

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

1-2020

The Inseparable Duo: The Holy Spirit and Preaching

Rodney A. Palmer

Andrews University, palmerr@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Palmer, Rodney A., "The Inseparable Duo: The Holy Spirit and Preaching" (2020). *Faculty Publications*. 1341.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/1341>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

The **INSEPARABLE DUO:** The Holy Spirit and preaching

The power of the Holy Spirit is indispensable when crafting and delivering effective sermons. To downplay His role in preaching creates a false dichotomy between the discipline of homiletics and the doctrine of pneumatology. The Holy Spirit plays seven important roles in the life of the preacher, the preparation of a sermon, the preaching moment, and the lives of listeners.



Rodney Anthony Palmer, DMin, is an assistant professor of religion at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Role 1: Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no . . . Bible

In discussing the Spirit's role in preaching, the first thing to underscore is that without the Holy Spirit, we would have no Bible to preach from. The Bible declares that all Scripture originated through "inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16, NKJV) and that the biblical prophets were "moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21, NKJV). The words of Scripture are "not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:13, ESV). This indicates that, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, God revealed His thoughts to the biblical authors, who, in turn, utilized the best words in their own vocabulary to convey the divine messages. So, "it is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God."¹

In addition to inspiring the Scriptures, it is also the Holy Spirit, as James Forbes says, "who has shepherded the word through compilation, translation, canonization, and transmission to the present time."²

Role 2: Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no . . . preaching

Even beyond the Bible, the Holy Spirit also bestows the spiritual gift of preaching from Scripture. While the Pauline epistles do not directly refer to preaching as a spiritual gift, we can infer that it is, based on Paul's description of the gift of prophecy. Sam Chan posits that "Paul primarily uses the term 'prophets' and 'prophecy' to describe persons who proclaim—*forthtell*—the word of God. . . . It is upon such Spirit-revealed proclamation (Eph 3:5) that the church is founded (Eph 2:20). . . .

"If so, then it is hard to see how preaching can be essentially different from Paul's primary understanding of prophecy. . . . *Although 'prophecy' is not restricted to 'preaching,' it primarily denotes 'preaching.'*"³

Preaching, then, is a spiritual gift that the Holy Spirit gives for the purpose of proclaiming and celebrating the good news of Jesus Christ.⁴

Role 3: Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no . . . preacher

In bestowing the spiritual gift of preaching, the Holy Spirit determines who receives the call to be a preacher. Greg Heisler affirms this notion when he states: "Spirit-led preaching can only be undertaken by a Spirit-called preacher. First there must be a divine call to preach that is firmly grounded in God's sovereign initiative, and that comes through the Spirit's inward prompting."⁵ It was indeed the Holy Spirit's prompting in Jeremiah's and Paul's lives that resulted in their declaring, "His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jer. 20:9, NIV), and, "I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16, NIV).

In addition to being "called to preach," those whom the Spirit selects are also "sent" to publicly represent God (see Rom. 10:14, 15, NRSV). For Paul, the preacher is a spokesman for another—and not as someone with his own message authorized by himself.⁶ Hence, it is "impossible to truly preach the gospel and not be called, commissioned, empowered, gifted and sent" by the Holy Spirit.⁷ Like Jesus, every preacher should declare with confidence that " 'the Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach' " (Luke 4:18, NKJV).

Role 4: Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no . . . understanding

Since the Bible is the product of God's mind revealed through the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:12, 13), we can comprehend both the original meaning and its

present application only through the assistance of the Spirit of God (vv. 13, 14; 2 Cor. 3:14–18; cf. John 6:45; 16:13).⁸ Recognizing the need of the Holy Spirit in gaining a proper understanding of Scripture, Luther declares: “Nobody who has not the Spirit of God sees a jot of what is in the Scriptures. All men have their hearts darkened, so that, even when they can discuss and quote all that is in Scripture, they do not understand or really know any of it. . . . The spirit is needed for the understanding of all Scripture and every part of Scripture.”⁹

The Holy Spirit also reveals to the preacher what the congregation needs to hear. It is through prayer that preachers invite the Holy Spirit to touch their hearts and to “impress the mind with ideas calculated to meet the cases of those who need help.”¹⁰ Thomas also suggests that if the Holy Spirit is going to transform the lives of people, “the Spirit must be involved at the point where we commence sermon preparation.”¹¹

On the other hand, the preacher should never use the Holy Spirit as an excuse for not spending quality time in crafting a sermon. Such neglect clearly ignores Paul’s counsel to “be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15, NKJV).

Underscoring the point that laziness vexes the Holy Spirit, Spurgeon states: “I cannot imagine the Spirit waiting at the door

of a sluggard, and supplying the deficiencies created by indolence.”¹²

Preachers are to rely on the Holy Spirit as they employ the principles of hermeneutics and homiletics. They must seek the Holy Spirit’s leading in selecting and studying the passage, discovering the exegetical concept, formulating the homiletical idea, determining the sermon’s purpose, choosing an illustration, and outlining and writing the sermon itself.

