



G R E G H E I S L E R

*"A great help and encouragement to any preacher who longs for the Spirit's true anointing in the pulpit."*

—JOHN MACARTHUR



SPIRIT-LED

*Preaching*

The Holy Spirit's Role in

Sermon Preparation and Delivery

# Chapter 1

## Missing in Action: Where Is the Holy Spirit When We Preach?

*Our generation is rapidly losing its grip upon the supernatural; and as a consequence, the pulpit is rapidly dropping to the level of the platform. And this decline is due, more than anything else, to ignoring the Holy Spirit as the supreme inspirer of preaching. We would rather see a great orator in the pulpit, forgetting that the least expounder of the Word, when filled with the Spirit, is greater than he.*

—A. J. Gordon

I can still remember the conversation to this day: “Preacher, all these people haven’t come today to hear you preach. I know it’s Sunday morning and it’s church, but they’re not interested in hearing preaching today. They want to hear the music group sing, not hear you preach.” Those were shocking words to a young pastor with his heart set on preaching the Word of God and winning the world for Jesus Christ. As this older deacon lectured me on what really mattered to the congregation on such a special day (no preaching = more music), I found my mind drifting back to Romans 10:14 where Paul says, “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?” Hearing music is one thing. But hearing the Word of God proclaimed, Paul says, is essential to bringing people to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

I have nothing against great music in a church worship service; in fact, more often than not, it warms and stirs my heart before I preach. I also have nothing against using the arts in worship. Readings, dramas, and visuals can enhance our worship experience. What I am dead-set against is allowing all these “good things” to crowd out and push out the “most needed thing”—the preaching of the Word! What that deacon was sharing with me opened my eyes to a stark reality and a growing trend I have seen among churches today: Preaching is no longer the priority of the church.

### The Contemporary Setting

Preaching has once again fallen on hard times. From a postmodern perspective, preaching is seen by many as rationalistic, elitist, and authoritarian. In a culture that worships at the altar of relativism and idolizes ideas that do not offend anyone, there is little tolerance for any preacher to be so bold as to proclaim, “Thus says the Lord.” Cultural critic and theologian Al Mohler believes biblical preaching has been replaced with needs-based, human-centered approaches to avoid what he calls “a potentially embarrassing confrontation with biblical truth.”<sup>1</sup> John Piper laments the decline of faithful biblical exposition in the face of a changing culture when he observes how preaching has become “relational, anecdotal, humorous, casual, laid-back, absorbed in human need, fixed on relational dynamics, heavily saturated with psychological categories, and wrapped up in strategies for emotional healing.”<sup>2</sup>

Preaching has lost its theological mandate. Consequently, we have replaced preachers with speakers because we are told people want dialogue without doctrine and talks without truth. Theology is out, storytellers are in, and as a result we are seeing an entire generation

---

1. Al Mohler, “The Urgency of Preaching,” Weblog 25 June 2004. Available at [www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler](http://www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler).

2. John Piper, “Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation,” *Trinity Journal* 16 (Spring 1995): 30.

of preachers who are more driven to be effective communicators than to be Spirit-empowered preachers. Methodology trumps theology, and sensitivity to the audience has replaced sensitivity to the Spirit.

Even those who propose expository preaching as the cure to the ailments of preaching today are not always preaching expository sermons; and when they do preach them, they do not preach them in an engaging manner. Poorly preached sermons, no matter what kind they are, give preaching a black eye. My first experience with preaching came through Young Life, a youth ministry that seeks to impact teenagers with the gospel. When it was my turn to give the message, my leader told me, “Never forget cardinal rule number one: It’s a sin to bore people with the gospel of Jesus Christ!” If you are a preacher or preparing to be a preacher, let me challenge you right now to take a moment to pray, and determine in your heart today that if people come to church and leave bored, it will not be because of your preaching! I tell my students in my preaching classes, “If you are boring in the pulpit today, it’s no one’s fault but your own.”

Let’s face the facts for a moment. We have more commentaries today than we know what to do with or have time to read, so understanding the text should not be the problem. We have access to millions of illustrations with Google and the Web. We have entire Web sites dedicated to helping us preach, and we have powerful computer software that can exegete the Hebrew and Greek text for us at the click of a mouse. Even when it comes to delivery, we have programs like PowerPoint to help us present our message in a visually stimulating way. We are spoiled indeed! So why, even with all these wonderful tools and technologies, do our sermons come across as boring, uninteresting, irrelevant, and uninspiring?

