

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN PREACHING

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INTRODUCTION

The Holy Spirit is indispensable to the task of effective preaching. Charles Haddon Spurgeon is reported to have climbed the fifteen steps leading up to the pulpit in the Metropolitan Tabernacle while he muttered at each step, “I believe in the Holy Ghost.”¹ Spurgeon exhorted his students to depend on the Holy Spirit in preaching: “If there is to be a Divine result from God’s Word, the Holy Spirit must go forth with it.”² Stephen Olford contended, “Only the Holy Spirit can transform a manuscript into a message.”³ How can we preach messages that bring about divine results? The answer lies in “a fresh and continual dependence on the Holy Spirit.”⁴

Even though the intent of the article is not to provide an exhaustive treatment on the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching, I will attempt to give a general overview to the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching by amplifying the preacher’s dependence on the Holy Spirit in four areas: (1) the preacher’s dependence on the Holy Spirit in his daily life, (2) the preacher’s dependence on the Holy Spirit in his preparation, (3) the preacher’s dependence on the Holy Spirit in the preaching event, and (4) the preacher’s dependence on the work of Holy Spirit among his audience.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE PREACHER

The proclaimer of the Word must depend on the Holy Spirit in his daily life. The preacher’s dependence on the Holy Spirit occurs when he is aware of what the Holy Spirit has done in his life and then when he is eager to obey the commandments of the Word of God in regard to the Holy Spirit. When a person places his or her faith in Jesus as Savior

¹John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 334.

²Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1973), 339.

³Stephen Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: B&H, 1998), 214.

⁴Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 153.

and Lord, the Holy Spirit brings to pass several dynamics to the life of the believer. First, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer at the moment of conversion (Romans 8:9). The Holy Spirit does not come in and then move out when a believer sins like a person who checks in and out at the hotel. The Holy Spirit comes into the believer's life and finds a permanent residence there. When the preacher is aware that God in His grace saved him, he should be eternally grateful for the work of the Spirit in his life.

Second, when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit seals the believer (Ephesians 1:13). The sealing refers to an official mark of identification placed on a letter, contract, or other document. That document was officially under the authority of the person whose insignia was on the seal. When one becomes a believer in Jesus Christ, he or she is placed under the authority of Jesus Christ. When the preacher is aware that he has been sealed by the Holy Spirit, he should rejoice that he no longer is under the authority of Satan but under the authority of Christ!

Third, the Holy Spirit baptizes the believer at the moment of conversion (1 Corinthians 12: 13). Many sincere Christians seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit; however, nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to seek it. The baptism of the Holy Spirit takes place in one's life when the person gives his or her life to Jesus Christ. I believe that one does not receive the Holy Spirit in parts but in His entirety at the moment of conversion. When the proclaimer of God's Word is aware that he has been baptized by the Holy Spirit, it should motivate him to seek even greater intimacy with God through the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit provides discernment to the person in relation to his call to preach. God calls individuals to the ministry of proclamation (Jeremiah 1:4-5). When a man receives the call from God to ministry, the Holy Spirit provides discernment to the nature and the purpose of the call (Acts 9: 6-17). The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to individuals when they trust Jesus as Savior and Lord (Romans 12: 3-8; 1 Corinthians 12: 8-11, 27-31; Ephesians 4: 11-12; 1 Peter 4: 10-11). Just as a believer discerns by the Holy Spirit that he has been called to the ministry, he also discerns what his spiritual gifts may be—whether they are knowledge, wisdom, preaching, teaching, or encouragement, among others.

To depend on the Holy Spirit in preaching, one must be aware of what the Holy Spirit has done in his life. His awareness of the Holy Spirit's indwelling, sealing, baptism, and help with discerning the call to preach, should encourage him to be obedient to the commandments of the Word of God in regard to the Holy Spirit.

The Bible gives four specific commands for the believer in relation to the Holy Spirit. Two commandments are negative and two commandments are positive. The first negative command is for believers not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). Believers grieve the Holy Spirit when they sin. When I tell my seven-year-old daughter not to do something and she disobeys, it grieves me deeply. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is grieved when believers lie, steal, harbor bitterness and unforgiving spirits. A single sin grieves the Holy Spirit. The moment the Holy Spirit convicts believers of a specific sin, they are to confess it and renounce it through the power of God (Proverbs 28:13).

