inspired the text in the first instance. The cover maxim of this lesson states the conviction precisely: when the preacher opens the Scripture and proclaims its meaning, God speaks to His assembled people. The sermon is not a human commentary on a divine text; it is the divine text made audible, applied, and alive in the power of the Spirit to the specific people gathered before it. This conviction is the theological foundation of the entire enterprise of biblical preaching.

The contemporary evangelical church's drift away from this conviction, from the text-driven, expository, theologically serious proclamation of the whole counsel of God, is among the most significant pastoral failures of the present generation. The displacement of preaching by experience-centered, needs-based, culturally curated, entertainment-adjacent worship services has not produced a more spiritually satisfied or more spiritually mature evangelical church; it has produced a theologically impoverished one, whose members lack the biblical formation necessary for genuine covenant community life, genuine mission engagement, and genuine perseverance in the faith across the trials of human existence. The recovery of genuine preaching is inseparable from the recovery of the covenant community theology that this entire series has been arguing for: the community that knows what it is, why it gathers, and who is speaking when the text is opened will not settle for the therapeutic talk.

The lesson moves through the Reformation's recovery of preaching, the biblical mandate for the centrality of the Word in the gathered assembly, the nature of genuinely expository preaching, the relationship between preaching and the other elements of worship, the power of preaching in the Spirit's hands, and the congregation's responsibility to hear the Word with the attentiveness and the obedience that genuine encounter with the living God requires. Throughout, the lesson keeps before the congregation the single conviction that grounds the entire treatment: when the Scripture is faithfully proclaimed, God speaks. The gathered assembly that believes this will listen differently; the preacher who believes this will prepare and preach differently; and the worship service in which this conviction governs the treatment of the Word will be a service in which the living God is genuinely, characteristically, and powerfully present.

I. THE REFORMATION'S RECOVERY OF PREACHING

The Pulpit Replaces the Altar

A. What Was Lost and What Was Recovered

The medieval church's liturgical life was organized around the Mass as its central act, and the Mass was above all a priestly performance at the altar, a re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ enacted by the ordained priest in the presence of the lay congregation. The congregation was not the primary actor in the Mass; the priest was. The congregation was the audience for the priest's performance, not the participant in the proclamation. The sermon, when it occurred at all in the medieval parish church, was typically a brief exhortation appended to the eucharistic liturgy, not the central act of the gathering but a pastoral supplement to the sacramental drama that was the service's real event. The relegation of preaching to secondary status in the medieval liturgy was both a symptom and a cause of the theological impoverishment that the Reformation identified as the medieval church's most devastating spiritual failure: the people of God were being fed sacramentally while being starved theologically.

The Reformers' recovery of preaching was simultaneously a recovery of the centrality of the Word of God in the church's life and a recovery of the biblical understanding of what it means for the community to be the people of God. Luther's restoration of the sermon to the center of the worship service, his translation of the Bible into the German vernacular so that ordinary people could read the Scripture for themselves, and his insistence that the Christian is justified by faith received through the hearing of the Word rather than by sacramental participation, all of these were applications of the same principle: the Word of God, received by faith, is the primary instrument through which the Spirit creates, sustains, and forms the covenant community. The Reformed tradition pushed this principle further than Luther: Calvin's Geneva was built around the systematic, consecutive, expository proclamation of the whole counsel of God, with Calvin himself preaching through entire books of Scripture in consecutive sermons, Sunday after Sunday and weekday after weekday. The Puritan tradition received this Calvinist commitment and carried it to its fullest expression in the theology and practice of the English-speaking Reformed world.

The Reformation's recovery of preaching was the recovery of what the apostolic community had known from the beginning. The book of Acts presents preaching as the primary instrument through which the church was born and through which the gospel advanced across the Mediterranean world: Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2), Stephen's extended proclamation (Acts 7), Philip's exposition of Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), Paul's synagogue and agora proclamations across the entire Gentile world (Acts 13-28). The apostolic community's first description of its own life in Acts 2:42 places the apostles' teaching (the ministry of the Word) as the first of the four characteristic practices. The pattern is consistent and deliberate: the Spirit works through the proclaimed Word to produce the faith that the community of the redeemed is constituted by, the knowledge that the community is formed by, and the perseverance that the community's long-term faithfulness requires.

B. The Reformation's Theological Ground

The theological ground of the Reformation's recovery of preaching was the insistence on the Word of God as the primary means of grace through which the Spirit works in the life of the covenant community. Romans 10:14-17 provides the most direct apostolic account of this insistence: 'How then will they call on Him in whom they have

not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things! However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed our report? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.' The logic is a chain of necessary dependence: calling requires believing, believing requires hearing, hearing requires a preacher, the preacher must be sent. And the conclusion: faith comes from hearing, hearing by the word of Christ. The preached Word is not one means among several equally effective alternatives for producing faith; it is the appointed, irreplaceable instrument through which the Spirit produces the hearing that produces faith.

First Corinthians 1:21 adds the most paradoxical element of the preaching theology: 'For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.' The message preached is, by the world's standards, foolish, a message about a crucified Jew as the Savior of the world, proclaimed in the plain language of the pulpit rather than in the sophisticated rhetorical forms of the academy and the senate. But this foolishness is God's chosen instrument for the salvation of those who believe, because the preaching of the cross is not the display of human wisdom but the display of the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). The Spirit works through the foolishness of the message preached precisely because the foolishness is God's foolishness, and God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:25). The preacher who is tempted to improve on the plain proclamation of the apostolic message by making it wiser, more sophisticated, or more culturally palatable has misunderstood the theological logic of 1 Corinthians 1:21.

The 1689 Confession's account of the means of grace reflects the Reformation's theological recovery precisely: 'The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts; and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and the Lord's supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened.' The Spirit works ordinarily through the ministry of the Word, not exclusively, not mechanically, and not without the freedom that the Spirit maintains over His own work, but ordinarily, characteristically, and with the reliability that the covenant community depends on for its regular formation in the knowledge of God. The ordinary means of grace are the means the community is supposed to rely on, and the Word proclaimed is the most fundamental of them.

