



The Ministry of Glory to Glory: Paul on Preaching the Gospel

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The most important task of the preacher is to proclaim the gospel. But how do we understand this task in terms of the texts that confound and confront us week after week? No matter what the text is, we have been told that the task in front of us is to somehow discover “good news” in it and to share it. But complicating that work are the diverse experiences and expectations among those who will hear our message. What might be “good news” to one person might sound strange to another or even fall on deaf ears. Is the gospel communication of certain truths about Christ? Is the gospel a spur to a new way of seeing the world or acting? Are we to proclaim a word of comfort? A challenge? As the channel between an ancient text and a contemporary audience, the preacher may struggle to define “good news.” Before we set about proclaiming the gospel, we are called to reflect upon what the gospel is.

And even beyond preaching, we might wonder if “the gospel” has any significance in the wider world outside the church walls. Is proclaiming the gospel reserved for the sermon? For eight years, I’ve worked as a chaplain for a nonprofit hospice. Central to that work is the obligation not to “proselytize” and to accept whatever beliefs and values patients and their families bring into the dying and

The most important job for any pastor is to proclaim the gospel, not only in sermons but in many aspects of their daily ministry. This is a complicated task, and one that is made more difficult by the differing contexts in which this proclamation takes place. Here, Paul’s admonition to the Christians at Corinth helps in discerning how this might be done.

grieving process without trying to change them. I will often receive from those I serve a request “not to preach at me.” For this work, is the gospel still relevant?

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Paul, the first Christian preacher of record, presents a strong guide for understanding what proclaiming the gospel means. His writings communicate complicated ideas by complicated and often paradoxical contrasts. In Paul’s writings, we are greeted with the struggles between things like “flesh and spirit,” “things seen and things unseen,” and “the old and the new.” Beneath all of them rests what is arguably the most famous of these contrasts, the opposition between the “letter” and the “spirit” referred to in Romans but made most notably in 2 Corinthians 3. By this contrast, Paul explains not only the contrast in what the law and gospel are but how they operate:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:4–6)

According to N. T. Wright, this phrase has “sent all the hares bounding across the landscape of scholarship of modern times.”¹ The contrast between the “letter,” which kills, and the “spirit,” which gives life, has been interpreted in various ways throughout the history of the church. Origen, borrowing from Philo of Alexandria, used it as his proof text for the distinction between the literal and allegorical reading of Biblical texts.² Augustine, in his vastly influential tract *On the Spirit and the Letter*, read this contrast through Romans and defined the “letter that killeth” as the law not “assisted and elevated by the Spirit of grace . . . as it rather holds them guilty of transgression, than justifies the ungodly.”³ This reading became the preferred reading during the Reformation. In modern times, thinkers like Kant used the contrast to distinguish between external authority and internally apprehended truth through rationality or inner feeling.⁴ Both before and after the emergence of the “new perspective” on Paul, there has been considerable effort to articulate how much Paul has the “law” in mind in the context of how a first-century Israelite would understand “the Law” when he invokes both

¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 984

² Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 130.

³ “Saint Augustine: Writings against the Pelagians,” in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ed. Phillip Schaff, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 91.

⁴ Seifrid, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 130; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 982.

in 2 Corinthians and in Romans the concept of the “letter that kills.”⁵ All these debates are vital if the judgment of Ernst Käsemann is correct that “for the first time in Christian history, [the apostle] developed an approach to a theological hermeneutic.”⁶

As formative as the opposition between “the letter that kills” and the “spirit that gives life” is for Christian theology and hermeneutics, when this phrase is placed in the context of Paul’s particular argument in 2 Corinthians 3, we can discern important things about the activity of the preacher and the activity of the gospel. In defending his ministry to what seems to be the most recalcitrant congregation he founded, Paul reveals key aspects about his own office as an apostle and preacher grounded in the power of God and the glorious interaction of that power in a preached word that brings about a profound transformation through an encounter with Christ.

