

Reform School: We are People of the Word

This is the fifth message in a five-part series of sermons offered for the glory of God in honor of John Calvin's 500th Birthday (July 12, 2009). They are intended to illustrate the connections between our Reformed faith and the Bible.

**A Sermon Preached by
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In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Genesis 1:1-3 NRSV

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:1-4 NRSV

Presbyterians are people of the Word. We believe that God has been gracious enough to reveal himself in His Word, and we trust His Word as God's voice speaking to us today. Because we love the Word, Presbyterians tend to love words . . . perhaps too much.

I was talking to my son Andrew the other night and – sensing a teachable moment – I asked him about worship and what he thought about it. “What do we do in worship?” I asked. “Talk and sing, that’s pretty much it,” he replied with a huff. I felt the need to point out other things we do, too, but he was right. Sometimes to a seven year old worship must seem like

words, words, words: all talk and no action. It certainly was a teachable moment: I, of course, was the one being taught.

Most often when Presbyterians think of God's Word we think first of the Bible. And indeed, the Bible is God's Word to us. But long before there was a Bible God's Word already existed. Remember the passage from Genesis: it tells us that God's Word was around from the very beginning. Indeed, God created the world with His words, saying, "Let there be..." And there was. And our second lesson, the passage from John's Gospel, tells us that God's creative and pre-existing Word isn't just a collection of nouns and verbs but a person: Jesus Christ.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

Long before the Word of God became words on a page the Word of God was a living and creative Word calling our world into being and speaking truth through the prophets. Jesus is that Word.

The Letter to the Hebrews puts the connection between God's Word and our world quite plainly:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

Hebrews 1:1-2 NRSV

God has never been silent. And he has spoken to us most clearly and loudly when, in Jesus Christ,

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14 NRSV

Jesus is God's first and last and most clearly articulated Word to us.

What do you think God says to us in Jesus? This question could take more than a lifetime to answer but I think we could begin by saying that Jesus is God's Word saying ...

- That we are accepted.
- That we matter.
- That we are worth dying for.

So when Reformed Christians speak of the Word of God our first thought is of Jesus, not Scripture.

By the way, sometimes world religion classes compare Christianity with Islam and Judaism, with each faith having a unique understanding of God's Word. Underneath Islam the teacher will write "The Koran." Underneath Judaism they'll write, "The Torah." And underneath Christianity they'll write, "The Bible." But this isn't completely accurate. As strange as it may sound to others' ears, for us the best and most perfect Word of God is not a book but a person: Jesus.

The Bible is also the Word of God to us. This is because it is the witness *without parallel* to the living Word of God, Jesus. Other books speak of God and godly matters, but the Bible is uniquely authoritative when it comes to understanding what God is saying to us today.

One of the hallmarks of the Reformation was a simple Latin phrase: *sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone." You see by the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic church had developed a set of teachings alongside the Bible. These teachings had been issued by Popes, and they had the same weight as Scripture—even when they had no basis in Scripture at all. For example, the church at the time taught that by making an offering to God's work you could shorten your anticipated time in post-death purgatory, which, they further explained, was kind of a waiting room for Heaven. People lined up to give and the church raised huge amounts of money based on this teaching. The problem was that the Bible never says that you can buy your way into Heaven, and it never speaks of a place called purgatory.

When Martin Luther pointed this out to his Roman Catholic superiors they countered that it was the prerogative of the Pope to make such declarations. That's where Luther drew the line and in his famous "95 Theses" he insisted that Scripture alone is the test of true teaching in the church. John Calvin followed Luther's lead and went further. Whenever there was a question of what the church in Geneva – where Calvin was

pastor -- should do (e.g., how it should worship, or be organized, or what it should teach) Calvin turned to Scripture, not to papal teachings, for answers.

That's why Scripture remains such an essential part of our worship services. We read the Bible aloud every week so that we can hear for ourselves God speaking to us. By the way, ever wonder why we don't try to save a few moments each week by simply listing the scripture citation and having everyone read it silently to themselves? Scripture itself tells us why. Romans 10:17 – "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." (RSV) It doesn't say faith comes by "reading." That's why we *listen* for God's Word as it is spoken to us each week.

If the Bible is the Word of God because it bears witness to Jesus, who is the living Word of God, then preaching is God's Word, because it brings the written Word -- Scripture -- to life, our lives. Yes, you heard me correctly. John Calvin taught and Reformed Christians believe that the preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God. In our Book of Confessions it says plainly, "when [Scripture] ... is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed." [The Second Helvetic Confession]

I know what you're thinking. "I've heard plenty of sermons that I wouldn't exactly call the Word of God." I hear you. But can you imagine what I'm thinking as I prepare a sermon? "I can barely write out a grocery list, God. How am I supposed to speak for you?" Reformed Christians make a huge claim: when a duly called pastor preaches from the Bible God is speaking in that moment to the gathered faithful. This is different from saying, that everything a pastor says is God's Word or that every person hears God's Word as it is spoken in a sermon. What we do believe is that in this thing that is happening right now – with me speaking and you listening – God is somehow at work and by the power of His Holy Spirit faith is being built.