II. THE BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR CENTRAL PREACHING

God Commands the Proclamation of His Word

A. Second Timothy 4:1-5 and the Apostolic Commission

The most direct and most comprehensive apostolic mandate for the centrality of preaching in the church's life is Paul's final charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1-5: 'I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn

aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.' The charge is solemnized by the invocation of the divine presence and the divine judgment, this is not pastoral advice; it is a commission issued under the authority of the God who will judge the living and the dead and the Christ who will appear in His kingdom.

The specific charge is both simple and comprehensive: preach the word. Not preach ideas inspired by the word; not preach themes drawn from the word; not preach messages that connect with the word at various points. Preach the word, the specific apostolic deposit preserved in the Scripture that Timothy has been entrusted with as an elder and teacher of the church at Ephesus. The modes of preaching that follow, reprove, rebuke, exhort, describe the full range of the Word's application to the congregation's actual spiritual condition. The Word reproves (corrects what is doctrinally or morally wrong), rebukes (addresses the will and calls for repentance), and exhorts (encourages, strengthens, and calls to faithful action). All three modes operate together in genuine preaching, and the sermon that consistently uses only one mode at the expense of the others has not faithfully discharged the full commission.

The warning of verses 3-4 is Paul's prophetic description of the failure that the charge is designed to prevent: the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate teachers in accordance with their own desires. The itching ears that seek teachers aligned with personal preferences rather than the apostolic deposit are the ears that govern much of the contemporary evangelical church's relationship to preaching. The congregation that shops for a pastor on the basis of his preaching style, his cultural relevance, or his therapeutic accessibility, rather than on the basis of his faithfulness to the text and his theological seriousness, is the congregation that has produced exactly the situation Paul warns about: teachers accumulated in accordance with the congregation's desires, who will tell the congregation what it wants to hear. The antidote Paul prescribes for Timothy is equally clear: 'But you, be sober in all things... fulfill your ministry.' The faithful preacher is sober, clear-headed, unintoxicated by the pressure to tickle ears, and he fulfills the ministry rather than the congregation's preferences.

B. The Nehemiah 8 Pattern: The Whole Assembly Under the Word

Nehemiah 8:1-12 provides one of the most vivid and most instructive Old Testament accounts of the covenant community gathered under the Word of God, and its pattern is strikingly similar to what the New Testament describes as the norm for the gathered Christian assembly. The people gathered 'as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate' (verse 1), the gathered assembly; 'they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel' (verse 1), the request for the Word; 'he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law' (verse 3), the extended, attentive hearing of the Word; the Levites 'gave the sense, so that they understood the reading' (verse 8), the explanatory interpretation that is the heart of genuine preaching; 'and all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law' (verse 9), the affective response to the genuine encounter with the Word; and the day's conclusion in joy: 'all the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them' (verse 12).

The Nehemiah 8 pattern establishes several features of the gathering under the Word that the New Testament assumes and the Reformation recovered. First, the gathering is the whole community, men, women, and those who could understand, gathered specifically for the hearing of the Word. The gathering is not organized around

the aesthetic preferences of a target demographic or the convenience of the most likely attendees; it is the covenant community as a whole, gathered under the obligation of hearing the Word that constitutes them as the people of God. Second, the hearing is extended and attentive, from early morning until midday, with all the people attentive. The length and the attentiveness are not incidental; they reflect the community's conviction that the Word being read is the Word of the living God, and that the encounter with the living God through His Word is worth the sustained attention and the extended time that genuine formation requires. Third, the reading is accompanied by interpretation, the Levites 'gave the sense, so that they understood the reading.' The interpretation of the text is the indispensable link between the text and the community's understanding of it, and this interpretive function is precisely what the sermon provides in the gathered Christian assembly.

The community's response to the Word, weeping at the recognition of their failure to keep the covenant, and then rejoicing at the good news that 'the joy of the LORD is your strength', is the prototype of the congregation's full response to genuine preaching. Genuine preaching produces both the grief of conviction and the joy of the gospel: it names the gap between the text's description of the covenant life and the community's actual practice of it, and then it points to the mercy and the grace that the same text provides for exactly those who recognize the gap and come to the Lord in repentance and faith. The sermon that only produces grief has not yet reached the gospel; the sermon that only produces joy has not yet reached the law's full weight. The full sermon brings both, and the full congregation that receives both is the congregation that leaves, like Nehemiah's people, to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

III. THE NATURE OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

The Text Determines the Message

A. What Expository Preaching Is

Expository preaching is the form of preaching in which the meaning of the biblical text determines the content, the structure, and the emphasis of the sermon. The text is not the preacher's launching pad for his own theological agenda; it is the preacher's master, whose meaning the sermon exists to serve. The expository preacher comes to the text with the question 'What does this say?' before he asks 'What shall I say about this?' He labors to understand the text in its original language, its immediate context, its canonical context, and its theological horizon before he begins to translate its meaning into the contemporary idiom that the congregation can hear and receive. The sermon that results from this labor is not the preacher's message about the text; it is the text's message delivered through the preacher's proclamation.

The primacy of the text in expository preaching means that the structure of the sermon is determined by the structure of the text rather than by the preacher's rhetorical preferences or the congregation's attention patterns. The narrative sermon that preaches a narrative text; the doctrinal exposition that preaches a doctrinal passage; the poetic meditation that engages a psalm; the epistolary explication that works through Paul's argument in sequence, each of these forms serves the text's own genre, structure, and emphasis. The preacher who forces every text into the same three-point topical structure has imposed his rhetorical preferences on the text rather than allowing the text's own form to shape the sermon's form. The genuine expositor is genuinely submitted to

the text in its specific form, trusting that the Holy Spirit who inspired the text in the specific form it takes knew what He was doing when He chose that form.

The expository sermon is also characterized by the comprehensiveness of its engagement with the text's meaning: it addresses what the text actually says rather than what the preacher would prefer to say, and it addresses the full range of the text's implications rather than the slice most comfortable for the congregation. This comprehensive engagement with the text is what Paul means by 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27): 'I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.' The preacher who preaches the whole Bible, who works through books of Scripture consecutively, who addresses the full range of the text's content and application, who does not avoid the passages that confront the congregation's comfortable assumptions, is the preacher who is delivering the whole counsel of God to the specific people God has placed in his care. The congregation that receives this full diet of the whole counsel is the congregation that is being formed in the full range of the knowledge of God that the apostolic deposit provides.

