

# From Sola Scriptura to the Sacramental Sermon: Karl Barth and the Phenomenon of Prophetic Preaching

---

Gary Tyra, D. Min.

Professor of Biblical and Practical Theology  
Vanguard University of Southern California

Presented at the Tyndale Fellowship Christian Doctrine Study Group<sup>1</sup>

June 28, 2017

## Introduction

Compared to some other ministry topics, the phenomenon of prophetic preaching has not garnered a lot of attention. Still, it has been discussed. In addition to sermons that focus on the end times, it has been conceived of as preaching that: (1) addresses “secret sins, spiritual immaturity, and unhealed wounds”;<sup>2</sup> (2) confronts false doctrine;<sup>3</sup> or (3) challenges the status quo<sup>4</sup> by inciting hearers to pursue justice<sup>5</sup> and thus change the current social order.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, these are noble sermonic aims. *But what if there were yet another way of understanding the nature of prophetic preaching?* In a book titled *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching in a Broken World*, Philip Wogaman reminds us that

[t]o be prophetic is not necessarily to be adversarial, or even controversial. The word in its Greek form refers to one who speaks on behalf of another. In Hebrew

---

<sup>1</sup> Actually, the essay presented here is a slightly revised version that incorporates some of the constructive feedback provided by the international group of scholars to whom it was presented during the summer of 2017 in Cambridge, England.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Woodley, “Introduction,” in *Prophetic Preaching* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Brian Larson, “What All Good Preachers Do,” in *Prophetic Preaching* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 60.

<sup>4</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 4, 21.

<sup>5</sup> John Ortberg, “Preaching Like a Prophet,” in *Prophetic Preaching* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 47–58.

<sup>6</sup> See Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 10.

tradition, a prophet is one who speaks for God.... To speak for another is to grasp, first, the mind of the other ... *genuinely prophetic preaching draws people into the reality of God in such a way that they cannot any longer be content with conventional wisdom and superficial existence.*<sup>7</sup>

This is a very basic conception of prophetic preaching that is, ironically, founded upon a highly nuanced understanding of the prophetic phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> According to this view, prophetic preaching is transformational in its effect precisely because it facilitates an existentially impactful (life-story shaping) encounter with the living God.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps another way of referring to the phenomenon of prophetic preaching is to speak of the possibility of a *sacramental sermon*. Those familiar with the work of theologian Hans Boersma will find some tacit support there for what I am proposing here. Our mutual embrace of what I refer to as a “theological realism” (Boersma’s “sacramental ontology”<sup>10</sup>) means that we both possess a “sacramental understanding of the Scriptures”<sup>11</sup> that opens the door to the possibility of “sacramental preaching.”<sup>12</sup> That said, I will humbly suggest that, while we are

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Philip Wogaman, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching in a Broken World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 3–4, (emphasis added) as cited in Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> See also my own treatments of the prophetic phenomenon in Gary Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission: Prophetic Speech and Action in Christian Witness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 22 n. 24; and Gary Tyra, *Pursuing Moral Faithfulness: Ethics and Christian Discipleship Witness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2015), 166-67.

<sup>9</sup> From the outset, I wish to make clear that, while my understanding of prophetic preaching presumes a likely engagement on the part of the preacher in a “Spirit hermeneutics” (see Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017]), and/or the spiritual/theological exegesis practiced by the early church fathers (see Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014]; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 15–28 [Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008]), what I am describing in this paper is more than a public rehearsing of the preacher’s Spirit-illuminated interaction with the text (see Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 250). Instead, the sermon involves a genuine prophetic prompting that, because it affects not only what the preacher proclaims, but when, how and to whom he or she does so, results in a greater sense of formational immediacy between the Spirit of Christ and the auditors of the sermon.

<sup>10</sup> See Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> See Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2017), xi.

<sup>12</sup> See Hans Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2016), xx.; see also, Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 138–39; 150–53; Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 1–2.

ultimately after the same thing—sermons that enable hearers to “enter further into the life of God as revealed in Christ”<sup>13</sup>—the prophetic dynamic I focus on in this essay differentiates my proposal in an important way from the one put forward by Boersma.<sup>14</sup>

With that thought in mind, a description of sacramental preaching that comes a bit closer to capturing the prophetic element I believe is crucial to it has been provided by John Frye, a frequent contributor to the *Jesus Creed* blog site. Frye points out that:

Preaching, in some traditions, is a sacrament or comparable to a sacrament.... Preaching is a *holy event* when the preacher and the preached to *encounter the living God together*. The aim of preaching is community-encounter with the living, eyes-blazing Christ Who [*sic*] walks in the community’s ordinary, particular midst. Revelation chapters 2-3 are not just about the living Christ showing up a long time ago to seven churches in Asia Minor. The glorified Jesus, as Lord of his church, still walks around in the midst of local gatherings.<sup>15</sup>

Frye then goes on to present his understanding why and how sacramental sermons can often result in the spiritual transformation of those who hear them. In the process, he asserts:

To be informed by the Bible about God is not the same as to be encountered by the God of the Bible. We preach to encounter God together, not to create a set of preferred human behaviors. Encounter with God in Christ carries its own energies to shape and direct human lives. We preach for corporate encounter with God, believing that encounter will provoke numerous discussions about how we together can live missionally in light of the encounter. Paul suggested even unbelievers and unconvinced will confess an encounter with God (1 Corinthians 14:25) when the church gathers.... Authentic kingdom of God gospel

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> To be more specific, Boersma’s advocacy is for sermons that “move from the surface level of the text ... to the deeper, contemplative level”—i.e., preaching that, following the practice of the early church fathers, points hearers to “Christ as the sacramental mystery present in the text” (Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching*, xxii). I will offer that my understanding of the “sacramental sermon” is a bit more pneumatologically-explicit, -dependent, and -immediate. My focus moves beyond the spiritual/theological *exegesis* that’s presented to the congregation, to the existentially-impactful *encounter* with the risen Christ that results when the Holy Spirit prompts and enables the preacher to speak to the congregation in a prophetic, biblically-informed, and Christ-honoring manner. In other words, while both Boersma and I agree that there is such a thing as sacramental preaching, I suspect we may disagree somewhat as to whether an engagement in what he refers to as “sacramental exegesis,” by itself, is capable of producing sermons that function sacramentally. It’s my contention that an anointing of the Spirit upon the preparation and presentation of the sermon is also required—prophetic prompting and enablement by the Spirit of Christ that the preacher can and must prayerfully cooperate with for the sacramental encounter between congregants and the risen Christ to occur.

<sup>15</sup> John Frye, “Preaching as Encounter,” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2013/05/17/from-the-shepherds-nook-preaching-as-encounter/>.

announcement (preaching) evokes startling and diverse questions about how we go about adjusting our lives to Jesus as Lord.<sup>16</sup>

According to Frye, this is a real possibility: preaching which facilitates corporate encounters with the risen Christ that are, ultimately, transformational in their effect! With this more dynamic understanding of the nature and effect of sacramental preaching I heartily concur.

And yet, as appreciative as I am of Frye's passionate endorsement, I will offer the observation that an element missing from this mini-essay on the sacramental sermon is an explicit indication of the importance of the Holy Spirit to it.<sup>17</sup> Though this was certainly an innocent omission,<sup>18</sup> from my perspective it is an important one. The version of prophetic preaching I have in mind presumes a particular pneumatology—one that is capable of generating a truly remarkable, even vital sense of *holy expectation* each time the preaching event occurs.

To be more precise, in a forthcoming work I put forward the provocative thesis that many evangelical (and Pent-evangelical) churches are in need of a more robust, fully Trinitarian, *realist rather than non-realist* doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Put simply, it's my suggestion that a doctrine of the Holy Spirit that is fully Trinitarian and realist in nature is one which acknowledges the Spirit's divine personhood and the crucial role he plays in enabling human beings to not only *know* the Father through the Son, but also to *experience—live in to—*what both are about. In other words, a *pneumatological realism* insists that, rather than conceive of the Holy Spirit as a philosophical concept or impersonal force that is simply presumed to be at work

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>17</sup> In addition to the absence of any general reference to the role the Spirit should be expected to play in the sacramental encounter, also missing from this particular discussion is an acknowledgment of the direct and immediate formational effect the Spirit of Christ can produce in the lives of individual disciples (as well as the congregation as a whole) as a result of an *anointed* (Spirit-prompted and empowered) preaching (see 1 Thess 1:4) of God's inspired, inherently powerful word (see 2 Tim 3:16; Heb 4:12).

<sup>18</sup> In his book, *Jesus the Pastor*, Frye not only refers repeatedly to the Holy Spirit but also devotes two entire chapters to the importance of the Holy Spirit to the pastoring task. John W. Frye, *Jesus the Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 65–73; 14–59.

in believers' lives, he can and should be known and interacted with in ways that are personal, phenomenal, and life-story shaping. As a result, a pneumatological realism produces among church members an important sense of *pneumatological expectancy* rather than *presumption* (or even *indifference*).

Some tacit support for this thesis has been provided by Timothy Tennent, president of Asbury Theological Seminary. Commenting on the neglect of the Holy Spirit within some quarters of traditional evangelicalism, Tennent has made the following observation:

The Reformation's emphasis on the authority of Scripture, ecclesiology, and Christology, as crucial as it was, meant that there was a further delay in a full theological development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and *several vital aspects of his work were neglected* in post-Reformation Protestant theology, which focused on solidifying and organizing the theological developments of the Reformers. Over time, Western theological traditions that developed *greatly limited the active role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church*. The result was a *pneumatological deficit* that is only now becoming painfully apparent.<sup>19</sup>

Tennent seems to be suggesting that the “pneumatological deficit” at work in some evangelical theologies and churches can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation. If this is true, it would be highly ironic since the magisterial Reformers had much to say about the importance of the Holy Spirit to the Christian life and faith. In an article titled “The Lively Work of the Spirit in the Reformation,” Jane Dempsey Douglass writes:

Historians all too seldom turn their attention to the Reformers' understanding of the Holy Spirit, yet something profoundly significant happened to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Reformation. Theologians like Luther and Calvin, though quite traditional in their view of the person of the Holy Spirit—because they found the tradition biblical—nonetheless reframed the understanding of the Holy

---

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2010), 94, emphasis added. See also, Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 521, 523; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 17–18; Moreover, Jürgen Moltmann provides not only a nuanced discussion of the reason for the “reserve in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit” within the established churches in Europe during the modern era, but also an eloquent critique of the tendency among some evangelicals to conflate Word and Spirit, and to conceive of the Spirit only in an intellectual manner. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 2–3.