Second, believers are not to quench the Holy Spirit of God (1 Thessalonians 5:19). The word "quench" means to put out the fire, stifle, smother, suppress. When believers

suppress what the Holy Spirit wants to do through them, the Holy Spirit is quenched. When believers say “yes” to sin, they grieve the Holy Spirit; when believers say “no” to what He wants to do through them, the Holy Spirit is quenched. One of the ways believers quench the Holy Spirit is when they are not willing to witness to unbelievers. Approximately ninety-five to ninety-seven percent of American Christians do not share their faith on a regular basis. According to one evangelism specialist, no more than five percent of ministerial staff leadership has ever led a lost person to Christ through a “one to one relationship.”⁵ When believers refuse to witness, they quench the Holy Spirit of God.

The way believers do not grieve or quench the Holy Spirit is when they obey two positive commands. First, we are told to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5: 17-21). Several ideas communicated from πληροῦσθε help us understand what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. One idea is that of direction, like a wind blowing into the sails of the ship provides direction to it. Another idea is one of permeation, like how salt penetrates meat in order to preserve it and flavor it. A third idea is one of total control, like a person who is drunk is not in control of his or her behavior. From these ideas, we can derive that to be filled with the Spirit means to be directed, permeated, and controlled by the Holy Spirit. When believers are tempted to quench and grieve the Holy Spirit, they need to ask God to fill them with His Spirit.

The second command in relation to the Holy Spirit is to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5: 16-26). Walking in the Spirit is a daily awareness and surrender to the Holy Spirit of God. As believers go through the day, they are to surrender their desires, attitudes, and passions to the total control of the Holy Spirit, who brings about the fruit of the Spirit to their lives (Galatians 5:22-23). When believers are walking in the Spirit, they are able not to grieve or quench the Holy Spirit. A delicate difference between filling and walking in the Spirit lies in how walking in the Spirit is a daily awareness of the control of the Holy Spirit while being filled with the Spirit is being empowered for certain tasks, which for preachers includes the preaching event.

When I prepare for the preaching event, I seek dependence on the Holy Spirit in my daily life. I thank God for what the Holy Spirit has done for me personally through His indwelling, His sealing, His baptism, His calling, and His spiritual gifts. Then I ask God to help me not grieve or quench the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit brings conviction in any of these areas I ask the Lord to bring cleansing, forgiveness, and transformation. I plead with the Lord to fill me with the Holy Spirit so that I may have power to preach. When I conclude my prayer, I ask the Lord to allow me to walk in the Spirit throughout the day so that I may not miss opportunities to share my faith with those He is going to put in my path that day.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PREPARATION

In addition to dependence on the Holy Spirit in his daily life, the preacher must be willing to depend on the Holy Spirit in his preparation for the task of preaching. The Holy

⁵Jay Strack and Robert Witty, *Do the Work of an Evangelist* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 29.

Spirit has been abused by some preachers who wait to the last moment for God to give them a message using Mark 3:11 as a proof text. In the passage, Jesus stated, “But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that: for it not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.”⁶ The problem with this rationale is that in the context of Mark 3:11 the audience is persecuted Christians not procrastinating preachers.

To use the Holy Spirit as a pretext for not spending adequate time in preparation is to ignore an exhortation from Paul in 2 Timothy 2:15: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The words “diligent” and “worker” convey ideas of hard work and demanding labor. Spurgeon noted aptly, “I cannot imagine the Spirit waiting at the door of a sluggard, and supplying the deficiencies created by indolence.”⁷ As the preacher does the hard work of exegesis, employing good hermeneutics and homiletics, he will be able to “to lay open the mind of the Holy Spirit in the biblical text.”⁸

Even though the techniques of sermon preparation are beyond the scope of this paper, I feel it is imperative to elucidate the role of the Holy Spirit’s illumination during sermon preparation. Illumination is neither revelation nor inspiration. The Holy Spirit was an agent in revelation of His Word (1 Corinthians 2:10). Inspiration is the process by which “men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Timothy 1:21). The human writers of the Bible received revelation when God inspired Scripture. Illumination enables believers to comprehend “God’s truth in the final and complete revelation of it in Scripture.”⁹ Jesus instructed his disciples in John 16:13: “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all the truth.” The Holy Spirit is the agent of illumination.

