

## **STEP ONE IN THE PROCESS OF A SACRAMENTAL SERMON: THE PREPARATION (SPIRITUALITY) OF THE PREACHER**

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**Presented at the 76th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the introduction to his book *Proclamation and Theology*, William Willimon makes this bold assertion:

The gap, the evangelical distance that ought to concern the preacher, is not one of time—the historical space between Jesus and us—nor is it one of communication—the rhetorical space between speaker and listener. The gap that is the main concern of the evangelical preacher . . . is the theological space between us and the Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

A few lines later, bringing his introduction to a close, Willimon shares an equally bold personal anecdote, one that clarifies what this particular book on preaching is about:

At the front door, as people filed out of the service, some said things like “Nice service,” or “Good sermon, preacher.” But one young woman shook my hand and said, “Thanks. God really spoke to me today. I really felt a presence. Thanks. I feel like I know what I’ve got to do next week.”

I do not know precisely what happened between that woman and God. I do not know what she heard or what she will do with what she heard. All I know is that, whatever it was, it wasn’t silly. It was a surprising, holy miracle, a divine intervention quite beyond the range of my abilities or intentions. She heard the very voice of God. Her name was called. She was addressed, summoned by nothing more spectacular, but certainly nothing less miraculous, than a sermon.<sup>2</sup>

My reaction to this story is to ask: *But what if this kind of preaching was less of a rarity? What if, instead, post-sermon conversations like this were something preachers could routinely hope for?*

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

I am convinced that it is possible for sermons to be sacramental in the sense that they are encounter-facilitating—i.e., they can do more than point people to Christ; they can function prophetically, enabling those with ears to hear to experience the *wisdom, courage, compassion,* and *authority* of *Jesus* in real time, being strengthened, encouraged, comforted (and perhaps challenged) in the process (1 Cor. 14:3).

The thesis of this essay is that the first step in the actualization of sacramental sermons is the preparation (spirituality) of the preacher. Last year I had a book published titled *Introduction to Spirituality: Cultivating a Lifestyle of Faithfulness* (Baker Academic, 2023). This contribution to Baker Academic’s “Foundations for Spirit-Filled Christianity” series promotes what I refer to as a Pauline, fully trinitarian, theologically real, “I-Thou,” lifestyle spirituality. My aim in this paper is to explore how such a spirituality can impact the preaching dynamic. After explaining in a bit more detail my understanding of the nature of sacramental sermons, I will then suggest some various ways the convictions, commitments, and customs of the lifestyle spirituality I believe Paul himself practiced and promoted will dramatically impact the *logos* (meaningfulness), *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (viscerality), *telos* (intention), and *kairos* (timeliness) of our sermons in such way as to greatly increase the likelihood that they play out in a sacramental, encounter-facilitating manner. For sure, sacramental sermons are not something we preachers can conjure or manufacture in our own strength. But they do happen, and there are things we can do, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to put ourselves in a position to deliver them.

## **THE NATURE OF SACRAMENTAL SERMONS**

I, like many evangelicals, was nurtured in an ecclesial environment which viewed a sacrament as a mere memorial or, at best, an opportunity to profess my faith and/or renew my spiritual devotion to Christ. But I, once again like many evangelicals, have become inclined to

think of a Christian sacrament as something more than a reminder or opportunity for spiritual renewal. We are wondering: *what if, while not denying that a sacrament can and does function in the ways just referred to, it can also function as a means by which we might, through the Holy Spirit, encounter the risen Christ in real time, genuinely experiencing his real, spiritual presence?* And what if the divinely intended effect of these frequent sacramental encounters with Christ is to empower his followers to live as he did, in a God-the-Father pleasing manner? Could it be that God has provided his people with the means by which we might experience him in spiritually real ways, the effects of which will be not only phenomenal, but existentially impactful as well?<sup>3</sup> My sense is that William Willimon is not the only preacher to have had the post-sermon experience of congregants eagerly asserting that a particular homily was special—that they sensed the presence of Christ in the room, strengthening, encouraging, comforting, and challenging them in their walk with him in a way that was personal, powerful, especially compelling.

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<sup>3</sup> A theologian who seems to epitomize for me this nuanced understanding of the sacraments is Emil Brunner who, describes the “sacramental meal” thusly: “It is in a quite special way . . . edification, the building up of the Body of Christ. It is therefore that which constitutes the Christian community as such: fellowship in and through Christ. It is in fact, what is expressly said of it: *Koinonia somatos Christou*, a common sharing in the Body of Christ. . . . At this point divine materialism and divine socialism unite: for in the eating of the bread and in the drinking of the wine it happens that Christ is in their midst and in consequence they become one body.” (See Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Cambridge, England: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 64–65.) For Brunner, the Lord’s Table is all about *communion*: “both a communion with Christ and of one member with another. It is precisely in this act of communion that there really takes place, ever afresh, the creation of the Christian community.” (See *ibid.*, 69.) Thus, we find in Brunner an alternative to the sacramental meal as salvific or merely memorial. Engaged in properly (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17–33), the rite entails a genuine *communion* (fresh encounter) with Christ that is existentially impactful in that it not only symbolizes genuine Christian community (fellowship, communion), but actually enables it, albeit in an edificational rather than soteriological manner. (See *ibid.*, 68–71.)

The question then is: *how does this work?* Many ecclesial traditions refer to some sermons as being especially “anointed.” But what does this mean? What is it, besides volume, length, and the preacher’s passion, that sets genuinely *anointed* sermons apart from others?

#### The Chief Characteristics of Sacramental, Genuinely Anointed Sermons

The notion of *theological realism* contends that the God of the Bible can be genuinely known and experienced in ways that are real, personal, phenomenal (evident to the senses), and existentially impactful (life-story shaping) rather than in a manner that is merely conceptual or formalistic. A *trinitarian realism* extends this realist understanding and experience of God to all three members of the trinity. I contend that a trinitarian realism has some huge implications for how we understand the nature of *anointed* preaching. It is when preachers take seriously the possibility of Christ’s followers interacting with our trinitarian God in ways that are real rather than merely conceptual or formalistic that they can preach in a manner that is sacramental—i.e., *prophetic, incarnational, and truly transformative*. These, I suggest, are the three chief characteristics of sacramental, truly anointed sermons. Presented below is a necessarily cursory overview of these three crucial characteristics of sacramental sermons.