B. The Relationship Between the Text and the Application

The application of the biblical text to the congregation's life is not the separate third movement of the sermon that the preacher adds after the exegesis and the exposition are complete; it is the culminating expression of the text's own trajectory toward the specific people gathered before it. The text is not inert historical data that the preacher analyzes and then applies by finding modern equivalents; it is the living and active Word of God that is addressed to the specific covenant community in its specific present situation, and the application is the Spirit-guided identification of the specific ways in which the text's meaning bears on the specific life of the specific congregation receiving it. The preacher who preaches the text without applying it has not finished the sermon; he has stopped at the exegetical stage of a process whose goal is the formation of the people of God in the knowledge and the obedience that the text is designed to produce.

The application of the biblical text must be as specific as the text itself is and as the congregation's life permits. Abstract, generic applications, 'we should all trust God more' or 'we should love our neighbors', are applications that any text could produce and that therefore reflect the preacher's failure to hear what this specific text is saying to this specific congregation in its specific situation. The genuine application names the specific ways in which the text's meaning confronts, challenges, comforts, or calls the specific people in the room: the text's account of God's faithfulness applied to the specific fears that the congregation's current situation is producing; the text's description of the covenant community's life applied to the specific relational failures or the specific doctrinal confusions that the preacher has observed in the congregation he knows; the text's promise applied to the specific grief or the specific spiritual battle that specific members of the congregation are fighting. The application is the bridge between the text's meaning and the congregation's life, and it is built by the preacher who knows both the text and the congregation with the thoroughness that genuine pastoral preaching requires.

The relationship between the text's authority and the preacher's application is one of the most delicate and most important in the entire homiletical enterprise. The text is authoritative; the preacher's application is not, by itself, authoritative in the same sense. When the preacher says 'the text means this,' he is making a claim that can be evaluated against the text itself; when he says 'therefore this specific application follows,' he is making a pastoral judgment that may be well-founded or poorly-founded depending on his knowledge of both the text and the congregation. The congregation that understands this distinction, that receives the text's meaning with the submission appropriate to the authority of the Word, and the application with the respectful but discerning

engagement appropriate to the pastor's pastoral judgment, is the congregation that is most fully equipped to practice the Berean vigilance that Acts 17:11 commends. The preacher who has taught his congregation to receive the text and to evaluate its applications has formed the congregation in the kind of biblical literacy and theological discernment that genuine covenantal maturity requires.

IV. PREACHING AND THE OTHER ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP

The Word at the Center and Everything Else Around It

A. The Sermon as the Main Event

The claim that preaching is the main event of the gathered assembly, the element around which the other elements are organized and toward which or from which the other elements are directed, is a claim with both theological and practical dimensions. Theologically, it is grounded in the conviction that the Spirit works most fundamentally and most normatively through the proclaimed Word to produce the faith, knowledge, and formation that the covenant community's life requires. The other elements of worship are genuine means of grace and genuine acts of worship in their own right, but they are most fully what they are when they are in relationship with the Word that gives them their theological content and their practical force. The prayers are most genuinely addressed to the God who is most fully known through the text that has just been read and expounded. The singing is most genuinely expressive of the community's response to the God whose character and acts the text has declared. The Lord's Supper is most richly received when the Word that has been proclaimed has opened the community's understanding of the covenant that the Supper enacts.

Practically, the claim that preaching is the main event shapes the ordering and the proportioning of the worship service. The congregation that organizes the service so that thirty minutes of music production precedes a fifteen-minute talk has communicated through its service's structure what it believes the main event to be. The congregation that gives the largest proportion of the service's time and the highest proportion of its pastoral investment to the careful preparation and the attentive reception of the preached Word has communicated through its structure the conviction that the Word is the main event. The structure of the service is itself a theological statement, and the congregation that has never examined its structure's implicit theology may find that the structure is communicating a different theology from the one the congregation formally professes.

Acts 20:7's account of Paul's extended discourse at Troas, 'Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight', is the most vivid single illustration of the apostolic priority of the preached Word in the gathered assembly. Paul prolonged his message until midnight; the congregation did not leave; the lamp that went out and the young man who fell from the window were the incidental accompaniments of a gathering whose primary event was the extended proclamation of the Word by the apostle who was about to leave. The congregation's endurance of the extended discourse, however unintentional the midnight conclusion may have been, reflects a community whose relationship to the Word is the relationship of people who know they are hearing from the God who speaks, and who are not eager to leave that hearing prematurely.

B. The Relationship Between Preaching and the Other Elements

The other elements of corporate worship are not merely the context for the sermon; they are the genuine expressions of the covenant community's full response to the living God. The songs that precede the sermon prepare the congregation's heart for the hearing of the Word by engaging the full person in the declaration of the character and acts of the God who is about to speak in the text. The prayers that follow the sermon are the congregation's most direct response to the Word that has been proclaimed: the petitions that arise from the text's specific calls to prayer, the thanksgivings that arise from the text's specific declarations of God's goodness, the confessions that arise from the text's specific identification of the community's failure to live as the covenant requires. The Lord's Supper, observed after the preaching, is the enacted proclamation of the gospel that the verbal proclamation has expounded: the same death and resurrection that the sermon has declared in words, declared again in the physical forms of bread and cup.

The connection between preaching and the public reading of Scripture is one of the most practically significant relationships in the ordering of the worship service. Paul's instruction to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13, 'give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching', places the public reading of the text alongside the exhortation and teaching that derive from it. The sequence is natural: the text is read, the congregation hears the Word in its own voice, and the sermon then expounds the meaning of the text the congregation has just heard. The congregation that has heard the text read with care and attention before the sermon is a congregation that has already encountered the Word in its own form before the preacher's exposition begins; the sermon then deepens and applies an encounter that the public reading has already initiated. The practice of reading the preaching text before the sermon, or of reading extended portions of Scripture in the service beyond the immediate preaching text, honors both the text's own authority and the relationship between the reading and the expounding that Paul's instruction establishes.

