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8

Preaching as Foolishness

—Steven Paulson

Before we get to the real question of this essay, “What is Preaching?” let us begin with a more basic question, “What is Theology?” Normally the answer is some type of “thinking.” In school, for example, you are normally supposed to be “thinking,” which means using your brain to figure things out according to the gift of reason.

That form of reasoning, in turn, normally means learning the special “concepts” of a discipline—learning what words “mean” by studying the history of the use of relevant words by those in the discipline. Lawyers learn the words of a courtroom, doctors learn the words that apply to the body and its health, and so theologians are likewise supposed to have a set of concepts that they should be learning so that when people hear them talk they say, that person is not a lawyer or a doctor, but a theologian. Indeed, we sometimes use the noun “theology” as an adjective modifying the word “thinking” so that a theologian is the one who is supposed to be thinking theologically.

THEOLOGY IS FOR PROCLAMATION, NOT UNDERSTANDING

The long history in the Christian church assumes something more particular about the way to “think theologically” captured in a famous phrase from Anselm of Canterbury: “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). “Faith Seeking Understanding,” was to be the title of his famous

book, *Proslogion*. But though the phrase did not become his title, it has become the most famous artifact of the book when Anselm uttered his confessional prayer, "I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand (*credo ut intelligam*). For this also I believe,—that unless I believed, I should not understand."¹

Arguing for God's existence is in itself a rather sorry affair, but what is worse is this notion that one starts with faith, like a child, and then matures in faith by adding *intellectum*. This is the way I was taught to teach religion at a Lutheran school—taking parochial country bumpkins fallen fresh from the beet truck and educating their desires in order to remove simple faith and replace it with liberal meaning, or higher desires than a beet farmer has—say the opera and Friedrich Nietzsche, or Karl Marx and social gospel.

Hegel taught along these lines, when he said that religion is a true, but lower, form of thought than philosophy—religion dealing with a "picture book" level of the world (telling stories of Adam and Eve and Moses) and philosophy dealing with a "chapter book" view of the world that gains the higher mode of pure thought. This approach to theology has a habit of dividing the world into parts: feeling, doing, and thinking. These parts are considered the three *bona*, or goods, of life, and the greatest of these (*sum-mum bonum*) is "thinking."

In comparison to thinking, feeling (aesthetics) is considered loose, disorganized, and somewhat dangerous. "Doing" (practice/ethics) is better than feeling because it does not simply leave one with an impression (to be impressed) but allows you to impress yourself on others—to make a difference or a mark. And what school child does not want to make a difference in the world? Yet thinking is the greatest. Such a presumption goes right back to Plato and Aristotle and has never stopped since.

1. Migliore's textbook on theology builds on Anselm's theme, "What distinguishes theology from blind assent is just its special character as 'faith seeking understanding'" (*Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2). Anselm continued in his Preface, "In my judgment, neither this work nor the other, which I mentioned above, deserved to be called a book, or to bear the name of an author; and yet I thought they ought not to be sent forth without some title by which they might, in some sort, invite one into whose hands they fell to their perusal. I accordingly gave each a title, that the first might be known as, An Example of Meditation on the Grounds of Faith, and its sequel as, Faith Seeking Understanding. But, after both had been copied by many under these titles, many urged me, and especially Hugo, the reverend Archbishop of Lyons, who discharges the apostolic office in Gaul, who instructed me to this effect on his apostolic authority—to prefix my name to these writings. And that this might be done more fitly, I named the first, *Monologium*, that is, A Soliloquy; but the second, *Proslogium*, that is, A Discourse" (Deane, *Works of St. Anselm*, 2). Thus the great error of theology was set, and has become implacable.

The result is to make a big split between theory (thinking) and practice (applying your thoughts) in much the way that a builder of a skyscraper first has the architect picture the whole building, and the builder simply implements another's imagination. In the end it is the architect who is remembered for the building, not the construction company. A person says, "This is a Frank Lloyd Wright building," not "This was built by Siemens and Sons."

