

# SPIRIT-LED PREACHING



REVISED EDITION

# SPIRIT-LED PREACHING

*The Holy Spirit's Role in Sermon  
Preparation and Delivery*



GREG HEISLER



ACADEMIC  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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VP

To Laura, my bride, my love, and my support.

To Andrew and Benjamin, the arrows God has  
blessed us with (Ps 127:4).

To Danny Akin and Robert Smith Jr., the two men who took me in  
as a young Timothy and helped me become a better preacher and,  
more importantly, showed me what it means to be a man after  
God's own heart.

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## FOREWORD

IN THE FALL OF 1995 at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, a young man in one of my classes preached a sermon from Rev 1:17–18, a text that showcases the glorified Christ, who was resurrected by the power of the Holy Spirit. Little did I know that that young man, Greg Heisler, would experience a call to preach—not on a Damascus road like Paul, not in a winepress like Gideon, not while picking sycamore fruit like Amos, and not while lying in bed like Samuel, but, rather, in my homiletics classroom. God used the words of the apostle Paul, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16), to pierce his heart with unceasing and overwhelming prophetic burden to preach the Word.

It has been my magnanimous privilege to watch God use him as he has progressed from a call to preach to a call to pastor to his most recent call to serve as a seminary professor at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. His book *Spirit-Led Preaching* is a much needed and timely work in the field of homiletics. The Christian church is quick to emphasize the importance of Spirit-led singing, Spirit-led praying, and Spirit-led living. However, there has been a long and overdue promulgation on the necessity of Spirit-led preaching.

The contemporary church suffers from the ache of memory that has resulted in pneumatological amputation and absence. In fact, the Holy Spirit has been demoted to the status of the stepchild of the Trinity, especially in preaching. A plethora of noted preachers join in a chorus of ecclesiastical indictment on the church for demoting the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. James Forbes, in his 1989 book *The Holy Spirit and Preaching*, indicts the church for being “Holy Spirit shy.” Stephen Olford, in his work *Spirit-Anointed Expository Preaching*, says that the sin of the Old Testament was the rejection of God the Father, the sin of the New Testament was a rejection of God the Son, and the sin of the contemporary church is the rejection of God the Spirit.

C. H. Dodd, in his 1936 watershed work *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development*, lists six elements of the *kerygma*, the gospel message of the early apostles. The fifth element is *metanoia*—repentance accompanied by the Holy Spirit, as evidenced in Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Ecclesiastical prophet A. W. Tozer surmised that if God decided to take the Holy Spirit out of the church, the church after twenty-five years would still be doing the same thing and not even notice the difference!

Even Jesus, who had the Holy Spirit without measure and is the human face of God—God with skin, representing God without skin—who would send the Holy Spirit to be God inside *our* skin, said in his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). If Jesus—the Son of God, the infinite One, the sender of the Holy Spirit to the church on the day of Pentecost—declared that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to preach, can we preachers—who are frail, weak, and finite vessels—settle for anything less? To see the work of God demonstrated in our preaching necessitates the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

In these days of unprecedented fear and incomparable tragedies, the Spirit and the Word need to be married together in an inextricable bond so that the hearers of our gospel can be initiated into the faith through the gospel, instructed by the faith through the gospel, and inspired to keep the faith through the gospel.

Dr. Heisler reminds us in this work that preaching carries a dual responsibility: the hand of the human preacher and the hand of God through the Holy Spirit make preaching effective. His work is an epitome of Augustine’s contention that we ought to work as if everything depended on us and pray as if everything depended on God. The book bridges the gap between the head and the heart, what other homileticians like Fred Craddock call “the longest journey in the world.”

Dr. Heisler reminds us that preaching is not a planned and calculated event accomplished through mere human preparation, but rather it is an inexplicable and supernatural happening executed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the human agency of the preacher. To paraphrase the well-known definition

of preaching provided by Phillips Brooks, preaching is the truth of God mediated and poured through the personality of the preacher by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Haddon Robinson, professor of preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, includes in his definition of biblical preaching that after the textual idea is discerned through a grammatical, historical, and literary study of a passage in its context, the Holy Spirit must first apply the text to the life and personality of the preacher and then to the hearers. This is precisely the focus of Dr. Heisler's book, and his challenge to us is to be Spirit-filled Christians before we are Spirit-empowered preachers.