The relationship between preaching and congregational singing deserves particular attention because it is one of the most practically contested dimensions of the contemporary worship service's ordering. The Reformed tradition's historic emphasis on the theological content of the sung texts, on psalms, hymns, and confessional songs whose lyrics engage the mind with the truths of the apostolic deposit, reflects the conviction that the singing is not merely a warm-up exercise for the sermon but a genuine act of theological formation in its own right. The congregation that sings theologically rich texts before and after the sermon is a congregation that is receiving double formation: the formation of the sung Word in the singing, and the formation of the preached Word in the sermon. The congregation that sings theologically thin texts organized around the emotional experience of the singing has reduced the singing to an affective warm-up for the sermon, losing the double formation that genuinely theological singing provides.

V. THE POWER OF PREACHING

The Spirit Works Through the Word

A. Not the Preacher's Eloquence but the Spirit's Power

The power of preaching does not reside in the preacher's eloquence, rhetorical skill, or communicative giftedness. It resides in the Spirit of God who works through the proclaimed Word to accomplish in the hearts of the hearers

what the Word is proclaimed to accomplish. Paul makes this point with characteristic bluntness in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5: 'And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.' The preacher who comes with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power is the preacher whose message produces the faith that rests on the power of God rather than on the wisdom of men. And the faith that rests on the power of God is the faith that will stand in the trials that the wisdom of men cannot address.

The practical consequence of this conviction is significant for the preparation of the preacher and for the reception of the congregation. The preacher who trusts in the power of the Spirit working through the Word prepares differently from the preacher who trusts in the power of his own communicative skill: he invests his preparation time in the Word, in the deep, patient, prayerful engagement with the text whose meaning he is called to proclaim, rather than in the refinement of his delivery technique or the polishing of his illustrative material. The congregation that trusts in the power of the Spirit working through the Word approaches the sermon differently from the congregation that is evaluating the preacher's performance: it comes with expectation of God's speech rather than assessment of the preacher's skill, and it leaves with the question 'what does God want me to do with what I heard?' rather than 'how well did the preacher perform today?'

Romans 10:17's 'faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ' establishes the normal mechanism of the Spirit's faith-producing work: hearing the proclaimed Word. The hearing that Paul describes is not passive audio reception; it is the engaged, faith-receptive, Spirit-enabled hearing of one who is genuinely open to what the Word is saying and genuinely willing to respond to what the Word requires. The Spirit creates this hearing in the hearts of those who are being regenerated and of those who are growing in the faith that regeneration has already produced. The preacher's role in this process is not to manufacture the hearing; it is to proclaim the Word clearly, faithfully, and applicably, and to trust the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do with the Word that is being proclaimed.

B. The Preacher's Preparation and Dependence

The conviction that the Spirit works through the Word to produce faith and formation requires both the preparation that faithful exposition demands and the dependence on the Spirit that no amount of preparation can replace. These are not competing convictions; they are complementary dimensions of the same faithfulness. The preacher who does not prepare is not trusting the Spirit; he is presuming on the Spirit's willingness to cover his laziness with anointing. The preacher who prepares thoroughly but does not pray is trusting in his preparation rather than in the Spirit whose help is the only difference between eloquent exposition and genuine transformation. The preacher who prepares thoroughly and prays earnestly is the preacher who is most fully aligning himself with the Spirit's own process: the careful, Spirit-dependent exposure of the text's meaning to the specific people whom the Spirit has placed before it.

The pastoral dimensions of the preacher's preparation extend beyond the exegetical and homiletical work to the relational and pastoral knowledge of the congregation that genuine application requires. The preacher who knows his congregation, who knows the specific fears, the specific struggles, the specific joys, and the specific spiritual conditions of the specific people in the room, is the preacher who is best equipped to translate the text's meaning

into the specific application that the Spirit can use to address the specific needs of those specific people. This pastoral knowledge is not gathered in the study; it is gathered in the pastoral visits, the counseling conversations, the Lord's Supper preparations, and the daily life of the elder who shepherds the congregation he preaches to. The separation of the preaching office from the pastoral office, the emergence of the professional preacher who preaches to strangers, is one of the most significant pastoral impoverishments of the contemporary church, because it has disconnected the sermon's application from the relational knowledge that genuine application requires.

The congregation's role in the preacher's formation is also important: the congregation that prays faithfully for its preachers, that petitions the Spirit to anoint the preparation and the delivery and the reception of the Word each week, is the congregation that is most directly participating in the Spirit's own work in and through the preaching. The congregation that receives the Word with faith-expectant attentiveness, that returns to the text during the week, and that brings the questions and the responses that genuine engagement produces to the community's life is the congregation that is completing the circuit of formation that genuine preaching begins: the Word proclaimed, received, reflected on, applied, and obeyed in the specific life of the specific people who have heard it. This is what formation through preaching looks like when it is functioning as the Spirit designed it to function.

VI. THE CONGREGATION'S RESPONSIBILITY

Hearing the Word with Faith and Obedience

A. How the Congregation Receives the Word

The sermon is not complete when the preacher stops speaking. It is complete when the Word has been received with faith, reflected on with attention, and acted on with obedience by the specific people to whom it was proclaimed. The congregation's responsibility in the preaching event is not passive; it is the engaged, prayerful, faith-expectant reception of the living Word of God addressed to it in its specific situation. The congregation that comes to the sermon having read the preaching text beforehand, having prayed for the Spirit's illumination of the Word it is about to hear, and having brought the genuine questions and the genuine spiritual needs that its week has produced, is the congregation that is most fully positioned to receive the full benefit of the sermon the Spirit has prepared through the preacher's labors.

James 1:22-25 provides the most direct apostolic instruction on the congregation's responsibility to receive the Word with obedience rather than with mere cognitive appreciation: 'But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.' The hearer who does not become a doer is a hearer who has deluded himself about the encounter he has had with the Word. The Word that is heard and not acted on is the Word that has passed through the mind without reaching the will, and the person who regularly hears without acting has formed a spiritual habit of hearing that is actually a habit of inoculating themselves against the Word's transforming power.