#### Sacramental Sermons are *Prophetic* in Nature

The concept of prophetic preaching is not unheard of. However, I am using the term in a very specific way. When I use the term, I am *not* referring to sermons that merely:

- focus on the end times;
- address secret sins and/or spiritual immaturity;
- confront false doctrine; or
- challenge the status quo by inciting hearers to pursue justice and thus change the current social order.

These are *not* the only ways to understand what it means for preaching to be prophetic.

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 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>4</sup>

The Apostle Paul routinely requested prayer near the end of his letters—prayers that he might be helped by God to preach the gospel fearlessly, clearly, effectively (e.g., see Col. 4:3–4; 2 Thess. 3:1). But, as Paul concluded his letter to the Ephesians, his request was more specific. He called for the church members in Ephesus to pray that *words might be “given” him* (Eph 6:19). This petition brings to mind one of the most profound and powerful promises Jesus made to his apostles prior to sending them into the world to proclaim the good news. Having warned them in advance that their ministry on his behalf would sometimes be met with stiff resistance (see Matt. 10:18), he went on to say: “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time *you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you*” (Matt. 10:19-20, emphasis added). Luke’s version of this same promise is even more striking: “But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For *I will give you words and wisdom* that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:14-15, emphasis added; cf. Acts 6:8–10).

This is the sense in which I refer to preaching that is prophetic. To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that sermons are revelatory in a sense that rivals the authority of sacred Scripture. But

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<sup>4</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.

Gary Tyra, “Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon”

I am asserting that there are times when we preachers sense that *both words and wisdom are being given to us*. Sometimes this prophetic phenomenon occurs as we are preparing our sermons. Often it happens in the preaching moment itself. We find ourselves going “off script” as it were, saying things we did not plan to say, communicating things we did not know we knew, and doing so with an eloquence and impact we sense is coming from God himself.

Why does this happen? In the quote above, Philip Wogaman explains that *genuinely prophetic preaching draws people into the reality of God*. He is not alone here. Explaining the homiletical theology of Pentecostal scholar, Frank Macchia, Chris Green writes:

Frank Macchia has described Pentecostal preaching as “an event of the Holy Spirit,” akin to prophecy, that urges hearers into a transformative engagement with the scriptural text. As the preacher delivers her message, the Spirit generates for the faithful hearers a “present tenseness” of revelation that itself encourages “the faith necessary to experience the God of the Bible as this same God was experienced in ‘Bible times.’” As Macchia sees it, preaching holds a special place in the church’s relationship to God. He is quite emphatic: more than merely human words are given in a sermon. Under the Spirit’s anointing, the sermon is “divine speaking.” In worship, the congregation addresses God and in preaching, God speaks back.<sup>5</sup>

It is because Spirit-anointed, prophetic preaching facilitates an encounter in real time between the hearer and the risen Christ that I refer to it as not only prophetic, but sacramental as well. Moreover, this insistence that a theologically real encounter with Christ can take place when sermons function sacramentally leads us to consider the second chief characteristic.

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Macchia, “Services of the Word – Pentecostal” in *New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2005), 488–89, as cited in Chris E. W. Green, “Transfiguring Preaching: Salvation, Mediation, and Proclamation,” in *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Preaching*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015), 71.

Sacramental Sermons are *Incarnational* in Manner

Obviously, I am not suggesting that sermons are literally incarnational as if a fresh “enfleshment” of the eternal Son of God occurs, or that the preacher or that preached merits adoration. Rather, my contention is simply that a truly anointed sermon can be incarnational or incarnation-like in the sense that, through the working of the Spirit, it becomes *Christ-evincing* even as the humanity of the preacher and sermon is very much also on display. Even as the Word that created the world (Jn. 1:1–3, 10) was experienced by those who interacted with a very human Jesus of Nazareth, whose voice and body were apparently not perceived as being inherently, essentially flawless or even distinctive in their native qualities, so the Word can be experienced by those who hear His message proclaimed to them by human preachers whose voices, bodies, and even homiletical skills may be less than flawless.<sup>6</sup>

A personal anecdote from my own ministry history comes readily to mind. Bud and Sylvia were previously unchurched when their son and his wife began attending the church I was pastoring at the time. After beginning to attend the church themselves for a few months, Sylvia was diagnosed with cancer. Though in my ecclesial tradition water baptism usually involves full immersion, I baptized Sylvia in the hospital, as she lay on her bed, pouring water from a Styrofoam cup over her head into a folded towel I held in my other hand. A few hours later, I was there with Bud in that hospital room when Sylvia, in the wee hours of the morning, passed from this life into the presence of the Lord. In due time, we conducted her funeral. After all the mourners had filed by the casket paying their last respects to Sylvia and expressing their

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Karl Barth’s “Incarnational” Understanding of Christian Proclamation, see Gary Tyra, *Getting Real: Pneumatological Realism and the Spiritual, Moral, and Ministry Formation of Contemporary Christians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 164–66.

Gary Tyra, “Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon”

condolences to her stoic husband, Bud made his way to where I was stationed and threw his arms around me. He is a tall, strong man whose hold on me that day was firm. Then, with the side of his face pressed against mine, he began to sob deeply. Time passed. More than once I patted him on the back reassuringly. Still, he held on to me tightly, his sobbing unabated. More time passed. I wondered how long this act of grieving would last. Then I sensed Jesus speaking to me, not audibly, but unmistakably still. He said, “*Don’t let go of him, Gary. Hang in there. He’s not holding on to you. He’s holding on to me.*”

Incarnational ministry—Jesus ministering to hurting people through the words, actions, presence of one of his followers—is a thing (see John 14:20; 15:18–20; Rom. 18:18; 2 Cor. 13:3; Eph. 3:20–21; Phil. 2:13; 2 Thess. 1:1–12; 2 Tim. 4:17)! As a result, sometimes people really do sense Jesus in a palpable manner during the preaching/ministry moment. It is important for us preachers to never forget our humanity; to never act like we are more holy than we really are. But it is also important for us to show up, our humanity notwithstanding, humbly doing our best to discern and obey the ministry promptings graciously provided by the Holy Spirit of God (see Gal 5:25).

#### Sacramental Sermons are *Truly Transformative* in Effect

Going further still, I also contend that fully trinitarian, theologically real preaching is, ultimately, God-the-Father pleasing in its impact. This is due to the fact that sacramental sermons do not merely rehearse, inform, or entertain; they leave a mark on those who “hear” them, one way or another (see 2 Cor. 2:14–17). Speaking positively, not only can anointed preaching affect people soteriologically (see Rom 10:13–14; 1 Cor 1:21); they can also influence hearers in terms of their devotion (spirituality), sanctification (morality), and commitment to the *missio Dei* (missionality).