Throughout his epistles, Paul is often forced to make a defense for his ministry. But very few letters attributed to Paul depict him on his heels as much as 2 Corinthians. At the beginning of chapter 3, Paul asks a revealing rhetorical question: “Do I need as some do letters of recommendation to you or from you?” (2 Cor 3:1). The use of *συστατικῶν ἐπιστολῶν* refers to a practice of “letters of recommendation” that were commonly used in the ancient world to attest to the abilities and needs of the bearer from a higher authority.⁷ In the midst of many accusations against Paul—that he was not one of the original apostles or was weak in speaking in person but so bold in letters (2 Cor 10:1)—Paul may have had to bear the accusation that he had no higher authority to attest to him or to the work he was doing.

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How often do we have fear like this as preachers? I am often awed by the faith, witness, and even the status of those I’m called to preach to. When we consider the lifelong witness of saints in our midst who have taught Sunday School for years or the endurance of saints who have endured unspeakable tragedy with grace, we can often be daunted that the words we have to preach to them can add anything

⁵ For helpful if dated surveys of the controversy, see Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1–16; and Stephen Westerholm *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

⁶ Ernst Käsemann “The Spirit and the Letter,” in *Perspectives on Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971), 138.

⁷ Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 180.

to their spiritual lives. Even more in my own practice as a hospice chaplain, I am surrounded by incredible professionals in nurses and doctors with a vast wealth of medical knowledge, or administrators with strong gifts for leadership and community engagement. In care-team meetings, I often struggle to put the work I do in some kind of technical or psychological language just to keep up. In presentations to the community, I often strive to define spirituality in health care with terms that are both approachable and profound. For one reason or another, the task of ministry is thrown back on my ability to make it sound both sophisticated and relevant. All of this in one way or another represents my vain attempts to “measure up” to some worldly standard of competence.

Paul refuses to play this game. A “letter” from a higher authority is not what Paul is seeking to defend himself as a minister or buttress the relevance of his message. According to Käsemann, “the question of credentials should lead immediately to fundamentals.”⁸ Paul roots his authority as a preacher entirely in the message he shares and the effects it has as proof of a higher authority already at work. Paul does not need a letter of recommendation because “you are our letter, written on our hearts, to be read and known by all” (2 Cor 3:2). In the reception of Paul’s preaching, the congregation itself has become all the proof that his message is of God because they are already a “letter from Christ.” Anticipating the contrast between the letter and the Spirit that Paul will make later, he describes this letter as “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor 3:3).

Paul is rooting the authority he has as a preacher beyond himself and even beyond the congregation in the direct activity that God has taken in Christ upon the congregation. This is important to remember as we attempt to understand the nature of the gospel. The gospel’s authenticity as a message from God does not rest on a special ability that Paul has. Indeed Paul is quick to diminish himself and his lack of ability. In verse 5 Paul states, “Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us.” This word for competence is the Greek word *ικανοι*, which carries a meaning of “worthy” or “able.” It is the same word that the Septuagint uses to translate Moses’s protest in Exodus 4:10, when he is called by God to preach to Pharaoh. Rather than saying “I have never been eloquent,” Moses protests to God “I am not sufficient.”⁹ Paul may be directly drawing from an Old Testament tradition in which prophets do not evidence being able to speak a word from God on their own authority but because of God who often calls prophets in spite of their own insufficiency. In such a case, the authority Paul has as a preacher is found not in who Paul is but what his preaching brings about.

This fact of the power of preaching being present somehow beyond our abilities as preachers is one we are often slow to learn. Many preachers comment that the sermons they feel are their best are greeted with little approbation while sermons that are significantly below their best efforts are enthusiastically received.

⁸ Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, 148.

⁹ Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel*, 43.

Congregation members will present preachers with radically different interpretations of what the preacher thought that she presented. It is part of the nature of the gospel that the efficacy of its communication often comes from a place beyond the preacher's intention and effort in various ways. Part of the power of the spirit in preaching is the way that the concrete reality of the message takes form in the ears of the hearers.

