THE ART OF PROPHESYING

and

THE CALLING OF THE MINISTRY

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST
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Preface

The pages which follow have been written for faithful ministers of the gospel and for all who are concerned about and pursue the knowledge of holy learning.

The preparation of sermons is an everyday task in the church, but it is still a tremendous responsibility and by no means easy. In fact it is doubtful if there is a more difficult challenge in the theological disciplines than that of homiletics. Its subject matter is prophecy, which is a ‘higher gift’ indeed (cf. 1 Cor. 12:31), whether we think about its dignity or its usefulness.

The dignity of the gift of preaching is like that of a lady helped into and carried along in a chariot, while other gifts of speech and learning stand by like maidservants, conscious of her superiority.

In keeping with this dignity, preaching has a twofold value: (1) It is instrumental in gathering the church and bringing together all of the elect; (2) It drives away the wolves from the folds of the Lord. Preaching is the flexanima, the allurer of the soul, by which our self-willed minds are subdued and changed from an ungodly and pagan life-style to a life of Christian faith and repentance. It is also the weapon which has shaken the foundations of ancient heresies, and also, more recently cut to pieces the sinews of the Antichrist. So, if anyone asks which spiritual gift is the ‘most excellent’, undoubtedly the prize must be given to prophesying.
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The better something is, the more it deserves to be carefully presented with a wide variety of rich and wise counsel. But this everyday task is frequently described in a scarcely adequate and even impoverished manner by comparison with the attention other disciplines receive. I have, therefore, carefully studied the writings of the theologians, composed a series of rules and principles from their teaching, and tried to explain them in a way that will be both useful and easily remembered.

I am now committing these reflections on preaching to print—to be approved if they have any value, to be criticised and rejected if they have any inadequacies. If you are persuaded of this style of preaching, walk on with me; if you have some doubts, inquire with me; if you begin to see points at which you have wandered, come back on to the right path with me; if you see that I have strayed, call me back to the road you are on. Your appreciation of me will become disapproval soon enough if you do not like godly and moderate-minded men! But if anyone has petty complaints about these pages—few as they are—my conscience is a strong enough defence against all criticism, because my only concern has been to serve the church of God. So I commit you to him, and this little book on the art of prophesying to you as well as to him.

William Perkins
12 December 1592
Introduction

The study of prophesying involves a commitment of the mind to acquire the ability to exercise prophecy rightly. Prophecy (or prophesying) is a solemn public utterance by the prophet, related to the worship of God and the salvation of our neighbours, as the following passages indicate: ‘But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men’ (1 Cor. 14:3). ‘But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all’ (1 Cor. 14:24). ‘For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son’ (Rom. 1:9).
I. *The Art of Prophecy*

There are two parts to prophecy: preaching the Word and public prayer. For the prophet (that is, the minister of the Word) has only two duties. One is preaching the Word, and the other is praying to God in the name of the people: ‘Having . . . prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith’ (*Rom. 12:6*); ‘Restore the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live’ (*Gen. 20:7*). Notice that in Scripture the word ‘prophecy’ is used of prayer as well as of preaching: ‘The sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals’ (*1 Chron. 25:1*); ‘The prophets of Baal called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon . . . And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice . . . ’ (*1 Kings 18:26, 29*). Thus every prophet’s task is to speak partly as the voice of God (in preaching), and partly as the voice of the people (in praying): ‘If you take out the precious from the vile, You shall be as My mouth’ (*Jer. 15:19*); ‘And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!”’ (*Neh. 8:6*).

Preaching the Word is prophesying in the name and on behalf of Christ. Through preaching those who hear are called into the state of grace, and preserved in it. God has ‘given us the ministry of reconciliation . . . Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God’ (*2 Cor. 5:18, 20*); ‘God from
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the beginning chose you for salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit, and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel’ (2 Thess. 2:13, 14); ‘The gospel is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes’ (Rom. 1:16); ‘Where there is no revelation the people cast off restraint’ (Prov. 29:18); ‘How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?’ (Rom. 10:14).
2. The Word of God

The Word of God alone is to be preached, in its perfection and inner consistency. Scripture is the exclusive subject of preaching, the only field in which the preacher is to labour. ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them’ (Luke 16:29); ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat [that is, they teach the doctrine of Moses, which they confess]. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do’ (Matt. 23:2–3).

The Word of God is God’s wisdom revealing from heaven the truth which is according to godliness. ‘But the wisdom, which is from above is first pure . . .’ (James 3:17); ‘Paul, a bondservant of God . . . according to . . . the acknowledgement of the truth which accords with godliness’ (Titus 1:1). The exceptional qualities of the Word, both in its nature and its effects, evoke our admiration.

The Nature of Scripture

The excellency of the nature of Scripture can be described in terms of its perfection, or purity, or its eternity.

Its perfection consists either in its sufficiency or its purity. Its sufficiency is such that as the Word of God it is so complete that nothing may be either added to it or taken from it which belongs to its proper purpose: ‘The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul’ (Psa. 19:7); ‘Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it, nor take away from it’ (Deut. 12:32); ‘For I testify to everyone who hears the words
of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book' (Rev. 22:18–19).

