

***Fiat Lux: The Doctrine of Creation as the
'Origin' for a High Theology of Preaching***

Benjamin B. Phillips, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's Houston Campus

Abstract

Creation *ex nihilo* is the paradigmatic display of God's speech. This powerful word that created the universe is carried by Christian preaching. The creation/preaching connection provides content to the assertion of preaching's 'word of God' character. It also raises critical issues (e.g. transcendence, pride, apparent failure of preaching) and requires interaction with other systematic categories (e.g. revelation, pneumatology, hamartiology, soteriology, and eschatology). These considerations make the doctrine of creation well-suited to ground a systematic theology of preaching.

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"Let there be light" (*fiat lux*) hardly seems to describe the current state of the doctrine of creation, a subject which usually degenerates into narrowly-focused debates over creation and evolution. What hope then can there be that the doctrine of creation will provide a fruitful point of entry for a theology of preaching? Shouldn't we instead start with the doctrine of revelation, or perhaps more narrowly, the doctrine of Scripture? These are, after all, the more traditional places for locating a theology of preaching.

The choice of the doctrine of revelation as the locus for a theology of preaching is especially prominent among those influenced by the Reformed tradition.¹ Yet, others have begun to explore the possibilities in considering preaching from the perspective of other doctrinal categories, such as ecclesiology (Willamon)² and soteriology (Buttrick).³ Yet the pull of the doctrine of revelation is so strong that even Buttrick thinks it necessary to spend his first chapter decoupling a theology of preaching from bibliology (or at least from a caricature thereof). Given the inescapable significance of the doctrine of revelation for a theology of preaching, what reason is there to seek an alternative starting point? And, if an alternative is to be found, why should it be a doctrine as beleaguered and contentious as creation?

¹ E.g. Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching*, (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1996); Charles Bartow, *God's Human Speech*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

² William Willamon, *Peculiar Speech*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

³ David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster-John Knox, 1994).

The Christian doctrine of creation prompts far more than a debate about the age of the earth. It extends well beyond discussions of special creation vs. naturalistic evolution—as important as these things are! In fact, the doctrine of creation is one of the fundamental Christian doctrines. It, along with the doctrine of Trinity is decisive for the Christian version of theism—our understanding of the God-world relationship. An approach which begins with the most basic elements of reality (God and the world; paralleling ontology) and their relationship (Creator-creation; paralleling cosmology) grounds a theology of preaching at a more fundamental level than an approach framed primarily by the doctrine of revelation (just as metaphysics grounds epistemology).

The connection of the doctrine of creation and a theology of preaching is both biblically justified and fruitful for the development of a systematic theology of preaching. This starting point raises and helps to answer critical questions for a theology of preaching which are too easily ignored when starting elsewhere. Yet this approach also raises questions which can only be addressed through interaction with the other major categories of systematic theology, thus serving as the integrating point for a systematic theology of preaching. Finally, using the doctrine of creation as the *entrée* into a theology of preaching yields an almost troublingly high view of preaching—one which the contemporary state of evangelical preaching sorely needs.

The Christian Doctrine of Creation

The Nicene Creed begins with the affirmation, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth,” paralleling Genesis 1:1 by starting with the identification of God as Creator. Here, “Heaven and earth” is a phrase which encompasses all that is “not-God.” Apart from what God has made, God is the only thing which exists. The Christian doctrine of creation unpacks what it means to say that God has created.

The Old Testament uses the word *bara* to indicate that God is the Creator. The God of Israel is the only figure that the Old Testament describes as creating in this manner.⁴ Humans, of course, may be said to create things; machines, clothes, works of art, etc. Yet, the physical objects which humanity creates are always created out of material already to hand. By contrast, a description of the material used by God to create the world is conspicuously absent in Scripture. The Old Testament never connects a material to a divine act of creating (*bara*).⁵

The New Testament makes explicit what the Old leaves implicit concerning the material out of which God creates. The book of Hebrews affirms that “what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Heb 11:3). The world as we see it was not made out of similarly visible

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 34; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 14. The term *b'r* is used in the piel stem in Joshua 17:15, 18 to refer to the cutting of trees and forests. Yet the etymological connection between the word used in Joshua 17:15,18 and the term used for divine creating (e.g. Genesis 1:1) is doubtful. At the least it seems the act of creating is a uniquely divine prerogative.