Spirit's work in the church and the world, giving the Spirit *a new immediacy* in the lives of believers.<sup>20</sup>

Now, given the increased importance the Reformers attributed to the Spirit, and the fact that they did so because they believed the move enjoyed biblical support, it would be quite ironic were we to discover that the Reformation theme *sola Scriptura* might have in any way contributed to a neglect of the Spirit in post-Reformation Protestant theology.

Hence, this paper. After briefly exploring the connections that seem to exist between two overly restrictive takes on *sola Scriptura* and a marginalization of the Spirit in contemporary evangelical theology and ministry, the remainder of the paper will focus on the possibility that, over against this unfortunate Spirit-devaluing dynamic, the pneumatological realism implicit in the Scripture-based Reformed theology of Karl Barth, when combined with his distinctive takes on the nature of revelation and the three-fold form of the Word of God, might actually provide some rather impressive theological support for the type of *prophetic preaching* I am advocating for—biblically-grounded, Christ-honoring, Spirit-empowered sermons that are sacramental (encounter-facilitating) in their effect. As well, I'll also provide a concluding, Barth-sensitive reflection on what a pneumatologically real approach to the preaching task entails.

From two evangelical understandings of *sola Scriptura* that have proved to be Spirit-marginalizing in their effect, to an eager engagement in a Spirit-empowered form of prophetic preaching: this is the ironic, important possibility this paper will explore.

### ***Sola Scriptura* and the Pneumatological Deficit**

Many scholars hold that for Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin the fundamental meaning of *sola Scriptura* was that the Scriptures alone constitute the ultimate authority for Christian faith and

---

<sup>20</sup> Jane Dempsey Douglas, "The Lively Work of the Spirit in the Reformation," *Word & World* 23:2 (Spring 2003) 121-33, "[https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/23-2\\_Holy\\_Spirit/23-2\\_Douglass.pdf](https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/23-2_Holy_Spirit/23-2_Douglass.pdf). Emphasis added.

practice, *rather than the Scriptures and an ecclesiastical tradition conveyed by either the pope or magisterium*.<sup>21</sup> However, I am going to draw attention here to a couple of ways in which a tendency among some evangelicals to go beyond the original intention behind the Reformers' use of *sola Scriptura* has contributed to the marginalization of the Holy Spirit in contemporary Christian theology, and has cultivated within too many contemporary churches an ethos of pneumatological presumption (or even indifference) rather than expectancy.

### **The Connection between *Sola Scriptura* and the Doctrine of Cessationism**

At the heart of my proposal regarding the need for evangelical churches to cultivate an ecclesial atmosphere earmarked by the embrace of a pneumatological realism is the conviction that contemporary Christians can and should *expect* to interact with the Holy Spirit in ways that are both personal and sometimes phenomenal (i.e., immediate and evident to the senses) rather than impersonal and purely theoretical. In other words, contemporary Christians can and should *expect* to experience the Spirit of Christ in essentially the same intimate, interactive manner as did Jesus' first followers.

Moreover, as I have indicated elsewhere, the Bible as a whole seems to evidence a dynamic connection between empowering encounters with the Holy Spirit and the phenomenon of *prophetic activity* (Spirit-prompted and enabled speech and action). Passage after passage in both testaments demonstrate a pattern that is simply too apparent to ignore: when the Spirit of God comes upon a person or persons, a divinely enabled ability to speak and/or act into the lives

---

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 21, 27, 36–37, 42, 45, 49, 52–54, 64, 68–70, 74–75. See also W. Robert Godfrey, “What Do We Mean by *Sola Scriptura*?” in *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009), 1; and James R. White, *Scripture Alone* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 27–28. It should be noted, however, that an alternative to this view is provided by Keith Mathison who asserts: “What we observe in the Reformation is not Scripture versus tradition. Instead, it is the inevitable clash between two mutually exclusive concepts of tradition.” See Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 86.

of others on God's behalf is often the result.<sup>22</sup> Thus, my thesis is that both the Old and New Testaments teach that when the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of mission—comes upon God's people in an empowering manner, something missionally significant occurs: *the impartation of prophetic capacity*. Put simply, this prophetic capacity involves a Spirit-enabled ability to—like Ananias of Damascus—hear God's voice, receive ministry assignments from him, and speak and act into the lives of people on his behalf, making disciples, and building up Christ's church in the process (see Acts 9:10–22).<sup>23</sup>

Obviously, then, the version of prophetic preaching I have in mind presumes a *continuationist* rather than *cessationist* pneumatological perspective. Now, while a church does not have to self-identify as Pentecostal-charismatic to be continuationist in orientation, it is not at all uncommon to find evangelical scholars basing their fervent rejection of continuationism on an understanding of *sola Scriptura* that is explicitly anti-Pentecostal-charismatic in its application. Consider, for example, this explanation provided by a Reformed theologian as to why the charismatic movement as a whole should be seen as nothing less than an enemy of the Protestant Reformation:

[T]he most fundamental element of the Reformation was the cry of 'Sola Scriptura' from students of the Bible. The 'charismatic movement' does not carry on the Reformation, but rather strikes a damaging blow to its very roots. They would destroy the Protestant foundation of confiding in Scripture alone.<sup>24</sup>

In a pertinent volume titled *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts*, Don Codling elaborates at some length upon why some evangelicals insist that *sola Scriptura* and the charismatic movement are inimical to one another. According to Codling, at the heart of the

---

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Num 11:25–29; 1 Sam 10:6–11; 19:19–24; 1 Chron 12:18; 2 Chron 24:20; Joel 2:28–29; Lk 1:41–45, 67; 2:25–28; Acts 2:4; 4:8; 8:4–19; 9:17–18 (cf. 1 Cor 14:18); 10:44–46; 13:9; 19:6; Eph 5:18–20.

<sup>23</sup> See Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission*, 68, 98, 129.

<sup>24</sup> Walter J. Chantry, *Signs of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 33, as cited in Don Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts: How Should Christians Deal with Present Day Prophecy?* (Rice, WA: Sentinel Press, 2005), 51.

doctrine of cessationism is an understanding of *sola Scriptura* which emphasizes a *closed canon* and the *sufficiency of Scripture*.<sup>25</sup> The presumption on the part of some cessationists seems to be not only that commitments to these two notions are absent in the continuationist perspective, but that many, if not most, Pentecostal-charismatics have explicitly rejected them in favor of the possibility of “new revelation” they consider as authoritative as (or even more so) than the canonical Scriptures.

For instance, in Matthew Barrett’s *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture*, a linkage is established between contemporary Pentecostalism and the view of the radical reformers who “believed the Spirit trumped even the Bible.” Says Barrett of these radicals: “The internal, personal word or revelation from the Spirit *they* received took priority over what the Bible said.”<sup>26</sup> Then, Barrett summarizes the belief of those within contemporary “Pentecostal circles” thusly: “While the Bible is appreciated, even revered, what is of ultimate significance and authority is a *new, additional* revelation from the Spirit, one that goes above and beyond the Bible.”<sup>27</sup>

Though to his credit Barrett includes a footnote in which he acknowledges that “many charismatics ... affirm *sola Scriptura* and argue that their view of the gifts is not to be set over or against Scripture,”<sup>28</sup> it’s my sense that many non-Pentecostal/charismatic evangelicals are not buying it. For one thing, my experience of presenting academic papers at some evangelical conference venues has been that any suggestion that the prophetic phenomenon witnessed to in Scripture might occur today is for many conferees an absolute non-starter. Furthermore, my experience of working with Christian university students who hail from some evangelical

---

<sup>25</sup> Codling, *Sola Scriptura*, 51–53.

<sup>26</sup> Barrett, *God’s Word Alone*, 369, emphasis original.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 369, n. 119.

churches is that they have been taught to be deeply distrustful of anyone, regardless of academic degree, who speaks too much or too enthusiastically about the Holy Spirit.

Now, because the purpose of this paper is *not* to suggest that prophetic preaching will (or even might) contain new, extra-biblical revelation that should be considered authoritative alongside sacred Scripture, the cessationist argument is not one I feel the need to respond to here.<sup>29</sup> I draw attention to the connection some have made between *sola Scriptura* and the doctrine of cessationism simply to indicate one of the ways in which the pneumatological deficit referred to by Tennent (and others) can be traced back to the Reformation, and one reason why the ethos or atmosphere of some evangelical communities of faith might not be earmarked by the type of pneumatological expectancy which I believe best accommodates the type of prophetic preaching this paper is about.