This book is a success waiting to happen. I congratulate my son in the faith, Dr. Heisler, for ushering us as readers into the real presence of Christ and for urging us who preach the Scriptures to make Christ's presence real in every sermon. May the great "after preacher"—the Holy Spirit—provide not only the manner but the matter for the declaration of the whole counsel of God, to the end that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

To God be the glory—great things he hath done.

Robert Smith Jr.  
Professor of Preaching  
Beeson Divinity School  
Birmingham, Alabama



## PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE that ten years ago *Spirit-Led Preaching* came into print and dwelled among us. A generation of pastors has been challenged to keep in step with the Holy Spirit with regard to their preaching, and for that I am grateful. Students of preaching have continually reached out to me, saying that *Spirit-Led Preaching* has been one of the most helpful and inspiring books about preaching they have read. *Spirit-Led Preaching* has also been translated into Korean and Chinese, affirming the book's value to cross-cultural preaching.

The revised edition of *Spirit-Led Preaching* is a bit heavier and longer this time around. Every chapter has received some type of reworking. I added some support where I thought support was lacking. I added some illustrations from my own preaching ministry now that I am both pastor and homiletician. I added a new chapter that focuses on the congregation's role in Spirit-led preaching which includes a theology of listening. I am dismayed by how many contemporary books on preaching simply leave out the audience's responsibility altogether. As a pastor, I am more convinced than ever that we can be well prepared, prayed up, and Spirit filled as preachers, only to find a congregation that is lethargic, apathetic, and unaware of their responsibility with regard to hearing the Word with the Spirit's help. So I believe you will find the revised edition of *Spirit-Led Preaching* to be a little more balanced than the first edition.

I hope and pray that God continues to raise up preachers in every subsequent generation that are Christ centered, Word saturated, and Spirit empowered. My prayer for *Spirit-Led Preaching* is summed up well by the old hymn "Brethren We Have Met to Worship," which says,

Brethren, we have met to worship, and adore the Lord our God;  
will you pray with all your power, while we try to preach the Word?

All is vain, unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down;

brethren, pray, and holy manna will be showered all around.

May God strengthen you as you become more aware of and dependent on the Spirit's power for preaching. To God be the glory!

Greg Heisler  
Maryville, Tennessee  
2018

# INTRODUCTION

## What Spirit-Empowered Preaching Looks Like

*I can't measure it. I can't quantify it. I can't feel it. I don't know what it is the Holy Spirit is doing; I don't know when He's doing it and when He's not. In fact, I've said this before, but there are times when you feel . . . you know this, there's a great freedom when you preach and you feel like something's kind of carrying you along and you're better than you should be, right? And you just feel like it was cohesive and it came together and it worked. . . . The Holy Spirit illumines the Word to my mind, and empowers my passion.*

—John MacArthur, Shepherd's Conference, 2005

EVERYBODY NEEDS A HERO. My childhood hero of choice was Superman—faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive. It's a bird. It's a plane. It's \_\_\_\_\_! I think the transformation of mild-mannered Clark Kent into the bold and courageous Superman something everyone could identify with. Judging from outward appearances, Clark Kent wasn't much to contend with. But we all knew what was underneath that shirt and tie. The *S* on his chest stood for the true power inside him.

Do preachers have a hidden *S* underneath their ministerial garb—not an *S* pointing to their superhuman strength but an *S* pointing to the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit? Does the Holy Spirit still empower preachers today? If so, how? Do we pray and study throughout our week like Clark Kent, only to change into blue tights and a red cape on Sunday morning in hopeful expectation of something supernatural happening? Or do we begin our sermons as the mild-mannered Clark Kent, waiting expectantly for the Spirit

to miraculously transform us at some point of the message into Superman, so we can fly out of the pulpit at high noon every week?

“Nonsense,” you may be saying to yourself, “preachers are just human beings like everybody else.” Yet in a 2004 Knight Ridder news article on the Holy Spirit, one evangelical pastor had this to say about the role of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life: “We are Clark Kent, but with the Holy Spirit, we become Superman.” Really? Seriously?

