Preaching and the Presence of God in Christ

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Allen Ross states this about worship,

For worship to be as glorious as it should be, for it to lift people out of their mundane cares and fill them with adoration and praise, for it to be life-changing and life-defining experience it was designed to be, it must be inspired by a vision so great and so glorious that what we call worship will be transformed from a routine gathering into a *transcendent meeting with the living God.* When that happens, then we will be caught in our spirits to join the heavenly choirs of angels who even now are gathered around the throne of God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The question is, what must happen in gathered worship on the Lord's Day for there to be "a transcendent meeting with the living God." It is my belief that God is truly present in His Word by the Spirit, especially in the preaching of his word. When the word of God is faithfully proclaimed, the preaching event becomes the means by which the Lord Jesus, himself, is savingly present. Preaching is not merely instruction or exhortation; it is the moment in which the Triune God reveals himself, speaks to his people, convicts, comforts, and calls them to himself.

Biblical Foundations:

The basis for understanding preaching in this manner is God's self-revelation of himself. God has chosen to reveal himself by speaking. Al Mohler is right: "We preach because God has spoken." [[2]](#footnote-2) In Genesis 1:1 there is a short statement of fact regarding God. He appears with these words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This is quickly followed by him speaking, "Then God said…"

The God who speaks is also the God who says, "Let us create man in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26). The creation of male and female is then followed by words that God speaks to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it (1:28). In Genesis 2 the creation of man is followed by God speaking a command to eat freely of every tree in the garden with the exception of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Following the creation of woman, the man speaks for the first time, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh…" (2:23). The God who reveals himself by speaking, created humanity in his own image, speaks to them and gives them the capacity to speak.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The creation account sets the tone for God's self-disclosure, he speaks. One of the most provocative scenes regarding God's demonstrative self-revelation is in Exodus 33-34. Moses had seen God descend on Sinai in the visible form of a cloud, accompanied by thunder, lightning, smoke, and fire. He then ascended up into the thick cloud on Sinai to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments and instructions regarding Israel. But he wanted more. Moses pleads with God, "Please, show me Your glory" (33:18).

Yahweh, the only true and living God, responded to Moses’ request with a promise to proclaim his name. He also promises to have “all his goodness” pass before Moses. What is meant by “all my goodness?” The use of the word “goodness” in other contexts denotes the sense of “the best” (cf. Gen 24:10) or in the case of something visible, “loveliness/splendor” (Hos 10:11) so the translation could actually read, “I will cause my full splendor to pass in front of you.” God would then be promising Moses a chance to encounter God’s glory, something so splendid, the best thing he could possibly encounter so that he would know without a doubt it was God’s revealed presence. Moses would not be able to see God's face, for no one can see God and live. Instead, he would be hidden in a cleft of a rock and see the back, or the afterglow of God’s full glory.

The disclosure of God's splendid glory is signaled by the words, “descended…and stood” (Ex. 34:5). This represents a standard way of describing what otherwise is not easily comprehended by humans, that is, God manifesting himself personally in Moses’ presence. "Descended…and stood" reflects God as a real personal being. Moses did not perceive a concept, feeling, or mystical impression. No, he personally met the one true living God, Yahweh.[[4]](#footnote-4)

God then proclaimed his name twice for emphasis (34:6). There could be no mistake about what Moses was experiencing: the glory of Yahweh. Along with proclaiming his name, God declares five attributes that characterize Him (34:6-7), all of which would be welcome to Moses and the Israelites, who very much needed His compassion and forgiveness for the gross idolatry they had recently committed. Yahweh proclaims that he is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in goodness (חֶסֶד), and he is abounding in truth, and forgiving. God then issues a corrective against the natural human tendency to accept grace on the assumption that because an infinite God can produce an infinite amount of grace, sin has no significance. God promises to judge sin.

Moses responds to God’s glory with immediate worship: “made haste and bowed his face toward the earth and worshipped" (34:8). When in the presence of God, one must honor him not only by actions but also in heart or thought. Moses responds in worship because God manifested his glory to him. What is striking is that Moses’ worship here seems intensified when set against the backdrop of his previous encounters with God, beginning with the burning bush, continuing through the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, and repeated manifestations of God’s power and guidance. Yet this encounter appears to be the most dramatic and intimate of all.

