

**Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and, more specifically, the means of grace. We have been examining the principle that governs corporate worship, which is called the regulative principle. Dr. Spencer, are we finished with that topic?**

Dr. Spencer: Not quite. In Session 215 we quoted 1 Corinthians 14:26, which says, “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.”<sup>1</sup> I noted at the time that this verse clearly indicates that a normal worship service should include singing and preaching, but that we then need to discuss what kinds of singing and preaching we should have. They are to build up the church, which is the body and bride of Christ.

**Marc Roby: And that led directly into our discussion last week about worship music and singing.**

Dr. Spencer: Right. But I now want to say a few things about preaching. First and foremost, we must recognize that the preaching of the Word of God is the *most* important thing that takes place in a worship service. Worship in song is important. Prayer is important. Fellowship is important. Tithes and offerings are important. Communion is important. Testimonies are important. And even making appropriate announcements about the events going on in the church community is important. But Paul wrote in Romans 1:16 that “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

**Marc Roby: And when he said “I am not ashamed”, that was a figure of speech that means he is actually proud.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. It was a litotes. For example, you can draw attention to how good a particular meal was by saying, “That meal wasn’t bad at all.” And Paul was proud of the gospel precisely because it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

The main purpose of life is to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and the main purpose of the church is to proclaim the gospel of salvation. Therefore, the most important part of a worship service by far is the preaching of the Word of God. Singing hymns, hearing prayers and fellowship will not save you. Taking communion will not save you. Only the Word of God is able to save, and only when the Holy Spirit works in our hearts as we hear it. We are told in James 1:18 that our heavenly Father, “chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

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Marc Roby: The Word of God is the only place we can learn the gospel. But can you provide biblical support for the preaching of the Word being so important in this regard? People can also read the Word of God, so someone might ask why the preached Word is so important.

Dr. Spencer: Well, I'm not denying that a person can be saved by reading the Word, but the preached Word is the most common way by far and absolutely has precedence in a worship service. Romans 10:13-17 is an important passage in this regard.

Marc Roby: Well, let me read that passage. Paul wrote, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that passage says a lot. First, Paul begins by laying out clearly the importance of the gospel message. He says that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved", which is a quote from the prophet Joel. And, of course, Paul means those who call on the name of the Lord in all sincerity from a converted heart. And he then goes on to make a very logical case, as is characteristic of Paul. First, he points out that no one will call on Jesus to save him if he hasn't believed in him. And, second, no one can believe in Christ if he hasn't heard of him.

Marc Roby: And Paul is obviously referring to hearing the gospel. To be saved, people must be told that Jesus is the eternal second person of the Trinity, that he became incarnate and was born of the virgin Mary, that he lived a sinless life, that he gave his life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and that he was raised from the dead for our justification.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. All of that is included in the meaning of Paul's saying that someone *believes in* Jesus. And Paul then asks a rhetorical question. He says, "And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

Marc Roby: Although, as we noted earlier, someone can obviously *read* the gospel for themselves, they don't necessarily have to have it preached to them.

Dr. Spencer: True. But there is a reason Paul specifically refers to someone preaching it to them. I don't know of anyone who has been saved by reading the gospel without *also* having had people witness to them. I'm not saying it hasn't happened or can't happen, God can save however he chooses to save. But the normal way in which people are saved is evangelism. They need to see other people who are living the Christian life and they need to have a person preach the gospel to them, and that most often happens in a worship service. Being saved isn't just a matter of gaining information, a sinner needs to be confronted with the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Marc Roby: Like the apostle Paul was confronted on the road to Damascus.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Paul knew the gospel already, he simply had not been born again and could not, therefore, surrender to Christ and truly believe. It took Christ confronting him in a personal way. Let's look at how his conversion is described in Acts. But before I read the passage, I need to let those listeners who may not know that Paul was called Saul prior to his conversion. In Acts 9:3-6 we are told that "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'"

Now, most conversions are not as overtly dramatic, but in another sense all conversions *are* just as dramatic as Paul's. In every single case, it is a miraculous work of God in the heart of a person. It is nothing less than being born again. It is a radical change.

**Marc Roby: Jesus himself said in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." And then in Verse 5 he said, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." New birth requires the active work of the Holy Spirit.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. And the normal way for this to occur is for a person to be confronted with the powerful, Spirit led, preaching of the Word of God. That doesn't mean that the person is necessarily born again during the preaching, but that is the normal means God uses to confront people with the claims of Christ. Most conversions also involve personal evangelism on the part of people who know the person.

**Marc Roby: Alright. You said that Paul knew the gospel already. How do we know that?**

Dr. Spencer: We can deduce that very easily from the account of his conversion given to us in Acts. As we just read, we are told that a bright light from heaven flashed around him while he was on the road to Damascus. This light blinded him and his traveling companions then led him into the city. We are next told that God sent a believer named Ananias to pray for Saul and, in Acts 9:17-19, we read that "Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus."

**Marc Roby: Clearly, when we are told that something like scales fell from his eyes, this has a metaphorical meaning in addition to the literal meaning. Paul was enabled by God to see the truth.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree completely. But the answer to your question about Paul's knowledge is in the next verse. In Acts 9:20 we read that "At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God." Now think about that statement. Paul didn't have to go off and study the scriptures with his newly functioning spiritual eyes. He already had all of the information. He was a biblical scholar. And so he started to preach the gospel *at once*.

**Marc Roby: We should point out that when you say he was a biblical scholar, you are referring to the Old Testament, which was the only part of the Bible in existence at the time.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is what I mean. He was a scholar in the Hebrew scriptures, which are the Old Testament. He knew all about the prophecies involving the Messiah and he had to know that Jesus fulfilled those prophecies. In addition, he also knew what Jesus had said and done and the things claimed by his followers. He didn't need more information to be saved, what he needed was a new heart to enable him to put the pieces together, believe and be saved.

