

## The Power of Proclamation in the New Testament

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*This study addresses the basic phenomena of preaching in the New Testament. Those who formed the New Testament bear testimony to the power of preaching, both by the rhetoric of their own texts and by their record of the church's earliest preachers. There was never one simple kerygmatic formula, because each audience was uniquely situated in a setting in place and time, and accordingly preachers from Jesus to John responded with timely proclamations to shape their communities in those settings. Even while the composition of the assemblies changed so also the proclamation and its manifest power changed. Rather than merely describe the kingdom of God, proclamation worked to deliver it too. It was the conviction of these early preachers, however, that God was with them, guiding them in the creation of that new social reality, the church. Simple bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ through their speech acts. The power of preaching arises at the junction of human and divine inspiration.*

To most readers of the New Testament, it is obvious what preaching is. The availability of hundreds, even thousands, of examples through the modern media enhances that sense of familiarity. One knows when one is in the presence of preaching. Preaching in the New Testament, which is the concern of this essay, is nearly equivalent to the New Testament itself. Since literacy was still very low, *every* text was oral, performed audibly in its reading. Mark's book is self-titled as the *arché tou euangeliou Iésou Christou*, "The beginning of the good news (proclamation) regarding Jesus Christ, the Son of

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God.”<sup>1</sup> So it is arguable that the entirety of his book is preaching, and so by analogy also Matthew and Luke. Acts may be a species of historiography, but it was the author’s intent to represent many highlights from early proclamation. It may oversimplify matters to say that Paul’s letters are “preachy,” but no doubt it gets across the point regarding their oral rhetoric. Resonances of sermons are regularly heard in Hebrews and 1 Peter too. Apostolic proclamation, in what has broadly been categorized as *kerygma* and *didaché*, is a significant legacy from the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Within the simplicity of preaching, even during the era of the apostles, are the rich, varied tones of tradition. One could call this *voices of tradition*. Voices of tradition, being social artifacts, come about in all manner of creative and cooperative expression. It requires only basic skills to hear in each preaching performance various sub-genres, including narrative, illustration or analogy, quotations or allusions to key religious authorities (oral and written—from scripture, Jesus, rabbis, etc.), aphorisms, testimony, poetry or hymns or liturgy, prayer and thanksgiving, promises, oracles, admonitions, just to name a few. Beyond concerns of genre are other essential elements of proclamation such as clever turns of phrase, strategies of rhetoric and persuasion, timely (prophetic) analysis, use of honor and shame, and so on. Talented preachers have known how to orchestrate these tones, in combinations of timbre and ranges of dynamics.

This study addresses the basic phenomena of preaching in the New Testament, asking why it is that preaching is recognizable and why it worked. To put a finer point on it, I am chasing down an intriguing line in Paul’s writings, specifically Romans 1:16–17, in which he asserts that “the gospel [oral proclamation of good news] . . . is the power of God for salvation.” From one view of this, it may seem that the predication (*estin*) emphasizes the gospel as a *story* of the power of God. As one proclaimed the gospel, one *was* in fact proclaiming *salvation history*, the story of God’s power—most poignantly the recent events of Jesus’ life, which relayed God’s righteousness. Knowing that grand story, especially the *kerygma*, was the key to knowing that

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> A classic text on this topic is C. H. Dodd’s *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), especially 7–17. Also helpful is A. Haire Forster, “The Gospel according to the Epistles and the Gospel for the Present Day,” *Anglican Theological Review* 30 (1948): 201–208.

power. Doubts, however, set in from three sides. First, little overt evidence is found in Paul's letters that that story was central to Paul's thesis, even within Romans, with its key survey of that history in chapters 9–11.<sup>3</sup> Jesus traditions are alluded to in Paul's letters from time to time, but they do not show up as prominently as might have been expected.<sup>4</sup> All sorts of theories have attempted to account for this. Second, it is rather difficult to square this inference with the sheer brevity of Paul's prescribed confession for salvation, such as is found in Romans 10:9–10. Could one gain access to the very power of God, his justification, solely by a proclamation that Jesus was raised by God and that he was Lord? Would that alone signal appreciation for the story? Third, and most decisively, the predication would most directly relate to "being ashamed" (*epaischunomai*), which would emphasize the social dimension of preaching.