⁵ Wenham, 14.

matter, nor even material which can in principle be detected! The teaching of Platonism, popular in the Greco-Roman context of the New Testament, was quite different. Plato taught that a semi-divine Demiurge (craftsman) created the world by shaping a visible mass of pre-existing matter. Hebrews, on the other hand, leads us to the conclusion that the only thing that existed before creation was the Creator.⁶

The core of the Christian doctrine of creation is the idea that God did not use any pre-existing material to form His creation. There was no material distinct from God, existing from eternity independently of God, with which God might create. There was not even an eternal, unformed substance that could have potentially produced a “something.”⁷ Nor is creation an emanation of God; the world is not made of the divine substance nor is it divine itself. The idea is most precisely stated *creatio non de deo, sed ex nihilo*—creation not from God, but out of nothing. The divine act of creation is the bringing of things into being when those things were not there before.

The theological implications of *creatio ex nihilo* are immense. The existence of creation is contingent upon the will of the Creator. Ontologically, the existence of creation depends on God’s willing it so. Cosmologically, the world has not always existed—creation has an absolute temporal beginning. In contrast, God has always existed. While the world is created, God is not-created. Thus, the existence of creation is contingent; God’s existence is necessary. Furthermore, *creatio ex nihilo* points to the freedom of God. His act of creation was not constrained by limitations imposed by the characteristics of a material for creation that God did not bring into existence. God is also free in that despite being self-sufficient in the inner-Trinitarian life, God graciously chose to create a reality that is truly ‘other’ than Himself. The interesting question for a theology of preaching is, “How did God create?”

The creation account in Genesis 1 describes God creating by commanding that the various parts of creation come into existence. “And God said, ‘Let there be...’” (Gen 1:3ff.), is the phrase that drives the whole account forward.⁸ Thirteen different times in Genesis 1, God brings something into existence by verbally commanding it to be.⁹

Creation is the result of divine fiat. Outside of Genesis 1, there are at least seven more passages that describe God creating by speaking. Psalm 33:6, Hebrews 11:3 and 2 Peter 3:9 reference the Genesis account when they state that God created by His word. Psalm 33:9, 148:5, Isaiah 48:13,

⁶ William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 47b, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 332.

⁷ Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, 38; Robert W. Jensen, “Aspects of a Doctrine of Creation,” in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 22.

⁸ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 56.

⁹ The phrase “Let there be...” or a variation on it appears in once each in Genesis 1:3, 11, 15, 24, 26, and twice each in Genesis 1:6, 9, 14, 20.

and Romans 4:11 describe God as having “spoke[n],” “commanded,” and call[ed]” the world into being. God speaks, and it is. This is nothing less than “creation by speech.”¹⁰

The doctrine of creation shows us that God’s speech is inherently powerful. When God speaks, it happens! The Psalms praise God for the power of His word not only in the act of bringing things into existence, but also in the exercise of God’s rule over creation and history.¹¹ God speaks, and storms winds blow (Ps 107:25).¹² God speaks, and Egypt suffers plague upon plague (Ps. 105:31-34). In the gospels, Jesus demonstrates His divinity by verbally commanding the obedience of creation. Christ speaks and men are healed of sickness, paralysis, and blindness.¹³ Jesus summons the dead, and they come back to life.¹⁴ He commands the storm winds and the waves, and they obey (Matt. 8:23-27; Mk 4:35-41; Lk 8:22-25).