### **The Connection between *Sola Scriptura* and Pneumatological Heresy**

Another contemporary take on the meaning of *sola Scriptura* is pilloried in an essay penned by Lutheran theologian Matthew Block and provocatively titled: “Evangelicals, Heresy, and Scripture Alone.”<sup>30</sup> In this alarm-sounding piece, Block refers to some LifeWay Research published in 2014 which suggests that increasing numbers of evangelicals “hold views the early church long ago declared heresy.” Relevant to the theme of this paper are the following findings: (1) “a majority of Evangelicals deny the personhood of the Holy Spirit, with 56 percent saying he is a ‘divine force but not a personal being’”; and (2) according to 28 percent of the

---

<sup>29</sup> For a book-length treatment of the connection between cessationism and *sola Scriptura*, see Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts*.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Block, “Evangelicals, Heresy, and Scripture Alone,” <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2016/10/evangelicals-heresy-and-scripture-alone>.

evangelicals interviewed, “the Holy Spirit is a divine being, but is not equal with God the Father or Jesus.”<sup>31</sup>

So, why are these unorthodox pneumatological perspectives apparently on the rise among contemporary evangelicals? Block is convinced that there is a connection between these substandard takes on the Trinity and a profound misunderstanding of *sola Scriptura*. Instead of the *sola Scriptura* the Reformers had in mind, too many contemporary evangelicals have embraced something which Block refers to as “solo Scriptura” and Matthew Barrett refers to as *nuda Scriptura*.<sup>32</sup> Though their respective aims in drawing attention to this problem differ somewhat, of immediate concern to both Barrett and Block is the surprising number of evangelical Christians who

seem to think saying *Sola Scriptura* is the ultimate authority somehow means it is my personal “solo” reading of Scripture that is authoritative. They reject the witness of the Church down through the ages in favor of a personal, private understanding of Scripture (which is not at all what the reformers meant by the term “Scripture alone”). Consequently, we see that many Evangelicals deny that the historic Church’s creeds and confessions have any relevance today.<sup>33</sup>

Now, straightaway I want to make clear that the “prophetic preaching” I am advocating for, while holding firmly to the concept of *sola Scriptura*, resolutely rejects the notions of “*solo Scriptura*” or “*nuda Scriptura*” as described above. The sacramental sermon I have in mind is one which is not only based on the canonical Scriptures, but has benefitted from the interpretive assistance provided by the witness of the Church down through the ages.

So why then draw attention to the “solo Scriptura” at work among some evangelicals? I do so for this reason: given the alarming numbers, it’s very possible that either of the heretical

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Barrett, *God’s Word Alone*, 23, 54–55, 343–45.

<sup>33</sup> Block, “Evangelicals, Heresy, and Scripture Alone.” As well, a strident critique of what the author refers to as the “modern Evangelical doctrine of Scripture, or solo *Scriptura*” can be found in Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 237–53.

pneumatological perspectives identified by the LifeWay research might be held *not only* by a rogue church member here or there, but by entire congregations. If so, this is a serious matter. Once again, the phenomenon of prophetic preaching is based on the notion that the Spirit of Christ can be interacted with in ways that are personal, phenomenal, and existentially impactful. It also presumes an ecclesial ethos earmarked by a significant sense of *expectancy* based on this belief. Thus, it seems legitimate to ask: *What kind of pneumatological expectancy, if any, are we likely to find among groups of Christians sporting a pneumatology which significantly downplays either the personhood or divinity of the Holy Spirit?*

Apparently, then, some connections can indeed be made between a couple of controversial takes on the Reformation theme *sola Scriptura* and a tendency in some evangelical theologies and churches to not only deemphasize the work of the Spirit, but to depersonalize him as well. The question is: *Does it have to be this way?*

### **Karl Barth and the Possibility of Prophetic Preaching**

I want to press on now to explore the possibility that the practice of a Spirit-empowered version of prophetic preaching might actually enjoy some impressive theological support, and that from a somewhat surprising source: a Reformed theologian who is not only famous for his “biblicism” (i.e., his methodological turn to the Bible<sup>34</sup>), but who has also been accused of having neglected the doctrine of the Holy Spirit despite his focus on the Trinitarian nature of God. As ironic as it may seem, it’s my contention that when we combine the pneumatological realism I suspect is inherent in Barth’s theology, with his distinctive (encounter-oriented) notions concerning

---

<sup>34</sup> Says Kurt Anders Richardson: “Reading Barth, one is not pressed to see multiple sources of theology constantly at work, as with those who direct constant attention to some quadrilateral (revelation, tradition, reason, and experience—or variations on this theme). The *CD* [*Church Dogmatics*] attends to these, but the source of theology is always singular: the Word of God.” Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth*, 13. See also Francis Watson, “The Bible” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster, 274–95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 58–59, 61–62.

revelation, the Word of God, and Christian proclamation, we stumble upon some significant, if tacit, support for this paper's thesis.

### **Barth's Pneumatological Realism**

To be clear, Timothy Tennent's provocative assertion is that it was the Reformation's emphasis on ecclesiology and Christology, as well as Scripture, that seems to have contributed to a marginalizing of the Spirit in at least some post-Reformation Protestant theologies. This was especially true, says Tennent, of some theologies emanating from the Reformed tradition. He explains:

A typical example can be found in Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, a classic text in Reformed theology that is still in use today. Berkhof discusses the work of the Holy Spirit but *limits it* to applying the work of Christ into our lives (e.g., regeneration) and in personal holiness (e.g., sanctification). In his development of ecclesiology, *Berkhof is silent about the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the church for witness and mission or in enabling the church as a whole to live out in the present the eschatological realities of the New Creation*. It is not unusual to find Western systematic theologies that do not even develop the person and work of the Holy Spirit as a separate category of study but develop their theology of the Holy Spirit as subsets under the doctrine of God and the doctrine of soteriology.<sup>35</sup>

Some have argued that Barth, as a Reformed theologian, was himself complicit in this Protestant, post-Reformation marginalizing of the Spirit. A version of this argument was put forward by Robert Jenson in an oft-cited journal article titled: "You Wonder Where the Spirit Went."<sup>36</sup> Barth scholar, Eugene Rogers, explains that in this article Jenson

crystallizes an unease about successive nineteenth- and twentieth-century trinitarian revivals: whether they have much interesting to say about the Holy Spirit; whether, indeed, they tend (despite themselves) to reduce the Spirit to a

---

<sup>35</sup> See Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 94, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "You Wonder Where the Spirit Went," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 2 (1993): 296–304.

function or “power” of the Son. He poses that question by focusing on the greatest and most ambitious of those revivals, that of Karl Barth.<sup>37</sup>

Anyone concerned about impoverished pneumatologies that put forward depersonalized, overly-conceptualized depictions of the Holy Spirit must take Jenson’s critique seriously. And yet, while certainly understanding Jenson’s concern, my own (admittedly non-expert) reading of Barth, informed by the commentary provided by some actual experts on Barth’s pneumatology, has caused me to wonder if his work—despite its conspicuous Christocentrism—might actually be considered a “Spirit theology” nevertheless.

***Barth and the theological tie-in with T. F. Torrance.*** In a nutshell, what I’m suggesting is that back of Barth’s theologizing was a metaphysics of divine reality in which *both* Christ and the Holy Spirit play vital, indispensable roles. Indeed, so crucial is the Holy Spirit to Barth’s widely acknowledged theological realism<sup>38</sup> that a pneumatological realism can be inferred as well.

Crucial to my thesis is the observation that we see something very similar in the theology of Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance who, I will suggest, popularized for evangelicals the concept of theological realism. Both Barth and Torrance famously insisted that because of the incarnation of Christ, a real, trustworthy knowledge of our trinitarian God is possible.<sup>39</sup> This

---

<sup>37</sup> Eugene Rogers, *The Holy Spirit: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 9.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Volume 2: Reality* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002), 257–64. See also Sandra Sonderegger, “Barth and Feminism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster, 258–73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 264; Graham Ward, “Barth, Modernity, and Postmodernity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster, 274–95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 281; George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4–5. Even though “realism” is the label Hunsinger attaches to one of six Barthian motifs, I will offer that the theological/pneumatological realism I have in mind, and see in Barth’s work, comprises elements of all six of the motifs to which Hunsinger refers. See Hunsinger’s survey of the motifs in *ibid.*, 27–64.

<sup>39</sup> See Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality & Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 23. A very concise comparison of the ways in which the theological realisms of Barth and Torrance compare can be found in McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Volume 2: Reality*, 265.

mutually held conviction was grounded on the following Christological tenet: “what God is antecedently and eternally in himself he really is toward us in the concrete embodiment of his Truth in Jesus Christ the word made flesh.”<sup>40</sup> Obviously, this theological precept possesses huge epistemological significance.<sup>41</sup> Supportive of the notion of a pneumatological realism is the fact that both Torrance and Barth also spoke of the dramatic, critical importance of the *indwelling of the Holy Spirit* to the process of divine self-revelation. For instance, in a passage underscoring the need for orthodox understandings of both Christ and the Spirit, Torrance wrote:

Everything hinges on the *reality* of God’s *self*-communication to us in Jesus Christ, in whom there has become incarnate, not some created intermediary between God and the world, but the very Word who eternally inheres in the Being of God and is God, so that for us to know God in Jesus Christ is really to know him as he is in himself. *It is with the same force that attention is directed upon the Holy Spirit*, whom the Father sends through the Son to dwell with us, and who, like the Son, is no mere cosmic power intermediate between God and the world, but is the Spirit of God who eternally dwells in him and in whom God knows himself, so that for us to know God in his Spirit is to know him in the hidden depths of his divine Being.<sup>42</sup>

According to this passage, Torrance held that it’s *both* the *incarnation of Christ* and the *indwelling of his Spirit* that makes a theological realism—a real, trustworthy knowledge of our Trinitarian God—possible. Thus, it’s my contention that even though Torrance never used the term “pneumatological realism” in his writings, given the importance of the Spirit to his Christ-centered theological realism,<sup>43</sup> the presence of a pneumatological realism can be inferred. *The burden of the next few pages of this essay is to provide some support for the contention that the very same thing can be said of Barth as well.*

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 141. See also see Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 466.

<sup>41</sup> As I argue below, I believe this precept also possesses an existential significance as well.

<sup>42</sup> Torrance, *Reality & Evangelical Theology*, 23, emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> See Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission*, 112–13, 164; Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy*, 119–21; 327; Tyra, *Pursuing Moral Faithfulness*, 20–21.

***Barth himself on the importance of the Holy Spirit.*** For instance, here are three initial quotes from the mature Barth which indicate the critical importance he attached to the Holy Spirit for Christian theology:

It was the Spirit whose existence and action make possible and real (and possible and real up to this very day) the existence of Christianity in the world.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear that evangelical theology itself can only be pneumatic, spiritual theology. Only in the realm of the power of the Spirit can theology be realized as a humble, free, critical, and happy science of the God of the Gospel.<sup>45</sup>

Only the Spirit himself can rescue theology! He, the Holy One, the Lord, the Giver of Life, waits and waits to be received anew by theology as by the community. He waits to receive from theology his due of adoration and glorification. He expects from theology that it submit itself to the repentance, renewal, and reformation he effects. He waits to vivify and illuminate its affirmations which, however right they may be, are dead without the Spirit.<sup>46</sup>

Still, what do we do with the accusation that Barth's earlier theological work, so very Christ-centered, was guilty of not only neglecting the Holy Spirit but depersonalizing him as well? In the next several pages I will interact with several observations put forward by two prominent Barth scholars who insist that such an accusation is without merit; Barth's theology was always as much pneumatocentric as it was Christocentric.