The congregation that understands its responsibility to be a doer of the Word rather than merely a hearer will develop specific practices for the reception, retention, and application of the preached Word. The practice of taking notes during the sermon, not as an academic exercise but as the concrete form of the attentive engagement that genuine reception requires, is one of the most practically significant habits the congregation can cultivate. The practice of discussing the sermon with fellow members of the covenant community during the week, bringing the text and its application into the conversations of the community's ordinary life, is one of the most powerful forms of the communal reinforcement that genuine formation requires. The practice of returning to the text during the week to read and reflect on the passage that the sermon has expounded is the practice that most directly continues the formation that the sermon has begun. And the practice of identifying one specific act of obedience that the sermon's application requires, and committing to that act before the next Sunday's gathering, is the practice that most directly produces the effectual doing that James 1:22-25 envisions.

B. The Culture of Reception in the Covenant Community

The congregation's culture of Word reception, the communal habits, expectations, and practices that shape the community's relationship to the preached Word over time, is one of the most important and most formative features of the covenant community's life. The congregation in which the preached Word is regularly discussed, regularly applied, and regularly cited in the community's mutual encouragement and accountability is a congregation that is being formed by the Word in the comprehensive way that the Reformation's vision of a Word-saturated community envisions. The congregation in which the sermon is politely received and then forgotten as the community moves to its social activities after the service is a congregation in which the regulative principle has been formally honored while the Word's formative power has been practically suppressed.

The elders who cultivate the congregation's culture of Word reception bear a specific pastoral responsibility that goes beyond the preparation and delivery of the sermon itself: the responsibility of creating the communal structures and pastoral relationships in which the Word can continue to do its formative work beyond the boundaries of the Sunday gathering. The small group or Sunday school class that returns to the Sunday sermon for further discussion, application, and mutual accountability is one of the most effective of these structures. The pastoral conversation that begins with the text of the previous Sunday's sermon as a natural point of entry into the member's spiritual life is one of the most effective of these pastoral relationships. The elder who has preached the text on Sunday and is following up on its application in the pastoral visits of the week is the elder who has understood that the sermon is the beginning of the formation it is designed to produce, not its completion.

The connection between the preached Word and the community's discipline is one of the most practically significant features of the Word's formative work in the covenant community's life. The congregation whose members have genuinely received the preached Word's account of the covenant community's character and the covenant member's obligations is the congregation that is most prepared to exercise the mutual accountability of Galatians 6:1 and the formal discipline of Matthew 18. The Word that is preached and genuinely received produces the theological formation that makes discipline intelligible, the pastoral love that makes discipline compassionate, and the covenant seriousness that makes discipline necessary. The preaching and the discipline are not two separate dimensions of the covenant community's life; they are two expressions of the same covenant seriousness, grounded in the same commitment to the apostolic deposit, and directed toward the same goal: the formation of the covenant community in the character and the knowledge of God that the new covenant community was always meant to display.

VII. THE PREACHING OFFICE AND THE CONGREGATION'S FORMATION

Long-Term Formation Through Faithful Proclamation

A. *The Cumulative Power of Consecutive Exposition*

The most significant and most lasting formation that preaching produces in the covenant community's life is not the formation of the single sermon that addresses a specific topic or a specific need, but the cumulative formation of the community under the sustained, consecutive exposition of the whole counsel of God across years and decades of faithful pastoral ministry. The congregation that has heard the entire letter to the Romans expounded in sequence, that has received the full theology of grace, law, righteousness, election, and ethics that Paul's letter contains, has been formed in a way that no topical sermon series on the Christian life could achieve. The congregation that has worked through the entire Gospel of John, the entire Psalter, the entire book of Isaiah, and the entire letter to the Hebrews over the course of years of consecutive exposition has encountered the full range of the biblical testimony about the character of God, the nature of the covenant, the reality of human sin, the sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ, and the life of the new covenant community, in the forms that the Spirit chose when He inspired the specific texts in their specific order and their specific structure.

The consecutive, book-by-book, chapter-by-chapter exposition of Scripture is the form of preaching that best serves the long-term formation of the covenant community, for several reasons. First, it takes the preacher into territory he would not choose for himself: the difficult passages, the passages that confront the preacher's own comfortable assumptions, the passages that address topics the congregation has not asked to hear about and the preacher has not planned to address. These are often the passages through which the Spirit does His most specific and most unexpected formative work, and the preacher who avoids them has impoverished the congregation by editing the Spirit's own syllabus. Second, it provides the congregation with a comprehensive, balanced diet of the whole counsel of God rather than the selective diet that topical preaching naturally produces. Third, it models for the congregation the fundamental hermeneutical posture of the Reformed tradition: submission to the text rather than use of the text, receiving the Word rather than wielding it.

The pastoral privilege and the pastoral responsibility of preaching the whole counsel of God to a specific congregation over an extended period of ministry is one of the most significant and most irreplaceable dimensions of the pastoral office. The elder who has preached his congregation through the Psalter and through Paul's letters and through the major prophets and through the Gospels has left in that community a formation that his successor will build on, that his successors' successors will build on, and that will shape the community's understanding of the God who speaks for generations. This is the long-term fruit of faithful expository preaching, not the immediate response of a single sermon, but the cumulative formation of a community in the whole counsel of God across the full range of the apostolic deposit that the Spirit inspired for exactly this purpose.

B. *The Sermon and the Soli Deo Gloria*

The sermon, when it is what genuine preaching is, is itself an act of worship, not merely the preparation for worship or the teaching component of the worship service, but the most direct form in which the covenant community encounters the living God in its gathered assembly and offers back to Him the response of faith,

obedience, and praise that the encounter produces. The preacher who proclaims the Word is not performing a service for the congregation; he is serving as the instrument through which the living God addresses His assembled people. The congregation that receives the Word with faith and attentiveness is not merely taking in information; it is encountering the living God in the most direct form available to the gathered assembly. And the response that genuine encounter with the Word produces, the faith, the repentance, the gratitude, the awe, the commission, is the congregation's act of worship in response to God's act of speech.