More likely the predication of Romans 1:16–17 is simply the explicit collocation of *proclamation as power* and less about the implied story. Specifically, it refers to Paul's own proclamation as power. This essay will explore that predication. In order to proceed, three questions will be posed and answered: What is preaching (in the New Testament)? What is the function of preaching? And, how does it work? I will deal with the first two more summarily, given the great cloud of scholarly witness, and then I will spend more energy on the final question, thus returning to Paul, preaching, and power.

### *What Was Preaching in the New Testament?*

Extensive work in biblical scholarship has been devoted to this topic, which I cannot rehearse here in detail. One of the few certain results of this work is the conclusion that the New Testament records not a single voice who heralded good news, but many disparate voices. It is, for example, commonplace to describe the portrait of Jesus through the varied colorings of the Evangelists. Hence reference is made first to the Lucan Jesus and Johannine Jesus *before* speaking of

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas C. Mohrmann, "Paul's Use of Scripture in Romans 9–11 as Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree," in Todd Wilson, ed., *The Crucified Apostle*, WUNT 2.450 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 141–149.

<sup>4</sup> See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christology in the Making* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 181–183; D. C. Allison, "The Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels: The Pattern of Parallels," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 1–32; J. W. Bailey, "Light from Paul on Gospel Origins," *Anglican Theological Review* 28 (1946): 217–226.

the historical Jesus. One must attend to their voices before hoping to hear his proclamation. Inevitably these discussions also acknowledge the challenge of dealing with Greek overlays on Aramaic. Very few words of Jesus have survived this translation; a most notable exception is *Abba*. Attempts to “reverse engineer” Matthew’s Gospel or portions of Paul’s credal texts from Greek into Aramaic have been attempted in order to travel back to earlier times, or like excavation to reach the lowest stratum. All told, this process creates an altered intuition for reading the New Testament that replaces a *prima facie* or natural intuition of simply reading the Gospels to hear Jesus’ words. Critical reflection on the New Testament’s texts instead points us to the literary shaping that these ancient authors exercised on their oral (and written) sources. When referring to “preaching in the New Testament,” therefore, the timbre of these many voices, their variant tones or attitudes, their individual fears and aspirations—all of these differences and more—emerge rather quickly. As one gains appreciation of these differences, one tunes out their harmonies; the chords and melody lines recede, while the counterpunctual or discordant comes forward.

That is one side of the coin, and on the other is the way audiences emerge from the books in the New Testament. Authors clearly adapted their messages, just as good communicators would, to the needs of their audiences, some specifically (1 Corinthians) and others generally (1 Peter). Audiences, both known and implied, factor into estimations of the *what* of New Testament proclamation. Discussions usually stem from analyzing the nexus between audience profile and literary tension.

Without attempting to sketch an airtight chronology of New Testament kerygmatic traditions, it is still reasonable to note major changes within the church’s proclamation during the apostolic age. First, there is the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth and Capernaum who, at least for a while, partnered with the separatist and apocalyptic John the Baptist to herald the imminence of God’s kingdom, that is, a renewed exercise of God’s sovereignty in Israel. Subsidiary phases between Jesus’ rural and his urban proclamations probably developed. Second, there is recorded proclamation from Jesus, the Christ figure, who visited his disciples postresurrection and expounded on the necessity of his suffering and resurrection. Then there is the preaching of the early *Jewish* believing community that featured the risen Jesus and special advent of God’s anointing Spirit; this was a message exclusively to fellow Jews. Again, multiple voices may have been

present at this stage, which could be differentiated between Aramaic- and Greek-speaking Jews. Then there is the proclamation about Jesus the Christ to Samaritan Yahwists, which was closely paralleled by proclamation to Diaspora Jews. Doubtless this latter proclamation highlighted traditional and innovative proofs from scripture to articulate Jewish belief. Near to this time, there began the proclamation about Jesus to God-fearers and other gentiles, representing Jesus as the Christ and Lord. Ideas relating to Jesus' death as atoning for sins would have emerged by now. At points somewhere here or soon afterward another voice added his proclamation about Jesus as High Priest, a modern Melchizedek. Near to the closing years of the apostolic age, the church would hear the proclamation of Jesus as Logos and the unique bearer of God's sonship. And, depending on one's dating of Gnosticism's rise, the church would hear proclamation on the divine Jesus who was never (fully) incarnated and whose resurrection freed him to pure spiritual existence.