A Lutheran, however, will not go with the crowd in this matter, but instead says something completely new. Theology is not a child-like faith seeking adult concepts by means of the irritation of doubt. Theology is not *fides quaerens intellectum*. Instead, theology (with its thinking, doing and feeling) is for something. It is a "doing," but unlike any previously imagined "doing," since it is passive. Nevertheless, theology will change the world in the most radical way possible: by preaching. So our thesis will be: theology is for proclamation instead of faith seeks understanding.

By rejecting the search for understanding we are not left with irrationalism but instead we learn how to preach. This takes a brain, and a tongue, and hutzpah, along with some other attributes that Paul lumps together and calls *παρρησία* (boldness) in preaching Christ.

Preachers must become bold, in particular with the gospel. As Paul says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" (Rom 1:16–17).

This means that in order to understand theology we have to tackle the more basic question: what is preaching? Proclamation and preaching are synonyms for us. Sometimes they are distinguished slightly by saying that preaching is opening your mouth and saying the gospel to sinners in order to distinguish this act from giving a sacrament. In this case we have developed a habit of using the two related words for proclamation: word and sacraments.

For this reason, "word and sacrament," have a special place in evangelical teaching as we find in the fifth article of the Augsburg Confession, "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who produces faith, when and where he wills in those who hear the gospel." Preaching is therefore "giving the gospel and the sacraments" as the "means" by which God gives the Holy Spirit to sinners. If we continue in this famous article, we notice immediately that the statement stands against the Anabaptists in teaching that the Holy Spirit does not come to us "without

the external word of the gospel through our own preparations, thoughts, and works," but through the external word—all else excluded.²

In this crucial definition we learn first that the Spirit uses "means," so that the Holy Spirit is not immediate, but mediate. Further, the Spirit is not given through our own preparations whether feelings, thoughts or works. That means especially not by thinking! How then does the Spirit come? Through the external word (*externum verbum*). He comes not from inside, but from outside. And the external means is particularly and uniquely a word. Preaching is that word. So preaching is the way God gives his Holy Spirit to sinners—while they are sinners. This happens not through anything inside them, but from the outside, through the means of an external word: a little sermon.

This little sermon is not simply speaking about God, but speaking for God: Jesus said to the twelve, before sending them out for their first preaching mission, "And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. . . ." (Matt 10:7-8). "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me." (Matt 10:40)

But in contradiction to this evangelical discovery, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were often consumed with the question, "How might I speak truthfully of God, the One whom I do not see or know, who is other than me and the whole creation?" Theological thinkers of these centuries wondered, "How can my mere human words be adequate for the perfect, the total, the all-in-all of God?" Two basic attempts were made to answer this false question that reverted to the patterns of earlier theology. One is called "analogy." This assumes that creatures cannot speak directly about God, but they can do so by analogy from what they know. What do we know? We know other creatures, and so from them we can say something true about the Creator as the effect always retains some of its cause within it. This way was called the "modest way" of Thomas Aquinas. Analogy created a dualism that distinguished the realm of the divine above from the realm of the earth below with a ladder of analogical language propped up between them. What is not true in one realm may be quite true in the other. So for example, death is the case on earth, but in heaven there is only eternal life. This duality has fascinated theology and gutted preaching at the same time.

The other was a revolt against Thomas Aquinas and this modest way of teaching by analogy. It said words should not be equivocal, or shifty. They should be univocal, true in all realms—heaven and earth—if we are going

2. KW 40 = BSLK 58.

to say anything sensible about God. This emerged as nominalist teaching in the likes of Duns Scotus and William of Occam. They asserted that there are not two kinds of “being,” but only one kind, and words must and do fit this one true being, or they do not. Words are thus either true or false, not shifty. Our words must be precise and unequivocal about God in order to speak properly of him. But this line of thinking also undermined preaching, since it knew nothing of a new kingdom. We cannot afford to be in this ancient (and also very recent) fight between analogy and univocity without losing preaching.³