When the preacher exegetes a passage and toils with the tasks of hermeneutics and homiletics, he must ask throughout the process for illumination by the Holy Spirit. Whether it is reading the passage, examining commentaries, or doing word studies, the proclaimer of the Word must pray for the Holy Spirit’s enablement in comprehension of the passage. Whether it is looking for appropriate illustrations, crafting strategy for argumentation, or arriving to application points, the preacher must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit as the agent who helps to make truth known not only to the preacher but also to the audience. Whether it is looking for an acute title, arranging the message around themes, movement, and points, or preparing a listening guide for the audience, the preacher must depend on the Holy Spirit to help him understand the passage and the best ways to communicate it to his audience.

⁶All quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

⁷Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Lectures to His Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945), 191.

⁸Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 28.

⁹John MacArthur, *Preaching* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 6.

In my experience as a pastor, who has had responsibility to prepare at least three messages weekly, I faced at least two major challenges in preparation. The first had to do with planning my messages. Earlier in my ministry, I planned on Monday what I felt God wanted me to preach on Sunday. Later, I realized the benefits of planning my messages three to six months in advance: “the Holy Spirit became a guide who could see further into the future than the pastor could anticipate.”¹⁰ In response to those who feel that planning one’s messages does not fully depend on the Holy Spirit because it does take into account congregational needs, the preacher can be assured that God is aware of “the congregational needs just as well three months in advance as He does three days ahead of time.”¹¹ If the Holy Spirit leads the preacher to other texts besides the ones planned, he should be obedient to the immediate prompting of the Holy Spirit. Over the years, even though the preaching plan became a beneficial tool, I attempted not to allow it to take precedence over the Holy Spirit’s immediate leadership.

The second challenge in preparation was learning to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit when facing major catastrophic events. When terrorist attacks on September 11th took place, I felt a departure from the preaching plan was necessary in order to address the attack and speak to the presence and nature of evil in the world. On August 28th, 2005, I was flying from a speaking engagement in Seattle to New Orleans. My plans were to arrive late Saturday in New Orleans so that I could speak at the church I pastored at that time on Sunday morning. Although my flight was delayed for several hours because of hurricane Katrina looming in the Gulf of Mexico, it was the last flight allowed to land in Louis Armstrong International Airport Sunday morning. Amazingly, the first series of messages planned for that dreadful Sunday was about how to respond to the storms of life as a family. Because the mandatory evacuation in New Orleans did not include suburb of my church, we went ahead with Sunday morning services. Even though the two services were abbreviated in order to encourage church members to evacuate, I felt that I needed to deliver the message. That message became a springboard for the five weeks following Katrina, challenging our church to lead in recovery efforts.

I learned from my ministry that facing the preparatory challenges of advanced planning and responding to catastrophic events are possible with continual dependence on the Holy Spirit. From September 11th, I learned that sometimes the pastor must deviate from his preaching schedule, led by the Holy Spirit, in order to address the current crisis. From my experience with Hurricane Katrina, I learned that the Holy Spirit could use the theme of the message planned in advance to address major catastrophes.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PROCLAMATION

When the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit in his daily life and then with preparation of the messages, he must be careful to depend on the Holy Spirit as he delivers the message. Spurgeon commented on the importance of depending on the Holy Spirit in delivery, “It were better to speak six words in the power of the Holy Ghost than to preach

¹⁰Joe Cothen, *The Pulpit Is Waiting* (Grenta: Pelican, 1998), 56.

¹¹Stephen Rummage, *Planning Your Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 24.

seventy years worth of sermons without the Spirit.”¹² In the analysis of the delivery in which the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit, the following four salient features are noteworthy: the goal, the substance, the focus, the anointing, and challenges in delivery. The goal of the preacher in proclamation is articulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:4: “And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power.” As the preacher delivers his message, his goal is not to demonstrate his eloquence or erudition but to allow God to manifest His Spirit and power through the message.

The manifestation of Spirit and power through the message is possible when the substance of the message is the Word of God. Paul put forth the content of his message in 2 Corinthians 2: 1: “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God.” The “testimony of God” refers to God’s revealed Scripture. Just as the preacher is confident in the inspiration of the Word and seeks the illumination of the Holy Spirit in preparation, he should not depart from God’s revealed Scripture in delivery. When the substance of the message is Scripture, the preacher must also be reminded that the focus of delivery is the person of Jesus Christ. Paul continued in 2 Corinthians 2:2: “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” The ministry of the Holy Spirit includes testifying of Jesus (John 15:26) as well as bringing glory to Christ (John 16:12-14). When the focus in delivery is on Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit fulfills His role and demonstrates power in the process.