This sketch is hardly enough to characterize the kerygmatic traditions found in the New Testament, since they would have been formative only against a contrasting set of beliefs. Formation through their preaching created communities, a point I will explore below, and these would be somewhat distinctive, either behaviorally or ideationally. Since communities regularly tolerate a variance of proclamation without a rupture of that community (contrast Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and so on), it is worthwhile to ask what would have been disruptive enough within the greater matrix of the Jewish religion to mark the followers of Jesus. Witnesses within the New Testament seem to indicate that it was issues related to the temple and the Torah that truly marked out the nascent communities of Christ followers. Each of these issues, especially together, figure into such key questions as the following: What was at stake in the early church's proclamation? And, by whose authority did they make proclamations? By contrast to these most sensitive issues, Judaism was tolerant of debates about resurrection and messianic expectations and probably even the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup> The temple's role, however, was more central, touching on numerous categories related to Jewish identity: geographic, physical, ethnic, religious, spiritual, scriptural, and political. At times, it may have been more central to Jewish identity than monotheism; it clearly

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick C. Grant, "Preaching the Easter Message," *Anglican Theological Review* 28 (1946): 53-59.

separated Judaism from Samaritan faith. Likewise, reverence for the Torah as the preeminent expression of God's word demarcated Jew from Samaritan or pagan, so it takes little imagination to see this as a key factor to define both Judaism and the followers of Jesus. It was reverence for Torah that would ultimately assist Judaism's survival of the temple's destruction in 70 CE.

Key junctures in New Testament storylines hint at the temple and Torah's pivotal role in creating controversy. The communities' attitudes and teaching on these topics were by no means either uniform or immediately disruptive. So, there is evidence of controversy within the movement as well as between it and wider Judaism. Inclusion of gentiles eventually weighted these issues even more. The temple was highlighted within the Gospels as an issue during Jesus' ministry and trial (Matt. 21:12, 23; 26:61; 27:51 and parallels; John 2:19), and Acts highlights the temple in both Stephen's and Paul's trials (Acts 6:13–14; 7:47–48; 21:26–27; 24:6).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the topic of the temple sparked fireworks. Even though it is a point made from silence, Paul ignores the temple almost completely in his letters, save only 2 Thessalonians 2:4. It was conspicuously ignored and at the same time transformed into a metaphor for the believers (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 8:10; 2 Cor. 8:16; Eph. 2:21; compare also Heb. 10:19; 1 Pet. 2:4). Multiple voices within the New Testament can be heard regarding the Torah's ongoing role within the lives of early church members. There is no reason to doubt Luke's record of James's testimony on the law-abiding members of the Jerusalem churches: "You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the Law" (Acts 21:20). Meanwhile the missions of Paul, Barnabas, and Silas were moving in a different direction. This, indeed, is probably the key issue in discussing the continuity or discontinuity between Jesus and Paul.

The touchstone for preaching content in the New Testament may now be discerned. Among the common features of early proclamation, which would be likely to identify the church from the synagogue? It could be said that Jesus' death and resurrection was key. Would this be sufficient? It seems that it would be a necessary but not a sufficient demarcation. What would be a more significant cause of concern, however, would be declarations of the *atoning value* of his death by crucifixion (for example, 1 Cor. 15:3). This would doubtless

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<sup>6</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 514–515, expresses some confidence that the memories of Jesus' comments on the temple's destruction are authentic (Mark 14:58).

displace the centrality of the temple. This teaching would have direct implications for the position of the temple as well as the Torah in the community's relation to Judaism. Whatever *facts* could be established about Jesus, it would be most difficult to see this interpretation gaining wide acceptance among Jews.

### *What Is the Function of Preaching?*

At first the question "What is the function of preaching?" and its answer appear rather obvious. It would be to communicate the *kerygma* and *didaché*: reaching and transforming people through the proclamation of the story of Jesus Christ and their subsequent discipling.

Such a historical survey of preaching, as illustrated above briefly, seemingly prejudices *kerygma* over *didaché*, but this may be questioned. Clues within our texts are sought by scholars to understand the logic of antecedent and succedent, and so on. Yet, schematic "progressions" remain hypothetical, since the primitive oral proclamation evaporated, leaving its precipitant, written proclamation, all that is left in the test-tube. It is important to remember this. The articulated, verbal mission of Jesus is usually considered a first stage, but this need not be so. It could be merely the stage that is more fully preserved in the writing of the New Testament. Therefore, one may ask, why should *kerygma* precede *didaché*? *Didaché* can just as feasibly be the prompt for *kerygma*. Said in other ways, formation could have preceded conversion or discipling before evangelism. In fact, *actions* (which may not be intentionally symbolic) may have been the most primitive or formative stage of Jesus' mission.