In the broader context of pastoral care, I have often found that I am most effective when I am less concerned about directing the results of what I do. From that same sense of insufficiency in ministry compared with the more "clinically" inclined of my colleagues, often on visits I will engage in a kind of Socratic questioning to fulfill the Medicare requirement to complete a "spiritual assessment" on each patient. For people in the southwest who may not have engaged in religious activity for many years, if at all, this could no doubt at times be frustrating. Visits run on a much better course when I am less concerned about painting a good clinical picture or getting good outcomes. Simply offering a caring and supportive presence with a heartfelt prayer and blessing have been reported to me as the most helpful thing I do by many patients and families. Even for those who are distant from religion, the chance to encounter the divine through the chaplain produces more comfort than my own efforts to assert myself onto the process by mastering the technical aspects of active listening and clinical dialogue. Not that these are ineffective if properly applied, but when I expect them to display my own competence rather than serve the needs of patients and families, they produce confusion and frustration in both myself and the people I am called to serve.

This is not to reduce the gospel to mere ineffable experience, as if it is something that happens beyond the words that are spoken. This is a common misreading of the distinction between the letter and the spirit. One commentator on Paul expressed such a sentiment when he stated, "The spirit gives exegetical freedom. He destroys the tyranny of words."¹⁰ "The letter" is often misconstrued as any words that are exterior to the inner sense or activity of internalizing the understanding of the words in the hearer. A common way this gets thought of is a reinterpretation of Origen's emphasis on the distinction between the literal words that contain a text and the spirit concealed in them that is unleashed by the interpreter. In stating that his own authority as a preacher comes from beyond himself and in the hearing of the congregation, Paul is not trying to suggest that the gospel is heard only in its interpretation by the hearers. One possible meaning of what Paul intends when he posits "the letter" or the Greek word *γραμμα* is according to many ancient authors the "antithesis of the spoken word."¹¹ The contrast could be between the words that were written into the law and the words spoken by the preacher. The gospel is understood not in how it is interpreted but in what it does with the words spoken by the preacher through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ R. M. Grant cited in Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, 145n19.

¹¹ TDNT vol 1., 762, 4.

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Part of the difficulty is the common assumption that what Paul is doing in this text is offering us a choice as hearers of sermons and readers of Scripture. We can either have the letter or the Spirit as possible avenues to hear a particular text. But this fails to take into account certain cues provided in the rest of the chapter. The letter and the spirit are not offered as hermeneutical alternatives or contrasting experiences but are presented as two separate “services” (διακονια).¹² Paul claims that his ability to preach comes from his call in “the service of the new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6). In verses 7–11, Paul contrasts this with the “service of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets.” Both services share in God’s glory, but the glory is of a different kind. In addition to one bringing death and the other bringing the spirit, one brings judgment and the other brings righteousness. One is temporary and one is permanent (2 Cor 3:11). What unites the services besides sharing this glory, albeit unequally, is the fact that they are services that are enacted upon the hearers. The services are active and the hearers are passive. The “letter” and the “spirit” are not two avenues of understanding a text or receiving a truth. They are instead the experiences of hearing the “letter” and becoming “dead to that which held us captive” (Rom 7:6) and hearing the “spirit” and receiving “new life.” We don’t choose between the letter and the spirit—both happen to us. As Luther put it:

It is impossible for someone who does not first let himself be killed by the letter, to hear the gospel and let the grace of the spirit bring him to life. Grace is only given to those who long for it. Life is a help only to those who are dead, grace only to sin, and Spirit only to the letter. No one can have the one without the other.¹³

Through hearing a sermon, we are exposed to the letter that kills and the Spirit that gives life.¹⁴ The sermon is understood as a narrative in which each hearer is carried from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The sermon communicates the deadness of the hearers under the weight of the law and also communicates the life that comes in Christ.

The gospel can be defined as a life-giving word. This activity of the gospel is brilliantly explained when Paul continues his argument in his analysis of Exodus 34, which retells the story of Moses putting a veil over his face in speaking with the

¹² Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith*, 212.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Answer to the Hyper Christian Book* (1521), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 39, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 185.