But, what can we actually say about this event? Moses requests to see God's glory. Yet, no one can see God and live. So, God hides him in the cleft of the rock and allows him to see a glimpse. But what stands at the heart of the display of God's incredible presence and glory is not the visual, but the audible. The text does not describe the glimpse that Moses saw, it only describes what he heard.

Note the verbs in Exodus 34:5: *“*The LORD *descended… stood…* and *proclaimed.”* These actions connect God’s real, personal presence with his speaking. The glory of God was revealed to Moses supremely through the proclamation of his name and character. This pattern of revelation, where God makes himself known by speaking through his word, prepares us to understand how he continues to reveal his glory today, not in visions or spectacles, but in the faithful preaching of God's word.

Throughout the Old Testament, God's self-revelation is closely tied to the words he speaks. In the opening of the New Testament, the word that God has spoken through the ages is now enfleshed in the person of the Lord Jesus,[[5]](#footnote-5)

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 were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:1-3, 14).

The choice to describe the Lord Jesus as *the Word* is telling. Jesus becomes the ultimate, greater, and final Word that God has spoken. This Word is more than the audible declarations that accompanied manifestations of God’s glory in the past. It is the Word embodied, a person who can be seen and touched (cf*.* 1 John 1:1–3). Yet because Jesus is the incarnate Word, there remains a profound emphasis on hearing, responding to, and keeping the words he speaks. Near the end of John’s Gospel, as Jesus prepares his disciples for a time when he will no longer be visibly with them, he stresses the abiding power of his words: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me…and I will love him and manifest myself to him…If you abide in me my words abide in you" (Jn 14:21; 15:7).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The ascension of the Lord Jesus to the right hand of the Father does not negate his true presence among his people. Jesus told his disciples that when he left, they would do greater works, and that it was better for him to go away. In fact, the beatitude at the end of John's gospel is given not to the one who sees the resurrected Jesus bodily and believes, but to those "who have not seen yet believe" (Jn 21:29). The catalyst for believing, while not seeing, is the abiding words of Jesus, "but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 21:31).

With the ascension of the Lord Jesus, the apostolic preaching of the gospel becomes the means by which people encounter the incarnate Word and his saving presence. Although many texts support this idea, based on my comments on Exodus 33–34, I want to focus briefly on 2 Corinthians 3–4.

2 Corinthians 3–4 is set against the backdrop of the Sinai event. Paul references Moses’ descent after his extraordinary encounter with God. When Moses came down from the mountain, his face radiated the glory of God, which made the people afraid to come near him. As a practical solution, Moses wore a veil to cover his face.

Paul uses Moses and the remarkable events of Exodus 34 to argue that the glory associated with the gospel far surpasses the glory Moses saw, experienced, and even reflected on his face when he came down from Sinai. According to Paul, believers see a greater glory than Moses on Sinai, and it is not a glory that diminishes like it did on Moses's face or remains static, but through the gospel, it is increasing "from glory to glory" (2 Cor 3:18).

It is important not to miss what Paul is saying: believers are able to behold a greater and far surpassing glory than Moses did on Sinai. This beholding of God's glory is not limited to a special occasion after pleading with God to see his glory. The believer is able to encounter more of God's glory than Moses could dream and to do so repeatedly and continually. And the way believers are able to behold the glory of God in the Lord Jesus is through the preaching of the gospel: "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord…For it is God who commanded light to shine out of the darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:5-6).

The response of Moses following his encounter with God on Sinai was worship. So overcome by what he had experienced, he immediately bowed down and worshiped the glorious God. For the believer, the proclamation of the gospel brings an encounter with the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, a glory far surpassing even the Sinai event. Knowing that in the preaching event we are coming face to face with the living God should deepen our sense of reverence and elevate our worship. If Moses fell to the ground before a partial glimpse of God’s glory, how much more should we approach the preaching event in gathered worship with awe, knowing that in the gospel we behold the fullness of God’s glory revealed in his Son.