Part of the presumption about the primacy of Jesus' preaching is the notion that it created a community of disciples. This, however, ignores the certainty that he belonged to a community well before his mission. The latter community may have grown organically from the earlier.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament indeed hints at his preexisting community (Mark 1:9; 3:19–35; 6:1–6; 10:28–30 and parallels). It is fair to wonder what inspired Jesus to embark on his journeys to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God. Was it an influential person, such as

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<sup>7</sup> See Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 152–156. Furthermore, there is a presumed familiarity between Jesus, John the Baptist, and some of the disciples Jesus called.

John (the Baptist), Mary or Joseph, or a local rabbi? Or, was it stories heard from scripture or tales of the Essenes' Teacher of Righteousness? Did his ideas form as a reaction to cruelty or neglect, abuse of wealth, self-aggrandizement over trust in God, or hopes for an apocalypse? Was it self-discovery that brought him to a place to form his ethics, and did these become the foundation of his proclamation of the kingdom? All but the slimmest of details are lost from oral traditions that had long evaporated before the writings of the New Testament. How might the *didaché* of that early community have influenced or even been the genesis of the *kerygma* of Jesus?

Such musings are hardly trivial for three reasons. First, a call for repentance is usually associated with *kerygma*, that is, is it viewed as a foundational element of Jesus' proclamation and then as a key element replicated by the early church.<sup>8</sup> Repentance would most naturally indicate a response of changed priorities, relating both to God and humanity. Various stories might shift the emphasis slightly, but both dimensions emerge. Jesus' summary of the law typifies this (Matt. 22:37–39). Love of God and love of neighbor are inextricably connected. This is also drawn out in Paul's letters, as seen in Romans 13:8, 1 Corinthians 8:4, and Galatians 5:14.

Second, many of Jesus' ethical teachings are mixed with his visions of God's kingdom. Similarly, Paul's letters often blend theology and parenesis. The epistle of James, as a literary piece, stresses wise living amid more transcendent thoughts of religion and theology. And so on. New Testament texts, in other words, do not demarcate these well, so scholars have set out to find the yolk among the white in this scramble but the mix is itself central to New Testament proclamation.

Finally, among Paul's writings, which are acknowledged as Christianity's earliest literature, one finds that he can summarize his mission in a two-word quip, *hupakoén pisteos*, the "obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). Could a more succinct expression of *kerygma* and *didaché* be written? Accordingly, he recalls with some frequency how his congregations may look to himself and Christ as exemplars of faith(fulness).<sup>9</sup> This clearly implies they were given knowledge of Jesus' life as a prerequisite to the apostle's reminders to emulate him.

<sup>8</sup> Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> See Rom. 15:1–3; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6–11; 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7–9; Col. 2:6–7; Eph. 4:20. For the Jewish background to this practice, consult H. H. Drake Williams III, "Imitate Me as I Imitate Christ," in Wilson, *The Crucified Apostle*, 209–224.



Just as they would know Paul's life's story, so they likely would know Jesus'. Their "finished" product of living would embody this mutuality of vision and character. There were precedents for this balance in principle already within Judaism which were adapted for these new contexts.<sup>10</sup>

Readers jump into the proclamation of the New Testament quite similarly to the way they jump into the proclamation of their own parishes. Within these assemblies, people are found at many different places on their spiritual journeys. Formation through preaching blends big-picture ideas with personal resolution naturally, even unconsciously. Preaching has always addressed these two dimensions. In this way, Paul's sermon addressed to fellow Jews in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13–41) would be more typical of his ministry than his address to complete strangers at "Mars Hill" in Athens (Acts 17:18–33). Luke's history remembers Paul frequenting synagogues (for example, Acts 13:14–15; 14:1; etc.), and this comports with Paul's own line "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

New Testament proclamation was never a hardened formula of kerygmatic points or scriptural testimonia.<sup>11</sup> It adapted to the needs of casting a vision of the kingdom of God as well as to the need for developing a Jesus-like character. The biblical image of "walking" reflects the peripatetic proclamation of the New Testament, where *kerygma* and *didaché* are like right and left sandals. The challenge remains to bring contemporary proclamation alongside the ever-changing landscape that church communities face, what Judith McDaniel calls the "tension between theology and anthropology."<sup>12</sup> The earliest Christian communities changed, partly by the intentions of the apostles and partly by outside forces. Preaching shows a conflict of *what was* against *what is becoming*. New Testament proclamation provokes such struggles and reflects the church's responses.