Preaching is not concerned with speaking about God, but the much bolder matter of speaking for him. We cannot afford to be silenced by the difference between human and divine words, but are rather concerned with when and where those two become identical in true preaching. We call this *verbum reale*, which is the word that does not merely describe reality accurately, but creates a new reality. The word of preaching does what it says: So when you say, “The Kingdom of God has drawn near,” you are not simply describing a fact or a possibility, you are bringing the kingdom itself—giving it to someone who needs it. Once you learn to deal with *verbum reale*, or *efficax*—the word that creates anew—you will no longer be giving theological opinions, points of view, or spiritual directions, but bestowing the divine word of the gospel to people who really need it. When you say the words, “I forgive you,” you will not merely be stating a fact that aligns with a reality already there, nor will you be using a transcendent word that is like something we already know on earth. Instead you will be uttering the word that creates out of nothing and makes a new reality that was not there before. You will be doing what only God does, which is to create something new, out of nothing: *creatio ex nihilo*.

WHAT IS PREACHING?

When you become thus equipped, and bold, you will no longer merely be thinking theologically, but doing theology—or better yet, exercising the truth that theology is for something—it is for proclamation. So, now we will assume that theology is for proclamation—no more and no less. Then, what do we mean by preaching? As you can guess, there are many attempts at describing this, almost all of them in opposition to the key distinction between law and gospel because they are operating with a theory of analogy or univocity.

3. One can consider the struggle further in Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy*.

First, we can note the obvious; preaching is some kind of public speaking. As Martin Luther often said, the qualifications for a seminarian include three things: can the fellow stand up in front of people (i.e., can he speak publicly)? Can he open his mouth and speak (i.e., does he have a big mouth)? And does he know when to shut his mouth and sit down (the gospel being a short word)?⁴ Just so preaching is related not only to grammar, but to oratory or rhetoric especially as it as it was studied in the world of Greek and Roman oratory.

Consequently, the primary purpose of public speaking is always assumed to be persuasion: a sudden change in attitude.

There is to my mind no more excellent thing than the power, by means of oratory, to get a hold on assemblies of men, win their good will, direct their inclinations wherever the speaker wishes, or divert them from whatever he wishes. In every free nation, and most of all in communities which have attained the enjoyment of peace and tranquility, this one art has always flourished above the rest and ever reigned supreme.⁵

This influenced the most important book on preaching in the Middle Ages right up to the time of Martin Luther, called *The Seventh Ring*. Its author was a Cistercian monk, Alan of Lille (1128–1202) who lived in the twelfth century renaissance of preaching that reached back to Greece and Rome to reclaim the glory of those days. Alan was interested in the secondary purpose of rhetoric, a lifelong process concerning the effect of the preaching, called “formation.” Much of Christian theology and many seminaries presently are caught up in this effort to understand preaching as “formation.” This inclination toward preaching as formation today claims renowned theologians like Sarah Coakley and Stanley Hauerwas. We can understand this movement best by going back to its early Christian master in *The Seventh Ring*.

Jacob’s Ladder: Preaching as Formation according to Alan of Lille

To depict this effect of preaching called “formation,” Alan used the story of Jacob’s Ladder in which “Jacob beheld a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, on which angels were ascending and descending. The ladder represents the progress of the catholic man in his ascent from the beginning of faith to the full development of the perfect man.”⁶

4. LW 23:227.

5. Crassus in Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.viii.3.

6. Alan of Lille, *The Art of Preaching* 15.

The steps on the ladder were seven, with preaching being the highest and last:

1. Confession
2. Prayer (for grace)
3. Eucharist (for grace once it is given)
4. Careful study of the Scriptures (allows one to persevere in holding onto the gift of grace)
5. Learning to ask someone more experienced when Scripture is obscure.
6. Expounding Scripture (i.e., pounding out Scripture to others of his acquaintance)
7. Preaching (publicly giving what one has learned from Scripture).