How this all works is a mystery, yes. When my other son, Aaron, was four I found him deep in thought, lying on his bed, writing on one of my yellow legal pads that I use to help me organize my thoughts for preaching. I asked him what he was doing. "Writing my sermon," he replied matter of factly, without looking up. When I took a look at exactly what he was writing it was just a collection of scribbles and lines, completely incomprehensible to me. Which I imagine is how you've felt, many times,

listening to me and others preach – that what we were saying was completely incomprehensible. The good news for both of us is that God intervenes to make preaching powerful, even when we don't fully understand it at a conscious level.

The miracle of preaching doesn't depend on me or you. Just like God made the first humans out of some clay and water, God makes something good happen when we offer our words and our ears to him in worship. I grew up in a church where the pastor had tremendous ministry gifts in many areas. Preaching wasn't one of them. I can't remember a phrase, story, or word of advice from a single sermon he ever preached. But looking back I know that somehow God was speaking to me through that man each Sunday morning. I would not be standing here today if it were not so. I take great comfort in knowing that if God can turn water into wine, God can take my words and turn them into his Word as they move through the air from my lips to your heart and mind.

Reformed Christians trust in

- the *living* Word of God, Jesus,
- the *written* Word of God, the Bible, and
- the *spoken* Word of God, preaching.

All that remains is what we call the *visible* Word of God: the sacraments.

Calvin taught that God's grace comes to us in many ways, but the way that our minds can most easily apprehend this grace is through the two sacraments that he recognized: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We observe these as the only sacraments because God commanded us to do them in the Bible and God attached promises to them. God knows that sometimes words alone aren't enough. Actions need to accompany them for us to believe.

God wants us to believe his Word of love and hope but he knows we put up all kinds of fancy filters and barriers that make it hard for us to hear him. So he cuts through that by calling us to do things that are so elementary, so fundamental, that we've been doing them since we were kids: he asks us to wash in the waters of Baptism and he asks us to eat at his Table. When we do these things, with words of scripture spoken over them, God's Word does an end run around our logical thinking and simply comes inside of us.

God knows that we are like infants. And how do infants learn about the world around them? Is it through asking questions? No. Is it through hearing? Is it through seeing? No. Their primary way of learning is through their mouths. If they want to know something they put it in their mouths. So in the Lord's Supper God has packaged his living Word – Jesus – in the form of bread and juice – and allows us to take him into our mouths – that we might truly know him.

Over the past several weeks of Reform School we've been focusing on what is unique to the Presbyterian way of being Christian. But there is more uniting us with other Christians than separating us from other Christians. It's sad that wars have been fought over the so-called proper understanding of the sacraments, because in the end all Christians of faith believe that in the sacraments we somehow receive God in a tangible way.

Frank McCourt was an Irish Catholic through and through and in his best-selling memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, he recounts what it was like to grow up in Ireland when Protestants and Catholics were deeply at odds with each other. One day when he was still small his grandmother saw his hair and couldn't stand it. It was a Sunday morning, right before Mass.

“Presbyterian hair,” she called it with disgust. “She spat twice on my head. “Grandma, will you please stop spitting on my head,” I countered. “If you have anything to say, Shut up,” she replied.

McCourt continues,

“We ran to the church... [and] arrived just in time to see the last of the boys leaving the altar rail where the priest stood with the chalice and the host, glaring at me. Then he placed on my tongue the wafer, the body and blood of Jesus. At last, at last. It's on my tongue. I draw it back. It stuck. I had God glued to the roof of my mouth. I could hear the [head]master's voice. ‘Don't let that host touch your teeth for if you bite God in two you'll roast in hell for eternity.’ I tried to get God down with my tongue, but the priest hissed at me. ‘Stop that clucking and get back to your seat.’ God was good. He melted and I swallowed Him and now at last I was a member of the True Church, an official sinner.

Presbyterians, of course, experience the Lord's Supper in a different way from Roman Catholics even today. But one thing is the same. In the bread and cup somehow we receive and experience the visible Word of God. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we believe that God's good Word passes right through our lips.

Presbyterians are people of the Word.

- In Christ we find the living Word.
- In Scripture the written Word.
- In preaching the spoken Word.
- And in the sacraments the visible Word.

May God's Word always speak not just to our ears, but to our hearts as well. Amen.

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