The entire series has been building toward this moment: the covenant community, constituted by regeneration (Units 1-4), governed by the apostolic pattern (Unit 5), sealed by the ordinances (Units 6-7), maintained in integrity by discipline (Unit 8), gathered in the worship prescribed by the God who inhabits the praises of His people (Units 9-10), and at the center of the gathered assembly, the preacher opens the text and declares what the living God has said. This is the main event of the covenant community's corporate life. Not the music, not the prayers, not the offering, not even the ordinances, though all of these are genuine means of grace and genuine acts of worship. The main event is the moment when God speaks to His assembled people through the faithful exposition and application of the apostolic deposit that He preserved in the Scripture for exactly this purpose. To this Word, and to the God who speaks through it, belongs the Soli Deo Gloria that has closed every lesson in this series: to God alone be the glory.

“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”

2 Timothy 4:2, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Expository Preaching	The form of preaching in which the meaning of the biblical text determines the content, the structure, and the emphasis of the sermon. The text is the preacher's master rather than his launching pad. Characterized by: (1) submission to the text's own meaning through careful exegesis; (2) the text's structure determining the sermon's structure; (3) the text's own emphasis determining the sermon's emphasis; (4) comprehensive engagement with the text rather than selection of the most comfortable elements. Contrasted with topical preaching (organized around a topic the preacher has chosen) and textual preaching (using a text as a springboard for a message the preacher has determined independently of the text).
2 Timothy 4:1-5	Paul's final charge to Timothy, solemnized by the invocation of God's presence and the divine judgment. The charge: 'preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.' The three modes of preaching (reprove, rebuke, exhort) describe the full range of the Word's application. The warning of verses 3-4 (the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine) describes the specific failure the charge is designed to prevent. The antidote (verse 5: 'But you, be sober in all things... fulfill your ministry') defines the faithful preacher's countercultural commitment.
Whole Counsel of God	Acts 20:27: 'I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.' Paul's description of his own preaching ministry as the declaration of the entire apostolic deposit rather than the selective proclamation of the most comfortable or the most popular elements. The preacher who delivers the whole counsel engages the full range of the biblical text, addresses the full range of the congregation's spiritual condition, and does not avoid the passages or topics that confront the congregation's comfortable assumptions. The foundation of the case for consecutive, book-by-book expository preaching as the form most likely to ensure the whole counsel's delivery.
Romans 10:14-17	Paul's account of the necessary chain connecting salvation and preaching: 'faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.' The logic: calling requires believing, believing requires hearing, hearing requires a preacher, the preacher must be sent. Establishes the preached Word as the appointed, irreplaceable instrument through which the Spirit produces the hearing that produces faith. Not one means among several equally effective alternatives, but the normative, Spirit-appointed mechanism of the community's formation in faith.
Nehemiah 8:1-12	The Old Testament prototype of the covenant community gathered under the proclaimed Word. Key features: the whole community gathered specifically for the hearing of the Word; the extended, attentive hearing (early morning until midday); the interpretive exposition ('gave the sense, so that they understood the reading') as the prototype of the sermon's explanatory function; the affective response (weeping) as the prototype of genuine conviction; and the joy in understanding as the prototype of the congregation's response when the Word is genuinely received. Establishes the gathered community under the proclaimed Word as the norm for covenant community life across both Testaments.
1 Corinthians 1:21	Paul's paradoxical description of preaching's power: 'it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.' The preaching of the cross is foolish by the world's wisdom standards, but it is God's chosen instrument for salvation precisely because the foolishness is God's foolishness, and God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. The preacher tempted to improve on the plain proclamation by making it wiser or more culturally sophisticated has misunderstood the theological logic of the Spirit's work through the proclaimed Word.
Consecutive Exposition	The practice of preaching through books of Scripture sequentially, chapter by chapter, passage by passage, from beginning to end, as the form of preaching most likely to deliver the whole

	counsel of God to the congregation over time. Benefits: (1) takes the preacher into passages he would not choose, including the difficult and the confrontational; (2) provides the congregation with a comprehensive, balanced diet of the whole counsel rather than the selective diet of topical preaching; (3) models the fundamental hermeneutical posture of submission to the text. The historic practice of Calvin, the Puritans, and the Reformed tradition broadly.
James 1:22-25	The apostolic account of the congregation's responsibility in the preaching event: 'prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.' The hearer who does not become a doer has deluded himself about the encounter with the Word. The image of the person who looks in a mirror and immediately forgets: the Word has passed through the mind without reaching the will. The effectual doer who 'looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it' is the person who has received the Word in the way that produces genuine formation.
Acts 20:7	Luke's account of Paul's extended discourse at Troas: 'Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.' The most vivid illustration of the apostolic priority of the preached Word in the gathered assembly. The congregation's endurance of the extended discourse reflects a community whose relationship to the Word is the relationship of people who know they are hearing from the God who speaks. Establishes that the apostolic community's gatherings were organized around the extended proclamation of the Word rather than around the congregation's attention-span preferences.
1 Corinthians 2:1-5	Paul's account of his own preaching as the demonstration of the Spirit and power rather than persuasive words of wisdom: 'my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.' Establishes: (1) the power of preaching is the Spirit's power, not the preacher's eloquence; (2) the faith produced by Spirit-empowered preaching rests on the power of God rather than on human wisdom; (3) the faith that rests on the power of God is the faith that will stand in trials that human wisdom cannot address.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that when the preacher opens the Scripture and faithfully proclaims its meaning, God speaks. Not the preacher speaks about God, not the congregation hears human commentary on a divine text, but God speaks to His assembled people through the Spirit-anointed proclamation of the apostolic deposit. This conviction is the foundation of the congregation's relationship to the preached Word: it is not an evaluation of a human performance, it is the reception of divine speech. The congregation that genuinely believes this will come to the sermon differently, listen differently, and respond differently from the congregation that treats the sermon as one element of the service it is assessing for its quality and relevance.