Bernhard Anderson summarizes the Biblical description of God’s creative word/speech in this way,

As Israel learned in its historical experience, the word of God is the sovereign power that shapes people’s lives and controls the course of history. Yahweh’s word is active and dynamic; it is the means by which the divine will is accomplished. ... As the rain and the snow descend from heaven and do not return thither until they have made the earth fertile, so the word that goes forth from Yahweh’s mouth does not return empty but accomplishes Yahweh’s purpose and effects Yahweh’s will (Isa 55:10-11). ... In these instances, it is clear that the word is not a sound or even an idea. God’s word is an act, an event, a sovereign command, which accomplishes a result. The creation story affirms that God’s word, mighty in history, is also the very power that brought the creation into being.¹⁵

Fiat Creation and the Problem of Transcendence

The Christian doctrine of creation answers the question of how God created by asserting, “God spoke it.” This both raises and addresses the claim that the nature of God and creation is such that we should not (cannot!) think of God as speaking. Creation by divine fiat means that any understanding of the ontological distinction between Creator and creation (divine transcendence)

¹⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 110.

¹¹ Bergman, Lutzman, and Schmidt, c.v. “Dabhar” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 11 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:118.

¹² See also Psalm 147:15-18; 148:8.

¹³ See especially the healing of the Centurion’s servant (Matt 8:5-13), the paralytic (Matt 9:1-8), and blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52).

¹⁴ See especially the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17) and Lazarus (Jn 11:38-44).

¹⁵ Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 29.

which precludes God from interacting with creation by speaking is invalid for Christian theology. Any opposition of transcendence and immanence (especially expressed by excluding divine speech) shows a flawed understanding of the Creator-creation relationship because it pits the ontological distinction inherent in the statement ‘*God created the world*’ against the means implied in the causal connection ‘*God created the world*’ (by speech!). The connection between Creator and creation is the word of God. The divine speech is so powerful that when God calls, even that which does not yet exist leaps into being in obedience to His command. For Christian theology, to affirm God’s ability to speak is to affirm His ability to act in the world, and *vice versa*.

The transcendence of God entailed by the Creator-creation distinction also raises the problem of the adequacy of human language to bear divine speech. If God and creation are ontologically distinct, then how can words designed to describe finite entities be adequate for describing an infinite being? The question here narrows the focus from divine speech about God’s will and ways, acts and purposes in creation to speech about God’s own nature. This problem forms the basis for the apophatic approach to theology proper, which asserts that theologians can only say what God is *not*; no positive assertion about the nature of God can be made. The apophatic conclusion would seem to have devastating effect on the project of Christian preaching—at least where it claims to speak of God Himself.

Here the use of information theory by intelligent design theorists provides a helpful clue as to how the doctrine of fiat creation overcomes the problem of transcendence.¹⁶ Design theorists argue that design may be reliably inferred from the presence of complex specified information in a biological system.¹⁷ We may further note that one of the means by which information can be transmitted is speech. Fiat creation, then, means that God was able, through the divine speech, to call into existence finite realities that could adequately bear the constructive information He desired to impart (“it was good”). The success of the divine speech at conveying information in the act of creating lends plausibility to the assertion that God can use other finite realities (e.g. human words) to bear adequately the information He desires to transmit.

Yet the objection may be raised that the doctrine of creation merely shows that God can transmit information concerning finite objects into creation, not use the creaturely phenomenon of human language to convey information about an infinite being. The creation account, however, allows us to infer that God created several things beyond what the text directly asserts God to have created. For example, the progression of days in the creation account allows us to infer that God brought time itself into being with creation. More importantly here, the narrative introductions “... and God said,” (Gen 1:3ff), the report of the divine deliberation on creating humanity (Gen 1:26), and the divine pronouncement of blessing (Gen 1:24) all imply that God was also the creator of language as such. Indeed, God spoke the very first words heard by human ears (Gen

¹⁶ William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 153-160.

¹⁷Ibid., 159-164.

