

# IN RESPONSE – PREACHING AND THE CHURCH, PART 1

by Dennis Prutow

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Last time I discussed true preaching as preaching the Word of God, the more sure Word, the Word of Christ. I added that true preaching is the proclamation of the Word of Christ by the power of Christ with the evident grace of Christ. I now turn to the *ordinary* context of this preaching, the church. My point is quite simple. The corporate body is a vital element in preaching and teaching. Not only so, a proper understanding of the corporate body is important to preaching and teaching. The church is the school of Christ. It is a primary place where the sheep may receive the Word of Christ by the power of Christ with the evident grace of Christ. To begin, I look at what the Westminster Confession of Faith has to say about the *visible* Church, the *visible* body.

We start with the Confession's definition of the church in Chapter 25. Paragraph 1 defines the invisible church. In contrast, Paragraph 2 goes on to say,

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

The visible church consists of openly professing believers. For example, converts in Antioch were baptized, formed into church, and discipled. See Matthew 10:32 and 28:19-20 and Acts 11:21-26.

The Confession also equates the Kingdom and the church. The proof texts are Matthew 13:47 and Isaiah 9:7. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind." "There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this." We regularly recognize this truth when we pray at the beginning of Session meetings, Presbytery meetings, and Synod meetings. We

constitute the court of God's house by the authority of Christ, the Head and King of the Church.

The Confession also maintains there is no *ordinary* means of salvation outside of the visible organized church. The proof text is Acts 2:47, "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." In the minds of the Westminster Divines, and of the Puritans in general, there was and is an indispensable connection between salvation and the *visible* church. In this day of rabid independence and autonomy, this truth sounds strange. Christianity today tends to be highly individualistic. The most powerful encounters are one on one. Hence the drive toward individualistic evangelism. Preaching is often seen as a pretext for the more important work of personal evangelism. The importance of the visible body fades. The *ordinary* means of grace outlined by the Confession are now viewed as *extraordinary*.

The Confession follows this line of thinking and explains that Christ gives the visible church particular gifts in order to be God's agency of salvation in the world. Westminster Confession of Faith 25.3 says, "Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life to the end of the world: and doth, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto."

The ministry of the church is varied. To be sure, it includes preaching. The oracles of God are the Scriptures. Christ has committed His Word to His church. The ordinances of God include the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. We teach and study the Word in a variety of ways. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are vital means of grace. Prayer and Bible reading, privately and individually, within the family, and within the corporate body, are vital means of grace.

God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not care-

lessly or wilfully to be neglected or forsaken.... (Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.6).

Christ not only gives ministries, oracles, and ordinances to His church, He promises His own presence. There are two proof texts. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20). The injunction to baptize and teach implies the organization of visible bodies of believers, the creation of churches. The promise of Christ is clear. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." If we do not obey Christ's teachings from the heart, we cannot expect Him to be with us.

The second proof text is Isaiah 59:21. "As for Me, this is My covenant with them," says the Lord: "My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring," says the Lord, "from now and forever."

God promises His own vital presence with His people. God declares His basic covenant promise in Leviticus 26:12, "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people." This is a promise to the corporate body. Of course it includes individuals. Christ promises to be present among His people gathered for worship. *In this context*, He also covenants to make the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, and "especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 89).

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## IN RESPONSE – PREACHING AND THE CHURCH, PART 2

by Dennis Prutow

Christ promises His own presence to the church (Matthew 28:19-20). God pledges His presence through the Spirit in fulfillment of His covenant promise. Leviticus 26:12, “I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.” God also covenants with His people to make the ministries, oracles, and ordinances, effectual to salvation.

“As for Me, this is My covenant with them,” says the Lord: “My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,” says the Lord, “from now and forever” (Isaiah 59:21).

It is these two latter points that bear further exploration along with their implications for our corporate worship including the preaching of the Word.

The apostle Paul interprets Leviticus 26:12 for us in 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

Paul combines two images. He declares of the church, “We are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). In the Old Testament era, God chose to dwell in the temple in Jerusalem situated on mount Zion. Now He chooses a new temple in which to dwell. Paul declares, “The whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22). Peter adds to the imagery, “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). Note how the writer to the Hebrews therefore describes those gathered in God’s New Testament temple to offer sacrifices of praise. “You have come to

Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Hebrews 12:22-23).

Beyond doubt, God dwells with and among his people in addition to dwelling within them. This is especially the case when the people of God are gathered for worship. Paul’s burden in Corinth was similar. He sought the powerful witness of God’s presence among the people so that when an unbeliever enters the assembly “the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (1 Corinthians 14:25).

At this point, we must not bypass Paul’s argument. Paul announces to the church at Corinth, “We are the temple of the living God.” Paul then elicits Leviticus 26:11-12 to substantiate his statement regarding the church. A temple is indeed a dwelling place of God. So it is with the people of God composing the church. “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” God promises He will dwell within believers. God also promises He will walk among them. These are two distinct concepts. There is the rich indwelling presence of the Spirit transforming lives and bearing fruit to the glory of Christ. Second, there is the vital dwelling of God with the people gathered around the tabernacle in the wilderness.

