

A Dangerous and Glorious Calling

Expository exultation is a unique kind of communication. It is something not brought from the world into the service of the church. Nor can the world take it from the church and use it for its own purposes. It is different, radically different, from anything in the world.

In a Class by Itself

First, there is God. Then there is his work and his way in the world—his creation and redemption and providence. Then there is his book, his infallible book, the Bible, written by mere men, carried along by the Holy Spirit. Then there is a divine calling, a mystery of providence, family, church, desire, delight, duty. A preacher comes into being. Then there is the sweat and prayer of preparation—the pounding on the closed door of the text, until it cracks, and beams of light shine out. Then there is the seeing of truth and wisdom and power. And then there is the laughter of joy and the tears of repentance, and in both, the savoring, O the savoring, of the glory. Then all day, and if necessary all night, the work of reason and imagination, praying, toiling, weaving dark and bright strands of truth into a fathomable fabric, a message to enfold the people. Then while praying (again and again), there is the opening of the mouth, the heralding of the horrors and the glories. There is the explaining, the clarifying, the showing, the amazement, the rejoicing, the exultation, the offering, the pleading, the looking in the eyes. And all the while, there is the utter self-engagement, and, please God, the utter 306 Concluding Thoughts self-forgetting in the brightness of the truth. And then, God knows, the everlasting fruit, and weariness and thankfulness. And it all begins again. There is nothing comparable to this. Expository exultation is unique.

Everything Affected

The preacher knows, and the people know, that preaching and worship services are not the totality of the life of the church. There are a hundred worthy ministries for the children and the young adults, the men and the women, the singles and the married, the grieving and the aged. There are untold possibilities of reaching out to the unbelieving world. There are countless good deeds to show the glory of our Father in heaven. There are more ways to meet in small groups than we can imagine, to encourage each other and pray for each other and care for each. The preacher knows this, and makes no pretense that preaching is all people need. But the preacher also knows this: if he fails in his expository exultation, if corporate worship languishes in lifelessness because the word of God does not come with clarity and faithfulness and soul-satisfying power, all the ministries suffer. Preaching is not everything, but it affects everything. It is the trumpet of truth in the church. And it echoes in every ministry and every household, for joy and strength and love and perseverance—or not. If every part of the engine is in working order but the spark plug fails to fire in its appointed rhythm, the whole car lurches or stops.

The Lord Will Stand by You

If God has called you to preach, the task, of course, is humanly impossible. Preaching is worship. And preaching aims to awaken worship. Both worshiping and awakening worship are miracles. They are not mere choices. You cannot worship at will any more than you can be thrilled at will. It is a work of God, opening our eyes to the ultimately thrilling. But he who called you is faithful. He will do it. I testify from forty years in the ministry of the word, through the best and the worst of times, God loves to help the preacher who is desperate to make the word plain for the holy happiness of his people, by the blood of Jesus, for the glory of God. He will help you. ...Your labor for his glory, in the name of Jesus, for the good of his people, will never be in vain.

How many times have I trembled that I was not sufficient for this moment, or this great crowd, or this tiny gathering, or this painful topic, or this inscrutable text? And, as I have ventured on, trusting that his word never comes back empty, he has stood by me. He is faithful. “The Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed” (2 Tim. 4:17). He will do this for you, if you trust him and give yourself utterly to his word, confident in the cross, loving your people, and glorying in the worth and beauty of God.