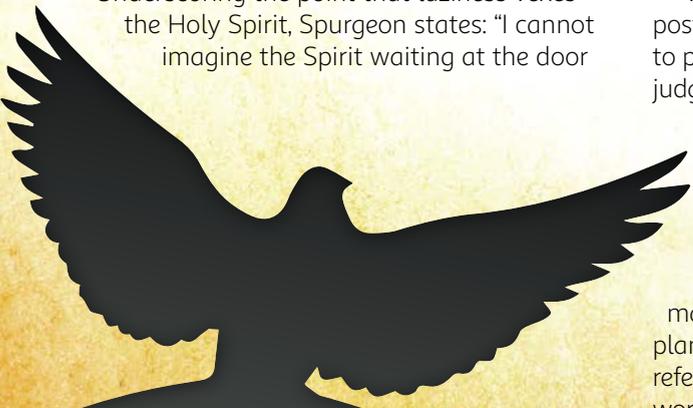
Role 5: Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no . . . power

Having received a proper interpretation of the passage and the message to proclaim, the preacher, during the delivery of the sermon, must also demonstrate a “strong reliance on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Spurgeon states that “it were better to speak six words in the power of the Holy Ghost . . . than to preach seventy years worth of sermons without the Spirit.”¹⁴

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit empowers preaching by working within and alongside the individual’s words to bear witness to Jesus Christ—and not by the preacher’s persona or rhetorical skill.¹⁵ Preaching devoid of the Holy Spirit’s power will never result in transformed lives.

We especially need the Holy Spirit’s power in a postmodern world in which it is often intimidating to preach truth to those cynical, skeptical, and judgmental of anything that confronts sin, calls for repentance, and challenges the status quo. Preaching with power necessitates openness to the moving of the Holy Spirit. During the presentation of the sermon, the Holy Spirit can bring new insights to the preacher’s mind. At other times, the Spirit may guide the speaker to replace or even omit a planned sermon illustration, to quote a scriptural reference not originally included, or to change a word or phrase to express a thought more clearly. Spurgeon suggests preachers should not get so tied to their manuscripts that they quench the Spirit’s leading during their sermons:

“I do not see where the opportunity is given to the Spirit of God to help us in preaching, if every jot and tittle is settled beforehand. Do let your trust in God be free to move hand and foot. While you are preaching, believe that God the Holy Spirit can give you, in the self-same hour, what you shall speak; and can make you say what



It is through prayer that preachers invite the Holy Spirit to touch their hearts and to “impress the mind with ideas calculated to meet the cases of those who need help.”

you had not previously thought of; yes, and make this newly-given utterance to be the very arrow-head of the discourse, which shall strike deeper into the heart than anything you had prepared.”¹⁶

Role 6: Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no . . . proclamation of Christ

The Holy Spirit also reveals the personal Word of God, Jesus (John 1:1, 14; 15:26; 16:14). For Vessel Kerr, “it is the Spirit, the Great Communicator, who takes the risen Christ out of the realm of mere ideas and history, and makes Him a present reality to the consciousness of the believer.”¹⁷ Fully convinced that the Holy Spirit has and continues to fulfill Jesus’ prediction, H. M. S. Richards writes: “The Holy Spirit said more about Jesus than about Himself. The Holy Spirit doesn’t say much about Himself. . . . He talks about Jesus.”¹⁸

Role 7: Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no . . . conviction and conversion

Irrespective of how well researched a sermon is or how eloquent the speaker, no one will be converted unless the Holy Spirit works on the hearts of the listeners. As Ellen White so aptly states: “While we are to preach the word, we can not impart the power that will quicken the soul, and cause righteousness and praise to spring forth. In the preaching of the word there must be the working of an agency beyond any human power. Only through the divine Spirit will the word be living and powerful to renew the soul unto eternal life. This is what Christ tried to impress upon His disciples. He taught that it was nothing they possessed in themselves which would give success to their labors, but that it is the miracle-working power of God which gives efficiency to His own word.”¹⁹

Many preachers employ guilt and fear to coerce people into committing their lives to Jesus. But that places human manipulation above the working of the Holy Spirit, reducing preaching to little more than a theatrical performance. We can overcome such homiletic powerlessness when we recognize that “only the Spirit can birth our hearers again into seeing the kingdom (John 3:3), and only by the Spirit can our hearers mature (Gal. 3:3).”²⁰

Indispensable

The Holy Spirit is indispensable to effective preaching. Preachers must regain and maintain the conviction that “if greatly improved quality

of preaching is to be experienced in our time, it will stem from the renewing power and presence of the Holy Spirit.”²¹ Recognizing the necessity of constant reliance on the Holy Spirit during the sermon preparation and delivery process, and for the response of the hearers to the message, the prayer of every preacher ought to be, “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.”²²



- 1 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 21.
- 2 James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 19.
- 3 Sam Chan, *Preaching as the Word of God: Answering an Old Question With Speech-Act Theory* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 240, 241; emphasis in the original.
- 4 Chan, *Preaching as the Word*, 47.
- 5 Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching: The Holy Spirit's Role in Sermon Preparation and Delivery* (Nashville, TN: B&H Pub. Group, 2007), 71.
- 6 J. A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 33 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 596.
- 7 Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 46.
- 8 Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, vol. 12 of the Commentary Reference Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2001), 67.
- 9 M. X. Seaman, *Illumination and Interpretation: The Holy Spirit's Role in Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 26.
- 10 Mervyn A. Warren, *Ellen White on Preaching* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2010), 34.
- 11 Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit*, 86.
- 12 Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: The 28 Lectures, Complete and Unabridged—A Spiritual Classic of Christian Wisdom, Prayer, and Preaching in the Ministry* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 156.
- 13 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 10.
- 14 John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 263.
- 15 Patrick W. T. Johnson and David J. Lose, *The Mission of Preaching: Equipping the Community for Faithful Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2015) 220.
- 16 C. H. Spurgeon, *Select Writings of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 4 (n.p.: Irving Risch, n.d.), n.p.
- 17 Vassel Kerr, *The Power of Biblical Preaching* (Oshawa, ON: Miracle Press, 2001), 27.
- 18 H. M. S. Richards, *Feed My Sheep* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2005), 128.
- 19 Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), 64.
- 20 Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 200.
- 21 Forbes, *Holy Spirit and Preaching*, 11.
- 22 Daniel Iverson, “Spirit of the Living God,” 1926.