In an essay titled “From Proclamation to Embodiment: The Sacrament of the Word for the life of the World and Its Destiny in *Theosis*,” Pentecostal theologian Daniela Augustine, with a tip of her hat to a prominent theme of Eastern theology—that in Christ’s incarnation, the Eternal Word (Jn. 1:1) translates itself through the agency of the Spirit within the human story (Jn. 1:14) so that, in turn, “humanity may be translated (by the same Spirit) into the life (story) of the Eternal Word”<sup>7</sup>—has argued that the transformational effect of sacramental sermons can be supported theologically as a corollary to or extension of Christ’s incarnation. Having embraced the notion, firstly, that preaching involves “an audible embodiment of the Word,”<sup>8</sup> she offers further that “the purpose of preaching is to unveil the Word’s arrival/presence amongst the faith community.”<sup>9</sup> This suggests that “[t]herefore, the purpose of the Word’s perpetual coming to humanity in the liturgical act of kerygmatic proclamation is identical with that of the advent in the Incarnation—the enfleshment of the Word in the human community until it is transfigured into a living Gospel.”<sup>10</sup> Augustine then provides these stunning conclusions:

Therefore, incarnational preaching becomes an event of cosmic transformation that is initiated with the transformative encounter between the hearers and God’s Word. As they become one with the message, the Word goes forth in the world and applies itself to it through their life.<sup>11</sup>

The proclamation of the Gospel, as the content and *telos* of Christ’s life, becomes a means of communion with Him and thus, a transformational encounter for the believer toward *theosis* (growing into the likeness of God as Christ-likeness toward the fullness of communion and community with God)... until they become *theophorous* (God-bearing) and *theophanic* (God-manifesting) so that the living

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<sup>7</sup> Daniela C. Augustine, “From Proclamation to Embodiment: The Sacrament of the Word for the Life of the World and Its Destiny in *Theosis*,” in *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Preaching*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015), 84.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

Christ may be unveiled before the world in His communal embodied form, that the world might believe and live.<sup>12</sup>

To say that Augustine has provided a rather stunning theological argument for the incarnational manner and transformative nature of anointed preaching is an understatement. Just as the telos of the living Word was not simply to assume human flesh but to heal it, so the goal of the proclaimed word is not simply to be known by human hearers but to transform them, and through them, all of creation!

On the other hand, it is also possible to argue for the transformative nature of encounter-effecting sermons without having to embrace the Eastern church’s concept of *theosis* and/or its rigorous sacramentalism.<sup>13</sup> Adequate support can be discerned by simply focusing attention on

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 106–7.

<sup>13</sup> The concern might be that an understanding of the transformational nature of sacramental sermons that is so thoroughly grounded in the sacramental theology of the Eastern Church *might*, if we are not careful, result in the routinization of the charisma at work in anointed preaching—i.e., a minimizing of the agency of the Spirit in this or that preaching moment.

In an article titled “Salvation as Theosis: The Teaching of Eastern Orthodoxy,” Donald Fairbairn explains: “Eastern Christianity asserts that the church is, by definition, the activity of the Holy Spirit among people. Therefore, even though it is not the church itself which conveys grace, one can be confident that one does receive grace by means of the sacraments, precisely because it is through the church that the Holy Spirit works.” (Donald Fairbairn, “Salvation as Theosis: The Teaching of Eastern Orthodoxy,” in *Themelios*, 23:3, [accessed 12/12/23], <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/salvation-as-theosis-the-teaching-of-eastern-orthodoxy/>, ¶9.) Indeed, Fairbairn, goes on to point out that, according to the Russian theologian, Sergei Bulgakov, the mode of the transmission of the Holy Spirit, himself, is via “sacraments administered by a priest of the apostolic succession.” (S.N. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* [London: Centenary Press, 1935], 55–56, as cited in Fairbairn, ¶9.)

This institutional understanding of the way the Holy Spirit is received and works brings to mind the way Emil Brunner rather cogently warned of how a *sacramentalism* which purports to guarantee the transmission of grace through liturgical, ritual acts can serve to deemphasize “the Word and Spirit through which He Himself [Christ] is truly present” to his people. (See Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, 75.)

Then, as it relates to preaching in particular, Brunner warns: “The proclamation of the written word is God’s Word, wherever and whenever it pleases him; the word of preaching is recognized as the Word of God only when and because the Holy Spirit gives it to be recognized as such. . . . The Word of God is no disposable object, but a free gift of grace. For ‘The Spirit bloweth where it listeth.’ The church ‘has’ the Word, and yet it must always receive it anew, if it is actually to proclaim it. The preacher ‘has’ his sermon, on paper or in his head; but it can become a mighty deliverance of God’s Word only through

some biblical passages which serve as analogues for the transformative effect of theologically real encounters with God. Some examples of these analogues include Isaiah’s visionary experience as depicted in Isaiah 6:1-12; Peter’s, James’, and John’s life altering experience of Jesus as depicted in Luke 5:4-11; and Paul’s experience of Christ and the Spirit as depicted in Acts 9:1-22. Each of these encounters with a holy yet merciful God had the effect of enabling a spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness that was not there before. If it be allowed that anointed sermons can be sacramental (in the sense of being *encounter-enabling*), then the upshot would be that such preaching could be expected to be transformative in effect.

Attributed to Tim Keller is this understanding of how encounter-enabling preaching is truly transformative: “good preaching . . . doesn’t tell you to go and change. Rather, it changes you on the spot because you begin to *encounter* something of such beauty that you just desire it and want to become it—you *want* to change.”<sup>14</sup> With respect, I will offer that the reason why some sermons are transformative in effect is not simply because they enable hearers to encounter *something* of beauty, but *someone* (cf. Ps. 27:4; 2 Cor. 3:17–18; 4:1–6)!<sup>15</sup>

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the gift of God’s Spirit—and for that he must constantly make renewed entreaty. This waiting and hoping, this dependence on God’s free intervention, is always burdensome and vexing for man.” (See Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963], 72.) It is for this reason, says Brunner, that “the church built up a mighty apparatus, a system of ecclesiastical assurances, by means of which it might become the power in control of the divine revelation.” (Ibid., 73.) And then, he goes on to make clear that he has in mind, not only Roman Catholicism, but “the whole sphere of the Christian Church.” (Ibid.)