**Marc Roby: And he received that new heart as a result of Christ confronting him on the road to Damascus.**

Dr. Spencer: I would say that was the definitive event, yes. Although the Bible doesn't tell us the exact moment he was regenerated, we can clearly see that this event was used by God to cause him to be able to acknowledge the truth of all that he already knew. The main point I am making is that the difference was not one of information, nor was it Saul seeking God, in fact, he thought he already knew God. Nor was it Saul deciding for himself to believe. His conversion is a clear example of the biblical teaching about divine election. We must be born again before we can repent, believe and walk in obedience. Prior to conversion, the Word of God simply doesn't make sense to us. As Paul himself later wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

**Marc Roby: And therefore, your point with regard to the preached Word is that it often serves as the catalyst for salvation. It is often, so to speak, the Damascus Road experience for people.**

Dr. Spencer: That is precisely my point, yes. We need information, there is no doubt about that. So the content of the preaching is also very important. But the environment of a proper worship service and the powerful Spirit-led proclamation of the Word of God by a true preacher is often what God uses to confront someone seriously with the claims of Christ. And we see that Paul goes on in the passage we are considering in Romans 10, in Verse 15, to say, "As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"

**Marc Roby: And the gospel is the best possible news for hell-deserving sinners.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that it is. But Paul immediately adds, in Romans 10:16, that "not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'" The reason that not everyone who hears it accepts the gospel is that God has not chosen to save everyone. But for those whom he has chosen to save, the Holy Spirit works to give them a new heart so that they do respond to the message with repentance and faith.

And Paul finishes the passage we are considering by saying, in Romans 10:17, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." The words spoken by a true preacher speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit are not the words of men, they are the very word of Christ.

**Marc Roby: Which immediately makes me think of what Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 that “we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”**

Dr. Spencer: And the fact that these people received the Word this way is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote about this in the previous chapter of the letter you just cited. We read in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5 that Paul said, “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” For those whom God has chosen, the preached Word is accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that is why the preached Word is the centerpiece of every true worship service. It is also why the preacher must not preach the words of men. He must be a man who is both pious and learned. He must study the Bible carefully, pray seriously, and he must be called by God, not himself. Notice in our passage, in Romans 10:15, that Paul asked, “And how can they preach unless they are sent?”

**Marc Roby: You don’t hear many people speak that way anymore. Preachers will sometimes say that they felt called by God, but it is rare to hear one saying that he was sent by God.**

Dr. Spencer: But when God calls a man, he equips him and sends him. Just attending a seminary and being ordained does not make someone a true minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And a true minister doesn’t pick the church in which he ministers, God sends him if he is a true preacher. He is to be a man of God, which is another phrase that isn’t used very often anymore, but should be. It speaks about the fact that being a true minister of the gospel is not just another possible profession. In fact, if a man chooses it as his profession, then he isn’t called by God. The phrase “man of God” also points to the fact that the minister is not your buddy. He represents God. It is not a position anyone should presume to take upon himself.

And only a true God-called and sent minister will preach the Word in the way we are describing. He will preach as Jesus himself preached. Remember that after Jesus’ resurrection he appeared to two men who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about 7 miles away.

**Marc Roby: Yes, I remember. It is an interesting passage. Jesus somehow prevented the men from recognizing him as they walked and talked. But then, when they got to Emmaus and he broke bread with them, they were suddenly enabled to recognize him.**

Dr. Spencer: At which time he vanished and left them alone. And as they were talking about this together, we read in Luke 24:32 that “They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’”

When a true preacher properly exegetes the Scriptures, it will cause our hearts to burn within us if the Holy Spirit is working. The preacher must not just tell stories and jokes and entertain the people. He must preach the Word of God with all authority and power.

Marc Roby: Do you have anything else you'd like to say about the preaching of the Word as the centerpiece of a worship service?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I'd like to quickly look at the answer to Question 89 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The question asks, "How is the Word made effectual to salvation?"

Marc Roby: And the answer given is, "The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Spencer: One of the proof texts cited by the catechism is in the book of Nehemiah, which tells us about an assembly of Israelites in Jerusalem after they had returned from the exile in Babylon. We are told that Ezra the priest read the Word of God to them and that the priests then instructed them. In Nehemiah 8:8 we are told that "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read." This is one reason why the preaching of the Word is so important. The Bible is clear about what is necessary for salvation, but not all of it is equally clear and the people need to have the Word explained. Proper exegesis of the Word of God is the main function of a true minister of the gospel.

Marc Roby: The Westminster divines also cite a couple of verses from 1 Corinthians. Paul is speaking about the importance of prophecy – meaning the preaching of the Word of God, in distinction from speaking in tongues, and in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 he writes that "if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'"

Dr. Spencer: That passage clearly shows the importance of the context in which the Word of God is heard. Seeing the lives of the people of God, hearing their personal testimonies, seeing them worship, and then hearing powerful preaching is often used by God to convert sinners.

Unfortunately, many modern churches seem to think the primary purpose of preaching is to make people feel good about themselves. In reality, proper preaching often makes people feel very guilty and terrifies them with the presence of a holy, just, all-knowing Judge. But the bad news that we are guilty sinners in the presence of a holy Judge is a necessary precursor to our repenting, believing and trusting in Christ for salvation.

Marc Roby: And so, the preached Word is the centerpiece of all true worship. That seems like a good place to finish for this week, so let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org) and we will do our best to answer.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012, pg. 38, English updated slightly