It is indeed profound that for Alan, the top rung was not naked contemplation of God as with the mystics; there he placed earthly preaching. At first glance this appears positive. Alan concentrated his book on the highest rung and asked, what is preaching? He answered in five ways, first, by inquiring what preaching's form is (where he distinguished "surface aspects" from the treasure beneath, which predictably was "thoughts" that bear weight—since theology is really for thinking). Second by asking, who can preach? Third, who is the audience? Fourth, what are the reasons for the sermon (its context)? And finally, what is the "place" for the sermon?

His answer to the first question of preaching's form was this, "Preaching is an open and public instruction in faith and behavior, whose purpose is the forming of men; it derives from the path of reason and from the fountainhead of the authorities."⁷ Instruction meant not just imparting facts, but the way to "form a life." But most importantly, this preaching was to be public ("What I say in your ear, preach upon the housetops") not secret (gnostic) knowledge imparted only to the initiated. This is an important point, because preaching is the anti-gnostic inoculation. Lying and deceiving are practiced privately in the dark. Preaching, on the contrary, is not private. So far so good for Alan; preaching is not to be given to one, but to many. Teaching can be to a single person; preaching must be for the many.

But then Alan tipped his hat regarding the content of sermons, "Public speaking is the admonishing of the people to maintain the well-being of the community."⁸ How common this has become! People assume that preach-

7. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

8. *Ibid.*, 17.

ing is getting people to act communally, not individually so that preaching and the divine service as a whole are meant to make people less selfish. It is typical for Alan that the content of preaching must then include two aspects: faith and behavior. One must impart doctrine (what to believe) and behavior (what to do) exactly as the old theories of theology assumed. Therefore, theology appeals to reason's knowing of spiritual or "holy things," while ethics deals with "living the good life." Consequently, the preacher is responsible for the opening the treasure of doctrine and seeing to it that this teaching is applied throughout the week in action of the laity or religious. Alan interpreted Jacob's ladder accordingly: "preachers are the 'angels,' who 'ascend' when they preach about heavenly matters (doctrine) and 'descend' when they bend themselves to earthly things in speaking of behavior."⁹

This is a decidedly different thing than I will momentarily argue, since Alan removed the distinction of law and gospel, and in its place put the distinction between doctrine and ethics—what you know about heaven, and what you do here on earth. This is the most common of theological errors that rears its ugly head in preaching. Alan concluded that the form of preaching comes out of reason which is to direct the will in the way it should go. Reason through preaching is thus the instrument of Christian formation. Reason is serious, and cannot be diverted from its proper goal, so Alan insisted that preaching have no jokes, childish remarks, or rhythmic speaking meant to delight the ear—a theatrical display—or anything that is glittery. Too much embroidery on the cloth removes the power to reason.

Of course there are things that evangelical preachers can note to their advantage when considering Alan's understanding of the form and content of sermons, since a sermon too embroidered (too worked over) is contrived. Overworking usually means trying to get people's admiration rather than serving the benefit of the neighbor. Instead of such frivolity (Alan was a Cistercian) there must be *gravitas*—enough to "move the spirits of its hearers, stir up the mind, encourage repentance." So, he concluded that one should let the "sermon rain down doctrines, and thunder forth admonitions, soothe with praises. . . ." and so help the neighbor, not gain credit for the self. Those who gain credit for themselves are "merchants," rather than "preachers."¹⁰

Alan noted that neither a preacher's nor a hearer's reason is strong enough to preach with *gravitas*, no doubt because of the fall and sin. Instead, reason must be directed by authorities, just as you would have a director at a good monastery where you learn not only poverty and chastity, but obedience. Alan did hold that the chief authority was Scripture, "a theological

9. Ibid., 18.

10. Ibid., 20.

authority—especially a text from the Gospel, the Psalms, the Epistles of Paul or the Books of Solomon. . .” was necessary for a sermon.