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<sup>10</sup> William H. P. Hatch, "Jesus' Summary of the Law and the Achievement of the Moral Ideal according to St. Paul," *Anglican Theological Review* 18, no. 3 (1936): 134–135.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Kerygmatic Summaries in the Speeches of Acts," in Ben Witherington III, ed., *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 213–217, notes the similarities and variations between the speeches. Research in "testimonia" owes a great debt to Rendell J. Harris, *Testimonies* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1916).

<sup>12</sup> Judith M. McDaniel, "The Place of the Bible in the Virginia Seminary Curriculum: Homiletics," *Anglican Theological Review* 84, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 60.

*How Does It Work?*

The final question, “How does it work?,” is more subtle. While an impulsive answer might be that New Testament proclamation flourished by the natural charisma and clever rhetoric of Jesus or Peter or Paul, one could also claim that the time was ripe for such a movement. These explanations, however, falter or fail in the longer view of the church, and even within the apostolic age. Luke acknowledges this through Gamaliel’s speech in Acts 5:34–39, noting that other charismatic leaders had already come and gone. Messianic movements were not new, nor did they end after Christianity established its presence on the world’s stage. There is more to the answer.

Most followers of Christ would be unsatisfied with such an answer anyway, so other factors—more spiritual ones—move to the fore. In 1 Corinthians 1–4, Paul discounts his own role in the success of founding assemblies in Corinth, and illustrates this handily by likening his proclamation to a simple planting (3:5–9). Planting seeds could be attributed to him, he admits, and yet God mysteriously causes their seed to sprout, grow, and bear fruit. Even though the proclamations of Apollo were likened to watering, it was nonetheless an insufficient explanation for their growth. The mysteriousness of God’s work thus becomes the central part.

It is possible now to return to Romans 1:16, where Paul expresses his conviction that the power of God attends his proclamation. This is not the first time the apostle asserted this. First Thessalonians 1:5 says that Paul and his companion’s words came with power in a passage roughly parallel to Romans 1:16. Paul recalls this for his audience not to make a point about the story of justification, but rather the validity of their conversion. Again, he hearkens to the Galatians’ conversion in Galatians 3:1–5 in terms of “believing what you heard,” thereby connecting power with preaching. The fullest expression of the collocation of power and preaching comes from 1 Corinthians 2:4–5: “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” These verses link preaching with power, the power to effect conversion.

There are two more elements of Romans 1:16 to explore. The first is the fact that *Paul* wrote it and the second is the *fact* that Paul wrote. Regarding the first element, the apostle hopes that this letter will introduce himself and begin to forge a genuine bond. The reader

can sense his nervous determination. At 1:11, he makes a pledge to offer them "some spiritual gift," but apparently recognizing that it would likely come off as a presumption of superiority, he quickly reverses course and acknowledges their strengths and the opportunity for mutual edification.

Nevertheless, his voice of authority is promptly resumed in 1:16, when he puts forward the essential "fact" of his epistle: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." Paul is in full apostolic mode, continuing his forceful writing for fifteen chapters to the extent that, by 15:15, he has to admit that "on some points I have written to you rather [too?] boldly." Paul's presence in this letter is palpable from start to finish.

The full force of Romans 1:16 cannot be appreciated as only part of Paul's initial self-commendation to a community he has yet to meet. While it surely contributes to that immediate task, it also joins with the texts quickly surveyed above to articulate a more enduring belief that his preaching is divinely empowered. Paul's prayer and invocation of God in vv. 1–10, where "God" is mentioned ten times directly or by pronoun, lays plain what he sees as the source of power behind his calling and effective ministry. What is clear to see, given this declaration's strategic position in the letter as its *thesis*, is that Paul intended *by his very declaration*, namely his predication of preaching and the power of God, to *produce* the fact. This is Paul preaching on preaching. Hardly a passing commentary on preaching, Paul's assertion as a speech act performs preaching. It is impossible to avoid its impact. The dynamic relationship between content and speech act is what makes his primary declaration so believable: "He is not ashamed!" One who can assert that his preaching is the very conduit of God's power could not be ashamed.