***Aaron Smith and Barth's dual-focused theology.*** One of the stated aims of Aaron T. Smith's *A Theology of the Third Article: Karl Barth and the Spirit of the Word*, is to function as a "summary defense of Barth" against the charge that his Christocentrism had left him "little room for thinking and speaking of the Holy Spirit."<sup>47</sup> In the process, Smith is also pushing back against the notion (promoted by Eberhard Busch) that the famous remark made by Barth late in his career regarding the possibility of a theology of the Third Article, meant that he "was

---

<sup>44</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 55, emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> Aaron T. Smith, *A Theology of the Third Article: Karl Barth and the Spirit of the Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 2.

thinking of a theology which, unlike his own, was not written from the dominant perspective of Christology but from pneumatology.”<sup>48</sup> For both of these reasons Smith’s work is filled with passages which strongly indicate Barth’s pneumatological realism despite how very Christ-centered his theology was. For instance, Smith writes:

Barth’s christocentrism is at once pneumato-logical. His thought trades on the agency of the Spirit at every turn; apart from the event of faith, which is Spirit-inspired and maintained, there is no christocentric point of departure for pastoral or theological thought and speech. And at the same time, apart from the exegetical work and Person of Christ, there is no pneumatocentric content upon which one could think and speak of God.... Thus, Barth has to be directing us to a pneumatocentrism materially and methodologically consistent with the content and shape of his christocentrism.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, according to Smith, Barth’s theology is actually suggestive of what a theology of the third article might look like, his Christocentrism notwithstanding. Again, Smith says of Barth: “there is a substantive pneumatological undercurrent flowing with and even guiding his christological conclusions. One can draw out and build on Barth’s own ‘pneumatocentric dialectic’”<sup>50</sup> Then, within a very important footnote devoted to this discussion, Smith articulates the critical relationship between pneumatology and Christology in the theology of Karl Barth thusly: “There is no Christology that is not also Pneumatology. One simply cannot understand the Word, particularly as the center of dogmatic reflection in the light of which Christian thought takes defining shape and substance, apart from the living action and distinct identity of the Spirit.”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 19, 50–51.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 52–53

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 18–19.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 19, n. 10. This contention that a biblically-informed pneumatological realism will necessarily be Christ-honoring also finds support in George Hunsinger’s essay titled “The Mediator of Communion: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster, 274–95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 181-82.

*Philip Rosato and the dual importance of the Spirit in Barth's theology.* Another source of support for my thesis that a pneumatological realism is crucial to Barth's theological project is Philip J. Rosato. In his work titled *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth*, Rosato provides multiple passages which signal not only the profound *epistemological significance* that Barth, like Torrance, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit, but the *existential significance* Barth associated with the Spirit as well. In other words, the references presented below suggest a truly dynamic, two-pronged connection between the Holy Spirit and the realism at work in Barth's theological project.

First, with respect to the *epistemological significance* of the Spirit for Barth, Rosato offers the following assessment:

Barth grounds his insistence on a single source of man's knowledge about the Trinity on nothing less than the Holy Spirit.... Since the doctrine of the Trinity lies at the core of the revealed Word, and since the Word can only be known through the power of the Spirit, Barth links the knowledge of the Trinity to the mystery of the Spirit at work in Christian experience...<sup>52</sup>

Then, as if eager to put an even finer point on the matter, Rosato continues:

The Holy Spirit, God's own historical self-impartment to man, guarantees a correspondence between God in himself and God as He is known by man. Clearly the solution to the problem concerning knowledge of the immanent Trinity must be for Barth a pneumatological solution. Only the Spirit, as the spiritual power of God's own eternal Word, can create through faith a human knowledge which substantially corresponds to the truth of God himself. That man can know the immanent nature of God as the mystery which coincides with the economic activity of God on man's behalf is the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>53</sup>

Just as God the Father knows Himself in His Son through the Spirit, the man of faith can come to know his Father in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. Only a metaphysics rooted in *divine reality* guarantees that man can mediately know God as God immediately knows Himself.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Philip J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, emphasis added.

Furthermore, Rosato also has much to say about the *existential significance* of the Spirit for Barth. I have already suggested that a realist understanding of the Spirit entails that he can and should be related to in ways that are real, personal, and life-story-shaping (i.e., existentially impactful). In support of this notion is Rosato's insistence that, for Barth, the work of the Holy Spirit is not only objectively *revelational* in nature, but subjectively *transformational* also. For instance, in a discussion titled "The Father and the Son Meeting Man from Within," we find repeated references to *God's reality* and his very real working in human history toward the goal of an existentially-impactful "communion" with humanity *through the Holy Spirit*.<sup>55</sup> In this important discussion, Rosato asserts that

it is God the Holy Spirit, God in His third mode of existence, who according to Barth makes the actions of the Father and of the Son become historical *realities*.... The Holy Spirit is God *personally* manifest to and in men ... "men who become what by themselves and of themselves they can neither be nor become, men who belong to God, who are in *real communion* with God, who live before God and with God." Man's *being-related* to God, *being present before him and with him* is the distinct work of the Holy Spirit....<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, in another telling passage, Rosato makes the point that, according to Barth, the Holy Spirit lies behind not just the *faith* of the believer but his or her capacity for *faithfulness* as well:

The obvious, yet mysterious, reality of the conscious faith of the Christian induces Barth to investigate the various observable aspects of this faith before he can adequately explain their possibility. The first of these concrete aspects is that the individual Christian is in fact *capable* of acting publicly as a man who has heard the Word of God addressed to him and accepted that Word with the trust of a child. *The believer discovers that he both is and acts in a way which his own powers could not account for. He has become the recipient of a new capacity.*

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 60–65.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 60, emphasis added. The citation is from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), I/1, 450. It's worth noting that in the middle of this discussion Rosato makes the following observation: "Barth reiterates here that his presentation of the Spirit as the sole source of *communion* not only between the Father and the Son from eternity but also between man and God in revelation is intended to be a clear answer to the ambiguities of either an *overly philosophical*, *overly-institutional* or *overly-personal* [i.e., anthropocentric] understanding of the Holy Spirit." (Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord*, 63, emphasis added.) Apparently, Barth himself felt the need to argue for a pneumatological realism over against extant understandings of the Spirit!

This central fact of Christian existence constitutes for Barth *the subjective reality of revelation, the work of the Holy Spirit, God present in man creating in him the freedom to become obedient to the Father through faith*. When a man believes, God receives a new son *through the power of the Holy Spirit who alone makes it possible first that a man is a child of God and thus that he can subsequently become so....*<sup>57</sup>

I'm suggesting that, without doing so explicitly, Rosato is ascribing to Barth the type of pneumatological realism described in this essay. Then again, perhaps the question should be asked: *To what degree can we trust Rosato's observations regarding Barth's theology?*

Presented below is a quote from Barth himself which seems to underwrite not only Rosato's commentary, but this paper's thesis as well. Barth speaks here of a *freedom* the Spirit imparts to Christian disciples that has implications for just about every aspect of the Christian life:

To receive the Spirit, to have the Spirit, to live in the Spirit *means being set free and being permitted to live in freedom....* To have inner ears for the Word of Christ, to become thankful for His work and at the same time responsible for the message about Him and, lastly, to take confidence in men for Christ's sake—that *is the freedom which we obtain, when Christ breathes on us, when He sends us His Holy Spirit*. If He no longer lives in a historical or heavenly, a theological or ecclesiastical remoteness from me, *if He approaches me and takes possession of me*, the result will be that I hear, that I am thankful and responsible and that finally I may hope for myself and for all others; in other words, that *I may live in a Christian way*. It is a tremendously big thing and by no means a matter of course, to obtain this *freedom*. We must therefore every day and every hour pray *Veni Creator Spiritus* [Come, Creator Spirit] in listening to the word of Christ and in thankfulness. That is a closed circle. We do not 'have' this freedom; it is again and again given to us by God.<sup>58</sup>

This is one of many passages from Barth's hand which, I believe, implies a realist rather than non-realist understanding of the Holy Spirit—a pneumatology which possesses both an *epistemological* and *existential* significance. It's difficult for me to read Barth (and those more familiar with his theology than I) and not be convinced that his theological project was and is, as

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 71, emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 138–39, emphasis added.

it were, “pregnant” with the sense of pneumatological expectancy I associate with a pneumatological realism.

At the same time, I readily acknowledge that some evidence for the importance Barth placed on the Holy Spirit does not by itself constitute compelling support for the phenomenon of prophetic preaching. To be clear, my thesis holds that such support is discerned when we go on to add to Barth’s realist understanding of the Spirit the emphasis on *encounter* which earmarked his doctrines of revelation, Word of God, and Christian preaching.

### **Barth’s Encounter-Oriented Takes on Revelation and Proclamation**

Assuming some familiarity on the part of the reader with respect to Barth’s provocative takes on revelation as event and the threefold form of the Word of God will allow me to treat these topics in light of the overarching question: *How did Barth’s concept of proclamation as the Word of God impact his conception of the preaching task?*<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the best way to introduce this discussion, then, is by making use of this summative observation made by Barth scholar Kurt Anders Richardson:

Barth wanted his readers to focus on *the active revelation of God’s Word*, which God is *constantly accomplishing* through Scripture, and *the preaching of Scripture by the power of the Holy Spirit*.<sup>60</sup>

There’s a sense in which this statement succinctly summarizes the theme of not only this section but the paper as a whole: the way Barth viewed revelation as encounter, proclamation as the Word of God, and the crucial role the Spirit plays in the proclamation of the Word of God,

---

<sup>59</sup> A summary discussion of these topics that aims to be accessible to those only beginning their study of Barth can be found in John R. Franke, *Barth for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 115–23. A quite brief though somewhat pedantic summary of Barth’s takes on these topics is available in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 6–8. For a more nuanced discussion of Barth’s perspective on revelation in general, see Roland Chia, *Revelation and Theology: The Knowledge of God in Balthasar and Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 129–60. For a nuanced discussion of Barth’s concept of revelation as event/encounter in particular, see Trevor Hart, “Revelation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster, 274–95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 45–55.