Preaching and the Reformation

Any conversation about reforming worship in general, and preaching in particular, must reckon with the Reformation. The Reformers rightly placed the reading and preaching of God’s Word at the heart of gathered worship. They believed that the all-sufficient Christ is savingly present in His Word. This understanding marked a significant departure from the medieval church, which regarded the Mass as the center of worship and the primary means by which God was present to His people.[[7]](#footnote-7) Roland Bainton sums this up, "The Reformation gave centrality to the sermon. The pulpit was higher than the altar, for Luther held that salvation is through the Word and without the Word the elements are devoid of sacramental quality, but the Word is sterile unless it is spoken."[[8]](#footnote-8)

The language of “real presence” is most often associated with Luther’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper, he also affirmed the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the Word. For Luther, the sermon was not merely instruction, it was the moment in which one actually encountered God. Even with his high view of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, he believed the Sacrament was nothing without the Word. As he saw it, the Supper was substantial, but the sermon was central.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Calvin differed with Luther on the nature of the Sacraments, but he understood preaching in a similar manner. He believed that through the faithful proclamation of Scripture, God makes Himself savingly present to His people. Preaching, for Calvin, was not only an act of worship, it was "something of a divine epiphany."[[10]](#footnote-10)

Bringing It All Together

The Reformers were right in starting with the word of God and preaching to reform the church. Any consideration of reforming worship must be underlined by a consideration of one's theology of the word of God and the preaching of God's word. We can start reforming the various elements of gathered worship, but if we fail to begin with preaching, then it will all be for nothing.

From this discussion, my conviction is that preaching is not merely words about God but, when faithfully exposited, is the word of God. And since God has chosen to reveal himself in his Word, the preaching event becomes a place where God is truly present. This is not to suggest that the other elements of gathered worship are unimportant or lack the presence of God. On the contrary, when we sing the Word, pray the Word, and read the Word, God by His Spirit is powerfully at work among His people. Yet in a unique way, preaching remains the central means by which the living Christ is proclaimed and His voice is heard, and he walks in the midst his church.

The purpose of preaching is to effect an encounter with the glorious God in Christ by the Spirit in his Word. Donald Miller writes, "No man has really preached until the two-sided encounter between him and the congregation has given way to three-sided encounter, where God himself becomes one of the living parties to it."[[11]](#footnote-11) Every preacher should pray and long in their gathered worship what John Stott describes:

The most privileged and moving experience a preacher can ever have is when, in the middle of the sermon, a strange hush descends upon the congregation. The sleepers have woken up, the coughers have stopped coughing, and the fidgeters are sitting still. No eyes or minds are wandering everybody is attending, though not at the preacher. For the preacher is forgotten, and the people are face to face with the living God, listening to his still small voice.[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 39. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Albert Mohler, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 39, Kindle. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Word: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1996), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Douglas Stuart, *Exodus,* New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 714. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jonathan Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testatment: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study*, vol 42, *New Studies in Biblical Theology,* ed. D.A. Carson(Downers Grove: IVP, 2017), 14. One of the functions of John's prologue is how reader understands Jesus in the light of the Old Testament. For the first five verses of John, the opening verses of Genesis are critical. But the final five verses reflect the Sinai event in Exodus 33-34. According to John, the incarnate Word is the "eschatological fulfillment of the Sinai covenant, a revelation of glory that fulfills the Sinai covenant by qualitatively surpassing it." Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Theme in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 50. See also Alexander Tsutserov, *Glory, Grace, and Truth: Ratification of the Sinaitic Covenant According to the Gospel of John* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 189-240 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament*, 14-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert Kolb and Carl Trueman, *Between Wittenburg and Geneva: Lutheran and Reformed Theology in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017)*,* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1950), 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. J. Mark Beach, "The Real Presence of Christ in Preaching of the Gospel: Luther and Calvin on the Nature of Preaching," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John H. Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in Light of Recent Research," *Review and Expositor* 84, (1989): 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Donald Miller, *Fire In Thy Mouth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John Stott, *The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, 1982), 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)