Immediately my childhood images of Superman come to mind: able to bend steel bars with his bare hands, able to see through walls with X-ray vision, able to lift massive objects with superhuman strength, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound, faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive. It’s a bird; it’s a plane; it’s . . . a Spirit-filled preacher? Talk of pastors turning into Superman via the power of the Holy Spirit may fit well with a culture obsessed with extreme makeovers, but it certainly has no foundation in Scripture. In fact, Paul’s self-assessment as a God-called, Spirit-filled preacher of the gospel stands in stark contrast to any Superman mentality: “I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3). Paul doesn’t sound like Superman, does he? Yet in the next verse Paul affirms that underneath all his trembling and weakness, his preaching donned the S—not of Superman but of the Holy Spirit: “My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom [not even Superman’s!] but on God’s power” (1 Cor 2:4–5). Paul acknowledges that his powerful preaching is not from anything within himself; he plainly tells the Corinthians there is nothing special about him: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants” (1 Cor 3:5). It seems the Holy Spirit turned Paul into a servant rather than a Superman, and a rather weak and humble one at that.

Furthermore, I cannot recall Superman boasting about his inherent weakness to kryptonite. To do so would lessen his superhero image. In contrast, Paul not only admits his weaknesses; he boasts and delights in them! “Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9–10).

Judging from the verses quoted above, Paul doesn't sound like a superhero at all. Yet no honest reader of the New Testament would deny the power of God that accompanied Paul's ministry of the Word. As pastors today we live in a church culture filled with large egos, supersized pride, and superhero expectations—pressures the man of steel himself could not handle! Yet we must reject any notion that we are Superman or called to be a superhero. The hero of our preaching is Jesus Christ, and our goal as preachers is to be Spirit filled and Spirit empowered so that our audience knows the difference between supernatural preaching and superhero preaching! Preaching is not an exhibition of the Superman skills you may have learned in seminary or at a seminar; rather, as Paul says, preaching is a demonstration of the Spirit's power. If we know we want to end up with preaching that is Spirit empowered, the question remains, What path do we take so we end up there?

As preachers we are quick to confess the need for the Spirit's power in our preaching, but we fall short when it comes to explaining how to involve the Holy Spirit in our preaching. The fruit of evangelical publishing and scholarship over the last two decades demonstrates that as evangelicals we are far more able to tell what the Spirit does *not* do in preaching as opposed to what the Spirit *must* do if powerful proclamation is to take place. My conviction is that we have failed to connect the discipline of homiletics with the doctrine of pneumatology, and as a result we find ourselves "surprised by the Spirit" when he does move. *Spirit-Led Preaching* seeks to establish a positive theology of the Spirit's role in preaching by building on the theological fusion of Word and Spirit together.

#### THE PURPOSE AND PLAN OF *SPIRIT-LED PREACHING*

The premise of *Spirit-Led Preaching* is this: if Spirit-empowered sermons are going to be preached in the pulpit, then the preachers who preach those sermons must become Spirit led and Spirit dependent in their preaching. *Spirit-Led Preaching* is more about having the right mind-set, heart, and attitude than it is about following a cookie-cutter methodology. It is directed toward keeping our hearts aligned with the Spirit rather than just keeping our outlines in line with the same letter. Our sermon preparation and sermon delivery must be intentionally and prayerfully carried

out under the leadership and power of the Holy Spirit. In order to accomplish this, the preacher must come to see preaching as the Spirit's ministry, not the preacher's own ministry. The Spirit is the one who is preaching through the proclamation of the Word. God by his grace uses us as his instruments—personalities and all—to spread the good news of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:20). The preacher who is Spirit filled, Spirit led, and Spirit dependent will ultimately be Spirit empowered! Preaching is truly the Spirit's ministry. Just think of how many ways the Spirit is involved in preaching:

#### ELEVEN WAYS THE HOLY SPIRIT IS AT WORK IN PREACHING

1. The Spirit's inspiration of the biblical text (2 Tim 3:16)
2. The conversion of the preacher to faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11–16)
3. The gifting of the preacher through spiritual gifts (1 Tim 4:14)
4. The calling of the preacher to preach the Word (2 Tim 4:1–2)
5. The filling of the Spirit to obey the Word (Eph 5:18)
6. The illumination of the Spirit in studying the Word (Ps 119:18)
7. The empowerment of the preacher in proclaiming the Word (1 Cor 2:4)
8. The witness of the Spirit to Jesus Christ (John 15:26)
9. The opening of the hearts of those who hear and receive the Word (Acts 16:14)
10. The application of the Word of God to listeners' lives (Acts 2:37)
11. The production of lasting fruit displayed in the lives of Spirit-filled believers (Gal 5:22–23)

*Spirit-Led Preaching* is designed to help preachers see just how much of preaching is influenced by the Holy Spirit. In chapters 1 through 5, I build the theological foundation for Spirit-led preaching by examining the biblical, hermeneutical, and doctrinal foundations. In chapters 6 through 10, I address the practical implications of *Spirit-Led Preaching* for both the preacher and the audience.