Could it be that the most important ingredient to engaging and powerful preaching cannot be boxed up and sold on a shelf or downloaded from the Web? Could it be that the reason our sermons are so passionless and powerless today is not that we lack resources but that we lack power—supernatural power? Yes, we have made ourselves more efficient, but has the Spirit made our messages more powerful?

Our calling as preachers is to proclaim the Bible, plain and simple. We must also deliver God’s Word in an engaging and

authentic manner. My conviction is that the Spirit of God and the Word of God come together in the heart and mind of the preacher to produce substantive and compelling sermons that transform the lives of listeners. A preacher's head and heart must meet together in the Holy Spirit to produce powerful preaching that informs the mind, inflames the heart, moves the will, and transforms the life. The Word of God is the substance of our message. It is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12). The Spirit of God is the fire of our message. He ignites us as we prepare it and deliver it, and he ignites our listeners as they hear it!

One way to overcome the apathy of the pew toward preaching is for preachers to return to the days of Jeremiah, when the Word of God was so powerfully shut up in his bones like fire that he couldn't hold it in (Jer. 20:9)! Come to the pulpit so full of the Word of God and so full of the Spirit of God—unable to hold it in—and you will find that your people cannot wait to take it in! Moody said, “Catch on fire for Jesus, and the world will come and watch you burn.”

### What's the Solution?

Why have so many churches been unaffected by the ministry of the Word? I believe the answer lies in our failure to harness the synergistic power that results when the Spirit of God and the Word of God combine together in preaching. We have so emphasized the needs of the text—and those are crucial needs indeed—that the Spirit's contribution to preaching seems secondary at best. We forget that without the Spirit we would have no text to begin with and without the Spirit we would have no illumined heart to discern the text (1 Cor. 2:14). Nothing short of a renaissance of the Holy Spirit's role in preaching will save powerless pulpits and sick churches from ineffective kingdom ministry.

In this book I am not advocating replacing the emphasis on the Word with an emphasis on the Spirit. I am advocating adding the Spirit's emphasis to the present emphasis on preaching the Word. I think A. J. Gordon's assessment is right. We have lost our sense of

the supernatural, and as a result preaching has become the activity of man instead of the ministry of God.

### Whatever Happened to the Holy Spirit?

Where did we get offtrack with regard to the supernatural—especially the Holy Spirit’s involvement in preaching? Unfortunately, explanations are scarce and answers are few and far between. First of all, most textbooks on preaching have little to say about the Spirit. Even classic preaching texts like John Broadus’s *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* have little to say about the Spirit in preaching. A generation of preachers in the 1930s and 1940s were raised on Andrew Blackwood’s preaching texts, which also place little emphasis on the Spirit’s involvement in preaching. In fact, the broad consensus of the literature as a whole reveals little interest in the Spirit. Only recently, with the publication of books like Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix’s *Power in the Pulpit* (1999), as well as Stephen Olford and David Olford’s *Anointed Expository Preaching* (1998), have textbooks on how to prepare a sermon incorporated more than a passing reference to the Spirit.

### Preaching Definitions

One of the most obvious omissions of the Spirit’s role in preaching is seen in how rare it is to find the Spirit incorporated into a definition of preaching. This is ironic since the way you define something will ultimately determine the outcome you can expect. In general, preaching definitions tend to center on the preacher, the Bible, and the delivery. Yet if preaching is the Spirit’s ministry and if the final goal of our preaching is a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, then we must define preaching to encompass the rich theology of Word and Spirit from the very beginning. In the next chapter I will develop the Spirit-led definition of preaching used throughout the rest of the book.