1:28-30; 2:16). Human language, then, should be understood as a creation and gift of God, fit to convey information from God to humanity.¹⁸

Of course, the ability of God to transmit information and His creation of human language entailed in the Christian doctrine of creation does not settle the question of *how* finite human language is successful at describing an infinite being (i.e. the question of whether all language about God is analogical, or whether some is univocal). Nor does the doctrine of creation justify an *analogia entis* approach to understanding analogical language about God. Rather God's creation of language and His communication of information to and through finite realities in the act of creating by fiat points to and undergirds an *analogia fides*. Of course, the Creator-creation distinction continues to hold. We may not conclude that the divine origin and use of language provides finite creatures with exhaustive knowledge of the infinite Creator, nor understanding commensurate with Cartesian certainty. Nevertheless, on this basis of an *analogia fides*, we are rational in holding that human language about God is successful (in some sense) in describing God when God uses it to describe Himself.

The Legitimacy of Connecting the Doctrine of Creation to a Theology of Preaching

God's revelation begins with a sermon; God preaches and the world is made. 'God said, "Let there be light", and there was light.' Six sermons are preached in a wonderful sequence; the Word of God is proclaimed in heaven's pulpit and all comes to pass; the preaching forms the universe... the Word preached is no empty word; it accomplishes what it pleases and never returns void to him who speaks.¹⁹

Alan Carefull's lyric description of the creation account in Genesis 1 raises the question of the legitimacy of connecting the concept of fiat creation with the language of preaching. That God creates by speaking, with all that entails about the power of God's speech, does not yet justify the claim that human speech in preaching bears any positive relationship to the divine fiat. The intersection of the doctrine of creation and a Christian theology of preaching, however, is not a matter of mere speculation. It is justified, even required, by Scripture itself.

The Old Testament connects the power of God's word as fiat with the preaching of the prophets. Jeremiah 1:9-10 describes God promising to place His words in the mouth of Jeremiah. As the prophet proclaimed the message of God, it was the Word of God. The result would be the lifting up and casting down of cities and nations. The preaching of Isaiah also had this "word of God" character (Isa 55:10-11). God indicated to Isaiah that God's word would not fail, but would

¹⁸ Mark D. Thomson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 66.

¹⁹ Alan Carefull, *The Priest as Preacher* (Birmingham, UK: Additional Curates Society, n.d.), 2; quoted in Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1996), 15.

accomplish God's purpose for sending it. In context, this applied most immediately to Isaiah's prophetic preaching.

The word of God character of prophetic preaching was not limited to these two major prophets. The phrase "word of the Lord/God" appears over 250 times in the Old Testament to describe the content of a prophetic message (sermon!). The sermons which the prophets preached are simply the "Word of the Lord." Their sermons did not just convey information, they were tools by which God implemented His will. The word of the prophet was the word of God in that it had God as its source, and was pregnant with divine power.²⁰

The New Testament continues and makes more explicit the word of God character of preaching in the ministry of the apostles. Peter affirmed the word of God power at work in preaching when he noted that the preaching of the Gospel ("the living and enduring word of God") had resulted in his readers being "born again" (1 Pet 1:23). Paul described his own preaching, especially in its transformative power, as "the word of God" when he reminded the Thessalonians that,

when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe (1 Thess 2:13).

In 2 Corinthians 2-4, Paul defended his preaching ministry to the Corinthians. He reminded his readers that he did not "peddle the word of God" but with "sincerity, as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God" (2 Cor 2:17). He "use[ed] great boldness in speech" (2 Cor 3:12), and did not "preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Cor 4:5). Paul's decision to preach Christ (the Word of God!) rather than human wisdom (preaching ourselves) was founded on a distinction between the Word of God and the words of men. The wisdom of men is foolishness (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25). The Apostolic preaching of "the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Cor 4:4-5) is the word of God. Paul affirmed that in such preaching, one sees the God "who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness'" causing "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" to shine "in our hearts."²¹

Paul insisted that the power of God's word in preaching is the same as that seen in the original act of creation (2 Cor 4:6; cf. Gen 1:3). Paul alludes to, rather than quotes, the Old Testament here. The dominant scholarly position is that Genesis 1:3 is the basis for Paul's language. Some scholars have pointed to Isaiah 9:2 as a possible point of connection, given the use of three important terms in both passages ("darkness," "light," and "shine"). However, God is not mentioned in Isaiah 9:2 and it is not He who speaks there.²² Instead, it appears that Paul is

²⁰ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 3.