Preaching is ultimately an act of surrender. In our humble brokenness before God, we are compelled to carry out our calling to preach under the unceasing inner compulsion of the Holy Spirit. Homiletics call this the joyful burden of preaching. The most

powerful preaching on earth comes out of a preacher who *must* say what he is compelled by the Spirit to say. Spirit-led preaching does not originate from our own strength or power but from God's power as the Holy Spirit energizes our spirits, ignites our hearts, and directs our minds as we preach his Word.

Spirit-led preaching captures well the dynamic relationship between the preacher, the Spirit, and the Word. According to Luke 4, Jesus was "led by the Spirit" (v. 1), "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" (v. 14), and then was anointed by the Spirit to preach (v. 18). The word "led" in verse 1 literally means "to lead by taking hold of." The word carries with it the idea of force or power and is translated elsewhere "to move, to compel, to urge, and to direct." The idea for preaching is clear: Spirit-led preaching is preaching that is birthed and delivered by the powerful moving of the Spirit so that the Spirit takes hold of us and compels us to preach. Spirit-led preaching is accomplished by a preacher who in his surrendered state has been "taken hold of" by the Spirit. As the Spirit takes hold of the preacher and compels him to preach, the Spirit also takes hold of the audience and compels them to listen, and God speaks through such preaching.

The book unfolds in the following manner. In chapter 1 I look at the absence of the Holy Spirit in preaching and give some explanations as to why we don't emphasize the Spirit in preaching. In chapter 2 I define preaching in terms of the Spirit, highlighting the Spirit's biblical ministries that form the basis of Spirit-led preaching. In chapter 3 I present the biblical evidence for Spirit-led preaching by examining Old Testament prophetic preaching and the preaching of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament. In chapter 4 I make the case for a recovery of the illumination of the Holy Spirit for preaching and clarify the Spirit's role between an inspired text and an illumined interpreter. In chapter 5 I make the case that Spirit-led preaching must implement a proper theology of Word and Spirit.

Chapter 6 begins the practical application section of the book where we discuss how the Spirit influences our sanctification by examining conversion, call, preparation, and character. Chapter 7 explores our preparation of the sermon under the Spirit's leadership, noting that what the Spirit illumines in the study, he empowers in the pulpit. Chapter 8 covers the practical issues of the sermon's presentation by focusing on the Spirit's role in sermon

delivery. Chapter 9 puts the spotlight on the congregation and includes a section on Spirit-led listening, which emphasizes the three-way conversation that takes place during preaching between the preacher, the congregation, and the Holy Spirit. Finally, chapter 10 addresses the Spirit's empowerment for preaching popularly referred to as the anointing.

Before we begin, I want you to know up front what this book is not intended to be or do. This book is not intended to be a how-to introduction to sermon preparation. This book is intended to be read alongside those books, to remind you that the Holy Spirit is preparing you to preach as you prepare to preach his text! Nor is this book a call to practice mysticism or illuminism or to seek special revelations or other types of extrabiblical experiences. The book is grounded in the biblical doctrines of revelation and pneumatology.

My hope is that *Spirit-Led Preaching* will cause you to approach your own preaching with a heightened sensitivity to the Spirit's leadership. I pray that the book will cause you to become more Spirit-saturated in your approach to preaching and will foster in you a fresh dependence on the Spirit in your life and in your preaching ministry. The book will succeed if it causes you to be more sensitive and responsive to the Spirit's dynamic role in your preaching. To take a stand on the Word of God is to take a stand for the Spirit of God who inspired it. To preach the Word is to honor the Spirit, and to honor the Spirit is to preach his Word. Homiletics shall not separate what God has joined together!

Just as every kid needs a hero, so every preacher needs the Holy Spirit. Although we are not called to be a Superman in the pulpit, we are called to be servants—servants of the Word of God, under the empowerment of the Spirit of God, and all for the glory of God. So the next time you get up to preach, remember this: an unseen *S* accompanies you to the pulpit. No, the *S* is not written across your chest; it is written deep upon your heart and sealed upon your soul. It stands for the Spirit—the Holy Spirit, who gives us the strength to preach: “But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that I might fully preach the word” (2 Tim 4:17). Praise God we never stand alone to preach! Rejoice that the strength you need for preaching comes from him!