What does the Spirit’s absence from the definitions of preaching reveal to us? First, I believe it shows just how post-theological preaching has become. Contemporary preaching begins with the

audience instead of God, and as a result preaching has become the trade of communicators, not pastor-theologians. Many preaching books, Web sites, and preaching blogs focus heavily on the pragmatic side of preaching by emphasizing techniques, tips, mechanics, and the how-to approach to preaching. Don't get me wrong; we need to learn the pragmatic side of preaching because the techniques and mechanical elements of preaching do help us to become better preachers. My concern is that often these books, Web sites, and blogs tell only half the story of what preaching is all about. We need to know how to put a sermon together, but before we tackle the how-tos, let's first learn the "why-do" by establishing the theological foundation and spiritual dynamic of preaching.

Put another way, sound mechanics must be complemented by spiritual dynamics lest we end up with a Rolls Royce sermon that looks great on paper but has no gas in the tank to give it any power. In *Spirit-Led Preaching* I am calling for a more holistic and theologically driven approach to preaching that by definition and design incorporates the dynamic Spirit of God ministering the living Word of God through the Spirit-empowered man of God. The Spirit adds the homiletic gas to the preacher's tank, empowering the sermon and ensuring that our preaching goes someplace!

*Spirit-Led Preaching* is intentionally centered on the theological and spiritual *dynamics* of preaching while still maintaining the importance of good sermon *mechanics*. This means that our sermons can have clear structure and can be Spirit-filled at the same time. Some preachers do not believe you can have the Spirit and structure at the same time because for them being led by the Spirit in preaching means unpredictability, and man-made structures tend to get in the way of the unpredictable and unstructured Spirit! In this view any sermon with clarity and sound structure is decried as man's creation not the Spirit's.

Yet when we begin to think about the Spirit's work of inspiration, we would not conclude that the Spirit-inspired Word of God has no structure, would we? Of course not! The Bible is replete with structure because the Spirit's inspiration was captured in words, which were placed into sentences, which were combined into coherent paragraphs, which fit into the flow of the writer's overall

argument, and so on. So the Spirit can and does work within good, clear sermon structure, especially if that structure is shaped by and anchored to the biblical text.

Is there a danger in having sound sermon structure and good preaching mechanics? Yes, the danger we face as preachers comes in the form of a misplaced confidence. For example, when I begin to think that the power and effectiveness of my sermon comes from how well-structured or how well-packaged my sermon is on a given Sunday, I will quench and grieve the true power of preaching—the Holy Spirit of God. As a preacher of God’s Word, I must constantly remind myself that the power of my sermon is not located in how well my outline comes together in alliterative fashion. The power of my sermon does not come from the balanced symmetry and parallelism of my three points and my three subpoints. The power of my sermon does not come from my creative introduction or my perfect-fitting illustration. The preached message always finds its true source of power in the theological fusion of the Word of God and the Spirit of God joining together in Christological witness to the Son of God, coming through the proclamation of the man of God.

### The Holy Spirit and Shyness

A second reason for the Spirit’s absence in preaching today has to do with the excesses and abuses attributed to the Spirit. Everything from laughing, crying, barking like a dog, meowing like a cat, passing out at the altar, jumping over pews, to transforming into Superman seems to be claimed as a true manifestation of the Spirit. It’s no wonder that James Forbes in his 1989 work *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* coined the phrase “Spirit-shy Christians” to describe believers who find talking about the Spirit to be an intimidating and anxiety-filled experience. Preachers are not exempt, by the way. James Montgomery Boice, a well-respected pastor and Bible expositor, confessed his own neglect of the Spirit in his preaching: “I had been in the ministry for about seven years when my morning preaching through Philippians, the Sermon on the Mount, and John eventually brought me to the discourses of John 14–16, in which the work of the Holy Spirit is described. *Strange to say I had never*

*done any serious preaching on the Holy Spirit before that time*”<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added).

As preachers we seem eager to tip our hats to the Holy Spirit’s importance for our preaching, but we tend to clam up when asked to explain the Spirit’s power in our own lives and in our own preaching. Once during my seminary days we had a chapel speaker who was going to discuss the life and preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I was excited because I knew Lloyd-Jones had some strong views about the Spirit and preaching. When the speaker finally came to Lloyd-Jones’s views on the unction of the Holy Spirit for preaching, he said to us, “There are some beliefs that you are better off keeping to yourself and taking with you to the grave.” With stifling statements like that, no wonder we have such a negative stigma about the Spirit!