One way to describe the demonstration of the Holy Spirit and power is in terms of the “anointing” of the message. A definition of anointed delivery may be elusive, but “when anointing is present, people know it; when it is absent, they also know it.”¹³ In a recent dissertation, Landon Dowden identified three characteristics of anointing in delivery: boldness, clarity of speech, and a sense of peace.¹⁴ Boldness was not the authority to share whatever the preacher desires, but the courage to declare what God commands. Clarity of speech is evident not only in the proclamation of the message but also in the liberty of utterance. A sense of peace is the work of the Spirit in delivery when panic and frustration are eliminated and substituted with an “aura of relaxed naturalness.”¹⁵

In my ministry, I faced two major challenges in relation to the dependence on the Holy Spirit in delivery. The first has been to adapt to the unpredictable factors surrounding the preaching event. One may plan, prepare, and pray and then during the service the testimony goes longer than anticipated. Does the preacher then preach everything or half of what he planned, or does he move straight to the invitation? What if the electricity goes off

¹²Spurgeon, *Twelve Sermons on the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 122.

¹³Bill Bennett, *Thirty Minutes to Raise the Dead* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 176.

¹⁴Landon Dowden, “An Examination of Pneumatological Content in Southern Baptist Homiletic Theory since 1870” (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 131-2.

¹⁵Craig Skinner, *The Teaching Ministry of the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 198.

during the message (it actually happened two times in my ministry)? Does he go and finish the message or stop and give an invitation? What if during the delivery different things come to mind, such as a supporting passage of the Scripture, an appropriate illustration, or an additional thought? How should I proceed? When the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit in delivery, the Holy Spirit can help in adapting and adjusting to each unique occasion.

The second major challenge in delivery has been in relation to the public invitation. While the analysis of the differences of opinion in relation to the public invitation is beyond the scope of this article, my personal conviction is that a biblical message demands a call for action. Vines and Shaddix listed and discussed the following models of calling for a response to the message: verbal appeal, physical relocation, post-meeting ministry, written record, physical gesture, and a multiple approach.¹⁶ In my opinion, the preacher must prepare the invitation including the model of response beforehand. In my earlier ministry, I would use the same model that the Holy Spirit empowered me to prepare in advance. As I became more comfortable in multiple models of public invitation, even though I sought the leading of the Holy Spirit in regard to the model of the invitation in advance, I allowed Him to change the model if necessary at the moment of delivery. Only when the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit at the moment of delivery, can he overcome the challenge of whether or not to go ahead with a prepared model of public invitation at the moment of delivery.

Another challenge in delivery has been the nature of an appeal in the invitation. Personally, I contend that every message, regardless of the passage, should include an evangelistic appeal. Some messages that the Holy Spirit empowers the preacher to prepare may dictate an appeal slanted more toward discipleship, but other messages may have more of an evangelistic orientation. Regardless of the orientation of the appeal chosen for the message in advance, the preacher must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit in delivery. I have experienced times when I prepared a message with a discipleship appeal in mind; however, the Holy Spirit led me toward a more evangelistic appeal during delivery. When the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit in preparation as well as delivery, He assists the preacher in the selection of the appeal during the public invitation.

When the substance of the message is the Word of God and the focus of the message is Jesus Christ, and when the anointing of the Holy Spirit is present, the message achieves its goal as a “demonstration of the Spirit and power.” When the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit, He will not only enable the preparation of the content, model, and appeal of the public invitation but God may lead the preacher to deviate from the previously prepared material through the Holy Spirit.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE PEOPLE

When the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit in his daily life, preparation, and delivery of the message, he should be aware of the Holy Spirit’s role among the audience. Understanding how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of believers and unbelievers enhances

¹⁶Vines and Shaddix, 213-15.

our dependance on Him for His work among the audience. Anointed preaching is not possible without the work of the Holy Spirit among the audience.

When the preacher stands before the people to proclaim God's Word, he should pray that the lost who are present may receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord. The Bible teaches us that the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of all lost people (John 16: 7-10). I have found comfort in knowing that before I speak to unbelievers about Jesus, the Holy Spirit has already been working in their lives. The Holy Spirit may have spoken to them through general revelation or Scripture. The Holy Spirit may have provided people who witnessed to them, or He may have allowed them to be more sensitive to spiritual realities. A helpful tool for illustrating this truth is the Spider Principle.¹⁷ The work of the Holy Spirit is to create a web that draws people to salvation. The Holy Spirit connects our message to that of other believers, circumstances, general revelation through nature, and specific revelation through the Word of God. When the preacher proclaims God's Word to unbelievers, he is adding another strand to the web that the Holy Spirit uses to draw the unbeliever to faith in Christ.