¹⁴ For this “material” reading of the letter and spirit contrast, I heavily depend on Seifrid’s “Excursus: The Letter and the Spirit in Recent Interpretation,” in *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 130–50.

people but removing the veil when he speaks to God. In the same way, the gospel is experienced whenever the Corinthians are turned to God because “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). The hearers are found in the place of the Israelites, who had to have the glory of God hidden from them in the “service” of the law, but are placed in the space of Moses by the gospel in their ability to turn to God and find something new. This produces a transformation “from glory into glory” (2 Cor 3:18). All this is possible because we all now look at the glory of God “with unveiled faces” (2 Cor 3:18). Understood in this way, the texts that the preacher faces are not inert clusters of words and ideas that need to have a “meaning” wrung out of them. They tell the story of the transformation from death into life.

There is much to be said about this passage in terms of Paul’s use of the law and interesting way of understanding the Old Testament. But for our purposes here, it is important to take into account key aspects of Paul’s discussion about the relationship of law and gospel here. First, preaching both of these offices is a service to a higher power. The word of law and gospel is fundamentally God’s way of communicating through the word. They do not depend on any special competence or ability of the preacher or some empirical evidence outside the bounds of the sermon but entirely upon what God does with both. Second, they are services that are performed upon hearers by God in the space of the sermon. They are not interpretive choices for preaching or principles that depend upon one another. The law does not improve the gospel, and the gospel does not fix errors in the law. They are both distinct services in which the preacher is tasked to speak. One to reveal deadness in sin. The other to speak those dead in sin to new life. The gospel turns people toward God and into freedom in the present moment. This is important to remember in the midst of constant temptation to root the gospel as some past act to encourage action in the present or to place it somewhere in the future to encourage action to bring it about. The verbs in 2 Corinthians 3:6 for *killing* and *making life* are in the present. The question to ask in sermon preparation is less “what does this text mean?” and more “how does Christ encounter my congregation here?”

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When an encounter with Christ is understood as the center of the letter that kills and the spirit that gives life, possibilities open up beyond the sermon for ministry as a whole. I found this out in a vivid way during one visit in the very beginning of my work as a chaplain. In making routine visits in an in-patient unit, I went into the room of an elderly couple in which the husband was heavily medicated

and very advanced in the dying process. Though he had identified himself as a non-practicing Jew, his spouse was a very devout Christian who had enthusiastically welcomed chaplain visits and shared how diligently she was working on converting her husband to Christianity. She shared how she had prayed with him the “sinner’s prayer” and encouraged him to look toward Jesus in his final moments. I prayed with her and continued with other visits.

Later in the morning, a family member of the same patient asked to speak with me. She was the patient’s daughter and like her father identified as a non-practicing Jew. In meeting with me, she shared how the patient’s wife (a stepmother from a subsequent marriage) had barred her from visiting the patient due to her concern that non-Christians visiting the patient might deter him from the conversion necessary for his salvation. The daughter was distraught in talking with me and shared how much she just wanted to be with her father during his final days.

After this, I went back to the patient’s room and asked the spouse if the patient’s daughter could come in and pray with us. I forgot exactly how I convinced her, but I do remember what I prayed for. Speaking words of peace to the patient, I prayed for God to bring unity and understanding to all those who stood by his side. I requested that God would unite the family together beyond human divisions. I prayed for the patient to be “led forward in peace” in the best way that God saw fit. Both the spouse and the daughter shared their appreciation for the prayers, and as they conversed together I left the room.

In leaving, I began to second guess the work I did, regretting not using the opportunity to pray about Jesus as the one able to bring all the prayer intentions about as a source of unity rather than division. But as I reflected further, I realized that without mentioning Jesus’s name I had borne witness to Jesus’s presence. Though the spouse had used the affirmation of salvation in Jesus as a barrier to family, contorting him into a symbol of division—a “letter” killing by demanding obedience—by hearing the daughter’s pain and building up her confidence to pray with her stepmother, I had led both of them into a sort of “turning to the Lord.” And none of this was by my own efforts but by the prompting of the Spirit through my office witnessing to the freedom to pray where before there was division. Though I don’t know exactly how everything turned out, for at least those little moments the Spirit was giving unity and life. This is the heart of the gospel—an encounter with Christ that gives life. This is what we are called to proclaim.

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