<sup>14</sup> J. D. Greear, “Tim Keller’s Friendship Transformed My Preaching,” in *Christianity Today*, August 28, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/tim-keller-issue/tim-keller-ministry-preaching-friendship.html>, ¶7 emphasis added. For more on the notion that a real, trust-based relationship between human beings and their creator is what the biblical story is all about, and how that an encounter with Christ is the key to this trust-based relationship, see Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> I am often asked how my understanding of sacramental sermons relates to the sacramental preaching referred to by Hans Boersma. For different reasons (my theological realism versus his “sacramental ontology” means that we both possess a sacramental understanding of the Scriptures (i.e., the Scriptures as a point of connection between us and God) that opens the door to the possibility of sacramental preaching (see Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental*

## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PAUL’S SPIRITUALITY AND SACRAMENTAL SERMONS

Now that we have in mind what a truly anointed sermon might involve, I want to go on in this essay to focus on the relationship between the preacher’s spirituality and his or her preaching. Specifically, I have in mind the connection between a Pauline, fully trinitarian, “I-Thou,” lifestyle spirituality and preaching that is prophetic, incarnational, and truly transformative.

To begin, I have become convinced that it is possible to discern in the letters penned by the Apostle Paul the basic *convictions*, *commitments*, and *customs* that animated the spirituality

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*Tapestry* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 21–39.) That said, I will humbly suggest that, while we are ultimately after the same thing—sermons that enable hearers to “enter further into the life of God as revealed in Christ” (see Hans Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* [Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2016], xxiii), the prophetic dynamic I am calling attention to, differentiates my proposal in an important way from the one put forward by Boersma.

Focusing on the idea that a sacrament portrays for us the hidden presence of Christ, Boersma argues that a theological interpretation of Scripture makes possible not only a sacramental reading of God’s Word (see Hans Boersma *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* [Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2017]) but a sacramental preaching of it as well (see Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching*, xvii–xxiii). In other words, Boersma advocates for an exegesis that “involves looking beyond the historical and literal meaning of the text to the hidden sacramental reality of Christ himself, which enables us to reach the deepest meaning of the Scriptures.” (See Hans Boersma, “Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ,” [accessed 11/8/2023,] <https://www.hansboersma.org/post-books/2016/9/16/sacramental-preaching-sermons-on-the-hidden-presence-of-christ>, ¶1. This type of exegesis, he suggests, can result in 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.” (See Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching*, xxii.)

However, my understanding of the “sacramental sermon” is, I would suggest, a bit more pneumatologically explicit, dependent, and immediate. The focus moves beyond the spiritual/theological exegesis that is 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, *Christ-evincing* 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” is, by itself, capable of producing sermons that function sacramentally in the sense I am proposing. It is my contention that an anointing of the Spirit upon the preparation, presentation and reception of the sermon is also required—prophetic prompting and enablement by the Spirit of Christ that the preacher and, to some degree, the hearers also, can and must prayerfully cooperate with for the sacramental encounter with the risen Christ to occur.

Gary Tyra, “Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon”

he himself practiced and promoted. My understanding of Paul’s spirituality begins with a consideration of how he prayed for the readers of his letters. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God ... (Col. 1:9–10)

My thesis is that *the practice of Christian spirituality can and should involve our learning how to live into this Pauline prayer*. It is not just about obeying a particular list of rules, observing a particular collection of rituals, or engaging in a particular register of practices. The focus is, instead, on an ongoing Holy Spirit-enabled interaction with Christ the Son which results in a *lifestyle or way of being in the world* that pleases God the Father.

In my book, *Introduction to Spirituality*, I refer repeatedly to a Pauline, fully trinitarian “I-Thou,” lifestyle spirituality that is Spirit-empowered, Christ-honoring, and pleasing to God the Father precisely because of the way it engenders within us the spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness he desires and deserves. My goal here is to address something not touched on explicitly in that work: *how the convictions, commitments, and customs of this Christian spirituality can facilitate the kind of sacramental sermons described in this essay*.

Well known is the fact that in his *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* Aristotle famously argued that public speaking that is effective (persuasive) possessed three key attributes: (1) *logos*—the message must be intelligible, meaningful, plausible; (2) *ethos*—the speaker and the message needs to be credible; and (3) *pathos*—the message must affect listeners in a visceral manner. Some contemporary experts in leadership and communication have suggested that we would also do well to pay attention to what Aristotle had to say about two other aspects of

effective oral presentations: (4) *telos*—clarity with respect to the purpose, aim or intent of the message; and (5) *kairos*—the message’s relevance to the audience based on its propriety and timeliness.<sup>16</sup>

But also well-known is the way the Apostle Paul seemed to minimize the importance of human wisdom and rhetoric, especially that promoted by the Sophists, to *his* preaching of the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 2:1–5).<sup>17</sup> Does this mean that Christian preachers must eschew the study and use of all communication theory and skills? In his book *The Imperative of Preaching*, John Carrick suggests that such a move would constitute an overcorrection—that there is such a thing as a *sacred* (Spirit-enabled) *rhetoric*, exemplified in the preaching of Paul himself, that is not only appropriate but necessary for faithful Christian preaching.<sup>18</sup>

So, the question I want to address is: *what if we discovered that some of the convictions, commitments, and customs that make up a Pauline, fully trinitarian, “I-Thou,” lifestyle spirituality work together to facilitate truly anointed preaching precisely because of the way they impact the logos, ethos, pathos, telos, and kairos of Christian ministers and the messages they deliver?* The rest of this essay is an attempt at explaining why I believe Christian preachers need to take the question just posed very seriously.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, see Rene Rodriguez, *Amplify Your Influence: Transform How You Communicate and Lead* (Hoboken: NJ, John Wiley & Sons, 2022). 27–39

<sup>17</sup> John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

### How Our Spirituality *Convictions* Can Contribute to Sacramental Sermons

The writings of Paul contain several references to a Spirit-enabled *mindset* that is necessary for Christ’s followers to live in a way that pleases God.<sup>19</sup> In other words, as it relates to a lifestyle spirituality productive of a truly God-pleasing life, our foundational beliefs about who God is and what he is about matter big time!