Although the apostle has this double emphasis, Leviticus 26:11-12 has a more singular connotation. “Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. ‘I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.’” As Matthew Henry notes, God promises, “*I will walk among you, with delight and satisfaction, as a man in his garden; I will keep up communion with you as a man walking with his friend.*” This seems to be alluded to, Rev. 2:1, where Christ is said to *walk in the midst of the golden candlesticks.*<sup>1</sup>

This promise comes to God’s people by way of covenant as Leviticus 26:9 indicates. Matthew Henry goes on to say,

The grace of the covenant, as the fountain and foundation, the sweetness and security, of all these blessings: *I will establish my covenant with you*, v. 9. Let them perform their part of the covenant, and God would not fail to perform his. All covenant-blessings are summed up in the covenant-relation (v. 12): *I will be your God, and you shall be my people*; and they are all grounded upon their redemption: *I am your God, because I brought you forth out of the land of Egypt*, v. 13.<sup>2</sup>

This covenant, according to Paul, is fulfilled in the church. “For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (2 Corinthians 6:15). Calvin is more pointed. “He [Paul] proves we are temples of God from the promise God once made to the people of Israel that He would dwell in their midst.”<sup>3</sup>

I maintain two things. First, we take the covenant promise of God in Leviticus 26:12 too individualistically. We think the most powerful personal encounter an individual may have with God occurs in private. It most assuredly occurs in evangelism presenting the gospel one on one. Second, I maintain the covenant promise of God, “I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” is most fully and powerfully fulfilled corporately in the church as the temple of the living God. If this is indeed the case, we may expect individuals to have their most personal, intimate, and powerful encounters with the living God in the corporate setting. If this is true, it speaks volumes about the power and impact of God guided Scriptural preaching.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 91.

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 1:553.

## IN RESPONSE – PREACHING AND THE CHURCH, PART 3

by Dennis Prutow

Christ promises His presence to the church (Matthew 28:19-20). God promises this presence to fulfill His covenant promise in Leviticus 26:12, “I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.” Finally God covenants with His people in this way to make the ministries, oracles, and ordinances, effectual for salvation. This is the position of the Confession. More importantly, it is the position of Scripture.

“As for Me, this is My covenant with them,” says the Lord: “My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,” says the Lord, “from now and forever” (Isaiah 59:21).

God’s covenant promise is that His Spirit and Word will not depart from His people.

That the Spirit of God shall come to us to be our sanctifier, v. 21. In the Redeemer there was a new covenant made with us a covenant of promises; and this is the great and comprehensive promise of that covenant, that God will give and continue his word and Spirit to his church and people throughout all generations. God’s giving the *Spirit to those that ask him* includes the giving of them all *good things*, Lu. 11:13; Mt. 7:11. This covenant is here said to *be made with them*, that is, with those that turn from transgression; for those that cease to do evil shall be taught to do well. But the promise is made to a single person—*My Spirit that is upon thee*, being directed either, [1.] To Christ as the head of the church, who received that he might give. The Spirit promised to the church was first upon him, and from his head that precious ointment descended to the skirts of his garments; and the word of the gospel was first put into his mouth; for *it began to be spoken by the Lord*. And all believers are his seed, in whom he prolongs his days, ch. 53:10. Or, [2.] To the church; and so it is a promise of the continuance and perpetuity of the church in the world to the end of time, parallel to those promises that

the throne and seed of Christ shall endure for ever, Ps. 89:29, 36; 22:30. Observe, *First*, How the church shall be kept up, in a succession, as the world of mankind is kept up, by the seed and the seed’s seed. As one generation passes away another generation shall come. *Instead of the fathers shall be the children*. *Secondly*, How long it shall be kept up—*henceforth and for ever*, always, even *unto the end of the world*; for, the world being left to stand for the sake of the church, we may be sure that as long as it does stand Christ will have a church in it, though not always visible. *Thirdly*, By what means it shall be kept up; by the constant residence of the word and Spirit in it. 1. The Spirit that was upon Christ shall always continue in the hearts of the faithful; there shall be some in every age on whom he shall work, and in whom he shall dwell, and thus the Comforter shall abide with the church for ever, Jn. 14:16. 2. The word of Christ shall always continue in the mouths of the faithful; there shall be some in every age who, *believing with the heart unto righteousness*, shall *with the tongue make confession unto salvation*. The word shall never depart out of the mouth of the church; for there shall still be a seed to speak Christ’s holy language and profess his holy religion. Observe, The Spirit and the word go together, and by them the church is kept up. For the word in the mouths of our ministers, nay, the word in our own mouths, will not profit us, unless the Spirit work with the word, and give us an understanding. But the Spirit does his work by the word and in concurrence with it; and whatever is pretended to be a dictate of the Spirit must be tried by the scriptures. On these foundations the church is built, stands firmly, and shall stand for ever, Christ himself being the chief corner-stone.<sup>1</sup>

The Spirit of God using the Word of God assures the Church of God perse-

veres in this world. Thus God covenants that the ministries, oracles, and ordinances He institutes in His church will be effectual to the salvation of His elect.