Before this observation can be extended past Romans, it is helpful to discuss this type of language more generally. Speech acts are a recognized function within language: namely, they refer to the use of language to *do* things (rather than merely describe). Parade examples of speech acts are utterances by judges, such as "I sentence you to . . .," or oaths in marriage ceremonies, such as "I do!" These utterances, and many others, actually do rather than report. J. L. Austin pioneered work in this field.<sup>13</sup> John Searle's work, *Speech Acts*,

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<sup>13</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962, 1975). Austin primarily describes these as illocutionary

advanced this by identifying more precisely the constitutive, linguistic rules of speech acts, or put another way, the conditions for properly functioning speech acts.<sup>14</sup> Within biblical scholarship, Anthony Thiselton has heralded the presence and importance of speech acts in the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> There are many examples of recorded speech acts that are germane to this present study. Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, the Synoptic Gospels record, were accompanied by a divine acclamation of approval: "This is my son, the beloved . . ." (Matt. 3:17 and parallels) as well as authorization (for example, Matt. 17:5, "Listen to him!"). Likewise, Jesus' call to "follow me," effectively named and authorized his disciples to join his community (Matt. 4:19, among others). These followers were later commissioned by his authority to represent him on their own mission forays (Matt. 10:5–15; 28:18–20).

Among the many component parts of preaching other speech acts are found, such as prayers (Matt. 6:9–13), oaths (Matt. 5:33–37) blessings (Matt. 5:3–12; Luke 6:28), cursings (Matt. 21:19; Gal. 1:8, 9) and rebukes (Matt. 16:23; 23:13–36; Gal. 2:11–14). These represent speech acts, and through the words themselves they *invoke* the presence, power, and authority of God. It is rarely as plainly obvious as Jesus' words on forgiveness: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14–15). That is, to say, "I forgive you," is an *act* of forgiveness, and Jesus strengthens this act by promising (a speech act) that the heavens will attend to and honor it. The efficacy of this act is illustrated sublimely in the pericope of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12).

Imperatives usually function as speech acts, since they function to stir people to action. Sometimes their authority is clear and at other times implied. Some speech acts are simpler or come from more humble or informal postures, such as entreaties (Matt. 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30, etc.), laments (Matt. 23:37–39; Rom. 9:1–5), warnings (Matt. 24:4–5) or promises (Luke 19:8–10). Religious practices

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(98–99). See also William H. Shepherd Jr., "A Rickety Bridge: Biblical Preaching in Crisis," *Anglican Theological Review* 80, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 198.

<sup>14</sup> John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> See his many of his works, particularly "The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974): 281–299; *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan: 1992), 283–312.

typically include both imperative and other speech acts. Jesus' speech at the Last Supper reveals this:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matt. 26:26–29)

Jesus' words *do work*: they consecrate and then institute these basic elements of the supper as memorials to his body and blood. So also baptism must not be merely a ritual of water, since it requires, in order to be effective, the speech act of invoking "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Austin and Searle catalog many categories and examples of speech acts.<sup>16</sup> There are hundreds of ways that language not only trucks and ships information between people, but also in fact works, creates, and conveys power. Preaching, as many of the examples have indicated, employs speech acts heavily. It is significant linguistic work done by preaching that makes it innately plain to an audience.

Confession as a speech act is the appropriate response to preaching, as is repentance.<sup>17</sup> They *commit* the audience to preacher and to God publicly. The act of commitment entails *renouncing* of past confessions or beliefs as well as a *declaration* of new affiliation.<sup>18</sup> Paul portrays that verbal transaction in 1 Corinthians 8:4–6:

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods

<sup>16</sup> Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 148–164, and Searle, *Speech Acts*, 54–71.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 1187–1188: "Hence foundational confessions in the pre-Pauline and Pauline churches serve both as declarative acts of truth claims in the context of proclamation and teaching and as an oath of loyalty in baptism, the Eucharist, or times of persecution."

<sup>18</sup> See Richard N. Longenecker, *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 45–131.

in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

His speech echoes the confession, inherited from Scripture and known as the *Shema*, that “There is no God but one.” No mere description, this assertion or confession changes reality, just as Paul says: “yet for us *there is* one God.” To confess is verbally to identify oneself and to join others who confess likewise. It is to that joining the essay may now turn.