## MISSING IN ACTION: WHERE IS THE HOLY SPIRIT WHEN WE PREACH?

*Our generation is rapidly losing its grip upon the supernatural; and as a consequence, the pulpit is rapidly dropping to the level of the platform. And this decline is due, more than anything else, to ignoring the Holy Spirit as the supreme inspirer of preaching. We would rather see a great orator in the pulpit, forgetting that the least expounder of the Word, when filled with the Spirit, is greater than he.*

—A. J. Gordon

TO THIS DAY I remember the conversation: “Preacher, all these people haven’t come today to hear you preach. I know it’s Sunday morning, and I know it’s a church service, but they’re not interested in hearing any preaching today. They want to hear the special music group sing, not hear you preach.” Those were shocking words to a young pastor with his heart set on preaching the Word of God and winning the world for Jesus Christ. As this older deacon lectured me on what really mattered to the congregation on such a special day (no preaching = more music), I found my mind drifting back to Rom 10:14 where Paul says, “How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing

about him? And how can they hear without a preacher?” Hearing music is one thing. But hearing the Word of God proclaimed in the Spirit’s power, Paul says, is essential to bringing people to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

I have nothing against great music in a church worship service; in fact, more often than not, it warms and stirs my heart before I preach. I also have nothing against using the arts in worship. Readings, dramas, and visuals can enhance our worship experience. What I am dead-set against is allowing all these good things to crowd out and push out the most needed thing—the preaching of the Word! What that deacon shared with me opened my eyes to a stark reality and a growing trend I have seen among churches today: preaching is no longer the priority of the church.

### THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING

Preaching has once again fallen on hard times. From a postmodern perspective preaching is seen by many as rationalistic, elitist, and authoritarian. In a culture that worships at the altar of relativism and idolizes ideas that do not offend anyone, there is little tolerance for any preacher to be so bold as to proclaim, “Thus says the Lord.” Cultural critic and theologian Al Mohler believes biblical preaching has been replaced with needs-based, human-centered approaches to avoid what he calls “a potentially embarrassing confrontation with biblical truth.”<sup>1</sup> John Piper laments the decline of faithful biblical exposition in the face of a changing culture when he observes how preaching has become “relational, anecdotal, humorous, casual, laid-back, absorbed in human need, fixed on relational dynamics, heavily saturated with psychological categories, and wrapped up in strategies for emotional healing.”<sup>2</sup> If Mohler and Piper are correct, then preaching has indeed lost its theological mandate. Consequently, we have replaced preachers with speakers because we are told people want dialogue without doctrine and talks without truth. Theology is out, storytellers are in, and as a result

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<sup>1</sup> Al Mohler, “The Urgency of Preaching,” Blog entry June 25, 2004, accessed September 17, 2017, [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com).

<sup>2</sup> John Piper, “Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation,” *Trinity Journal* 16 (Spring 1995): 30.

we are seeing an entire generation of preachers who are more driven to be entertaining and effective communicators than to be Spirit-empowered preachers. Methodology trumps theology, and sensitivity to the audience has replaced sensitivity to the Spirit.

Even those who propose expository preaching as the cure to the ailments of preaching today are not always preaching expository sermons; and when they do preach them, they do not preach them in an engaging manner. Poorly preached sermons, no matter what kind they are, give preaching a black eye. My first experience with preaching came through Young Life, a youth ministry that seeks to impact teenagers with the gospel. When it was my turn to give the message, my leader told me, “Never forget preaching rule number one: It’s a sin to bore people with the gospel of Jesus Christ!” If you are a preacher or preparing to be a preacher, let me challenge you right now to take a moment to pray and determine in your heart today that if people come to church and leave bored, it will not be because of your preaching! I tell students in my preaching classes, “If you are boring in the pulpit, it’s no one’s fault but your own.” If you are consumed with the truth you are preaching and energized by the Holy Spirit when you deliver it, you will not bore people with the Bible.

Let’s face the facts for a moment. We have more commentaries today than we know what to do with or have time to read, so understanding the Bible should not be the problem. We have access to millions of illustrations using Google and the Web. We have entire websites dedicated to helping us preach, and we have powerful computer software that can exegete the Hebrew and Greek text for us at the click of a mouse. Even when it comes to delivery, we have programs like PowerPoint and ProPresenter to help us present our message in a visually stimulating way. We are spoiled indeed! So why, even with all these wonderful tools and technologies, do our sermons come across as flat, powerless, and uninspiring?