The historical context of these passages makes clear that the renewing of the mind Paul himself had experienced and then prescribed for others had to do with some new paradigm-impacting theological beliefs that were generated by his own life-changing experience with the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit during and after his experience on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1–22). Far and away, the most important change in the apostle’s theology was his embrace of the trinitarian realism referred to at the outset of this essay. In Paul’s case, his new theological realism insisted that, rather than conceive of God the way many Greeks in his day did—as merely a philosophical notion (e.g., a first-cause or one’s ground of being)—or as many of his contemporaneous Jewish rabbis might have—as a technically personal yet austere lawgiver and judge—Paul came to realize that the Christian scriptures portray the Creator as a very real, hyper-personal, and ultra-relational divine being who, because of the incarnation of Christ and outpouring of his Spirit, can be personally known and experienced in an intimate and interactive manner as a holy yet loving heavenly Father. Going further still, I will argue that, for Paul, a “trinitarian realism” veritably mandated the necessity of intimate, interactive, life-story shaping relationships with the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit as well. All these possibilities were ones personally realized by the Apostle Paul as the Book of Acts and his writings reveal.

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<sup>19</sup> See Romans 8:6; 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:16; Ephesians 4:20–24; Philippians 3:17–21; Colossians 2:18; Colossians 3:1–4, 7–8; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; see also 1 Peter 4:7; 5:8.

Put simply, Paul came to know and experience our trinitarian God in an “I-Thou,” rather than “I-It” manner.<sup>20</sup>

I contend that Paul’s embrace of a trinitarian realism was a dramatic game changer with respect to his spirituality and ministry. How can the same thing not be true for us as well, especially with respect to the kinds of sermons we preachers deliver in Christ’s name? For one thing, a theologically real, “I-Thou” spirituality increases the likelihood that the nature of our sermons might be genuine “messages” from God rather than eloquent presentations born of our own creative genius. For another, if we, like Paul, become convinced that the self-revelation of God presented to us in both the written word (Scripture) and the living word (Christ) suggests that God’s essential attributes are an eternal *relationality* (love), *sanctity* (holiness), and *missionality* (sendingness),<sup>21</sup> we shouldn’t be surprised to find that the “messages” we feel prompted to deliver tend to focus on, and facilitate, the spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness of the those to whom we preach.

As a result, all our sermons will hopefully evidence a spiritual wisdom that Paul refers to as the “mind of Christ”—a divinely enabled understanding of who God is and what he is up to in the world (see 1 Cor. 2: 6-16). Thus, our preaching will possess a sense of meaningfulness (*logos*) for those with ears to hear. Of course, rhetorically speaking, our goal as communicators

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<sup>20</sup> This is a prominent theme in Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Touchstone, 1971), as well as Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*.

<sup>21</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “Starting Points, Trajectories and Outcomes in Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation,” Gospel and Our Culture Network, January 28, 2009, <https://gocn.org/library/the-gospel-and-our-culture-eries-no-2/>. See also Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 52–53; John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 5.



Gary Tyra, “Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon”

must be that no one leaves the preaching event wondering what the point of the message was. Though this confusion can occur despite the best attempts of the preacher to be coherent in his or her presentation, it would seem that when there is a prophetic dynamic at work in it—i.e., when we sense that we are being called to proclaim something which the Spirit of Christ has prompted us to say—the likelihood is much greater that our sermons will be experienced as “messages” rather than mere talks or discourses. Indeed, it has been my experience that when the Christian communicator is engaged in a fully trinitarian, “I-Thou,” form of spirituality, even Sunday School lessons, small group presentations, and classroom lectures can end up possessing a special, inherent, profound degree of divinely inspired meaningfulness.

It has also been my experience that in the case of a *sanctified rhetoric*, there is an interplay between the *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, *telos*, and *kairos* qualities of the preacher and his or her sermon. For example, I proffer that a prophetic, genuinely meaningful word or message (*logos*) from God will necessarily possess the timeliness and propriety (*kairos*) referred to in Proverbs 25:11 (NASB): “Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances. Such a communicate will also prove to be especially compelling at a visceral level (*pathos*) to those with ears to hear, whether or not emotion-stirring tactics are utilized. A Christologically and pneumatologically real understanding of those passages in John 10 where Jesus talks about the sheep recognizing and following his *voice* would not only allow for this suggestion but argues for it!

#### How Our Spirituality *Commitments* Can Contribute to Sacramental Sermons

Of course, the preacher’s embrace of a theological realism that is informed by a Spirit-empowered understanding of God’s essential attributes, does not, by itself, guarantee that the process of sermon formulation will be impacted. Knowledge is one thing; experience is another.

This is why it is necessary to acknowledge that Paul’s spirituality, founded on his new theological convictions, also comprised several crucial commitments. Thus, Paul specifically encouraged the readers of his letters to: (1) keep in step with Christ’s Spirit (i.e., be continually filled with and led by the Holy Spirit); (2) pursue a passionate, perpetual pursuit of Christ’s empowering presence; and (3) engage in a lifelong prosecution of God’s missional purposes for his creation. My suggestion is that these three Pauline spirituality commitments, when addressed in a pneumatologically, Christologically, and theologically real manner respectively, can and will enable a spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness before God. There is simply no way to overstate the impact a genuine life orientation such as this will have on the credibility (*ethos*) of the Christian preacher, and the God-pleasing ambition, goal, and purpose (*telos*) of his or her sermons! A preacher whose lifestyle spirituality has him or her genuinely, actively, wisely pursuing a spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness has veritably clothed himself or herself in the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-20).<sup>22</sup> It is hard to imagine how someone whose lifestyle is genuinely earmarked by a passionate and consistent pursuit of truth, righteousness, ministry readiness, faith, and soteriological hope—and who is also known for their ability to wield the word of God in a devil-defeating manner—could fail to bring to the pulpit a spiritual gravitas (*ethos*) and ministry ambition (*telos*) that would prove both reassuring and inspirational (*pathos*) to those in the congregation. Jesus said about himself: “I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (John 5:30). A lifestyle spirituality—the purpose or aim of which is to prove faithful to God, spiritually, morally, and missionally—engenders an ability to bring truly meaningful

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<sup>22</sup> For more on this notion, see the chapter titled “The Full Armor of God” in Gary Tyra, *The Dark Side of Discipleship: Why and How the New Testament Encourages Christians to Deal with the Devil* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 163–196.