<sup>60</sup> Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth*, 106, emphasis added.

combine in such a way as to suggest the possibility of prophetic preaching that is *incarnational*, *sacramental* (encounter-facilitating), and therefore *transformational* in nature. In order to better understand this equation, we must drill a bit more deeply into several of its components.

***Barth's "prophetic" understanding of true proclamation.*** Well known is the fact that it was due to a crisis in his preaching as a pastor that Barth was led to abandon his liberal theological training and to move in a new direction in his theology.<sup>61</sup> To be more specific, Bernard Ramm insists that, to fully understand Barth, it's necessary to see him reacting to a particular approach to preaching that he eventually came to regard as unsatisfactory. Ramm explains:

The Enlightenment and liberal Christianity *reduced preaching to a purely human performance*. The sermon may be passionate or learned, clever, textual, prophetic [i.e., confrontational], instructive, or inspirational, and may include fine remarks about Jesus. Nevertheless, its theological presuppositions *prevent it from rising above the level of human discourse*.<sup>62</sup>

Barth himself boldly asserted that both Modernism and Roman Catholicism could be faulted for not taking the task of preaching seriously enough. Both systems erred fundamentally in their low estimation of what constituted true proclamation. Barth made a huge distinction between the churchly tasks of social work, Christian education of youth, and even theology, and the task of proclamation rightly understood.<sup>63</sup>

Of course, such a critique begs the question: *What, then, is true proclamation?*

With what appears to be some willful, careful precision, Barth articulated a formal definition that is highly evocative of the prophetic dynamic:

---

<sup>61</sup> See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 61. See also John Webster, "Introducing Barth" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster, 3; Gregory G. Bolich, *Karl Barth & Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 108.

<sup>62</sup> Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 51.

<sup>63</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 50–51.

Proclamation is human speech in and by which God Himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God Himself speaks, and therefore heard and accepted in faith as divine decision concerning life and death, as divine judgment and pardon, eternal Law and eternal Gospel both together.<sup>64</sup>

That Barth had the prophetic phenomenon in mind is indicated by the language he used when issuing the following clarification and concomitant call for homiletical humility:

It is a decisive part of the insight of all true *prophecy* that man as such has no possibility of uttering the Word of God. What human utterance concerning God aims to be when it is intended as proclamation is not grace, but service of grace or means of grace. If the will in question were man's will to reach out beyond himself, to put himself with his word about God in the place of God, it would be blasphemous rebellion.<sup>65</sup>

There's no question that Barth sought to make it crystal clear that the preacher cannot, in himself or herself, conjure the reality of God or effect revelation.<sup>66</sup> Still, Barth certainly seemed to suggest that preaching does indeed possess a prophetic quality when it involves true proclamation.

**Barth's "theologically real" understanding of the Word of God.** To be more specific, according to Barth, the decisive criterion for true proclamation is the Word of God. The key to understanding this caveat, however, is to bear in mind that Barth did not understand Word of God in a nominal, static, merely propositional sense. *For Barth, the Word of God is event—i.e., God's speaking.* Says Barth: "Church proclamation is talk, speech. So is Holy Scripture. So is even revelation in itself as such.... God's Word means that God speaks."<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, as is well known, Barth saw this revelatory event as taking place in three forms: the Word of God *revealed* (Jesus Christ); the Word of God *written* (the Scriptures); and

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 52–53, emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 48–49.

<sup>67</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 132.

the Word of God *proclaimed* (Proclamation).<sup>68</sup> Barth maintained that there is an order of priority within this threefold expression of the Word of God. The Word of God proclaimed is contingent upon the Word of God written, which is contingent upon the Word of God revealed. This explains Barth's insistence that true proclamation is contingent upon the Word of God.

Or does it, fully? My contention is that one further degree of nuance is needed. While, *immediately*, true proclamation is contingent upon both the Word of God written (the Scriptures) and Word of God revealed (Christ), *ultimately*, it is contingent upon the theologically real dynamic of "God's speaking." In other words, for Barth, real proclamation is not only biblical and Christ-centered, but prophetic as well. Real proclamation sees itself as a possibility precisely because of the reality of the Word of God—God's speaking—and humanity's Spirit-endowed ability to hear/receive it.<sup>69</sup>

***Barth's "incarnational" understanding of Christian proclamation.*** Another distinctive of true proclamation for Barth is the encounter with God's speaking it facilitates, the humanity of the preacher and sermon notwithstanding.<sup>70</sup>

Barth was never reticent in his insistence that true proclamation is a miracle. However, he was also very careful to specify that the miraculous is not merely the divinization of human utterance, nor the humanization of the divine. Instead, true proclamation involves the phenomenon of incarnation.<sup>71</sup> Barth's reasoning was thus: just as the Word of God revealed (Christ) involved the assumption of human flesh, and just as the Word of God written (the Scriptures) involved the pen and intellect of human authors, even so, the Word of God proclaimed (Proclamation) involves the full involvement of fallible, imperfect human heralds.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 88–24.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 89. For more on this, see Tyra, *Pursuing Moral Faithfulness*, 20; Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy*, 119–21.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 93–94.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 94.

The incarnational aspect of true proclamation is a concept Aaron Smith really leans into in his book, *A Theology of the Third Article*. Throughout this work, he (following Barth) refers to the Spirit as “God a third time,”<sup>72</sup> and keeps referring to a dynamic he calls “inverberation.”<sup>73</sup>

Says Smith:

I argue that the Spirit of God is God a third time, subsisting in ontological unity with the Father and Son, yet distinctly his own Person in that he is the contemporaneity of the revelation event in which God has his existence. The Spirit self-determinatively repeats the (ontologically decisive) will of God to be God-with-us by reiterating the life-act in which God is in fact with us. The Spirit is contemporary instantiation of the Incarnation, or, the parallel life-act of *Inverberation*.<sup>74</sup>

Why coin and then make so much use of the term *inverberation*? In doing so, Smith means to connote three ideas: *incarnation*, *verba* (words), and the dynamic of *verberation* (resounding).

According to Smith, the concept of *inverberation* best describes the contemporaneous, ongoing manner in which the Holy Spirit, himself incarnate in the reading and preaching of sacred Scripture, functions as a fresh, contemporaneous incarnation of the prophetic and apostolic witness to Christ. Says Smith:

When I say that in and as the Spirit God is inverberate I mean that he continues to generate a real object for ocular and auditory ingestion by placing himself before us in the reading and proclaiming of Scripture. As these human words throttle space-time, the Spirit mediates correspondence between them and the eternal Word.<sup>75</sup>

Hopefully, the significance of the notion of *inverberation* for the type of prophetic preaching I have advocated for in this paper is apparent. According to Smith:

The Holy Spirit is *Spirit of the Word*. He is not a free-floating second revelation of God alongside or at variance with Christ, but the ongoing reality of God in

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 2, 7, 194, 241, 249.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 7, 12, 20, 22, 35, 44, 58, 60, 82, 83, 92, 108, 110, 114, 120, 121, 127, 156, 169, 189, 200, 253.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Likewise, Thomas Christian Currie implies that an incarnational dynamic is at work in Christian preaching when he asserts that, for Barth, “the Holy Spirit is the bond of union between the divine voice and the human voice in the event of the Word of God.” Thomas Christian Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us: The Threefold Word of God in the Theology and Ecclesiology of Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 31.

historical revelation as that revelation takes place in the idiomatic thoughts and words (verba) of Christ's proclamation today.... He is God in active generation and assumption of ongoing, contextualized human words bearing witness to the revelation event of the Word's enfleshing.... The Spirit is Spirit, then, in the event of the *church*—the where and when of gospel proclamation—in a manner parallel to the way that the Word is Word in the specific flesh of Jesus of Nazareth (and not flesh or humanity in general). The Word assumed *this* flesh, and the Spirit assumes witness to *this* logically prior assumption.<sup>76</sup>

Though I am concerned that Smith's language here and there can seem to *conflate* the Spirit with Christian proclamation—as if it is only through the act of preaching that the Spirit is present and active—still, in this notion of *inverberation* I find some tacit support for the possibility of biblically-grounded, Christ-honoring sermons that are incarnational in the sense that the Holy Spirit is not only using human words to convey to the congregation some general sense of divine reality, but, more specifically, some genuine ad hoc mentoring from the risen Jesus (see Jn 16:12–15). Therefore, to the degree Smith is justified in attributing the inverberation dynamic to Barth, I feel justified in suggesting that Barth's pneumatocentric as well as Christocentric theology provides some implicit support for the phenomenon of prophetic preaching.

***Barth's "sacramental" (encounter-facilitating) understanding of preaching.*** In his book, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church*, Hans Boersma acknowledges the significant influence of Barth on what he refers to as “a remarkable and growing interest in theological interpretation of Scripture.”<sup>77</sup> As has been noted already, for Boersma, a theological interpretation of Scripture makes possible not only a sacramental reading of God's Word<sup>78</sup> but a sacramental preaching of it as well.<sup>79</sup> Thus, if only indirectly, Boersma is

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 8, emphasis original.

<sup>77</sup> Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, xi.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>79</sup> Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching*, xvii–xxiii.

suggesting that Barth's work was a major cause of the recent upsurge of interest in the notion of sacramental preaching.