But this observation broke into three fateful “kinds” of preaching that reveal the problem with his approach. One kind of sermon was the spoken word, “go and preach the gospel to every creature.” The second was simply reciting the written word by reading the text aloud. Then came the problematic third: preaching “by deed.” It was in this last form that Alan described the primary attribute of the preacher as “humility” that sets people “on their way and to help them make progress.” For what is the ladder of Jacob other than a description of the whole Christian life as a progress up the steps of the ladder until one is perfect? Upon completion of the Christian life the preacher is imagined to disappear, and what remains is the instruction that forms the Christian for the remainder of life in heaven. No more preaching, but instruction remains forever. Then, as with any who seek to persuade, Alan said, “it is not the sharpness of the thorn that we should dwell on, but the sweetness of the rose.”¹¹ By no means a throwaway line! Persuasion always moves to the sweet attraction rather than the thorny accusation. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar—this always becomes the preacher’s code when preaching is moral persuasion. The same soup overwhelmed the antinomian Agricola among the Lutherans.

Even though preaching was a version of persuasion for Alan, his sober approach recognized that it is acceptable to move people to tears (but “as Lucretius says, ‘Nothing dries up faster than a tear’”)¹² and finally, that a preacher should use examples (as this is the main way to teach). Alan held that Christian formation was progress on the ladder. Such steps were enabled by public preaching in the form of exhortation that instructs (i.e., for reason’s control of the will).

The instruction was to be of two kinds: “doctrine” (spiritual things—like what heaven is like) that takes one up the ladder, and “deeds” (behavior, ethics) that return you to earth to do what is needed for others. In brief, a sermon teaches what you should know, and what you should do to be justified. Nothing could be more modern than this—perhaps without the Cistercian humility. Alan’s renaissance held sway some three hundred years before someone would hear something different in Paul’s letters. The medieval distinction of doctrine and ethics unseated the proper distinction between law and gospel, and the Cistercian humility unseated what Paul meant by saying that preaching was foolishness. This had to be overcome in order to unleash the power of the gospel.

11. *Ibid.*, 21.

12. Lischer, *Company of Preachers*, 7.

PREACHING AS FOOLISHNESS: 1 CORINTHIANS 1-4

It would seem that preaching is a special type of public speaking, a genre of persuasion that uses reason as its method—until we learn what Paul did. Then the first truth of preaching is folly, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,” (there goes the whole comparison to public speaking from Aristotle to the present) “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written [Isa 29:14] ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.’” (1 Cor 1:18-19) Preaching is not persuasion, it is the “word of the cross.” That means, it preaches the cross: “We preach Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

Preaching this foolishness means giving out grace: “the grace of God that was given you in Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:4). And what is this grace? It is God’s all-working power, which leaves nothing for you to do. This is folly to the perishing. If there is nothing for the hearers to do, then what good is persuasion? You can hear the folly, “Why bother? Why do anything, if God does all?” Well, Paul says of the Corinthian Christians, that they were “enriched (made rich) in every way,” “with all speech and knowledge.” (1 Cor 1:5) The proclamation of Christ is confirmed among them, so that they lack nothing (1 Cor 1:6-7). Everything is already given. Nothing more need be added. Christians do not fill the half-full cup or complete the doctrine with behavior. They do not climb any ladder. They are not lacking in any charismata (1 Cor 1:7) while they are waiting for the revealing of “our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8) that will come when they see what they already have in words (hearing).

Now Paul turns to what everything in the entire world come down to, as God sees it. It is his speaking that matters. What he says must really be the case. It must hold and so weather every storm. As Paul says: “God is faithful!” (1 Cor 1:9) There is the entire doctrine of God in a nutshell. It is the whole of evangelical teaching, and what made Luther’s form of preaching greater than any previous attempt (of which Alan of Lille was merely one). What is the attribute of God that matters most? Anselm said it was God’s justice, along with his mercy. Others say God’s attribute that matters most is goodness or love. Not so for Paul. God is faithful.