²¹ The aorist verb "he shone" here has the Hebrew causative sense, "he caused to shine." So, Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians* in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 40, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 80.

²² *Ibid.* also, Peter Balla, "2 Corinthians" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 762-763.

making the same kind of connection between Genesis 1:3 and his preaching of the gospel that one sees implied in Isaiah 9:2.

Where there was no light, light has been summoned into existence by the word of God. Where there was no faith, faith has been summoned into existence by the word of God in the ministry of preaching (Rom 10:13-17). The result is that those reconciled to God in Christ through the preaching of the gospel are a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). 2 Corinthians 4-5 and Romans 10 further indicate that the privilege of bearing this creative, powerful word of God is shared not only by prophets and apostles, but by all those who proclaim the Gospel orally. Not only Paul, but all those who share the ministry of preaching (and indeed, all Christians as they share the Gospel!) are ambassadors through whom God makes His appeal (2 Cor 5:20).²³

The connection between the doctrine of creation and a theology of preaching is neither speculative nor a matter of theological imagination. Scripture itself grounds the connection broadly in the attribution of power to God’s speech and the characterization of faithful preaching as demonstrating this same power. Paul makes the connection explicit in 2 Corinthians 4:6 where he sees the power of God’s speech in creation at work in the Christian preaching of the Gospel. The result is an extremely high view of Christian preaching as an event where God speaks, and human preachers—earthen vessels though they be (2 Cor 4:7)—bear in their preaching the same powerful word of God which called the universe into existence.

Implications for a Theology of Preaching

God can speak in the world, contra classical liberalism, and does in fact speak in Christian preaching. This elevates the act of preaching from mere human communication to an act of God. The sermon is worthy of high respect from both preachers and listeners, as are preachers themselves as agents of God. Because of the working of God, one can say that “Christ speaks” to those who hear His Word proclaimed.²⁴ This view allowed Luther to exhort his listeners to believe that when hearing the Word preached, they should not view it as the words of a man, but as the Word of God Himself.²⁵ Preachers are instruments of Christ, tools that He uses to speak to the present world.²⁶ Listeners hear Christ’s voice in the preaching of the Gospel,²⁷ and God works by the voice of the preachers.²⁸ The key here is that God Himself speaking is the event

²³ Greidanus, 4.

²⁴ Luther, “Day of Christ’s Ascent into Heaven: Third Sermon: Mark 16:14-20,” in *The Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, 8 vols. ed. John Lenker, trans. John Lenker et al., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 3:238-9. (Hereafter cited as *SML*, vol., and page); *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 61 vols (Weimar: Hermann Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883-). (Hereafter cited as *WA*, vol., and page.); 21: 407.

²⁵ Luther, “Sunday after Easter: Third Sermon: John 19:20-31, 1540,” *SML* 3.397; *WA* 49, 149.

²⁶ Luther, “Second Sunday after Easter: John 10:11-16; 1523,” *SML* 3.29; *WA* 12, 538.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance, reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960-1965). (Hereafter cited as *CNTC*: book, chapter:verse, page), *Ephesians* 5:14, 201-2; *Calvini Opera* 59 vols in *Corpus Reformatorum* vols. 29-88. (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1863-1900), *CO* 51/*CR* 79, 219. (Hereafter *CO*, vol./*CR*, vol., page).

²⁸ Calvin, *CNTC:Acts* 10:44, 317-8, *CO* 48/*CR* 26, 250-1.

which makes preaching true Christian proclamation. Christian proclamation is not merely human words about God, though it is surely that as well, it is speech “in which and through which God Himself speaks about Himself.”²⁹

Calvin used Philip as an example of the way in which God uses human preaching. God chose to speak through Philip and only used the angel to send Philip on his mission. This led Calvin to affirm that “the voice of God sounds in the mouth of men . . . , while angels hold their peace.”³⁰ He also affirmed that “Christ acts by his ministers in such a manner that he wishes their mouth to be reckoned as his mouth, and their lips as his lips.”³¹ The nature of preaching makes it an object worthy of great respect.