Could it be that the most important element in engaging and powerful preaching cannot be boxed up and sold on a shelf or downloaded from the Web? Could it be that the reason our sermons are so passionless and powerless today is not that we lack resources but that we lack power—supernatural power? Yes, we have made ourselves more efficient, but at what cost? Has the Spirit made our messages more powerful?

Our calling as preachers is to proclaim the Bible in the Spirit's power, plain and simple. This includes delivering God's Word in an engaging and authentic manner. My conviction is that the Spirit of God and the Word of God come together in the heart and mind of the preacher to produce substantive and compelling sermons that transform the lives of listeners. A preacher's head, heart, and affections must unite together in the Holy Spirit to produce powerful preaching that informs the mind, inflames the heart, moves the will, and transforms the life. The Word of God is the substance of our message. It is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12). The Spirit of God is the fire of our message. He ignites us as we prepare and deliver it, and he ignites our listeners as they hear it (Luke 24:32)!

One way to overcome the apathy of the pew toward preaching is for preachers to return to the days of Jeremiah, when the Word of God was so powerfully shut up in his bones like fire that he couldn't hold it in (Jer 20:9)! Come to the pulpit so full of the Word of God and so full of the Spirit of God—unable to hold it in—and you will find that your people cannot wait to take it in! Dwight L. Moody said, "Catch on fire for Jesus, and the world will come and watch you burn." The question is: Are you ignitable?

### WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Why have so many churches been unaffected by the ministry of the Word? I believe the answer lies in our failure to harness the synergistic power that results when the Spirit of God and the Word of God combine together in preaching. We have so emphasized the issues of the text—and those are crucial issues indeed—that the Spirit's contribution to preaching the text seems like a mere afterthought that gets tacked on at the end of preparation. We forget that without the Spirit we would have no text to begin with and without the Spirit we would have no illumined heart to discern the text (1 Cor 2:14). Nothing short of a renaissance of the Holy Spirit's role in preaching will save powerless pulpits and sick churches from ineffective kingdom ministry.

In this book I am not advocating replacing the emphasis on the Word with an emphasis on the Spirit. I am advocating adding the Spirit's emphasis to the present emphasis on preaching the Word.

I think A. J. Gordon's assessment is right. We have lost our sense of the supernatural, and as a result preaching has become the activity of man instead of the ministry of God.

### WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Where did we get off track with regard to the supernatural, especially the Holy Spirit's involvement in preaching? Unfortunately, explanations are scarce and answers are few and far between. First of all, most textbooks on preaching have little to say about the Spirit. Even classic preaching texts like John Broadus's *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* have little to say about the Spirit in preaching. A generation of preachers in the 1930s and 1940s were raised on Andrew Blackwood's preaching texts, which also place little emphasis on the Spirit's involvement in preaching. In fact, the broad consensus of the literature as a whole reveals little interest in the Spirit. The Spirit's role is assumed or even sometimes acknowledged but never integrated in any comprehensive manner. Only in the late nineties, with the publication of books like Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix's *Power in the Pulpit* (1999), as well as Stephen and David Olford's *Anointed Expository Preaching* (1998), have textbooks on how to prepare a sermon incorporated more than a passing reference to the Spirit.

### PREACHING DEFINITIONS

One of the most obvious omissions of the Spirit's role in preaching is seen in how rare it is to find the Spirit incorporated into a definition of preaching. This is ironic since the way you define something will ultimately determine the outcome you can expect. In general, preaching definitions tend to center on the preacher, the Bible, and the delivery. Yet if preaching is the Spirit's ministry and if the final goal of our preaching is a demonstration of the Spirit's power, then we must define preaching to encompass the rich theology of Word and Spirit from the beginning. In the next chapter I develop a Spirit-led definition of preaching that will be used throughout the rest of the book.

What does the Spirit's absence from the definitions of preaching reveal to us? First, I believe it shows just how posttheological

preaching has become. Contemporary preaching begins with the audience instead of God, and as a result preaching has become the trade of communicators, not pastor-theologians. Many preaching books, websites, and preaching blogs focus heavily on the pragmatic side of preaching by emphasizing techniques, tips, mechanics, and the how-to approach to preaching. Don't get me wrong; we need to learn the pragmatic side of preaching because the techniques and mechanical elements of preaching do help us become better preachers. My concern is that often these books, websites, and blogs tell only half the story of what preaching is all about. We need to know how to put a sermon together, but before we tackle the how-to, let's first learn the "why-do" by establishing the theological foundation and spiritual dynamics of preaching.