Searle’s work, *The Construction of Social Reality*, focuses on the social function of speech acts.<sup>19</sup> He starts his analysis by looking at what he calls the “brute facts” that surround us. The rain falling outside my window is one. For me to say, however, that the rain’s falling is a good thing, because the farmers and their crops need rain, is to assign a function or *telos* to that brute reality. That function or *telos* itself becomes a different kind of “fact” than the simple rain. Such “facts” only exist once they are put in linguistic terms and become instantiated by regular, collective intentionality. Buttressed by collective intention, social reality comprises many interrelated systems of institutional facts. Searle uses money as a classic example.<sup>20</sup> For our purposes, his insights are helpful for understanding the eucharist, baptism, and even Jesus’ resurrection. The brute fact of bread and wine, by collective intentionality and formal speech act, *becomes* the Lord’s body and blood. The parallel with baptism is obvious. Likewise, Jesus’ death, and, as some are convinced, his revivification *becomes* an atonement for sin. Searle acknowledges that most institutional facts become so by means of formal speech acts:

We have imposed, by collective intentionality, new status-functions on things that cannot perform those functions without that collective imposition. However, one special

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<sup>19</sup> John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Searle, *Social Reality*, 41–51.

feature of these cases is that often the function is imposed by way of performing explicit speech acts.<sup>21</sup>

Speech acts establish the institutional facts as a recognizable part of the society's fabric. Description alone is insufficient, as social reality requires formal verbal action to make it so. Jesus' preaching too was no mere description of the kingdom of God, rather it *promised* God's presence, it *invited* people to see it, it *expelled* the demonic, it *enjoined* kingdom ethics, it *blessed* the poor, it *warned* the cautious, it *cursed* the unresponsive, and so on. The author of John's Gospel found it fitting to encapsulate his life of proclamation simply as *the Logos*. As the disciples, and later the apostles, repeated and adapted Jesus' preaching, they too began to shape that collective intentionality that is requisite for a new social reality. That reality is the *ekklesia*.

Searle notes that institutional facts only exist by repeated affirmation.<sup>22</sup> Once a collective abandons it, it ceases to be a "fact." One clear example of this, in the history of the church, was Christianity's abandonment of the Sabbath for the Lord's day (see Rom. 14:5–6 for the early stages of this movement). It would also be possible to trace how the institutional facts of Jewish water purification (Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14) or John's baptism of repentance (Acts 19:1–7) were transformed by the church to become the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins (for example, Rom. 6:3–4). One of the most contested institutional facts for the early church was circumcision. Different voices on the role it should play in new conversions are preserved within the texts of the New Testament. Verbal contests ensued. First Corinthians 7:19 reflects its ambivalent role in a mixed congregation, but Paul is more candid in Galatians 2:11–14 regarding how ambivalence caused stress for the social fabric of the community:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not

<sup>21</sup> Searle, *Social Reality*, 81–82.

<sup>22</sup> Searle, *Social Reality*, 79–120.

acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Paul was convinced that a single, consistent proclamation of the gospel ("the truth") was necessary to bind them, or otherwise it could tear them apart. This story of Peter at Antioch puts in narrative form, what his *urses* (as speech act) in 1:8–9, "let that one be accursed!," were meant to accomplish in Galatia.

It is now possible to return to Romans 1:16, in order to conclude the analysis of Paul's predication of preaching and power. While the most obvious point of this sentence is the apostle's public declaration, a proper speech act, that he is not ashamed of preaching, he embeds in that act a crucial predication, that is, that his preaching *is* the power of God. A simple predication merely describes, performing nothing nor constituting a proper speech act.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the nature of this predication and its strategic placement in the letter imply an embedded act of belief or assertion or promise, for example, "I assert that . . ." or "I promise that." The conjunction *gar* is probably logical, specifying the cause of his "not being ashamed," rather than simply marking a content clause. A fuller rendering, accordingly, would be, "I am not ashamed of preaching the good news of Jesus! I declare this openly, as I believe/promise/assert that my preaching is the power of God for all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

The epistle proceeds from this point to give testimony to the content and power of his preaching by many moving explanations of scripture, sin, and salvation. It would be difficult to finish reading the book without acknowledging its theological accomplishment. Finally, although it would be possible to see Romans 1:16 as a speech act, used only as a means for the apostle to commend himself to the Romans, it is also important to note that his text does not imply that this power is his to give out, since its origin issues from God's calling (1:1–6).<sup>24</sup> From his Corinthian correspondence, it is clear that Paul is all too aware that preaching the cross comes from a place of weakness (for

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<sup>23</sup> Searle, *Speech Acts*, 121–127.