Gary Tyra, “Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon”

(*logos*) messages from God to his people that are likewise faithful and therefore God-honoring (*telos*). When our congregations become convinced that the intent of our lives is to honor our trinitarian God rather than ourselves, they begin looking and listening for God as we preach his Word to them.

#### How Our Spirituality *Customs* Can Contribute to Sacramental Sermons

But, as they say, the proof is in the pudding. Otherwise, all that I have suggested thus far is mere theory. This is why it is so important for us to go on to consider whether the spirituality practices promoted by Paul so that his readers could genuinely make good on the three spirituality commitments referred to above might also serve to facilitate the preaching of sacramental sermons.

Part three of my *Introduction to Spirituality* identifies and elaborates upon some spirituality customs/practices/disciplines proffered by Paul toward a faithful fulfillment of the three commitments he called his readers to make. Though I am unable in the space provided here to adequately summarize the three chapters that make up part three of my lifestyle spirituality proposal, what I can do is focus on one spirituality custom in particular—one that is primary to the first commitment to keep in step with Christ’s Spirit. Since this first commitment is foundational to the other two, taking this tack will provide us in short order with some powerful support for my thesis that the spirituality Paul practiced and promoted will not only enable a lifestyle of faithfulness before God, but will also facilitate the preaching of truly anointed, encounter-effecting sermons.

*The Primacy of Praying in the Spirit*

Once again, the first of Paul’s three spirituality commitments calls for us to be *continually being* filled with (Eph. 5:18),<sup>23</sup> and to *keep in step* with the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:25). These two exhortations strike me as being fundamental to Paul’s approach to spirituality, and the fact that both of these foundational exhortations enjoin upon us activities that are ongoing in nature argues for the notion that the spirituality Paul promoted should play out as a lifestyle rather than a discrete element of one’s walk with Christ.

As it happens, while Paul encouraged the readers of his letters to engage in various spiritual practices (e.g., worship, prayer, the study of Scripture, community, service, etc.), the cardinal discipline emphasized was prayer, a practice he referred to fifty-seven times! Once again, we must keep in mind that the apostle kept insisting that this crucial custom—prayer—can and should be performed in a way that is perpetual, ongoing, unceasing (e.g., see Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17)!

Some questions immediately come to mind: *Are we to write off these apostolic exhortations as mere hyperbole or is there a way for us to engage in a kind of praying that is virtually unceasing? Could it be that Paul was in touch with a way for theologically real prayer to become an especially prominent and impactful feature of our day-to-day lives? If so, does such praying somehow contribute to the prophetic, incarnational, truly transformative dynamics I have suggested are at work in truly anointed preaching?* I believe all three of these questions can be answered in the affirmative. While several customs need to be engaged in daily for the

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<sup>23</sup> Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 152.

Gary Tyra, “Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon”

first of Paul’s three commitments to be realized in our lives,<sup>24</sup> the key, I suggest, is the spirituality practice known as “praying in the Spirit.”

*The Nature of Praying in the Spirit*

To review, the phenomenon of Spirit-enabled prayer is referred to several times in the New Testament, principally by the Apostle Paul but also in the Epistle of Jude. In addition to a couple of passages in which Paul indicates that it is the Spirit who assures Christ’s followers of their familial status before God by inspiring them to pray in an “I-Thou” manner (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), the apostle also provided the readers of his Letter to the Romans with these profound words of encouragement:

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*. (Rom. 8:26, emphasis added)

Moreover, Paul refers to this practice again at the conclusion of his “armor of God” discussion located in Ephesians 6:10–20. In that classic spiritual warfare passage Paul exhorts his readers thusly:

And pray *in the Spirit on all occasions* with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and *always keep on praying* for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Eph. 6:18–20, emphasis added)

The importance Paul attaches to the Holy Spirit in his “armor of God” discussion as a whole, when combined with the way he concludes this discussion by exhorting his readers to *pray in the*

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<sup>24</sup> For more on this, see Gary Tyra, *Introduction to Spirituality: Cultivating a Lifestyle of Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 106–17.

*Spirit* “on all occasions” and “always” requires us to carefully consider what Paul had in mind when he exhorted his readers to engage in this practice.

It is not uncommon for biblical scholars to assert that praying in the Spirit was, for Paul, simply unscripted, extemporaneous prayer, or praying in an especially fervent manner.<sup>25</sup> However, I contend that these suggestions do not account for the way Paul practiced this type of prayer himself, which appears to have been decidedly charismatic and *prophetic* in nature. Not a few reputable New Testament scholars are willing to acknowledge that when Paul referred to praying in the Spirit he had in mind the phenomenon of *glossolalic* prayer—i.e., praying in tongues (see 1 Cor 14:2, 14–19).<sup>26</sup> We must therefore at least consider the possibility that what Paul had in mind in his multiple references to praying in the Spirit was a pneumatologically-real type of praying that not only involves our being sensitive to the Spirit, but *the Spirit praying through us in a prophetic manner*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For example, see Gregory Brown, *The Armor of God: Standing Firm in Spiritual Warfare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (BTG Publishing, 2017), 91–105. See also Brian Borgman and Rob Ventura, *Spiritual Warfare: A Biblical and Balanced Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 90–92; Joel R. Beeke, *Fighting Satan: Knowing His Weaknesses, Strategies, and Defeat* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 56–58.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Century Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 239, 241, 245; Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 731; F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 165; C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 164, 168. As for what Jude had in mind, see Bruce B. Barton, *1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude*, Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 1995), 258–59.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the role the Spirit plays in the prophetic dynamic, see Gary Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission: Prophetic Speech and Action in Christian Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 40–74; Gary Tyra, *Pursuing Moral Faithfulness: Ethics and Christian Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 166–67.

At the same time, I acknowledge that it is also possible to argue that the Spirit can pray through us by means of literal “wordless groans.”<sup>28</sup> While in 1 Corinthians 14:2, 14 and Romans 8:26 the apostle seems to be describing a kind of praying that does not originate in, and is not limited by, human understanding, a realist reading of these passages suggests the possibility that a genuine partnering in prayer with the Spirit can occur whether it is by means of *glossolalia* or literal *wordless groans*. This would mean that in both types of prayer, the Spirit of Christ is praying *through* the disciple.<sup>29</sup> Thus, there is reason to believe that both are pathways to a prophetic, empowering interaction with God.<sup>30</sup>

Going further, I will go on to assert that it is this pneumatologically real understanding of praying in the Spirit that seems to best explain why Paul indicates in Ephesians 6:18 that it can be practiced in an “on all occasions,” “always” manner. For sure, prayer that is a purely human endeavor will require a level of concentration (cognitive focus) that will make the practice of “continual” prayer an impossibility. But there is also a type of prayer that is more visceral in nature, that does not originate in one’s intellect, and therefore does not require huge amounts of human concentration. This kind of praying can occur throughout one’s waking moments, in between and even during the busiest seasons of the day.