Some substantiation for the credit Boersma attributes to Barth for this theological/ministry development may be evidenced in the way Aaron Smith, who has already emphasized Barth's incarnational understanding of Christian proclamation, presses on to note a sacramental conception as well. According to Smith:

Barth construes God's revelation in the terms of Reformation sacramentology: God is present *consubstantially*.... That is, we encounter God in the dialectic of coming to humanity without sacrificing his being to the media of human thought and speech. He remains Lord over those media by being their source and conception just as the Word was the source and conception of Jesus' flesh, and the enfleshed Word was the source and conception of the prophetic and apostolic words. The Word, God's all-determinative exegesis occurs today precisely as it did in 1–30 C.E.: *indirectly* identical with the medium of revelation.<sup>80</sup>

To provide support for his commentary, Smith proceeds to quote Barth directly. Early in his career, Barth had opined that: "The best preaching is as such an equivalent to the kerygma that the Roman Catholic church offers every day in the form of the sacrament of the altar."<sup>81</sup> Smith then clarifies Barth's meaning thusly: "Whereas for Rome, the presence of God is mediated in the Eucharist, *that presence is encountered in Reformation theology in the event of the sermon.*"<sup>82</sup>

A book-length treatment of this topic is provided by Thomas Christian Currie in *The Only Sacrament Left to Us: The Threefold Word of God in the Theology and Ecclesiology of Karl Barth*. The manner in which Currie introduces Barth's understanding of the sacramental nature of Christian proclamation emphasizes the crucial role the Holy Spirit plays in it. He writes;

---

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *A Theology of the Third Article*, 85, emphasis original.

<sup>81</sup> Karl Barth, *Gottingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, ed. Hannelotte Reifen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 31, as cited in Smith, *A Theology of the Third Article*, 85.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, *A Theology of the Third Article*, 85, emphasis added. See also Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth*, 114-15.

Barth describes this proclamation event in terms of mediation, in terms of divine sign-giving, in terms of secondary objectivity, and in sacramental language. Any reference to sacrament does not begin with the Lord's supper or baptism, Barth maintains, but begins with *Jesus Christ and his ongoing presence in the life of the Christian community through the work of the Spirit*. This broader view of sacramental presence, not only includes Scripture and preaching, but renders baptism and the Lord's Supper dependent on the gospel, on the proclaimed and heard Word of God. This sacramental understanding of Scripture and preaching in the church's life is why Barth maintains that *preaching grounded on the witness of Scripture*, "is the only sacrament left to us."<sup>83</sup>

To be sure, we must take into account the manner in which Barth's understanding of this topic evolved over time. To their credit, both Smith and Currie take this into account.<sup>84</sup> Thus, my contention is that between the commentaries provided us by both Smith and Currie we find some not-so-implicit support for my thesis that Barth's theological project has room in it for the possibility of prophetic, sacramental sermons that are encounter-facilitating in their effect.

***Barth's "transformational" understanding of the sacramental sermon's impact.*** The fact that not all sermons end up functioning in a sacramental manner prompts the questions: *What is the sign of prophetic preaching? How will we as preachers know that it has occurred, or is occurring?* My response to this important query is to offer that, in addition to the startling degree of serendipity that earmarks the collection of resources for some sermons, and the somewhat surreal experience we preachers sometimes have of the Holy Spirit seeming to "speak through us" during the preaching event (articulating sermonic content we hadn't intended to deliver), the dead giveaway that something prophetic is occurring in the preaching moment is that the Spirit goes on to impress this especially profound sermonic content upon the hearts of at

---

<sup>83</sup> Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, 20. Quotation is from Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 114, emphasis added.

<sup>84</sup> For example, see the chapter titled "What Happens to the Threefold Word of God: Revision or Rejection" in *ibid.*, 89–137.

least some of those listening in an especially powerful manner.<sup>85</sup> In other words, *genuine transformation occurs*.

Barth was famous for his assertion that the ultimate test of true proclamation—a true representation of God’s speaking—is its effect. Proclamation is true, said Barth, when it is “talk which has to be listened to and which rightly demands obedience.”<sup>86</sup> Barth’s assumption seems to have been that, when God speaks, you know it (cf. Jer 23:29; Is 55:10–11).<sup>87</sup> Put differently, Barth seems to have had in mind the possibility of encounter-facilitating preaching that leaves a mark.

This notion of an existentially-impactful, paradigm-shifting, faithfulness-producing encounter with a holy God is implicit in the manner in which Aaron Smith presents Barth’s high view of the Sunday sermon. Citing Barth in the process, Smith writes:

The sermon is instructive for Barth because of its existential poignancy. “On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an *expectancy* that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to *happen*.” It is not, of course, that everyone feels or is equally conscious of this anticipation, but that does not alter the fact that “*expectancy* is inherent in the whole situation.”

The sermon is wreathed in readiness. For what? Not merely for edification, entertainment, or instruction, Barth says, but to hear and confess that “God *is* present. The whole situation witnesses, cries, simply shouts of it, even when in minister or people there arises questioning, wretchedness, or despair.” It is to hear and interrogate the biblical claim that God is in fact present even in the midst of doubting and wretched humanity that people come to church and the minister climbs the pulpit.<sup>88</sup>

Barth seems to be suggesting that, given the human longing for transcendence, it’s a sermon-enabled experience of the divine that’s to take place each Sunday—an existentially poignant

---

<sup>85</sup> For more on my take on “prophetic preaching,” see Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission*, 156–57.

<sup>86</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 93.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 92–93.

<sup>88</sup> Smith, *A Theology of the Third Article*, 39. The quotations are from Barth, “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” 104, emphasis original.

audience with God that cannot help but be existentially impactful as well. Indeed, when I think of the ecclesial encounter Barth alludes to in this passage, I cannot help but think of the antecedent archetype depicted in Isaiah 6:1–8. And, if Isaiah’s experience in the temple is any indication, the only appropriate response to the manifest presence of God in the worship space is a sincere turning away from sin toward an eager engagement in the *missio Dei*. Some support for this association and the importance Barth placed on the prophetic, theologically real, incarnational, sacramental, and transformational nature of Christian preaching, is provided by Thomas Currie when he writes:

It is in the church’s attempt to proclaim and hear the gospel, that the risen Christ comes and comes again, speaking the Word of God through broken human words, *freeing* the Christian community to *get up and follow in discipleship*, and *sending* the Christian community to *engage the world* in correspondence to the life and activity of Jesus Christ at work in their midst.<sup>89</sup>

For sure, the Holy Spirit is at work in prophetic preaching to awaken and strengthen faith in the risen Jesus. But he is also doing more. He is graciously drawing those who have ears to hear deeper and deeper into the reality of an intimate, interactive, existentially-impactful relationship with the living God. Indeed, it has been my experience that, at times, he may even provide—for some specific disciples, or the community as a whole—some spiritual, moral, or ministry guidance that is amazingly timely and specific!

I have endeavored in this section of my paper to identify and briefly expound upon several Barthian constructs which, taken together, might suggest that it is indeed possible to find in his theologizing some implicit support for the phenomenon of prophetic preaching. *What would happen, I wonder, if more evangelical preachers, taking both sola Scriptura and the need for a pneumatological realism seriously, were to approach the preaching moment with this type*

---

<sup>89</sup> Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, xiii, emphasis added.

*of expectation in mind? Moreover, what would such an approach entail?* In the final section of the paper, I will do my best to address the latter of these two questions.

### **What a Pneumatologically Real Approach to the Preaching Task Entails**

Because Karl Barth placed so much importance on the preaching endeavor, he had much to say about how preachers should engage in it. In addition, I will humbly suggest that some of us who have been inspired by Barth's high view of preaching as *encounter*, and enabled by the Holy Spirit to recognize when and how the phenomenon of prophetic preaching has occurred within our own pulpit ministries, might also have some wisdom to share with respect to the preparation and presentation of sermons that prove to be sacramental in their effect.

Because of what has been previously discussed, we are already aware of the need to, like Barth, possess a high view of the preaching endeavor. In addition, I will simply suggest three other earmarks of a pneumatologically real approach to the preaching task.

#### **The "Proper Attitude" of Preachers: *Holy Expectation***

As we've seen, Barth was convinced that it's only normal for a profound sense of expectancy to animate the congregation each Sunday morning. In the introduction he provided for Barth's published lectures on homiletics, David Buttrick indicates Barth's contention that if this corporate sense of expectancy is to occur, it needs to begin with the preacher. Buttrick explains:

Those who preach the scriptures will not be pontificating clerics or detached visionaries or merely dull. For, again and again, the scriptures will speak God's *new* word. "The proper attitude of preachers," Barth says, "does not depend on whether they hold on to the doctrine of inspiration but on whether or not they expect God to speak to them...." Barth calls ministers to "active expectation" and "ongoing submission" in their study of the Bible.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., emphasis original.

Barth was adamant, it seems, that, given the prophetic potential inherent in the preaching moment, it is imperative that preachers approach it with a sense of holy expectation and reverent submission. In other words, a pneumatologically real approach to the preaching task will be neither perfunctory nor presumptive. Instead, it will be earmarked by a tremendous degree of anticipation and sense of responsibility born of the realization that, when empowered by the Spirit, something prophetic might occur.<sup>91</sup>

It's hard to overstate how important this first earmark is. In fact, there's a sense in which the other two entailments of a pneumatologically real approach to preaching are related to it. One is the *root* of the preacher's elevated sense of expectancy; the other is its *fruit*—a set of behaviors that flow from it.

### **The Root of Holy Expectation: *The Preacher's Own Encounter with the Risen Christ***

Because the attitude of *holy expectancy* Barth insists upon seems akin to the posture of *pneumatological expectancy* I associate with a realist understanding of the Holy Spirit, I will suggest that another requirement for prophetic preaching is a personal commitment to the pneumatological realism implicit in Barth's theology. Some tacit support for this deduction might be discerned in the way Barth insisted that *those who would function as prophetic witnesses for Christ need to have had their own revelatory, existentially-impactful encounter with him*. Elaborating on the manner in which Barth considered John the Baptist the paradigm for prophetic witness to Christ, Aaron Smith writes:

---

<sup>91</sup> Indeed, speaking specifically of the prophetic aspect of preaching, Barth offers preachers an important clarification, some encouragement, and then a warning when he states: "Our preaching today differs from that of the prophets and apostles who saw and touched Christ. To be sure, it does not differ qualitatively, but it differs inasmuch as it is done in a different place. If, however, God speaks through our word, then the prophets and apostles are actually there even though it be a simple pastor that speaks. Yet we should not be self-conscious about this, nor listen for our own prophetic booming, for even though Christ be present, it is by God's own action. Preachers are under a constraint, and *anankē* (1 Cor. 9:16) that strips them of all their own proposals and programs. Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, 48–49.

