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Speaking for God:

A Definition and Implications of Preaching That Glorify God

1 Peter 4:10–11

God has chosen to use human messengers to deliver divine truth. The activity whereby He does this today is called preaching. Those who preach can and must derive their content from God's Word, the Bible. Peter emphasized the importance of this in 1 Peter 4:10–11. The stated outcome of following his instruction is that God will be glorified. A close look at this text will lead us to a definition and some implications of preaching that glorify God.

A Definition of Preaching

A very simple definition of preaching that comes from the Biblical text we will examine is this:

preaching is speaking for God.

The idea of speaking for God is not meant to imply that preachers deliver new revelation. However, the messages that preachers deliver should represent, as accurately and fully as possible, the revelation we already have from God in the written Scriptures.

The basis for “speaking for God” as a definition for preaching arises from the language Peter used in 1 Peter 4:10–11. Peter instructs, “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone

speaks, *let him speak* as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, *let him do it* as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”¹

Peter treats the idea of spiritual gifting by marking out two categories of gifts. One kind is speaking (“if anyone speaks”) and the other is serving (“if anyone ministers”) (v. 11). Pastors are definitely among the “anyone” who “speaks.” A pastor devotes much of his life to preparing and delivering messages from God's Word.

What are “the oracles of God?” The English word “oracles” is a translation of the Greek word *logion* which is a form of the noun, *logos*. *Logos* is a general term for word or message. *Logion* specifies divine declarations, revelation from God.² D. Edmond Hiebert states that in classical Greek, *logion* refers to the utterances of a deity.³ The KJV, NKJV, and ESV all translate this phrase, “the oracles of God.” The NASB says, “utterances of God.” The CSB uses “God's words.” The NIV and the Amplified Bible expand it to, “the very words of God.”

The use of the word *logion* in the New Testament helps us understand the weight of meaning it carries. It is used four times by New Testament writers, our passage in 1 Peter being the last. Each of the first three refers to a specific portion of God's entire revelation to us.

Stephen's message just before he was martyred includes the word *logion* in reference to the Mosaic Law. Acts 7:38 says, "This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us." Here *logion* ("oracles") refers to God's commandments transmitted to Moses. They were specific messages directly from God contained within the entirety of God's revelation to us.

Logion is also used of the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul said in Romans 3:1–2, "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God." Here *logion* ("oracles") refers to the messages from God that were deposited with the Jewish people. Paul, writing in New Testament time, was referring to the Old Testament Scriptures, which are a major part of the whole revelation from God.

The word *logion* is also used of the substance of Christian teaching.⁴ Hebrews 5:12 says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food." The "first principles" are the basics, the fundamental teachings of God's Word. Here again the author refers to God's Word, but he specifies certain portions of it.

"Oracles" are divine utterances, specific messages that come from God. Therefore "oracles" are God's Word. But it seems from observing how the word *logion* is used by the New Testament writers that it refers to distinct elements of or sections in the entirety of Scripture. They are messages within the message.

Note a very important word in 1 Peter 4:11—"as." This is the Greek particle *hos*, which means "corresponding to." It indicates the speaking Peter is describing should correspond to the divine utterances (*logion*) which constitute God's Word. Achtemeier says what is spoken by those with this gift "must resemble God's own oracles" and that "the content of one's speech must bear the character of God's words and thus the divine intention, not the speaker's own."⁵

Applied to the ministry of the Word, our preaching should correspond directly and clearly to the divine utterances in the Word of God. It should arise from and accurately represent the *logion* – the divine messages within the overall message of God's Word. Hiebert says, "Here the sense seems to be that the speaker is conscious that he is not just giving his own opinion but, under the leadership of the Spirit, is delivering God's word."⁶

This is an instruction from the Apostle Peter to all who would speak into the life of the church, including today's pastors. It conveys to us our responsibility, but also the incredible possibility and opportunity of speaking in a way that represents God's message to people today. Schreiner says, "Those who speak should endeavor to speak 'the very words of God' . . . Peter wrote so that those who speak will do so in accord with the Gospel, not to suggest that the words spoken become part of the revelational deposit for believers."⁷ Preaching is not new revelation, but when done correctly, preaching is speaking for God.

Implications for Preaching

The idea of preaching as speaking for God has several **general implications** for preaching.

First, preaching is integral to God's program in the New Testament Church. Some may consider it presumptuous, unnecessary, irrelevant, and even offensive for one man to stand up in front of a crowd and speak authoritatively for God. However, such preaching is more than merely legitimate, it is commanded. Preaching is God's way. God wants

this to happen, and has designated people to do it. It occupies much time in a pastor's life and a church's schedule. The qualifications of a pastor listed in 1 Timothy 3 include one skill, which is "able to teach" (v.2). The parallel list in Titus 1 includes this description: "... holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). Speaking for God is intrinsic to the role of pastor.

Second, preaching is a spiritual exercise that requires the Holy Spirit's work. In the context of gifts, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:7, "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all." The ability to speak for God requires the Holy Spirit's involvement. It is empowered by the Spirit of God. Anyone endeavoring to preach the Word must learn to rely on the Spirit's enabling power.

Third, preaching is an art that requires disciplined development. Speaking is an art. The dictionary defines the noun, "art," as "a skill acquired by experience, study, or observation; the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects; an occupation requiring knowledge or skill."⁸ A preacher is a public speaker. A person's speaking voice, articulation, delivery, and vocal variety that supports the message can all be developed. A few people have a high level of natural speaking ability, but most need training. Additionally, a preacher should always be endeavoring to grow in his ability to communicate effectively so he can preach Christ and His Word better.