Put another way, sound mechanics must be complemented by spiritual dynamics lest we end up with a Rolls Royce sermon that looks great on paper but has no gas in the tank to give it any power. In *Spirit-Led Preaching* I am calling for a more holistic and theologically driven approach to preaching that by definition and design incorporates the dynamic Spirit-Word relationship. The Spirit adds the homiletic gas to the preacher's tank, empowering the sermon and ensuring that our preaching reaches its desired destination.

*Spirit-Led Preaching* is intentionally centered on the theological and spiritual dynamics of preaching while still maintaining the importance of good sermon mechanics. This means our sermons can have clear structure and can be Spirit filled at the same time. Some preachers do not believe you can have the Spirit and structure at the same time because for them being led by the Spirit in preaching means spontaneity and unpredictability. They contend that man-made structures tend to get in the way of the unpredictable and unstructured Spirit! In this view any sermon with clarity and sound structure is decried as man's creation and not the Spirit's. I once pastored a church where I would put Sunday's sermon title up on the church sign on Thursday or Friday. A member quipped to me, "Preacher, I don't understand how you can know on Thursday what you are going to preach on Sunday. . . . I thought you were depending on the Spirit?" Some people are like that—if you advertise it in advance, you cannot possibly be open to the Spirit.

Yet when we begin to think about the Spirit's work of inspiration, we would not conclude that the Spirit-inspired Word of God has no structure, would we? Of course not! The Bible is replete with structure because the Spirit's inspiration was captured in words, which were placed into sentences, which were combined into coherent paragraphs, which fit into the flow of the writer's overall argument, and so on. So the Spirit can and does work within good, clear sermon structure, especially if that structure is shaped by and anchored to the biblical text.

Is there a danger in having sound sermon structure and good preaching mechanics? Yes, the danger we face as preachers comes in the form of misplaced confidence. For example, when I begin to think that the power and effectiveness of my sermon comes from how well structured or how well packaged my sermon is on a given Sunday, I will quench and grieve the true power of preaching—the Holy Spirit of God. As a preacher of God's Word, I must constantly remind myself that the power of my sermon is not located in how well my outline comes together in alliterative fashion. The power of my sermon does not come from the balanced symmetry and parallelism of my three points and my three subpoints. The power of my sermon does not come from my creative introduction or my perfect-fitting illustration. The preached message always finds its true source of power in the theological fusion of the Word of God and the Spirit of God joining together in Christological witness to the Son of God, coming through the proclamation of the man of God.

### THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SHYNESS

A second reason for the Spirit's absence in preaching today has to do with the excesses and abuses attributed to the Spirit. Everything from laughing, crying, barking like a dog, meowing like a cat, passing out at the altar, jumping over pews, to transforming into Superman seems to be claimed as a true manifestation of the Spirit. It's no wonder James Forbes in his 1989 work *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* coined the phrase "Spirit-shy Christians" to describe believers who find talking about the Spirit to be an intimidating and anxiety-filled experience. Preachers are not exempt, by the

way. James Montgomery Boice, a well-respected pastor and Bible expositor, confessed his own neglect of the Spirit in his preaching:

I had been in the ministry for about seven years when my morning preaching through Philippians, the Sermon on the Mount, and John eventually brought me to the discourses of John 14–16, in which the work of the Holy Spirit is described. *Strange to say I had never done any serious preaching on the Holy Spirit before that time* (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

As preachers we seem eager to tip our hats to the Holy Spirit's importance for our preaching, but we tend to clam up when asked to explain the Spirit's power in our own lives and in our own preaching. Once during my seminary days we had a chapel speaker who was going to discuss the life and preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I was excited to hear this speaker because I knew Lloyd-Jones had some strong views about the Spirit and preaching. When the speaker finally came to Lloyd-Jones's views on the unction of the Holy Spirit, he said to us, "There are some beliefs that you are better off keeping to yourself and taking with you to the grave." Ouch! With stifling statements like that, no wonder we have such a negative stigma about the Spirit!