The purity of Scripture lies in the fact that it stands complete in itself, without either deceit or error: ‘The words of the Lord are pure words, Like silver tried in a furnace of earth, Purified seven times’ (Psa. 12:6).

The eternity of the Word is its quality of remaining inviolable. It cannot pass away until everything it commands has been fully accomplished (Matt. 5:18).

**Effects of Scripture**

The exceptional character of the influence of Scripture lies in two things:

1. Its power to penetrate into the spirit of man: ‘For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart’ (Heb. 4:12).

2. Its ability to bind the conscience, that is, to constrain it before God either to excuse or accuse us of sin: ‘There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy’ (James 4:12); ‘The Lord is our Judge, The Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King; He will save us’ (Isa. 33:22).

The Word of God is in the Holy Scriptures. The Scripture is the Word of God written in a language appropriate for the church by men who were immediately called to be the clerks or secretaries of the Holy Spirit: ‘for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’
(2 Pet. 1:21). We speak of it as *canonical* Scripture because it is, as it were, a canon, that is a rule or line used by a master workman, by the aid of which the truth is first discovered, and then examined: ‘... and as many as walk according to this rule’ (Gal. 6:16). Consequently the supreme, final determination and judgment of all controversies in the church ought to be made by it.

The sum and substance of the message of the Bible can be summarised in an argument (or syllogism) such as this:

**Major Premise:** The true Messiah shall be both God and man, from the seed of David. He shall be born of his heavenly Father’s bosom. He shall satisfy the law. He shall offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the faithful. He shall conquer death by dying and rising again. He shall ascend into heaven. In due time he shall return for judgment.

**Minor Premise:** Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, meets all of these requirements.

**Conclusion:** Therefore Jesus is the true Messiah.

In this syllogism the major premise is the scope or principal burden of the writings of all the prophets. The minor premise is contained in the writings of the evangelists and apostles.
3. *The Contents of Scripture*

The Scriptures are divided into the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is the first part of Scripture. Written by the prophets in Hebrew (with some parts in Aramaic), it chiefly unfolds the ‘old covenant’ of works (‘Moses and the prophets’, *Luke* 16:29). ‘And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself’ (*Luke* 24:27). It is divided into sixty-six books which are either historical, doctrinal, or prophetic in nature.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

**Historical Books**

The historical books record stories of things which took place, which illustrate and confirm the doctrine which is expounded in other books: ‘Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition’ (*1 Cor.* 10:11); ‘For whatever things were written before were written for our learning’ (*Rom.* 15:4).

There are fifteen historical books:

1. *Genesis* is a history of the creation, the fall, the first promise of salvation, and of the state of the church preserved and kept within the context of private families.
2. *Exodus* is a history of the deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians. It describes the exodus, the giving of the law, and the tabernacle.

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3. Leviticus records the regulations for ceremonial worship.
4. Numbers is a history of the people’s military activity in the land of Canaan.
5. Deuteronomy is a commentary which repeats and explains the laws found in the previous books.
6. Joshua describes the entrance into and possession of the land of Canaan under Joshua.
7. Judges provides a history of the corrupt and hopeless condition of the church and commonwealth of Israel from the days of Joshua up to those of Eli.
8. Ruth gives an account of the marriages and posterity of Ruth.
9. 1 and 2 Samuel record events in the days of the priests Eli and Samuel, and during the reigns of Saul and David.
10. 1 and 2 Kings narrate what happened in the days of the kings of Israel and Judah.
11. 1 and 2 Chronicles contain a methodical history of the beginning, increase and ruin of the people of Israel, and help to trace and explain the lineage of Christ.
12. Ezra contains a history of the return of the people from captivity in Babylon, and of the beginning of the restoration of the city of Jerusalem.
13. Nehemiah describes the restoring of the city which as yet remained unfinished.
14. Esther is a history of the preservation of the Jewish church in Persia through the action of Esther.
15. Job is a history which traces the causes of his trials and his various conflicts, with their eventually happy outcome.

Doctrinal Books
The dogmatic or doctrinal books are those which teach and prescribe the doctrines of our theology. There are four of them in the Old Testament.
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1. *Psalms* contains sacred songs suitable for every condition of the church and its individual members, composed to be sung with grace in the heart (*Col. 3:16*).
2. *Proverbs* serves as a handbook of Christian behaviour and teaches us about piety towards God, and justice towards our neighbour.
3. *Ecclesiastes* reveals the emptiness of all human pleasures to the extent that they are experienced apart from the fear of God.
4. *The Song of Songs* is an allegorical description of the relationship between Christ and the church in terms of the relationship between a bridegroom and his bride (or a husband and wife).

**Prophetic Books**

The prophetic books contain predictions, either of God’s judgments on the sins of the people or of the deliverance of the church which would be finally completed at the coming of Christ. These predictions of the prophets are interspersed with calls to repentance. They almost always point to the consolation which would be found in Christ by those who repent.

It was characteristic of the prophets to help the memory and understanding of their hearers by recording summaries of sermons which they preached at much greater length: ‘Moreover the Lord said to me, “Take a large scroll, and write on it with a man’s pen” (*Isa. 8:1*); ‘Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, That he may run who reads it’ (*Hab. 2:2*).

