

# Voices: What we forget about preaching

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A piece of preaching advice from John Calvin has affected both the way I preach and write more than any other piece of advice I've ever received.

The preacher, Calvin wrote, should primarily and always preach to themselves, recognizing that they are "students of the Word" just as much as the congregants. "When I climb into the pulpit, it is not simply to instruct others. I do not exclude myself, since I myself must remain a student as well."

For the preacher who is not preaching to themselves as much as to the congregation, Calvin had frightening words: "It would be better if he were to break his neck while climbing into the pulpit."

Why such harsh language, and why have his words stuck with me so strongly?

I believe Calvin is revealing something about the gospel that those of us in ministry tend to forget.

## From worship to sermon?

I think most of us, ministers and laypeople, equate preaching with teaching. The sermon is the part of the worship service where the pastor teaches about the Bible, using it to present facts about the afterlife or reasons to be involved in a particular social cause.

In fact, the language we use during a service very often implies that the sermon is *not* a part of our worship.

By “worship,” we usually mean “music.” Consequently, I often hear phrases like, “Let us transition from worship to the sermon,” again implying that worship ceases once the pastor takes the pulpit.

Our language seems to imply that, when the church gathers, it worships God through song and then, after worshipping, receives information based, in one way or another, on the Bible.

## **Teaching and preaching**

It should give us pause to think that worship comprises only a portion of our worship service.

This problem arises, I would argue, because preaching and teaching are not the same thing, biblically speaking.

“Teaching,” as it relates to the church, is a particular spiritual gifting. It isn’t a charge given to all Christians and is closely related to the discipleship process in the New Testament.

“Preaching,” in the original biblical sense, is a responsibility given to all Christians. In fact, the most common word for “preach” in the New Testament is “euangelizo,” a word that would come into English as “evangelize.”

“Teaching” in the New Testament usually means assisting others in growing in Christlikeness and is a spiritual gift given to some within the church. “Preaching,” meanwhile, also translated as “evangelizing” or “witnessing,” is the responsibility of all Christians to declare the work of God and the coming of God’s kingdom.

# The role of the sermon

So what are we doing when we gather on Sunday mornings, and where does the sermon fit into it?

It's worth remembering that, historically, the Protestant reformers substituted the Eucharist in the Catholic Mass with the preaching of the Word; the sermon replaced Communion as the "high point" of the service.

Communion, in Catholicism then and now, is the point of the service where God is most fully revealed and God's presence most immediately manifested.

We as Protestants believe much the same thing about the preaching of the Word. Preaching isn't teaching about something that happened in the past or the doctrinal content of the Bible, though both of those things have their place within the church.

Public preaching in the worship setting is, rather, the initiation of a unique encounter with God. Preaching is the recounting of the work of God, the declaration of the new state of the world because of God's actions in Christ.

Calvin's words were so stark because he recognized that a sermon is more than a scholar of the Bible telling congregants how to think or what to do: it is an invitation for God to enter that space and be with God's people in a unique, intense and dangerous way.

Those in preaching ministry should think of themselves not as teachers informing the less spiritually educated but as conduits for the Spirit to work in the lives of those gathered. The words we speak on Sunday mornings or the rest of the week when we proclaim the Word are not our own. Rather, to borrow a phrase from Matthew, we pray that they would be "the Spirit of the Father speaking through you."

Preaching is not teaching history or doctrine; preaching is the proclaiming of the mighty act of God in Jesus Christ, reflected in all of Scripture, done in the bold hope that God might take up those words as God's own.

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