The Power of Preaching and the Danger of Pride

The claim that preaching involves God Himself speaking is an assertion that is open to perversion by human pride. One potential problem is that of the false prophet—one who would use a high view of preaching to gain acceptance for false teaching. The Reformers, whose theology of preaching was no lower than that proposed here, considered the problem in light of their high view of Scripture.

While Christ commanded his followers to preach and extend the range of the Gospel,³² Luther made them dependent on Scripture for their message. Scripture was written because of the “infirmity of the human spirit,” which readily gives way to heresy, false teaching, and error, “giving the sheep of Christ poison in place of pasture.” The written Word exists to preserve the purity of the preaching and allows the sheep to protect themselves against the wolves, and even “to be their own guides when their false shepherds would not lead them into the green pastures.”³³

Luther argued that preachers must teach the Word of God purely,³⁴ and as His messengers they must be faithful in delivering God’s message as opposed to their own.³⁵ Human reason was not to be used as the criterion and standard by which ministers should mold the Word of God, nor should one “trifle with Scripture, or juggle the Word of God.”³⁶ Luther judged preachers who

²⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Volume I/1*. Trans. G.T. Thomson. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), §4, pt.1, 106.

³⁰ Calvin, *CNTC:Acts* 8:31, 246-8, *CO 48/CR 26*, 191-2.

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), *Isaiah* 11:4, 381; *CO 36/CR 64*, 240.

³² Luther, “First Sunday in Advent: Matthew 21:1-9, 1522,” *SML* 1.31; *WA 10 I/2*, 34-5.

³³ Luther, “Epiphany: Matthew 2:1-12, 1522,” *SML* 1.372; *WA 10 I/1*, 627.

³⁴ Luther, “Lectures on Galatians”, in *Luther’s Works*, 56 vols, vol.1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia; Fortress, 1955-1986), 26.206. (Hereafter cited as *LW*, vol., page); *WA 40 I*, 333.

³⁵ Luther, “Christmas Day: Luke 2:1-14,” *SML* 1.153; *WA 10 I/1*, 85.

³⁶ Luther, “Sunday after Ascension: 1 Peter 4:7-11,” *SML* 7.325; *WA 21*, 420.

proclaimed ideas foreign to Scripture “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”³⁷ He saw “no more terrible plague” than preachers who deviate from Scripture.³⁸ In the end such preachers are “accursed” because they inevitably end up preaching reliance on good works.³⁹

Calvin also emphasized the authority of the written Word as the source for oral proclamation and tied the Word of God-character of the proclamation to its fidelity to Scripture.⁴⁰ Calvin maintained that if the message preached was that actually given by God (Scripture being the normative standard here), it did not matter that the message came through a messenger— it remains the Word (or message) of God.⁴¹ The critical issue here for Calvin, as for Luther, was that the message must remain pure. Nothing in the message was to come from the imagination of the preacher.⁴² Humility before God requires the preacher to restrain his own dreams and inventions; the job is to “give pure and faithful testimony to God.”⁴³ Deviation from this standard always results in “falsehoods, errors, and deceits.”⁴⁴ Preaching must therefore be faithful to God’s Word.⁴⁵

Preachers may not preach themselves (2 Cor 4:5), that is to say, preach their own wisdom (1 Cor 1:18-25). Preaching which may legitimately claim to bear the power of the divine speech can only speak God’s words (i.e. expose the meaning and significance of what God has said). This ties the Christian preacher tightly and inextricably to the “God-breathed” text of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). Human speech which falsely claims to be the word of the Lord, being no more than mere human wisdom, stands under the judgment of God (Deut 18:20). The assertion of the fiat power of divine speech in preaching, based on the doctrine of creation, must thus be tempered by the doctrine of revelation (esp. the doctrine of Scripture).