Prophetic testimony derives from its object, not from the subject of the prophet; witness to God in Christ derives from the reality of Christ and not from the compromised reality of the human speaker. Witnesses are only witnesses, only persons whose thought and speech actually, truly reflect the divine reality, *insofar as they have been encountered by that reality*, found by it such that they may, in turn, find their entire reason for being in it.<sup>92</sup>

The Baptist and all witnesses are subordinate to the content of their collective witness because they, like all things, exist only through the Word to which they testify.... One can only be a prophet by *first being encountered* by the Word made flesh, by finding oneself in subordination to this event even as a participant in it.<sup>93</sup>

Because of the way Smith, following Barth, refers to the Spirit as the “contemporaneity of Christ”—the means by which all disciples in any era encounter Christ<sup>94</sup>—I find in these words a very important principle: *Before we can hope to preach sermons that may be used by the Holy Spirit to facilitate a spiritual encounter with the risen Jesus—we need to have had such a Spirit-enabled encounter ourselves!*

Moreover, I will press on to suggest that this encounter needs to go beyond the one that led to our personal discipleship, and even the one that produced within us a sense of call to the preaching ministry. Speaking personally now, I have found that *an important indication that I might end up functioning in a prophetic manner during this or that preaching event is my own sense of encounter with Christ as I prepared for it*. For instance, I’m referring here to the occasional experience of feeling the need to put down a sermon resource, or to lean away from my computer so that I might worship the one I’m hoping to help others encounter. I will have a bit more to say about this experience below, but here I will hasten to offer the bold suggestion that, *to function as prophetic (John-the-Baptist-like) witnesses to Christ in our contemporary era, we preachers must do more than merely nod our assent to the notions of a theological and*

---

<sup>92</sup> Smith, *A Theology of the Third Article*, 207, emphasis added. See also Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, 30, 37, 71, 100, 136, 144.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 208, emphasis added.

<sup>94</sup> E.g., see *ibid.*, 7, 60, 100, 103, 108, 123, 146, 151–52, 169, 186, 194.

*pneumatological realism; we must do more than simply affirm the theoretical possibility of a personal, intimate, interactive, existentially-impactful relationship with Christ through his Spirit; we must be living into this reality ourselves, and doing so on an everyday basis!* This is how that all-important attitude of holy expectation becomes in the preacher an ongoing rather than occasional attribute!

### **The Fruit of Holy Expectation: *Pneumatologically Real Prayer***

Thus far, I have identified as earmarks of a pneumatologically real approach to the preaching task: (1) the “proper attitude” required, and (2) the personal experience that feeds it. What we have yet to discuss are any *specific behaviors* that are likewise essential—practices that, when engaged in, increase the possibility that the Spirit of Christ might choose to speak prophetically through us during the preaching event.

Actually, there is only one practice I will focus on here—a single spiritual/ministry discipline that takes several forms as the preacher prepares and presents his or her sermon. The critical importance of this third earmark is indicated by the pronounced emphasis Barth placed on “the free and dynamic movement of God that can never be bound to or imprisoned by the proclaimed Word,” and his insistence that “it is never in humanity’s power ‘that our human word should be God’s Word.’”<sup>95</sup> This emphasis on the freedom of God would suggest that, *while a sacramental effect is possible in Christian preaching, it should never be considered inevitable.* Instead, it is the product of some serious *prayer*,<sup>96</sup> for, according to Barth, “it is prayer that puts us in rapport with God and permits us to collaborate with him.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, while not suggesting that

---

<sup>95</sup> Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, 24. Quotation is from Barth, *Homiletics*, 90.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25, 40, 43–44, 120. Worthy of note is Currie’s suggestion that the importance Barth placed on prayer in the life of the church increased over the course of his academic career. For example, see *ibid.*, 107, 112, 135.

<sup>97</sup> Karl Barth, *Prayer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 20, as cited in Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, 113.

Barth would endorse everything I have to say on the subject, I will offer that *at the heart of a pneumatologically real approach to the preaching task is a certain kind of praying.*

To be more specific, it has been my experience that the likelihood that I will experience something prophetic occurring while I am preaching (or lecturing for that matter) correlates with some serious time spent engaging in prayer that is: (1) theologically real; (2) missionally discerning; (3) in the Spirit; (4) in the moment; and (5) deferentially and enduringly hopeful. Presented below is a very brief description of these five forms of *pneumatologically real prayer* and the role I contend each plays in the phenomenon of prophetic preaching.

***Praying in a theologically real manner.*** As I have already indicated, a realist understanding of God maintains that he is much more than a philosophical concept or impersonal spiritual force. The God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is a personal, relational, and responsive “heavenly Father” with whom, because of grace, it is possible for humans to interact in ways that are personal, relational, and responsive. At the risk of greatly oversimplifying things, I contend that this basic understanding of the reality, relationality, and responsiveness of God suggests at least three prayer principles. First, there is a huge difference between *praying to God* and *praying toward the idea of God*. Second, the goal of prayer should *not* be to simply get something from God, but to discern and align ourselves with his benevolent purposes. Third, we can and should develop the habit of prayerfully waiting upon God, actually anticipating a response (e.g., Acts 13:1–3). Putting these three principles together, I want to suggest that one of the most fundamental and always-appropriate theologically real prayers any Christian can utter is this: *Father, what are you up to in this situation, and how can I cooperate with you in it?* I trust the implication of this suggestion for our current discussion is apparent. It’s my contention that praying in this relational, responsive, theologically real manner puts us in a position to, in one

way or another, “hear” God’s voice. As I have already indicated, hearing God’s voice is a dynamic that lies at the heart of the prophetic phenomenon.

*Praying in a missionally discerning manner.* Building on the foundation of theologically real prayer just presented, I will press on to offer that because the Holy Spirit is “the missionary Spirit sent by the missionary Father and the missionary Son, breathing life and power into God’s missionary Church,”<sup>98</sup> another prayer that should often be on the lips of devoted disciples of Jesus is this: *Spirit of mission, what are you up to in this ministry context, and how can I cooperate with you in it?*

As I have indicated elsewhere, at the heart of the ministry contextualization dynamic is the need for this type of mission-discerning praying that makes no sense unless we genuinely expect that, in one way or another, the Holy Spirit might actually respond.<sup>99</sup> Applying this logic to the topic at hand, *is it too much of a stretch to think that a similar form of missionally discerning prayer would also earmark a pneumatologically real approach to Christian preaching?* I am dead serious when I suggest that, as we evangelicals approach the preaching task, we can and should pray, seeking discernment regarding:

- what the Holy Spirit is currently up to in the life of this congregation;
- the biblical text the Holy Spirit seems to be encouraging us to have the congregation focus on at this particular time;
- what the Holy Spirit *was* up to in this biblical text (i.e., assuming some inspirational immediacy, what message was the Spirit inspiring the original author to communicate to his original ministry context?);<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Lausanne Movement, “Cape Town Commitment,” Part 1, §5, <http://www.lausanne.org/ctcommitment>.

<sup>99</sup> See Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy*, 220. For a more elaborate discussion of the role the Holy Spirit plays in the ministry contextualization endeavor, see Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission*, 133–44.

<sup>100</sup> See the discussion of how Pentecostals approach authorial intention in Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 138–39. See also the justification for grounding authorial intent in the Holy Spirit in Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 16. And yet, Boersma’s stance on the importance of authorial intention to the sacramental sermon needs to be nuanced. Though he asserts that “the proponents of genuine spiritual interpretation will take the literal sense seriously, since it is the starting point (*sacramentum*) of a search for the greater, more christological reality (*res*) of the gospel” (see

- what the Spirit *is* up to in this text (i.e., what message, keeping the original meaning ever in view, might the Spirit be encouraging us to communicate to our ministry context?);<sup>101</sup>
- the best way (homiletically speaking) to communicate this message to our ministry context (i.e., we can and should pray for wisdom and supernatural assistance in putting the sermon together, keeping the contextualization endeavor and prophetic aims referred to in 1 Corinthians 14:3 in mind);<sup>102</sup> and

---

Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 152), he also states rather bluntly and with evident approval that “the [early church] fathers would consider the modern preoccupation with history and authorial intent as insufficiently attuned to the divine purpose of the text.” (See Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 252.) Moreover, Boersma is forthcoming with respect to: (1) his Gadamer-influenced skepticism regarding the interpreter’s ability to discern the biblical author’s intention, and, therefore, (2) his conviction regarding the need to take seriously how the *wirkungsgeschichte* (history of the influence of the text) can and should influence our biblical exegesis (see *ibid.*, 231–36). For what it’s worth, I tend to struggle some with the way Boersma’s approach to sacramental exegesis seems to, despite some assertions to the contrary, overly relativize the importance of authorial intention. Moreover, missing from this incredibly important discussion is any explicit reference to the role the Holy Spirit plays in the contemporary interpretive exercise. Instead, the major, if not sole, focus seems to be on the impact of the Great Tradition/liturgy on one’s hermeneutical horizon. That said, I will quickly add that there’s reason to believe that, for Boersma, the Spirit’s illuminating activity is simply assumed. I have in mind here the way he references with overall approval the manner in which Yves Congar, presuming a commensurate influence of the Spirit in both, essentially conflates Scripture and the interpretive tradition (Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 63, 130–36).