This bothered someone as wise as G. W. F. Hegel since faithfulness is what you look for in a dog. Will he come when you call? Will he stay with you when he could get meat elsewhere? But as Paul says, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?” (1 Cor 1:20). Why is “God is faithful” so important for Paul? Faithfulness means something has been said in the form of a promise to you, and the promise-maker, or giver, is considered faithful when he sticks by the promise despite what

comes. So faithfulness only means something if there is a promise to which he is faithful, and sure enough, that is what Paul means by preaching. It is not the rhetoric of persuasion; preaching is the address by God that gives you his promise. The key to it all, to grace and God's faithfulness, is that you have everything you need in that simple promise. You have every *χαρίσματα* you could desire. All you need in this life is to know one thing: God is faithful! If you are so lucky as to get a promise from him, he sticks by his promise when he makes it. What if the one receiving it is not faithful? Paul took that up in his letter to the Philippians: so what! God is faithful, even if his chosen Israel is not. That is all that matters. If God sticks by his promise, even if the one getting the promise does not deserve it, what must you say about the promise? It holds. It is good. It lasts. It endures.

This is why the "world did not know God through wisdom," because it thought it was climbing on Jacob's ladder up to him. Instead, what was really happening? "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." (1 Cor 1:21) The world, as with Alan of Lille, assumed that reason persuades people to follow God's higher path or ladder. But to the contrary, all we do as preachers is give a promise of the cross of Jesus Christ. Not just Aristotle and the Greek speech for persuasion, this trips up everyone, as Paul says, "Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom." (1 Cor 1:22)

"Greeks seek wisdom"—which is to say, "faith seeks understanding." But Paul also found a problem with his fellow Jews, who were not looking for persuasion, but a sign. A prophet was to come and give the sign of Moses, which meant something even greater than Moses gave (Deut 18:15-18). And what is greater than Moses? How do you do better than the law of Moses? A better law, perhaps? No, Paul recognized that you give a new word, which is the gospel. But the Jews wanted a sign, not the gospel. The sign would tell them that suffering had come to an end, and the gift of their election would finally appear. But that is not what Paul means by grace. The sign seeks glory, and glory is the receipt of what is due—not the surprising gift of something that is not due. That is why glory concerns signs rather than wisdom. Wisdom understands a thing presently, signs await a future glory. Christ's cross overthrows both those who seek wisdom, as faith seeking understanding, and those who seek signs in anticipation of the glory that is soon to arrive (כְּבוֹד יְהוָה). But what does a dead Jesus do to persuade you of anything? The sign of the cross strikes one as pointing in the wrong direction. Where is the glory in that? For this reason, to the Jews Paul's preaching is folly.

"But to those who are called, both Jews and Greek, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than

men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:24–5). Here we have a sudden reversal, since God’s weakness is stronger than anything among creatures. But Paul’s reversal is not a simple, worldly reversal in which one group conquers another. It is the victory of Christ by using the foolishness of preaching to bring down and to lift up, to destroy and create new. So Paul says, “[C]onsider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.” (1 Cor 1:26–28) This is the dialectic, or the working, of law and gospel. And so Paul aligns this in columns with wise/powerful/noble overthrown by foolish/weak/lowly.

Thus we come to the matter of the true attribute of a preacher: boasting. Paul states that the dialectic of law and gospel so works “that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification, and redemption; therefore as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.’ [Jer 9:24]” (1 Cor 1:29–31). Preachers do not boast in themselves, but in Christ. It is true that Christ is not only the center of Scripture but the center of any sermon, but Christ can be used badly or preached poorly. “When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony [mystery] of God in lofty words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2:1–2) Christ crucified serves no purpose for reason or for those looking for a sign. There is no earthly scheme of power, glory, wisdom or strength which makes Christ crucified its announcement and declaration. Specifically, this does not work with a legal scheme, where you do something meritorious and God rewards you. Crucifying Christ is no merit.

