

## The perilous and promising pulpit

"Before there is faithful preaching, there is faithful listening," writes Thomas G. Long.

BY **THOMAS G. LONG**

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When Russell Moore, the editor-in-chief of Christianity Today, was interviewed recently on NPR, he told a chilling story about preaching. A number of pastors, he said, had reported to him essentially the same experience. They would be preaching on a passage like the Sermon on the Mount, including sayings such as “turn the other cheek,” “blessed are the merciful” or “love your enemies,” only to find themselves sharply attacked at the church door.

“Where’d you get that nonsense?” some aggrieved parishioner inevitably would ask.

“From Jesus Christ,” the startled pastor would respond. “I was literally quoting Jesus Christ.”

Far from mumbling out an embarrassed apology, the critic would instead walk away, scoffing, “Yeah, but that doesn’t work anymore. That’s weak.”

Chilling perhaps, but a familiar story. Not only do we find it disconcerting that Jesus’ teachings are openly ridiculed in church, but also many preachers are whispering among themselves that our entire culture’s toxic communicational environment has penetrated the sanctuary. In a new and disturbing way, preaching has become perilous.



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### Contrasting views of preaching today

In the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Second Helvetic Confession makes a claim that is as bold as one can make: “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” Preaching is not just about the Word of God, says the creed; it is the Word of God. That statement must be carefully parsed and interpreted, of course. Not all sermons are worthy. Some are frivolous, and some are simply wrongheaded — but to say preaching God’s Word is God’s Word expresses the faithful confession and the profound hope that the preacher is not the only voice speaking. The Spirit blows where it will, including in sermons.



English parish church pulpit.

But today, sermons are too often received not expectantly and hopefully, as vessels of the Spirit, but rather warily, as if they were opinion essays by preachers, full of dog whistles about culture war issues. One preacher was raked over the coals for suggesting in her sermon that Jesus might be grieved to see little children frightened, isolated and imprisoned in cages at the southern border of the United States. Another pastor was scorched by a parishioner for being a “crypto evangelical.” His sin? Mentioning Jesus too often in his preaching.

At preaching conferences, high on the list of urgent questions is this: How do you preach to politically and culturally divided congregations? Perplexed pastors pore over books with titles like *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*, published in 2018 by author Leah D. Shade.

“Almost every part of American life is tribalized and factionalized,” Moore said in his NPR interview, and the church is no exception.

## The peril of politics in the pulpit

Some would say that the lesson is simply to keep politics out of the pulpit. True, we must pity preachers who confuse their own partisan political views with the gospel. In her 1995 book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott recalls that a priest friend, Tom, once told her, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people as you do.” This insight applies to politics as well. If I ever stand in a pulpit and insinuate that God’s political views and mine are perfectly aligned, I can be very sure that I have downsized the Deity and shattered the second commandment, the pesky one about not creating idols.

But keeping preaching free of politics is not so simple — nor is it desirable, because the gospel is itself inextricably political. The very first sermon Jesus preached, and in essence every one of his sermons after that, was about the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. And when God’s kingdom draws near, the kingdoms of this world tremble and resist. That is politics. When the New Testament speaks about “principalities and powers,” it is not talking about vampires in Romania. It’s pointing to the stubborn resistance to God that marbles all human society, from education to military structures to economics to sexuality to immigration to media and beyond. Faithful preaching touches all these arenas. As the whole company of preachers can attest – from Jeremiah to Paul to Martin Luther King, Jr. – God’s Word has profound political ramifications. The Romans quickly deciphered that Jesus was not a harmless spiritualized street preacher but was, in fact, a political threat. They didn’t crucify him because he preached with cute hand puppets about chicken soup for the soul. They crucified him because his preaching and his presence were a threat to their very political power.

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It is no easy task to preach sharp, courageous and pertinent sermons that embody what we might call “the politics of God”: the gospel of the new creation in Jesus Christ that brings hope to a world passing away. Those sermons can so easily slip into the political agenda of the preacher, or at least be misinterpreted as such.

So I empathize with preachers today for whom sanctuaries can seem like minefields. I have myself experienced what I assumed was a gentle sermon on grace trigger unexpected anger and hostility. When preachers feel as though they are always walking on eggshells, they are tempted to scramble for cover in a safer line of work.

## The promise of politics in the pulpit

To me, though, today’s venomous communicational environment – both in and out of the church – seems, ironically, to be a time of great promise. Against the backdrop of today’s fractious and contentious communication, perhaps the gospel can stand out by contrast. Perhaps the same fraught communication with one another today can become the occasion for refreshment, for rediscovery of the power of the preached Word and the true

character of a sermon. Maybe a world in which words can be grenades – one in which Instagram, TikTok, cable news and all the cluttered rest are often filled with vitriol – is ripe for the power of honest preaching, by one person who cares for others and who therefore stands before them and speaks the truth in love.

To recover the power of preaching in a distressed time means rediscovering a great emphasis of the Reformed theological tradition: namely, that before there is faithful preaching, there is faithful listening. Biblical texts are not simply pretexts for whatever preachers want to say on Sunday. They are living documents, ever able to speak anew a word from God. Before one speaks in a sermon, one is summoned to listen to the text deeply and attentively, praying fervently to God, “Speak to me that I may speak.” And when the Spirit does speak, then and only then do we turn toward God’s people to speak “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help us God” about what has been heard.



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Theologian Karl Barth once provocatively said that the only appropriate attitude for a preacher to have in the pulpit is embarrassment. The reason for this embarrassment is that preachers do not possess what they are there to give: God’s Word. Preachers stand in the pulpit empty-handed, utterly dependent upon God to speak to and through them. Embarrassed preachers – preachers who know they are beggars, who can give only what God has given to them – are also faithful preachers, and their sermons ring with authenticity.