### Teaching Preaching

A third reason the Spirit is neglected in preaching today can be traced to the way we teach preaching in our colleges and seminaries. For starters, preaching typically ends up in the “practical” department rather than the “theological.” As a result, students show up in preaching class and say with a sigh of relief, “Finally, something practical I can use in ministry.” These pragmatically driven students eagerly but naively put behind all their “history, theology, and language stuff” so they can finally “let loose and just preach the Bible!”

As one who teaches preaching, I spend the first several weeks of my class laying down the theological foundation for preaching. One semester a student raised his hand and asked me, “When are we going to learn *how* to preach? This is all just a bunch of theory so far.” Can I translate that: “This theological foundation is a waste of my time.” With this type of mind-set, some students come to class wanting the “Top Ten Insights on How to Preach Like a Pro,” “Seven Steps to Preaching with Success,” “Five Days and Five Ways to Better Preaching,” and “Three Secrets to Spirit-Filled Sermons.”

---

3. James Montgomery Boice, “The Preacher and Scholarship,” in *The Preacher and Preaching* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 96.

Their expectations are nothing short of the miraculous: Teach me to preach with the passion of a Johnny Hunt, teach me to preach with the power of an Adrian Rogers, teach me to preach with the eloquence and imagination of a Jerry Vines, and teach me to preach with the theological depth of a John MacArthur. Disappointment sets in the minute I tell them that what they are seeing in the sermons of these preachers is the finished product that comes only at a great price: consistently walking with God in humility, daily seeking and surrendering to the Lord through prayer, and living clean and pure before God. Only after years of study, years of walking in holiness before God, and years of time spent alone with God in prayer is the chamber of the Spirit-filled heart ready to give birth to powerful preaching.

Preaching is not so much about you preparing a sermon to preach; preaching is about God preparing you—his vessel—to preach.

Let me challenge you to allow God to prepare you through kneeling in the power of his presence through unceasing prayer. Allow God to prepare you by soaking in the glory of his Word through diligent study of the Bible. Allow God to prepare your character through repentance, cleansing, and living above reproach before the Lord. Then you will find yourself walking into the pulpit as a transformed, Spirit-filled preacher who delivers a burden, not a sermon; who expresses convictions, not opinions; and who preaches to please God, not an audience.

We need to return to teaching the theological foundation of preaching from the classical theological doctrines of bibliology *and* pneumatology. Our students need to see the complementary relationship between Word and Spirit and to understand the proper function of sermon mechanics and sermon dynamics for preaching. They need to have as much zeal for the theological realities as they do for the how-to practicalities. Above all, they need to approach preaching with absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's role as the source and catalyst of all life-changing responses to preaching cannot be an afterthought; it is our consuming thought and prayer throughout our preparation and delivery!

This brief overview of the Spirit's absence should cause us to reexamine our own approach to preaching and ask ourselves some

hard questions: How does the Holy Spirit inform my own theology of preaching? Have I thought through how the Word and the Spirit work together in preaching, or do I see them as theological opposites? How does my current sermon preparation demonstrate a dependence upon the Holy Spirit? What is my definition of preaching, and does it include the Spirit's ministries for preaching?

Ignorance, tradition, fear, and theological apathy can be overcome with a proper biblical theology of the Holy Spirit. Simply acknowledging the Spirit's presence is not enough. We must overcome our own Holy Spirit shyness and boldly invite the Spirit's gifts and ministries into the realm of our preaching. If preaching with power hinges on the Spirit's involvement, then it only makes sense to develop an approach to preaching that is Spirit dependent, Spirit led, and Spirit demonstrated.

I want to end this chapter by asking you to reflect on this statement: "If the Spirit of God is left out of preaching, preaching does not really happen." Would you say that more often than not in your own preaching, the Spirit has been left out? Perhaps after reading through this chapter, God is convicting you that you need to make a fresh surrender to his power in your life and in your preaching. Maybe you've quenched the Spirit instead of surrendering to the Spirit because of anger toward your church or toward your spouse or toward God. Perhaps unconfessed sin has hindered the Spirit's work in your life, and right now he's calling on you to turn from it and confess it. Can you honestly say the Spirit is in control of you right now—that you are filled and controlled by him? Ask God to give you a fresh dependence upon his Holy Spirit for your life, your preaching, and your church.