#### *The Special Effect of Praying in the Spirit*

I have found that praying in this way engenders a sort of visceral, hopeful waiting on the Lord with listening ears and a receptive heart (e.g., see Ps. 77:1–4; 123:1–2).<sup>31</sup> Whether this type

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<sup>28</sup> For example, see Dunn, 241. See also Arthur Wallis, *Pray in the Spirit* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1970), 95–96.

<sup>29</sup> See Dunn, 241.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. See also Tyra, *The Dark Side of Discipleship*, 192.

<sup>31</sup> See also Num. 9:8; Ps. 5:3; 27:14; 33:20; 38:15; 40:1; 130:5–6; Isa. 30:18; 40:30–31; Lam. 3:24–26; Mic. 7:7.

Gary Tyra, “Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon”

of prayer takes the form of *glossolalia* or a literal “sighing too deep for words,” or both, it will ultimately manifest as a *prayerful mood* that continues and pervades even as we engage in necessary activities. What results is a *prayerful posture* or *state of being* that is virtually ongoing—a lingering season of hopeful waiting on God that is sustained by occasional yet consonant expressions of *whispered glossolalia* and/or *wordless groaning*.

The bottom line, it seems to me, is that it is one thing to be aware that a practice called “praying in the Spirit” is referred to in the New Testament, it is another to reckon with its charismatic/prophetic nature and then give ourselves to it. I contend that a genuine, ongoing partnering with the Spirit in prayer is critical to keeping in step with the Spirit and, therefore, embodying a Christian lifestyle spirituality. Going further, I am suggesting here that it might also contribute to one’s experience of a prophetic dynamic when preaching!

#### *My Own Experience With Praying in the Spirit*

Many years ago, I ran across a newspaper article which suggested a connection between repeating a mantra (or any meaningless phrase) and the actualization of the right hemisphere of the brain. The impression I gained from reading this article was that our intentionally doing something the left side of the brain considers nonsensical or simply boring allowed the right side of the brain to rise to the fore or, as it were, “come out to play.” This caused me to wonder if praying in tongues, or via wordless groans, might have the same effect. I began to pay attention to this possibility.

The inkling I gained over time was that my hunch possessed merit. Several decades later, it is my sense that a discernible correlation seems to exist between my praying in the Spirit and the experience of an increased sense of spiritual sensitivity and creativity, and, therefore, the possibility that something prophetic might occur during the preaching, teaching, counseling, or



writing activity I am preparing for. Please note that I am not claiming that a *direct* correlation has been proved to be true; only a *discernible* correlation. That said, I found the correlation to be consistent enough for the practice of praying in the Spirit to become an important component in my own everyday spirituality, and preaching, teaching preparation.

*Some Scientific Support for Praying in the Spirit*

But I want to do more here than provide some anecdotal evidence. As it turns out, some scientific support for the discernible correlation I’ve just described eventually became available as a result of the emergence of an academic discipline known as neurotheology. This field of study focuses on what is happening in the brain during a religious experience.<sup>32</sup> It turns out that the article I read years ago about the effect on the right side of the brain of merely chanting a prayer or repeating a mantra was not entirely accurate, but my hunch about praying in the Spirit was. Some recent studies of this type suggest that praying in the Spirit might genuinely involve a Spirit-enabled interaction with God that, while initiated by Christian disciples, does not require huge amounts of concentration, and does indeed stimulate the right hemisphere of the brain. Though one’s Christian faith and practice should not hinge on the findings of empirical science, these recently discovered neurolinguistic realities certainly suggest that the impact praying in the Spirit has upon one’s brain might contribute greatly to the cultivation of a Spirit-empowered lifestyle spirituality, and, as I am arguing here, the dynamic of prophetic preaching and teaching. Presented below is a summary of just one of these recent studies.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Molly Edmonds, “Is the brain hardwired for religion?” How Stuff Works, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/human-brain/brain-religion.htm>, ¶4.

<sup>33</sup> For a more thorough discussion, see Tyra, *Introduction to Spirituality*, 117–24.

A book titled *Born to Believe: God, Science, and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs* reports the landmark brain imaging studies conducted by Andrew Newberg.<sup>34</sup> Having conducted several brain imaging experiments which analyzed the effect of various types of praying (meditating, praying contemplatively in the vernacular, glossolalic prayer) on the brain, he and co-author Mark Robert Waldman offer the finding that, in a way that meditation and contemplative prayer does not, praying in the Spirit [i.e., in tongues] either evidences one’s belief in and sense of connection with God, or strengthens this sense of intimacy, or both (see Jude 1:20–21).<sup>35</sup> In addition, a related aspect of Newberg’s studies that seems appropriate to comment on here has to do with the “asymmetrical activity between the two sides of the thalamus” that occurs during the act of praying in the Spirit as opposed to when subjects are merely chanting or engaging in centering prayer offered in the vernacular. Since this asymmetrical condition is not usual, says Newberg, it might suggest that “the people we have been scanning [the Pentecostal prayer subjects] are born with a unique capacity to have spiritual revelations, *or that they have altered their neural functioning in permanent ways as a result of years of intensive practice.*”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the possibility exists that praying in the Spirit can, over time, affect the way the human brain functions. This causes me to wonder: *could it be that God created the human brain in such a way that praying in the Spirit can, over time, increase within the disciple a heightened sensitivity to the presence and voice of God, and do so to a greater degree than when humans are meditating or even praying contemplatively in the vernacular?*

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *Born to Believe: God, Science, and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> See Newberg and Waldman, 178.

<sup>36</sup> Newberg and Walden, *Born to Believe*, 214, emphasis added.