### *TEACHING PREACHING*

A third reason the Spirit is neglected in preaching today can be traced to the way we teach preaching in our colleges and seminaries. For starters, preaching typically ends up in the "practical" department rather than the "theological." As a result, students show up in a preaching class and say with a sigh of relief, "Finally, something practical I can use in ministry." These pragmatically driven students eagerly but naively put behind them all their "history, theology, and language stuff" so they can finally "let loose and just preach the Bible!"

As one who teaches preaching, I spend the first several weeks of my class laying down the theological foundation for preaching. One semester a student raised his hand and asked me, "When are

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<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery Boice, "The Preacher and Scholarship," in *The Preacher and Preaching* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 96.



we going to learn how to preach? This is all just a bunch of theory so far.” I can translate that: “This theological foundation is a waste of my time.” With this type of mind-set, some students come to class wanting the “Top Ten Insights on How to Preach like a Pro,” “Seven Steps to Preaching with Success,” “Five Days and Five Ways to Better Preaching,” and “Three Secrets to Spirit-Filled Sermons.”

Their expectations are nothing short of the miraculous: teach me to preach with the passion of a John Piper, teach me to preach with the power of a Johnny Hunt, teach me to preach with the eloquence and imagination of a Charles Spurgeon, and teach me to preach with the theological depth of a John MacArthur. Disappointment sets in the minute I tell them that what they are seeing in the sermons of these preachers is the finished product that comes only at a great price: consistently walking with God in humility, daily seeking and surrendering to the Lord through prayer, and living a clean and holy life before God. Only after years of study, years of walking in holiness before God, and years of time spent alone with God in prayer is the chamber of the Spirit-filled heart ready to give birth to powerful preaching. Preaching is not so much about your preparing a sermon to preach; preaching is about God preparing you—his vessel—to preach.

Let me challenge you to allow God to prepare you through kneeling in the power of his presence through unceasing prayer. Allow God to prepare you by soaking in the glory of his Word through diligent, consistent study of the Bible. Allow God to prepare your heart through repentance, cleansing, and living above reproach before the Lord. Ask God to stir up your affections for Christ, to gladden your soul with joy as his servant (Ps 86:4). Then you will find yourself walking into the pulpit as a transformed, Spirit-filled preacher who delivers a burden, not a sermon; who expresses convictions, not opinions; and who preaches to please God, not man.

We need to return to teaching the theological foundation of preaching from the classical theological doctrines of bibliology and pneumatology. Systematic theology tends to separate the two, but students of preaching need to see the complementary relationship between Word and Spirit and to understand the proper relationship between sermon mechanics and sermon dynamics for preaching. They need to have as much zeal for the theological realities as they

do for the how-to practicalities. Above all, they need to approach preaching with absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's role as the source and catalyst of all life-changing responses to preaching cannot be an afterthought; it is our consuming thought and prayer throughout our preparation and delivery!

This brief overview of the Spirit's absence should cause us to reexamine our own approach to preaching and ask ourselves some hard questions: How does the Holy Spirit inform my own theology of preaching? Have I thought through how the Word and the Spirit work together in preaching, or do I see them as theological opposites? How does my current sermon preparation demonstrate a dependence on the Holy Spirit? What is my definition of preaching, and does it include the Spirit's ministries for preaching?

Ignorance, tradition, fear, and theological apathy can be overcome with a proper biblical theology of the Holy Spirit. Simply acknowledging the Spirit's presence is not enough. We must overcome our own Holy Spirit shyness and boldly invite the Spirit's gifts and ministries into the realm of our preaching. If preaching with power hinges on the Spirit's involvement, then it only makes sense to develop an approach to preaching that is Spirit dependent, Spirit led, and Spirit demonstrated.

I want to end this chapter by asking you to reflect on this statement: If the Spirit of God is left out of preaching, preaching does not really happen. Would you say that more often than not in your own preaching, the Spirit has been left out? Perhaps after reading through this chapter, you feel God convicting you that you need to make a fresh surrender to his power in your life and in your preaching. Maybe you've quenched the Spirit instead of surrendering to the Spirit because of anger toward your church or toward your spouse or toward God. Perhaps unconfessed sin has hindered the Spirit's work in your life, and right now he's calling on you to turn from it and confess it. Can you honestly say the Spirit is in control of you right now—that you are filled with and controlled by him? Pause now and ask God to give you a fresh dependence on the Holy Spirit for your life, your preaching, and your church. As the old hymn reminds us, "All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down. Brethren pray and holy manna will be showered all around." Let it be Lord. Let it be.