We must believe that the power of the sermon is the Spirit's power working through the Word, not the preacher's communicative skill or rhetorical eloquence. This conviction liberates both the preacher and the congregation: the preacher from the anxiety of trying to be impressive, and the congregation from the distraction of evaluating the preacher's performance. The sermon that is Spirit-empowered and theologically faithful will do its formative work even when the preacher is awkward and the congregation is distracted, because the Spirit is not limited by the preacher's limitations. And the sermon that is rhetorically impressive but theologically superficial will not do its formative work, however skilled the delivery, because the Spirit works through the Word, not through the performance of the one proclaiming it.

We must believe that the long-term, cumulative, consecutive exposition of the whole counsel of God across years of pastoral ministry is the most powerful instrument of congregational formation available to the covenant community. Not the single powerful sermon that produces immediate emotional response; not the topical series that addresses the congregation's currently felt needs; but the patient, sustained, Spirit-dependent exposition of the full range of the apostolic deposit, text by text, book by book, year after year, that forms the community in the full knowledge of God that the new covenant community was always meant to possess.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a genuine hunger for the preached Word, the hunger of the community that knows it is hearing from the God who speaks, not merely receiving information from a knowledgeable communicator. The congregation that has been formed by the conviction that God speaks through the preached Word will have a relationship to the Sunday sermon that is fundamentally different from the relationship of the sermon consumer assessing whether the preacher was good this week. It will be the relationship of the people of God gathered under the Word of the God who speaks, who hear with the earnestness of those who know that the Word they are receiving is the Word by which they live.

We should feel a genuine desire for the preached Word of this congregation to be more faithful, more theologically substantive, and more directly formative than it currently is, not as a critique of the current preacher, but as the constant orientation of the covenant community toward the standard that the apostolic mandate establishes. The congregation that never wants more from the sermon than it is currently receiving has lost its hunger for the Word, and the loss of the hunger is itself a spiritual condition requiring pastoral address.

We should desire for the culture of this congregation's relationship to the preached Word to be the culture that James 1:22-25 describes: not hearers who delude themselves, but effectual doers who abide by the Word they

have heard. This desire should produce specific habits: the practice of reading the preaching text before the sermon, the practice of taking notes during the sermon, the practice of discussing the sermon during the week, and the practice of identifying and acting on the specific application the sermon has required. The congregation whose culture of Word reception is characterized by these habits is the congregation that is receiving the full formation that genuine preaching is designed to produce.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Before the next Sunday gathering, read the text that will be preached and bring your own reading to the sermon. Note what you observe the text saying, what questions the text raises, and what preliminary applications you can see. Then compare your reading with the preacher's exposition: where did the sermon illumine something you had not seen, and where did your reading prepare the ground for the sermon's application? Bring one specific insight from this practice to the next study session.
- Commit to a specific practice of taking notes on the sermon each Sunday for the next month. The notes should include: (a) the preaching text; (b) the main point of the text as the sermon expounded it; (c) two or three sub-points or key observations from the sermon; (d) the specific application the sermon called for; and (e) one specific act of obedience you will take in response. At the end of the month, review the four weeks of notes and identify the cumulative formation the month's preaching has produced in your understanding of the text, your knowledge of God, and your practice of the covenant life.
- Identify one book of the Bible that this congregation has not worked through in recent memory and that you think would be especially valuable for the community's formation at this particular moment in its life. Write a brief (one paragraph) case for why the congregation should preach through this book, identifying: (a) the specific theological themes the book addresses; (b) the specific ways those themes address the congregation's current spiritual needs; and (c) the specific passages in the book that are most important for the community's formation. Bring the case to the next study session or to an elder as a constructive recommendation.
- Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5 this week as both a pastoral charge and a congregational vision. For verse 2's 'reprove, rebuke, exhort,' identify one instance of each in the most recent sermon you have heard: one thing the sermon reprovved (corrected), one thing it rebuked (called to repentance), and one thing it exhorted (encouraged toward faithful action). If you cannot identify all three, reflect on whether the sermon was delivering the full range of the Word's application that Paul's charge envisions.
- Pray specifically for the preacher of this congregation this week: for his preparation (that he would have the time, the energy, and the Spirit's illumination needed for faithful exposition); for his delivery (that he would preach with the courage, the clarity, and the pastoral warmth that the text and the congregation require); and for his pastoral knowledge of the congregation (that the application he brings from the text would address the specific needs of the specific people he knows). The congregation's prayer for its preacher is one of the most direct forms of the community's participation in the Spirit's work through the preached Word.

Key Texts: 2 Timothy 4:1–5; Romans 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Nehemiah 8:1–12; Acts 20:7; 1 Timothy 4:13

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- What is your personal relationship to the preached Word? Do you come to the Sunday sermon with the expectation that God will speak to you through the text, or with the evaluation of whether the preacher will perform well? What specific practices would most directly cultivate the hearing posture that genuine reception of the Word requires?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5. Under what authority does Paul issue the charge (verse 1)? What is the specific charge (verse 2)? What three modes of preaching does Paul name, and what does each one describe? What does the warning of verses 3-4 specifically describe? What does Paul instruct Timothy to do in verse 5, and how does it contrast with the failure of verses 3-4?
- Read Nehemiah 8:1-12. Who gathered (verse 1)? What did they request and why (verse 1)? What was the duration and the character of the hearing (verse 3)? What did the Levites do with the text (verse 8)? What was the congregation's initial response (verse 9)? What was the congregation's final response (verse 12), and what does verse 12 identify as the reason for the joy?
- Read Romans 10:14-17. What chain of necessary dependence does Paul describe in verses 14-15? What does verse 17 identify as the mechanism of faith's production? What does 'hearing by the word of Christ' specify about the means through which the Spirit works to produce faith?
- Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. What did Paul specifically determine not to bring to the Corinthians (verse 1)? What did he determine to know among them (verse 2)? In what state did he arrive (verse 3)? How does verse 4 describe his message and preaching? What was the purpose of this approach (verse 5)?
- Read James 1:22-25. What comparison does the parable of the mirror establish about the hearer who does not become a doer? What is the difference between the forgetful hearer and the effectual doer? What promise does verse 25 attach to the one who looks intently at the perfect law and abides by it?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that expository preaching, in which the text determines the content, structure, and emphasis of the sermon, is the form of preaching most faithful to the apostolic mandate. Is this argument persuasive? Is there a form of topical or thematic preaching that could satisfy the biblical criteria for the proclamation of the 'whole counsel of God'? Or does the consecutive, book-by-book exposition of Scripture necessarily produce a more comprehensive and balanced diet of the whole counsel than topical preaching can achieve?
- The lesson argues that Paul's 'reprove, rebuke, exhort' in 2 Timothy 4:2 describes the full range of the Word's application to the congregation's spiritual condition. How are these three modes of application different from one another? Can you give an example of each from a specific biblical text? What happens to a sermon that consistently uses only one of these three modes at the expense of the others?
- The lesson identifies the Nehemiah 8 pattern as the Old Testament prototype of the covenant community gathered under the proclaimed Word. Is this an appropriate use of a passage from the restoration narrative? What features of Nehemiah 8 most directly correspond to what the lesson recommends for the Christian