A second significant problem arising from the twisting of a high view of preaching by human pride is the conversion of the power of God in preaching into a form of magic. Understanding preaching as magic would mean that simply by preaching the Scripture, one forces God to speak and so to act. Barth, however, affirmed that neither the mere intention of preachers to speak about the true God nor the fact that humans use the word “God” in their speech is sufficient to

³⁷ Luther, “Sermon on the Mount,” *LW* 21: 250-2; *WA* 32, 507-8.

³⁸ Luther, “Christmas Day: Luke 2:1-14,” *SML* 1.153-4; *WA* 10 I/1, 85.

³⁹ Luther, “Second Sunday in Advent: Luke 21:25-36, 1522,” *SML* 1.78; *WA* 10, I/2, 112.

⁴⁰ A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 50; cf. T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (London: Lutterworth, 1947), 22.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948-49), *Psalm* 2:7, 434; *CO* 32/*CR* 60, 258.

⁴² Calvin, *CNTC:Acts* 1:2, 22-4; *CO* 48/*CR* 76, 2-3.

⁴³ Calvin, *CNTC:John* 3:11, 69-70; *CO* 47/*CR* 75, 60-1.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), *Jeremiah* 14:4, *CO* 38/*CR* 66, 181.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *CNTC:Titus* 2:1, 368-9; *CO* 52/*CR* 80, 418-9.

achieve true speaking about God.⁴⁶ To say “Word of God,” is to confess that the Word is God’s. It is under His control, not the control of the preacher. He is the One who decides when and how it will come. The speaking of the Word of God through preaching is a matter of God’s will and pleasure, for preaching is only real proclamation when it is God who speaks through the language of the preacher.

Luther affirmed that the critical action here is God’s not man’s, citing Matt.10:20, “It is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaks in you.”⁴⁷ God has indeed linked the presence of Christ with preaching,⁴⁸ but not in a way that conveys control to human preachers. Without His presence in the preaching event, preaching would be useless, even if it were doctrinally and rhetorically sound.⁴⁹ Calvin could say, “Christ acts by his ministers in such a manner that he wishes their mouth to be reckoned as his mouth, and their lips as his lips.”⁵⁰ Yet he is careful to reserve to God the authority and credit in preaching.⁵¹ The impact of the doctrine of creation for a theology of preaching is, as a result, qualified by the sovereign freedom of God understood concretely in as the freedom of the Holy Spirit in illumining the minds of both the hearer and the preacher for faithful understanding.

The Power of Divine Speech and the “Failure” of Human Preaching

The idea that preachers bear in their preaching the same powerful word of God that called the universe into existence also raises the problem of the apparent weakness and failure of human preaching. The divine word is so powerful that when God calls, even that which does not yet exist comes to exist in obedience to the divine fiat. The natural relation of every “thing” in creation to the word of God is obedience. At a minimum this means that nothing which God wills to exist can fail to exist. Even suicide does not successfully deny God’s fiat because death does not result in cessation of existence.

If preaching carries God’s speech, and bears the power of God’s creative word, then the apparent failure of human preaching is a real problem, for it would seem either that God’s word is not infallibly efficacious, or that preaching does not bear God’s speech. How is disobedience to the word of God even possible? Just as non-existence is no barrier to the power of God’s speech, so too the lack of spiritual life or faith in a person is no barrier to the power of God’s word. The question raised here requires a theology of preaching grounded in the doctrine of creation to interact with the doctrines of humanity, sin, and salvation.

In an initial attempt to resolve the problem, one might recall that the decision to speak through preaching remains with God. Just as God is completely free in His decision to create, so too God

⁴⁶ *CD*, Vol. I/1, §3, pt.1, 52.

⁴⁷ Luther, “Second Sunday after Easter: Third Sermon: John 10:11-16; 1523,” *SML* 3.60-1; *WA* 21, 330.

⁴⁸ Luther, “Third Sunday in Advent: Matthew 2:2-10,” *SML* 1.94; *WA* 10 I/2, 154

⁴⁹ Luther, “Second Sunday after Easter: Third Sermon: John 10:11-16,” *SML* 2.397; *WA* 21, 324.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, *Isaiah* 11:4, 381; *CO* 36/*CR* 64, 240.