The Holy Spirit brings conviction (John 16: 8) and a new birth (John 3: 1-6) to the unbeliever. I did not realize until I was believer in Christ for several years that I could not bring about conviction in the lives of the lost. My role is not to bring conviction to the lost; that role is reserved for the Holy Spirit. Recently at my local church, several individuals professed Christ publically after the message. An individual came to me and said, "Pastor, thank you for saving those souls!" I had to explain to the person that I could not save anyone; God is the one who saves and brings conviction and a new birth through the Holy Spirit. Even with the greatest of persuasive presentations and the most flamboyant of personalities no one can be brought under true conviction and to an authentic new birth without the Holy Spirit. My responsibility as a preacher is not to convict an individual or even to bring him or her to a point of decision; that is the role of the Holy Spirit. My responsibility is to proclaim God's Word faithfully.

In addition, I must be aware that the unbeliever can resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7: 51). Preachers tend to get discouraged when unbelievers fail to receive Christ. The preacher must recognize that while God is willing to bring conviction and new birth through the Holy Spirit, the unbeliever can resist the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life. We are not to take it personally. The unbeliever is not rejecting us but the message of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life.

When the preacher proclaims the Bible, the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of the unbelievers as well as believers. The Holy Spirit has been described in Romans 1:4 as "the Spirit of holiness" and in 1 John 1:20 as "the Holy One." His objective is to generate holiness, and His ultimate work is to make believers into "a holy people, holy as the children of God."¹⁸ The Holy Spirit brings about holiness to believers through the process of sanctification (1 Corinthians 6:11) using God's Word in the process (John 17:17). The

¹⁷Charles Kelley, *Adult Roman Road Witnessing Training Teacher's Guide* (Nashville: Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1993), 8.

¹⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 8.

preacher must pray that God will use the message to generate holiness in his audience through the process of sanctification.

Just as the preacher is aware of the Holy Spirit as an agent of illumination in his preparation, he must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit as the agent of illumination of biblical truth among believers in the audience. Without the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the believers in the audience will not be able to fully comprehend the message and act upon it. In my preaching ministry, I have prayed for the illumination of the Holy Spirit among the people to whom I was attempting to communicate biblical truths.

Just as the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit in his daily life, his prayer should be that the message results the cultivation of a greater dependence on the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers. I have prayed that, as a result of the message, the believers will depend on the Holy Spirit for continual gratitude of what God had done for them at conversion and willful obedience to the four commandments in relation to the Holy Spirit: not to quench and not to grieve the Holy Spirit, and to be filled with and to walk with the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit is essential to the task of preaching. When the preacher is aware of the Holy Spirit's indwelling, sealing, baptism, discernment with spiritual gifts, he should be motivated to obey the four commandments described in this article. As the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit in his life, he needs to rely on Him in preparation for proclamation. The preacher ought to remember that He serves as the agent of illumination of biblical truths, He provides direction to how the preacher can plan messages in advance, and He assists the preacher in responding to possible catastrophic events.

Powerful delivery is not possible without the anointing of the Holy Spirit which takes place in the context of the proper goal, substance, and focus of preaching. When the preacher depends on the Holy Spirit in delivery, he is able to adjust to unpredictable factors surrounding the preaching event, and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit in invitation. Examination of the role of the Holy Spirit in proclamation is not complete without understanding that the Holy Spirit is at work among the audience at the moment of delivery bringing the lost to new birth and the believers to greater holiness through the process of sanctification.

Several years ago, I preached a series of messages on the Holy Spirit at the church where I served as pastor. In my preparation for the messages, I re-read Billy Graham's book on the Holy Spirit and came across a quote that is now prominently copied in my Bible: "Resist not His incoming; grieve not His indwelling; quench not His outgoing. Open to Him as the Incomer; please Him as the Indweller; obey Him as the Outgoer in His testimony of things concerning Christ."¹⁹ The reason I wrote this quote in my Bible was to remind me of the reality of the Holy Spirit in my daily life and the necessity of my continual reliance on Him for preparation and delivery of God's Word, and for the response among the people that He allows me to address.

¹⁹Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), 130.