Commenting on Newberg’s research, psychologist Michael Persinger of Laurentian University in Ontario, Canada, who has also done brainwave research with glossolalia, referred to it as an “excellent study.” He went on to offer: “Each of Dr. Newberg’s results have specific implications. For example, increased parietal activity would go with a sense of one’s self being ‘touched by the spirit.’”<sup>37</sup>

While Newberg’s studies don’t prove anything, they do seem to support my contention that *praying in the Spirit may be viewed as highly productive of a distinctive type of spirituality—one that plays out as lifestyle rather than a set of practices engaged in now and then*. Praying in the Spirit does not require huge amounts of mental concentration (thus allowing an ongoing engagement), while at the same time effecting a powerful, life-story shaping sense of surrender to, and communion with, God.<sup>38</sup> And, once again, my contention is that this effect can occur whether our praying in the Spirit takes the form of *glossolalia* or literal wordless groans, both of which involve partnering with the Spirit in a way that bypasses human understanding and, thus, the language center of the brain located in the left hemisphere.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, all of this would

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<sup>37</sup> See Constance Holden, “Tongues on the Mind,” *Science*, November 2, 2006, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2006/11/tongues-mind>, ¶5.

<sup>38</sup> Emphasizing the manner in which *glossolalic* prayer is nonsensical to the practitioner, Christopher Stephenson argues that such praying can be engaged in deliberately as a spirituality practice designed to cultivate a greater degree of “submission to the divine through the suspension of comfort and familiarity that comes with intelligible words.” In other words, Christian disciples can engage in *glossolalic* prayer in an intentional, self-emptying manner “that promotes in the speaker a greater docility to the Spirit in all moments of life.” See Christopher Stephenson, “Un-Speaking in Tongues: Glossolalia as Ascetical Prayer,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 13, no. 1, May 2020: 88–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790919893278>, 96–97.

<sup>39</sup> “The human brain is divided into two hemispheres. The left hemisphere is the ‘logical brain’ and is involved in language and analysis and the right hemisphere is the ‘creative brain’ involved in daydreaming and imagination.” Ananya Mandal, “Language and the Human Brain,” *News: Medical, Life Sciences*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Language-and-the-Human-Brain.aspx#:~:text=The%20human%20brain%20is%20divided,involvement%20in%20daydreaming%20and%20imagination>, ¶1.

Gary Tyra, "Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon"

also seem to suggest a connection between praying in the Spirit and genuinely anointed (prophetic, incarnational, and truly transformative) preaching.

To be clear, I have only addressed in this paper how one of several spiritual practices promoted by Paul toward the realization of the first commitment to keeping in step with the Spirit can impact our preaching. Also important, but not treated here, is how the customs entailed in our making good on the second commitment to cultivate a moment-by-moment mentoring relationship with Christ, and the third commitment to forge a missionally impactful, God-the-Father pleasing lifestyle, can and will dramatically affect the *logos, ethos, pathos, telos*, and *kairos* of our lives and the sermons we deliver, and in so doing, facilitate the preparation and delivery of sermons that are prophetic, incarnational, and truly transformative in nature!

## CONCLUSION

Pentecostal theologian Chris Green cites the work of fellow Pentecostal Cheryl Bridges Johns thusly: "[a]nointed preaching fuses Spirit and Word in the sacramental space of the worship event, and this fusion 'creates a zone of revelatory, efficacious grace that causes the sermon to convey transformative power.'"<sup>40</sup> Then, Green himself, concludes: "Preaching is a *sacrament* that signifies and effects the interruptive mystery of God's presence."<sup>41</sup>

But it is not just Pentecostals who speak of the transformative potential of anointed sermons. Mainline protestant preacher, William Willimon, also alludes to the power of encounter-effecting sermons to effect change in those who hear by drawing attention to a great and tragic homiletical irony. He writes:

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<sup>40</sup> Cheryl Bridges Johns, "What Makes a Good Sermon: A Pentecostal Perspective," *Journal for Preachers*, 26:4, Pentecost 2003, 46, as cited in Green, "Transfiguring Preaching," 73.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis original.

In my experience, preachers, particularly mainline Protestant preachers, tend to have too little faith in preaching rather than too much. And I use the word “faith” here with intention. How curious, among those who make their living talking about God in sermons, to find so little confidence in the ability of our sermons to *render God*. Too many preachers can tell you all the factors responsible for people’s inability to *encounter the Word of God* in a sermon—laziness, sin, ignorance, distraction, and so forth, but have no means of accounting for why, despite all of these conventional reasons for not hearing, sometimes people do hear. Some pastoral psychologists have suggested that this curious sort of pastoral lack of confidence in the efficacy may have something to do with the preacher’s unconscious fear that if preaching really is effective, if preaching is truly God’s appointed means for intruding upon the world, then that means that preachers must be considerably more invested in the preaching. If preaching is powerful, for good or ill, then preachers must be willing to exercise more care and responsibility in their preaching. Better to whine about the pointlessness of preaching and its ineffectiveness than to admit its possible power.<sup>42</sup>

How ironic indeed that many contemporary preachers, not only those in mainline Protestant churches but in evangelical and Pentecostal-charismatic churches as well, have become weary and jaded regarding the transformative potential of their sermons! But this need not be. Preaching with power really is possible. Spirit-empowered, Christ-evincing, truly transformative preaching really does change lives! What is more, we can do this!

The question is: *Will we?* If so, I contend that step one in the process is learning to live into Paul’s prayer found in Colossians 1:9–10. And to do that we must adopt a certain kind of spirituality—one that immerses us into the trinitarian realism that is productive of sacramental sermons. Put another way, we should consider the value of embracing a Pauline, fully trinitarian “I-Thou,” lifestyle spirituality that is Spirit-empowered, Christ-honoring, and pleasing to God the Father precisely because of the way it engenders within us the spiritual, moral, and missional faithfulness he desires and deserves. Doing this will impact the *logos, ethos, pathos, telos*, and

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<sup>42</sup> William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 141, emphasis added.

Gary Tyra, "Step One in the Process of a Sacramental Sermon"

*kairos* of ourselves and the sermons we preach in such a way as to make it possible for them to be sacramental in their effect.

I hope this essay encourages at least some readers to reinvest in their preaching. While it is true that because no sacrament functions *ex opera operato* (i.e., automatically, unconditionally, simply "out of the work worked"), Christ's real presence cannot be conjured. Still, we have every reason to believe that the risen Jesus, who promises to be with the two or three gathered in his name (Matt. 18:20), is honored when those he has called to preach in his name take seriously the possibility of prophetic, incarnational, truly transformative preaching, and then prayerfully cooperate with the prompting and enabling provided by the Spirit of mission as they engage in this potentially God-rendering endeavor. May it be!

*Coram Deo!*

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