⁵¹ Calvin, *CNTC:Acts* 9:6, 261-2; *CO* 48/*CR* 26, 203-4

is free in His decision to speak through preaching.⁵² In practice this would mean that God sometimes chooses to speak and sometimes not to speak. Yet the problem is reintroduced and exacerbated by the fact that the same preaching event sometimes produces faith in one person but not in others.

One might also appeal to the relationship between divine and creaturely agency. One version of this relationship points to the idea of divine permission. In this move, God permits the one who hears His word to embrace or refuse faith. Thus, the reaction of the hearer is the controlling factor in whether or not the person hears and experiences the sermon as having the power of the word of God. Alternatively, one might point to the idea of effectual calling in which God calls some but not others. Here, the decision of God is the controlling factor in whether or not the power of the divine speech is experienced by the hearer. Preaching is the Word of God for those God has called, but is not the Word of God for those He has not called.

Neither answer, however, is ultimately satisfactory. Appeal to the relationship between divine and creaturely agency in this case does not treat the objective fact that preaching carries the power of the divine fiat seriously enough. In the case of appeal to divine permission, the power of the divine speech in preaching is divorced from the creation paradigm because it is made to be dependent upon the object. Though the idea of effectual calling is more consistent with the fiat power of the divine speech, it too—if understood as above—contradicts the Scripture. In Jesus’ parable of the sower and the four soils, the seed is cast indiscriminately on all the types of soil (kinds of hearers). In Jesus’ interpretation, this seed simply is “the word of God” (Lk 8:11; see also Mk 4:14; Mt 13:19). Christian preaching, therefore, is the word of God both to those who accept it and those who reject it.

Each of the preceding answers to the apparent failure of human preaching is characterized by a common assumption: that the divine speech is always successful at achieving the will of the Creator *in a way that is positive for the creature to whom it is addressed*. Yet Scripture also indicates that it is “by the word of the Lord” that “the heavens and earth are being reserved for fire” (2 Pet 3:7). Creation has an eschatology that includes both redemption and destruction. The divine speech can convey not only blessings, but also judgment. Rather than understand the divine speech in preaching in terms of divine and creaturely agency, it will be more fruitful to develop an eschatological orientation.

One way to do this would be to point out that in the eschaton, “every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). The claim here need not be one of universalism. Rather, the power of the divine word carried in preaching is such that while not everyone responds obediently now, one day all will—though not salvifically and only under duress. On this understanding the fiat power of the word of God in Christian preaching is ultimately effective in every case. Unfortunately, it allows a gap between the articulation of the divine speech and the resulting obedience that does not seem to fit with the Genesis account of fiat creation, where that which God calls into existence springs immediately into being.

⁵² Barth, *CD*, Vol. I/1, §4, pt.1, 104.

The gap can be closed, however, by reference to the ‘already-not yet’ character of biblical eschatology. Christian preaching makes present in proleptic form both eschatological salvation to those who believe and judgment to those who do not believe (see Jn 3:18). This option offers an account of preaching as divine fiat that is most closely in conjunction with the instantaneous way the divine speech functions in Genesis 1, while also accounting for the different responses of those who hear. The divine word always accomplishes its purpose (Isa 55:10-11); unfortunately, that purpose is sometimes judgment. This answer would be compatible with either a divine permission or effectual calling understanding of how divine and creaturely agency relates in the human response to the word of God (an issue that can then be decided on other grounds).

Conclusion

God created the universe through the power of the divine word. Amazingly, God uses the foolishness of human preaching as a bearer of this divine speech. This assertion raises important questions for a theology of preaching from within the doctrine of creation. It also requires a theology of preaching to interact with nearly all of the other major categories of systematic theology. For these reasons, the doctrine of creation should be the ‘origin’ for a systematic theology of preaching. Yet the creation-preaching connection raises other important issues which await further development; the way in which the purposes and goals of God for creation are echoed in the goal of God’s speech through preaching, and the way in which a theology of preaching which has its ‘origin’ in the doctrine of creation intersects Christology.

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