community's gathered worship? Are there features of the Nehemiah 8 gathering that the New Testament has specifically modified or fulfilled in ways that the lesson has not addressed?

- The lesson argues that the long-term, cumulative, consecutive exposition of the whole counsel of God is the most powerful instrument of congregational formation available to the covenant community. Is this claim defensible? Are there specific contexts or specific congregational needs in which topical preaching is more appropriate and more formative than consecutive exposition? Or is the case for consecutive exposition strong enough to make it the default form for the regular gathered assembly of any congregation in any context?
- The lesson identifies the separation of the preaching office from the pastoral office as 'one of the most significant pastoral impoverishments of the contemporary church,' because it disconnects the sermon's application from the relational knowledge that genuine application requires. Is this identification correct? Can the professional preacher who does not know the congregation personally still produce genuinely formative expository sermons? What specifically is lost when the preacher and the shepherd are two different people?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson describes the culture of Word reception that James 1:22-25 envisions: effectual doers who abide by the Word they have heard. Which of the four specific practices the lesson recommends (reading the text beforehand, taking notes, discussing the sermon during the week, identifying and acting on the specific application) is most developed in your current practice, and which is most absent? What would it take to establish all four as regular features of your relationship to the preached Word?
- The lesson argues that the structure of the worship service is itself a theological statement, and that the congregation that organizes the service so that the sermon is a brief element among many has communicated through its structure what it believes the main event to be. Evaluate this congregation's current service structure: does the proportion of time, pastoral investment, and positional emphasis that the sermon receives correspond to the conviction that the preached Word is the main event of the gathered assembly? If not, what specific structural change would most directly reflect the correct theological conviction?
- The lesson emphasizes the congregation's responsibility to pray for the preacher. Does this congregation have a specific, regular, communally organized practice of praying for the preacher's preparation and proclamation? If not, what would be the simplest and most immediately achievable form of such a practice? If yes, how could the current practice be deepened and made more specifically informed by the specific needs of the specific sermon that is being prepared?
- The lesson closes with the vision of the preached Word as the main event of the covenant community's corporate life, the moment when God speaks to His assembled people. Does this congregation experience its Sunday gathering this way? If you were to identify the single element of the congregation's current worship culture most in need of reformation in the direction of this vision, what would it be, and what would the first concrete step toward its reformation look like?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Nehemiah 8:5-8 aloud: 'Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen! while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood what was read.' Read it again. The people stood when the book was opened, they stood in the presence of the living Word of the living God. They said Amen before a single verse had been read, they were affirming in advance the authority of what they were about to hear. The Levites gave the sense so that they understood, the interpretive work of exposition made the Word accessible to the community it was meant to form. This is the vision. The people standing, the Word opened, the interpretation given, the understanding received, and the worship that follows: 'they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.' Let this vision shape the prayers that follow.

Pray for the preacher of this congregation. Pray for his preparation this week: that he would have the time and the solitude needed for the patient, prayerful, careful study of the text he will proclaim; that the Spirit would illumine the text's meaning to him in the study; that the pastoral knowledge he has of the congregation would guide the application he draws from the text to the specific people he serves; and that the sermon that results from his labors would be the text's message delivered through his proclamation rather than his message illustrated by the text. Pray for the courage to preach what the text says rather than what the congregation wants to hear; for the tenderness to preach the hard truth with the pastoral warmth that genuine love requires; and for the humility to stand in the tradition of the apostolic proclamation rather than the culture of the motivational talk.

Pray for the congregation's reception of the Word. Pray that the members of this community would come to the Sunday gathering with the expectation that the living God will speak to them through the text being opened, not with the evaluation of whether the preacher will perform well, not with the distraction of their own concerns, not with the passive reception of spectators at a religious performance. Pray for the specific hunger for the Word that the Nehemiah 8 community displayed: the willingness to stand when the book is opened, to say Amen before the first verse is read, and to bow down in worship when the Word has been heard and understood. Pray for the specific practices of Word reception that the lesson has recommended: the prior reading of the text, the note-taking during the sermon, the discussion during the week, and the specific acts of obedience that the application requires.

Pray for the culture of Word reception in this congregation over the long term. The long-term, cumulative, consecutive exposition of the whole counsel of God across years and decades of faithful pastoral ministry is the most powerful instrument of congregational formation available to the covenant community, and it requires both the faithfulness of the preachers who sustain it and the receptivity of the congregation that is formed by it. Pray that the Lord would grant this congregation the sustained pastoral ministry that the long-term formation of the whole counsel requires: preachers who are willing to work through the difficult passages as well as the beloved ones, who are patient enough to trust the Spirit's cumulative work across years of faithful proclamation, and who love the congregation enough to give it the full diet of the apostolic deposit rather than the selective diet of human

preference. And pray that the congregation would receive that sustained ministry with the patience, the attentiveness, and the obedience of those who know that the Word they are hearing is the Word by which they live.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: 2 Timothy 4:1–5; Romans 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Nehemiah 8:1–12; Acts 20:7; 1 Timothy 4:13

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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