Here Paul then gives his famous dichotomy, “And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling and my word (λόγος) and my proclamation (κήρυγμα) were not [in the form of] persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power.” (1 Cor 2:3–4) Paul’s preaching was not persuasion. Instead, it was demonstration [actualizing—a token] of the Spirit and power. Persuasion tries to get you to look at the same thing differently—perhaps from a different point of view. But the thing remains the same. Persuasion seeks only a change of “perspective.” What Paul did was to change reality. This is what we mean when we say that preaching is actually doing something, not just talking about it. It is *verbum reale*. Paul’s words were not persuasive wisdom, but demonstrative Spirit and power—dynamite, actually giving them, not just talking about

them. That is what Christ crucified does. He does not ask you to look at things from the perspective of the little guy, or the poor, but instead gives you power. But the power does not enable you to do a work of the law. It is the power of what Christ did and the impact that has on you. What is that? He took your sin and killed it. You are free! That is the great power unleashed by these words, “that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power (*δύναμις*) of God.” (1 Cor 2:5) Here is the dynamite of the public speaking that preaching is. It is what God is doing that matters here, not what you are doing. The sermon does not move its hearers to accomplish something; it does not move them to tears. It addresses them with what God is doing, not just has done. The power is here and now, and it is God’s. If there are any tears they come later out of joy.

Paul quickly makes clear he is not talking about irrationalism or what the Greeks would call “skepticism,” a position of doubt and the critique of everything. “Yet among those who have come to their end (*τέλειος*) we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this aeon, or the rulers of this aeon, who are coming to nothing.” (1 Cor 2:6, translation mine) What does Paul mean here? To what “end” do the faithful come? Not the pinnacle of the law, as it was for Alan of Lille; that would make them virtuous and perfect on the top rung of Jacob’s ladder. It finishes the old attempts to grasp for power in the world. Now that God has demonstrated his power, applied it, made it actual, those who received a preacher are over and done as old creatures, and the new has begun. This gives the wisdom of a new aeon, not the attempt in the old world to gain a new perspective. Those who have no preacher are not arriving to a *τέλος* but simply coming to nothing.

Then Paul plays a dangerous, but necessary, game with the gnostics (the religious secret knowers) who teach that they have a wisdom only the initiated can get concerning how to climb Jacob’s ladder. Paul says, “But we declare the wisdom of God, a mystery that has been hidden, which God decreed before the ages to our glory” (1 Cor 2:7, translation mine). God decreed it, or said it before the ages, thus he predestined it. But this has been hidden—a mystery—until now! Until when? Until the moment you get your preacher, which means until the crucifixion of Christ is preached presently for you. Paul tells us clearly, “None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him [Isa 64:4]’ God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.” (1 Cor 2:8–10)

1 Corinthians 3 arrives at the problem that plagues the Corinthian church: once you have a preacher, and that one is the spiritual man (1 Cor

2:14–15) then the first thing people do is to make him a local hero. That is, a cult of personality, or a person of power. In other words they separate the words and the person, and idolize the person, rather than hear the word. The reverse also happens, to hate the person rather than hear the word.

Paul says first, “But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh (*σαρκίνοις*), as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh (*σαρκικοί*). For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and walking like old men.” (1 Cor 3:1–3)¹³ What are anthropoids after all? They are people without a preacher! Without a preacher they are running around like chickens with their heads cut off trying to persuade others of their opinion. They have no promise, no faith, nothing to run to in time of trouble—falsely comfortable in good times and without any trust in bad. They have no one to give them the word of Christ that forgives.