<sup>101</sup> See the discussions of divine illumination and the application of biblical texts in Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 12–13 and 31, 77–78, 149–51, 237–38, 249–50; 257–58 respectively. Note also how that Hans Boersma provides a helpful discussion of the reason why the church fathers were open to finding multiple meanings in biblical texts. According to Boersma: “what we have here is really a form of contemplation—*theoria*—in which the plain sense of the text becomes the basis on which to reflect on God’s providential dealings with believers in Christ.” (Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 255.) Boersma goes on to explain how important one’s growth in virtue was to the fathers, and then, using Gregory Nyssen as his example, asserts: “Gregory will let pretty much any interpretation stand, as long as it leads to virtue” (*ibid.*, 257). Moreover, having indicated the distinction Stephen Fowl makes between “virtue-through-interpretation” and “virtue-in-interpretation,” Boersma states: “I am interested here especially in virtue-through-interpretation, interpretation *leading* to virtue” (*ibid.*, 263). He then explains: “Virtue, for the fathers, is the *aim* of interpretation. Any interpretation that does not lead to growth in virtuous habits is, according to patristic exegesis, not interpretation that is worthy of God. If the Christian life is a journey into ever-deeper communion with God, then the Scripture is the guide on this journey.” (*Ibid.*, 263.) Then, citing Fowl in the process, Boersma continues, “‘Scripture plays a dual role. It articulates the shape and nature of the virtues. Further, as Christians interpret and embody their interpretations of Scripture, Scripture becomes a vehicle to help in the formation of virtues, so that Christians are moved ever closer to their true end.’ Scripture, for the fathers, is an aid—a means of grace (or a sacrament)—that assists in the development of virtue. If Scripture really has this function, it becomes imperative to approach the text with the question in mind of *how* it might assist in the development of virtue.” (*Ibid.*, 263–64. The quotation is from Stephen Fowl, “Virtue” in *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer, 837–39 [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 838.) In sum, according to Boersma, it is because sacramental preaching aims at the cultivation of virtue (cf. 2 Tim 3:16) that it is legitimate for preachers to consider the possibility that a biblical text is capable of a spiritual as well as a historical meaning. My contention is that prophetic preaching occurs when preachers are careful before and during the preaching event to pray in a theologically real manner about how the Spirit of Christ would have them, on the basis of the sermon’s text(s), encourage and exhort the congregation toward a greater spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness.

<sup>102</sup> For more on what a missionally orthodox approach to gospel contextualization involves, see Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy*, 64–86. Some more, quite specific homiletical suggestions toward effective sacramental sermons are proffered by Boersma in his work *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ*. However, I must confide that I am somewhat amazed by the scarcity of references to the work of the Spirit in Boersma’s treatment of this homiletical endeavor. Though this volume of sermons refers to the Spirit dozens of times, it is most often because the biblical passages treated in the sermons do so. It is my sense that Boersma simply presumes the

- how we might encourage congregation members to enter into their own pneumatologically real dialogue with the Spirit regarding the existential significance of this text/message for their lives.<sup>103</sup>

For what it's worth, I'm convinced that, were evangelical preachers to develop the habit of praying each week in a missionally discerning manner (actually expecting a response), this would, by itself, add a prophetic element to their Sunday endeavors. And yet, I would be remiss if I did not go on to address three additional forms of pneumatologically real prayer that I believe will only enhance the prophetic experience.

***Praying in the Spirit.*** One of the most significant theological statements presented in Scripture is found in Romans 8:28, which reads:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28)

We must keep in mind that this stunning word of assurance is preceded by an equally stunning pneumatological promise:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.  
<sup>{27}</sup> And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. (Rom 8:26–27)

Scholars are divided on whether Paul had in mind a literal groaning before God, or the dynamic of glossolalic prayer.<sup>104</sup> Regardless, I will humbly offer here a studied observation: my

---

working of the Holy Spirit in the sermon-building task, especially since the goal of the sacramental sermon is, for Boersma, ever and always to point the hearer to Christ as the ultimate telos of all biblical texts, and Boersma seems to concur with Gregory Nyssen's doctrine that "the external activities of the Trinity are indivisible" (Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 49). In other words, I wonder if Boersma does not simply presume the Spirit's agency/activity any time he refers to the presence or influence of Christ.

<sup>103</sup> For more on the communal, dialogical, confessional manner in which congregation members can be enabled to become doers of the word rather than hearers only (Jas 1:22–25), see Tyra, *Defeating Pharisaism*, 220–32.

<sup>104</sup> Eminent evangelical scholars F. F. Bruce and C. K. Barrett both acknowledge the *possibility* that Paul may have had *glossolalia* in mind in Romans 8:26. (See F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985], 165; and C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* [New York: Harper & Row, 1957], 168.) For his part, Gordon Fee is a bit more confident that this is the case. (See Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 580.) Moreover, according to Fee, Ernst Käsemann also sees a reference to prayer in tongues at work in this passage. (See Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret

experience over four decades of preaching and teaching has been that *there is a discernible correlation between my spending some time intentionally praying in the Spirit prior to a preaching/teaching event, and the likelihood that something prophetic will occur during it.*

Because I know this personal observation may prove provocative to some, I do not want to belabor it. Still, it is hard for me to overstate how important this connection has proved to be in my preaching and teaching ministries. Thus, whether our praying in the Spirit before we preach is glossolalic in form or literally involves our crying out to him with wordless groans, I very much want to encourage those who wish to experience the prophetic phenomenon in their preaching to at least experiment with this prayer discipline on their own.

***Praying in the moment.*** Not only do I consider it very important to pray for the Spirit’s wisdom and anointing before the preaching/teaching event, I will sometimes do so during the event—inwardly, silently, beseeching, inviting, counting on the empowering presence of Christ. I would like to think that such praying has resulted in something prophetic occurring: the Spirit prompting speech that caused the sermon (or lecture) to impact hearers in a way that was especially compelling. I am convinced this really can happen. The Holy Spirit really does at times enable prophetic speech (see Matt 10:19–20; Lk 12:11–12; cf. Matt 7:28–29; Jn 7:45–46; Acts 4:31; 6:8–10).

***Praying deferentially and enduringly in hope.*** Interestingly, Donald Bloesch’s take is that, though Barth affirmed that the “Spirit is presumably at work as the pastor preaches,” it is “not so much in and through the words of the sermon as with, over, and against these words.”<sup>105</sup>

---

Kohl [London: SCM, 1971], 135.) Regardless of whether Paul had *glossolalia* in mind or not, it appears that he meant to suggest that the Spirit can and will pray *through* the believer, offering effective intercession on his or her behalf. It’s my contention that whether Paul had glossolalia in mind or not, only a realist understanding of the Spirit makes sense of this provocative passage.

<sup>105</sup> Donald Bloesch, *Jesus is Victor! Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Salvation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 130, as cited in Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, 130.

If this read of Barth is correct, it could mean that he did not consider the actual words of the preacher to be all that important. While this observation *might* serve to suggest that Barth would not have felt the need for the “in the moment” praying I just advocated for, it also reminds us that, ultimately, the convicting/convincing work of the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:7–8) is not ultimately dependent on the preacher’s performance. Thus, thesis-counteracting or not, I will assert that this reminder is sorely needed.

It’s for this reason that I continually encourage my ministry-bound students to do the best they can in their witness to Christ, and then to be careful to pray deferentially and enduringly in hope. To pray deferentially is to entrust to the Holy Spirit the person or persons being ministered to rather than assuming responsibility for the ministry outcome ourselves. To pray enduringly in hope is, obviously, to engage in this entrusting dynamic in an enduringly hopeful manner rather than allow some initial resistance to cause us to conclude that God’s working through us has necessarily failed. Immediately after reminding his disciples that not everyone would be “ready” for their ministry into their lives (Matt 7:6), Jesus spoke of the importance of persisting in prayer (Matt 7:8–11), and engaging in ongoing prophetic *action* (Matt 7:12).<sup>106</sup> Simply put, what I’m suggesting is that, because a pneumatologically real approach to the preaching task takes very seriously the role of the Holy Spirit in the ministry endeavor, it is earmarked by some serious theologically real prayer before, during, and even after the preaching moment.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued in this paper *against* the idea that the Reformation theme *sola Scriptura* must necessarily produce in evangelical churches a pneumatological deficit. I have contended instead

---

<sup>106</sup> For more on this, see Gary Tyra, *Defeating Pharisaism: Recovering Jesus’ Disciple-Making Method* (Downers Grove, Ill.; IVP Books, 2009), 168–78.

that in Karl Barth’s theologizing we might find some ironic though implicit support for the phenomenon of prophetic preaching. As well, I’ve suggested that the key to sermons that are sacramental (encounter-facilitating) in their effect is a *pneumatologically real approach to the preaching task* that is earmarked by a “proper attitude” (holy expectation) which is born of a personal encounter/commitment and engenders a certain kind of pneumatologically real praying before, during, and after the preaching moment. *What I have yet to do is indicate why I believe we evangelicals simply must take this notion of prophetic preaching seriously.*

As we’ve seen, a growing number of evangelical scholars are acknowledging the pneumatological deficit at work in some post-Reformation Protestant theologies. Just to be clear, behind Timothy Tennent’s boldly stated concern is his desire for contemporary evangelical churches to “understand better the role of the Holy Spirit to the *missio dei*.”<sup>107</sup>

Because I share this concern I’ll conclude this paper with a very important reminder. We’ve already noted how Isaiah’s encounter with God in the temple led to his engagement in *mission* (Isa 1:8). Moreover, the Apostle Paul, having already clarified that the purpose of genuine prophetic utterance in the worship gathering is to speak to congregation members “for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Cor 14:3), goes on in that same discussion to refer to the dramatic, *missional* impact a prophetic—and therefore encounter-rich—ecclesial environment can have even upon those who are not yet disciples (1 Cor 14:24–25)! What I am insinuating here is the huge missional import of biblically-grounded, Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered sermons that, precisely because they are prophetic in nature, are sacramental (encounter-facilitating) in their effect. My experience of working with thousands of members of the emerging generations has been that while increasing numbers are becoming

---

<sup>107</sup> Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 94.

post-Christian (i.e., post-religious) in orientation, they still crave the experience of something transcendent. So, just think of it: *sacramental sermons that not only empower a missional faithfulness among congregants, but can be used by the Holy Spirit to awaken Christian faith in uninitiated seekers!* Surely any evangelical truly committed to *sola Scriptura*, the *missio Dei*, and a fully Trinitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit will be inclined to at least give such a possibility some serious consideration. It's my sincere hope that this paper will encourage those who have been called to a preaching ministry to do just that.

The lion has roared—who will not fear?  
The Sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy?  
(Amos 3:8)