At a theological conference dinner years ago, I found myself seated next to a theologian from a country that was at that time behind the Iron Curtain, under Soviet control. He told me that the KGB kept a wary eye on the church in his country and had, in fact, infiltrated the church, with secret agents sometimes posing as clergy. “Any time we clergy gather for a meeting,” he told me, “we are aware that there are some among us posing as ministers but who are really spies.” After a pause he added, “But we know who they are.”

“How do you know?” I asked him.

“It’s the voice,” he said. “You can hear the deception in their voices.”

If we can discern the inauthentic voice, we can also perceive the authentic one. Our culture, weighed down by poisonous communication and weary of divisive words, lies and cynicism, is beginning to realize afresh our need for authentic and truthful words. Trapped in a deafening echo chamber of rage, our culture is oppressed and exhausted by listening only to its enraged self. We yearn for a trustworthy word from beyond ourselves.



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When his own disciples were complaining and threatening to break into factions, Jesus asked if they intended to go away, as others had done. In a moment of deep insight, Peter asked, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Rediscovering the power of preaching, then, requires preachers to actively listen to the voice of the Spirit in the biblical witness and then to speak the truth in love. But that alone is not sufficient. The equation has at least one more part: the congregation.

In his 1993 book *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Jürgen Moltmann powerfully describes the symbolic actions involved in preaching: the preacher gets up from the congregation – from the assembly, from the body of Christ – walks forward and turns to speak in the name of Christ. In other words, as Scottish theologian P. T. Forsyth reminded us over a century ago, preachers preach not only to the church but also from the church. Preachers do not parachute into worship from pastorland. Symbolically, at least, they get up from the pew, as members of the body of Christ, before they open their mouths as preachers.



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## Preaching as a unified act of ministry

The conviction that preachers come from the pew to the pulpit guides us toward two additional insights about preaching, having to do with the less obvious roles of the preacher and the congregation.

The first insight is that preachers may come from the pews to preach, but we must remember that part of them remains back in the pews as listeners. Even as preachers preach the Word, they also listen. The forerunner of the current Presbyterian Directory for Worship, the 1649 Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God, said that preaching was “the power of God unto salvation.” That’s good, of course, but who is being saved through preaching? The old directory was amazingly candid about this: The preacher was being saved, as well as others. The preacher preaches, the Westminster Directory said, so that the gospel “may save himself, and those that hear him.”

So if Jeremiah or Amos or Jesus or Paul comes to us in next Sunday’s sermon with a demanding and challenging word, that word is meant for the preacher, too; and the fact that the preacher and the rest of the congregation hear and receive that word together changes the atmosphere of preaching. You can tell when preachers know they are serving as the Word of God as well as proclaiming the Word of God. You can hear it in their voices.

That leads to the second insight, as our image of the preacher arising from the pews to preach also upends the passive stance that many of us assume at sermon time. The typical assumption is that the preacher preaches the sermon while the congregation listens passively. Then, when the sermon is over, the hearers silently give a mental emoji, one of those thumbs-up or thumbs-down ratings. The preacher preaches, and the hearers evaluate: “I liked it ... I didn’t like it ... it was boring ... it was meaningful.”

But to think of preaching that way is to have it all wrong. Preaching a sermon is something that the whole gathered assembly does together, as a unified act of ministry. Yes, the preacher prepares and delivers the words of the sermon, as a division of labor — but equally important are the listeners, the role they play and how they prepare to hear and receive.



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One Sunday long ago, I was the guest preacher at a large and vigorous African American church in Trenton, New Jersey. After arriving early for the service, I stood in the pulpit and carefully marked my Bible passage, placing my sermon notes and getting a feel for the sanctuary. A tall man in glasses entered the room. He came up into the pulpit, greeted me, and introduced himself as one of the deacons of the church. He said, “It is our custom here to have prayer with the preacher before the service begins.” I started to bow my head, expecting him to pray on the spot, but instead, he pointed to a door at the front wall of the sanctuary. “In there,” he said.

He led me into a small room where perhaps a dozen others were gathered. I soon learned that these were the other deacons. The deacon who had greeted me said to the group, “Let us gather around Brother Long in prayer.” I imagined that we would simply form a prayer circle, so I was unprepared for what came next.

The deacon put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Would you kneel, brother?” I did. As I knelt on the floor, the deacons surrounded me, placing their hands on my head and shoulders. Then they prayed, pleading to God that I would be given an anointing of the Spirit to preach the Word. They were recapitulating my ordination in a deep sense. And then they prayed for themselves, asking that they, too, would be anointed by the Spirit, that Jesus would grant them open hearts and teachable spirits, that they might truly hear the Word and respond with their lives.

I had come to church that day with my sermon — but when I preached, I realized it was different. It was now our sermon, and the Spirit’s sermon. What those deacons knew and believed, gathered in that little room, was that when it comes to preaching and worshiping, we are in this together and we are not alone. They prayed for the Holy Spirit to animate us all, for each of us to be given the anointing we needed to take up our part. In their minds, the sermon was not something that a preacher delivered and then the congregation went home to talk about at dinner. Rather, the sermon was an event of the whole church, something for which all of them were responsible.



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Perhaps if we could renew that vision of preaching as a ministry shared by the whole, gathered church, we would go a long way toward draining the toxins from our communication.

This fresh mindset would at least answer the question we pastors often ask each other after hours at our gatherings: Who do you think is the greatest preacher today? Forsyth again supplies the wise answer. “The one great preacher,” said Forsyth, “is the church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the church to preach.”



### **THOMAS G. LONG**

Thomas G. Long is the Bandy Professor of Preaching Emeritus at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. A Presbyterian minister, Long has served churches in Georgia and New Jersey.