After addressing the joint (and not factionalizing) work of preachers, who on the single foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:4–23) Paul comes to his great definition of preachers, “Let a man reckon us as assistants (*ὑπηρέτας*) of Christ and stewards (*οἰκονόμους*) of the mysteries of God.” (1 Cor 4:1, translation mine) The key attribute of the preacher is none other than that of God himself, “As for the rest, what is to be sought in the steward is that they be found faithful.” (1 Cor 4:2, translation mine) Paul is not concerned that he is currently being judged and found wanting by people in Corinth, who are comparing him to Apollos or Peter or for that matter to Christ.

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Cor 4:3–5).

The only commendation a preacher seeks is this, “You have been faithful. Not to the law, but to Christ, that is, to his promise of forgiveness of sins which is the meaning of his grace that he alone gives.” Grace is not a power in the worldly sense. This is why many Bible historians of recent

13. *ἀνθρώπων* (3:3) does not refer to “ordinary men” as the RSV has it, a form of a common mistranslation, as if Christians were extraordinary. That is not the meaning of “pneumatic man.”

centuries have made the mistake of thinking Paul does not concern himself with the forgiveness of sins. That reflects a false assumption that grace is giving something other than forgiveness, which means the gift is power in the old world. But Paul is making his case throughout that this grace, this gift, is not a power; it is a weakness. It is not a possession; it is a freedom. It is not a quality of virtue; it is a new life, "I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another." (1 Cor 4:6) After all, what puffs up? The law. What does it mean to live according to Scripture then? To find the promise of Christ's crucifixion, and apply it.

So, who judges you? What do you have that you did not receive? If you received it, why boast as if you had not received it? Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men, sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. (1 Cor 4:7-9)¹⁴

In this way, Paul leads us to the next great teaching on preaching as foolishness, which compares preachers and hearers. Hearers of the word are kings! Already! There is not anything higher than to be a hearer of the proclamation. In fact, it would be nice if the hearers took the bull by the horns and ruled accordingly. Then the preachers would rule with you. But as it is, the apostles are not on the top of a church pyramid, but on the bottom—exhibited like caged animals sentenced for death. Even angels watch this sport as they get thrown to the lions! Preachers are, after all, sentenced to death. That is what the end of holding the office of preaching is. No wonder preaching is foolishness. Who would want to do it knowing this? Thus he says,

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Cor 4:10-13)

14. RSV slightly revised.

So, in the end, Paul contrasts the hearer and the preacher in a set of opposites: filled/empty, rich/poor, alive/dead, honor/humiliation, homeowners/homeless, blessed/reviled conciliated/slandered. So, in the end, what is the preacher? The preacher is *περικαθάρματα*, the “scum of the world” and *περίψημα*, the “refuse of all things.” Preaching is foolish in the world because in the end the preacher is garbage and scum, just as the Lord planned it.

But before we conclude the matter of preaching as foolishness, and confirm that preaching is not persuasion in any common sense, Paul ends by giving us one more metaphor for a true preacher, specifically an apostle like Paul to Corinth:

I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to counsel you as my beloved children. For though you have myriad guardians¹⁵ in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, become imitators of me. (1 Cor 4:14–16, translation mine)

Mimesis is not a way of acquiring knowledge, but is the direct imitation of Paul the preacher. “Preach like I do,” he is saying. How is that? What is preaching? It is learning the distinction of law and gospel and giving these words to the ungodly. It is not climbing Jacob’s ladder in doctrine and descending in ethics. It is not the rhetoric of persuasion. But it is power. The dynamite of his preaching is in the Word, who is Christ—crucified, and so in the simple word of Christ: “I forgive you.” Anything else is fluff, or “puffed up,” but has no dynamite in it. Unfortunately for the time being, this power is hidden under the sign of its opposite—weakness.

So Paul gave the Corinthians a final word on the foolishness of preaching, “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor 4:19–21). Such is the question of a father who knows when children have been caught up in false preachers who confused persuasion with their proper work, which is the foolishness of letting the word do its work as *verbum reale*.

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15. The same word is used in Gal 3:24–25 for pedagogues, teachers, disciplinarians.

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