The prophetic books are usually described as ‘Major’ or ‘Minor’. The ‘Major’ prophets record in detail the things that are foretold; these include the prophecies of *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel* and *Daniel*. Included here too are *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* which express the misery of the Jews about the time of the death of Josia. The ‘Minor’ prophets deal more briefly or in less detail with things that are foretold for the future, or at
The Contents of Scripture

least with some of them. These are: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

So much, then, for the Old Testament.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is the second part of Scripture. Its contents were written in Greek by the apostles, or at least were approved by them (cf. ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets’, Eph. 2:20). They plainly expound teaching on the new covenant. Peter approved the Gospel of Mark, at whose instigation and appointment it was written by John Mark, according to early church tradition. And John the Evangelist also approved the Gospel of Luke. The view reported by Eusebius that two places in Paul’s letters (2 Tim. 2:8 and Rom. 2:16) suggest that he was the author of that Gospel carries little weight. In these verses Paul is not speaking of the gospel as a book, but of his whole ministry, since he adds, ‘for which I suffer trouble as an evil doer, even to the point of chains’ (2 Tim. 2:9).


Histories

1. The four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John contain the narrative of the life, deeds and teaching which Christ showed to the world, from the time of his conception until his ascension into heaven. Of these four authors, two were hearers and eyewitnesses, so that they were able to give greater assurance of the truth of the history.

The difference between the Gospels can be expressed as follows: Matthew gives a clear account of the doctrines which Christ delivered. Mark sets down the history briefly; although his Gospel is not an abridgement of Matthew’s Gospel, as Jerome thought.
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He begins his account in a quite different way, and proceeds in a different order, dealing with some things more generally and also interweaving some new material. Luke aimed at providing an accurate history, and describes events in a certain order. John is almost completely dedicated to displaying the deity of Christ and the benefits which we derive from it.

Jerome distinguished the evangelists from one another by their different approaches. He says Matthew is like a man, because he begins with the manhood of Christ; Mark like a lion, because he begins with the preaching of John the Baptist, which was like the roaring of a lion. He compares Luke to an ox, because he begins with Zechariah the priest offering his sacrifice. He compares John to an eagle, because he soars to the heights, as it were, and begins with the deity of Christ.

2. *The Acts of the Apostles* is an orderly history recording the work of Peter and Paul particularly, and illustrating the governing of the early church (cf. 2 Tim. 3:10).

3. *Revelation* is a prophetic history of the condition of the church from the age in which John the apostle lived until the end of the world.

**Letters**

As for the Letters, thirteen of them are from Paul and cover the following themes:

2. *1 Corinthians*: reforming abuses in the church at Corinth.
3. *2 Corinthians*: Paul’s defence of himself and of his apostleship against his opponents.

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5. Ephesians  
6. Philippians  
7. Colossians  
8. 1 Thessalonians  
9. 2 Thessalonians  
10. 1 Timothy  
11. 2 Timothy  
12. Titus: ordering the church in Crete.  

Hebrews deals with the person and offices of Christ and describes the character of the faith which produces fruit in good works.

James expounds the good works which are to accompany faith.

1 and 2 Peter deal with sanctification and the works of new obedience.

1 John expounds the signs of fellowship with God.

2 John was written to ‘the elect lady’ about perseverance in the truth.

3 John, addressed to Gaius, is about hospitality and constancy in the good.

Jude emphasises constancy in the faith against the influence of false prophets.

These, then, are the books which belong to the canonical Scriptures.

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

There is strong evidence to show that these books alone, and no others, constitute the Word of God. One kind of proof enables us to know this, the other gives expression to it. Of the former kind there is only one, namely the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, not only telling an individual
within his heart but also effectually persuading him that these books of the Scripture are the Word of God. ‘My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth . . . from this time and for evermore’ (Isa. 59:21).

The way in which we are persuaded is as follows. The elect, having the Spirit of God, first of all discern the voice of Christ speaking in the Scriptures. Furthermore, they approve the voice which they discern; and what they approve they also believe. Finally, believing they are (as it were) sealed with the seal of the Spirit. ‘In whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise’ (Eph. 1:13).

The church can bear witness to the canon of Scripture, but it cannot inwardly persuade us of its authority. If that were so the voice of the church would have greater force than the voice of God, and the whole state of man’s salvation would be dependent on men. What could be more miserable than that?

More than one objection has been raised against this view by the Roman Catholic Church:

*Objection 1:* The Scripture is the Word of God by itself, but it is not clear to us that this is so except through the judgment of the church.

*Answer:* (i) This is an irrelevant contrast. For the first part of it shows the manner in which the Scripture is the Word of God (i.e. by itself as breathed out by God); the latter part shows not the manner how, but the person to whom it is the Word of God.

(ii) The Scripture itself testifies to itself with the kind of testimony which is more certain than all human oaths. For we have the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, who also works in our hearts a full persuasion of their inspiration, when we are engaged in hearing, reading and meditating on them. We do not believe something because the church says it is to be believed;