<sup>24</sup> This is a key point made by Jennifer Strawbridge, "The Word of the Cross: Mission, Power, and the Theology of Leadership," *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 65–68, 74–75.



example, 1 Cor. 1:18–31; 2 Cor. 4:7–12).<sup>25</sup> He does not retreat from this weakness, even in a world that is so jealous of honor and so averse to shame. The final phrase, “to everyone who has faith,” hints at his conviction that the power in his proclamation is available to everyone. This addition is more than an impulse or unconscious, rote formula. The consistency of Paul’s inclusive proclamation should be understood as his bid to build up the early church community. Paul saw his proclamation as conducting God’s power precisely for the creation of a community, both for Jew and Greek. That this assertion expresses the letter’s thesis indicates the author’s intent to lay out a theological and social blueprint for the Roman congregations. In Searle’s words, Paul’s preaching was crafting the church’s institutional facts; his letters, perhaps chief of them being Romans, became an extension of that labor. This pattern is made perfectly clear in 10:9–17. This passage has significant connections to the book’s introduction. There the reader hears how sincere confession is efficacious for salvation. Confession, as I have said, is the speech act, one that Paul here prescribes as a necessary response to the proclamation of the news of Jesus as Christ and Lord. Thus a chain reaction unfolds: the church sends out heralds to preach publicly the story of Jesus as Christ and Lord; it opens an opportunity for people to hear and then invoke or call upon the Lord, and that response is sealed by their confession. This is true for all, Jew and Gentile alike. The proclamation will bring not only conversion, but it will also establish the life of the communities.

### *Conclusion*

To stand before a congregation as a human voice for God is to assume a fearful role. The New Testament has been cherished as a record of the church’s genesis, when proclamation was such a precarious or intimidating occupation. So little could commend these heralds who bucked every prevailing wisdom or defied every civic truth to announce that a crucified criminal was their hero. And yet, they perceived in those stories of Jesus of Nazareth and Capernaum, who announced the arrival of God’s presence, more than simple narrative. So, they responded to his invitation to follow, they took his authorization for mission, and passed on the presence of God through their

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<sup>25</sup> Karl A. Plank, “Confronting the Unredeemed World: A Paradoxical Paul and His Modern Critics,” *Anglican Theological Review* 62, no. 2 (April 1985): 127–136.

own proclamation. As patterns emerged throughout the apostolic age, not everyone agreed on the details of the community; in fact, substantial divisions continued to beset the church, but people did respond, and the church both grew and matured. Mysteriously, it always carried this dual quality of human and divine presence. The voices never perfectly agreed (or agree even now!) on their messages, but God's power remains in the proclamation.<sup>26</sup>

The institutional facts of the church have evolved in universal *and* local terms.<sup>27</sup> This is to be expected as each generation finds new challenges to loving God with one's whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and one's neighbor as oneself. Preaching, therefore, may inspire each generation to find where that love may be lived. The invitation to all people to join that proclamation—across racial, gender, and social boundaries—as Paul envisioned in Galatians 3:28, remains open. Many traditions, including the Episcopal/Anglican, see apostolic commissioning as the enduring bond, linking the earliest practices to the latest.<sup>28</sup> Speech acts of ordination, consecration, commission, institution, liturgy, and confession have many of the earmarks of New Testament preaching because of that bond. God's kingdom, therefore, is mysteriously still drawing near through those institutional facts. Indeed, preaching is the very juncture of human and divine inspiration.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul M. van Buren, "The Word of God in the Church," *Anglican Theological Review* 39, no. 4 (October 1957): 350–354, makes a similar point.

<sup>27</sup> Aaron Milavec, "Modern Exegesis, Doctrinal Innovations, and Dynamics of Discipleship," *Anglican Theological Review* 60, no. 1 (January 1978): 55–74.

<sup>28</sup> O. C. Edwards Jr., "Biblical Preaching: What Would It Sound Like If You Heard It in Church," *Anglican Theological Review* 75, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 542.