Fourth, preaching is characterized by uniqueness and variety. Every individual has a unique background, personality, and set of life experiences. Even one's speaking voice and rhythm are distinct. Because of these peculiarities, no one person will preach exactly the same way. Learn from the ability and even style of others, but you should not mimic accomplished or well-known preachers. Neither should you envy others' ability to communicate effectively. God will use you. That does not mean you should not work

at improving. However, be the unique person God made you to be.

Fifth, the content of preaching is both limited and infinite. The source of material for your sermon is limited because it is the Word of God. It is also infinite because it is the Word of God. The preacher who speaks for God will never have to search for something to preach on. His subject matter is contained in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Charles Spurgeon said, "If we speak as ambassadors for God, we need never complain of want of matter, for our message is full to overflowing."⁹

Preaching as speaking for God also has **implications for preparing sermons.**

First, long-term planning works because your preaching is textual not circumstantial. I think prayerful, long-term planning of preaching is one of the best things a pastor can do. The Holy Spirit can lead months ahead just as well as days before. Long-term planning gives you time to do general as well as specific preparation. You know what you are going to preach on next Sunday, but you can always adjust as necessary. If sermons are based primarily on circumstances in your life, church life, or the world, you cannot really plan. Because speaking for God is based primarily on the Word, you can plan ahead, knowing your messages will always be relevant because truth is always relevant.

Second, the hard work of exegesis is critical to preaching that glorifies God. The only way to really speak for God is to exegete the Scriptures in preparing for sermons. The exacting labor of studying the content, grammar, sentence structure, background, and context of a passage produces sermons that say what God says. Do surgery on the text to find out what it contains, then use that data to formulate your sermons. (In my Homiletics classes, I have pastoral students focus first on determining what to preach by studying the Scriptures. Then they learn how to effectively deliver the message that accurately represents the Word of God. The labor of exegesis is worth it, because the

result is speaking for God— preaching the Word in a way that glorifies Him.)

Third, when you are stuck, keep digging in the text. Something good will come out! Everyone has times they find themselves staring at the paper on the screen, not knowing what to include next in the sermon. It is tempting to brainstorm for something— anything— to fill that space. Go back to the text and keep reading, look at key words and ideas in the text, and pray for insight. The Word always yields a treasure of truth that fills that gap.

Preaching as speaking for God also has **implications for delivering sermons.**

Because you are speaking for God you should preach with:

Confidence— If you have exegeted the Word, you can preach knowing you are delivering a message from God. Your confidence is not in yourself, but you can have complete confidence in the message you are delivering. Neither arrogance nor belligerence, however, have any place in the preacher's tone. Peter Adams says, "Because they are the words that God has spoken, they have all the power of God, the speaker, behind them and within them. Our role is not to make God's words powerful through our speaking, but to help people recognize the power and significance of those words."¹⁰

Humility— Because you are speaking for God, the message you deliver is not of your own making. You are not the original author of its content. You are only the vehicle through which it is communicated. You depend on God for the ideas that you convey, and the impact they have turns everyone's attention to their ultimate source, God.

Urgency— People need to hear from God. Moses felt this urgency when he spoke for God to the people of Israel. "Moses finished speaking all these words to all Israel, and he said to them: 'Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be

careful to observe—all the words of this law. For it is not a futile thing for you, because it is your life'" (Deuteronomy 32:45–47).

Jesus conveyed this same urgency in John 6:63, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." When you speak for God you deliver life-giving words. Your message is like water to a dying tree or food to a starving child.

Integrity— You should speak with personal integrity: your life must match your message. You should speak with homiletical integrity; your message should be an honest representation of your study. When you use other sources, give credit where credit is due. You should preach with doxological integrity: preach not for your own glory, but for God's.

Accountability— Preachers who speak for God know they are accountable to the One Whose words they speak. As Paul urged Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Expectancy—If what you are preaching accurately corresponds to the *logion*—the utterance of God—it will have impact and bear fruit. You will grow. Others will be saved and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. Your faithful preaching of the Word will build Christ's church and shepherd His flock.

Outcomes of Preaching

Peter's instruction tells us what the outcome will be when you preach messages that accurately represent the message contained in God's Word. First, you will minister to others. Peter instructed in 1 Peter 4:10, "minister it to one another." When you speak for God, you are fulfilling your ministry, using your gift to build up the body of Christ and bless people's lives.

Second, you will glorify God. Peter raised the ultimate motive for all Christian service in 1 Peter 4:11, "That God may be glorified." This grand purpose is fulfilled when you shape your preaching

by the template of speaking for God. But you must keep in mind your efforts alone are inadequate. The only means by which any of your acts of service are pleasing to Him is, as Peter includes, “through Jesus Christ.”

When you do your best to “speak as the oracles of God,” and you offer the content and the

communication of our message through the mediation and merits of Jesus Christ, God is glorified! What an amazing possibility—we speak, and God is glorified. May it be so in each of our ministries, by the grace of God, for the glory of God.

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- ¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.
 - ² G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1964, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), Vol. 4, 138.
 - ³ D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 Peter* (1992, Winona Lake: BMH Books), 276.
 - ⁴ These three categorizations are from A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (1933, Nashville: Broadman Press), 125.
 - ⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Peter 1: A Commentary on 1 Peter* (1996, Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 298–299
 - ⁶ Hiebert, 276.
 - ⁷ Thomas Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (2003, Nashville: B & H Publishing Group), 215.
 - ⁸ Merriam-Webster.com, “Art” (Accessed November 29, 2017).
 - ⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (1982, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), 70.
 - ¹⁰ Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (1996, Vancouver: Regent College Publishing), 55.



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