I add these words of Calvin.

*Which I have put in thy mouth*. The Prophet shows that God addresses us in such a manner that he chooses to employ the ministry and agency of men. He might indeed speak from heaven or send angels; but he has consulted our advantage the more by addressing and exhorting us through men like ourselves, that, by their voice and word, he may more gently draw us to himself. This order has therefore been established by him in the Church, that it is vain for those who reject his ministers to boast that they are willing to obey God; and therefore he commands us to seek the word and doctrine from the mouth of prophets and teachers, who teach in his name and by his authority, that we may not foolishly hunt after new revelations. *My words shall not depart*. The phrase, “shall not depart,” is rendered by some in the imperative mood, for which it is well known that the future tense is sometimes used. But here a command or exhortation is not appropriate; for the Prophet promises that which God intends to fulfill. An exhortation may indeed be drawn from it, but the priority is due to the promise, which is to this effect, that the Lord will assist his Church, and will take care of it, so as never to allow it to be deprived of doctrine. To this, therefore, we ought always to look, when we are tempted by adversity, and when everything does not succeed according to our wish; for we must be supported and upheld by the word and the Spirit, of which the Lord declares that we shall never be left destitute.<sup>2</sup>

God therefore guarantees Scriptural preaching will be effective.

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4:349.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 4:270-271.

## IN RESPONSE – PREACHING AND THE CHURCH, PART 4

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God covenants with His people to make His ordinances and oracles effective unto salvation. This is the import of Isaiah 59:21 in the thinking of the Westminster divines. Westminster Confession of Faith 25.3 says, “Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life to the end of the world: and doth, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.” Isaiah 59:21 states God’s covenant. “‘As for Me, this is My covenant with them,’ says the Lord: ‘My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,’ says the Lord, ‘from now and forever.’”

E. J. Young makes a point of the covenantal language in Isaiah 59:21.

With those who have turned from their transgressions the Lord will make an everlasting covenant. The introductory words *And I* make clear that the speaker is the Lord. They are also part of the covenantal formula used in Genesis 9:9; note also Genesis 17:4. Thus, the very language calls attention to the grace that God makes known in His covenantal dealings with Israel.<sup>1</sup>

What is the covenant God makes with Israel? Young answers.

The content of the promise is found in that the Spirit from on high and the words placed in Israel’s mouth will never depart from them. In so speaking the Lord uses language similar to that with which He spoke to Joshua (cf. Josh. 1:8). Thus the people are reminded of their glorious heritage and emboldened to trust in this particular declaration of the promise. The language upon *thee* suggests that the Spirit has descended from above and now rests upon Israel as a divine gift.

Parallel to the gift of the Spirit is the fact that God has placed *His words* in Israel’s *mouth*. Isaiah deliberately

stresses the fact that God has placed these words in the mouth of Israel to show that they are of divine origin; the Church likewise shall never forget that the Word is from God and not of human origin. The language is reminiscent of that of the prophetic inspiration (cf. Deut. 18:18; 30:14; Rom. 10:8). The gift of the Spirit (cf. John 16:13), who will instruct the Church in all truth and in the comforting, saving words that God has given her, will abide with her and with her seed forever. The Lord is declaring that His eternal truth, revealed to man in words, is the peculiar possession of His people. In the times of the Old Testament, this consisted of revelations made unto the fathers and the prophets. Today, the treasure of the Church is the Holy Scripture, the Word that *cannot* be broken, inerrant and infallible, the very truth of the eternal God. This Word and the Spirit will never depart from the Church, for the Church as the body of the Head is to declare the truth to all nations that the saving health of God may be seen by all. In language identical with that employed to depict the eternity of the Messiah’s kingdom (9:7), Isaiah brings to a close this remarkable chapter. Despite the constant sin and apostasy of His people the Lord abides faithful; the promises will be fulfilled, and the Redeemer will come bringing rich gifts, even His Spirit and Word; and these will abide with His Church forever. To God alone be all the glory.<sup>2</sup>

We therefore have the following. One, God gives His church ministries, oracles, and ordinances. These ministries include, but are not limited to, preaching and teaching. The oracles of God are Scripture. Regarding ancient Israel, Paul asserts, “They were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2). These oracles were bequeathed to the church. The ordinances of the church include the Word, the sacraments, and prayer.

Two, God gives the church His presence. “For we are the temple of the living

God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). God blessed the tabernacle in the wilderness with His presence in the form of the glory cloud. “Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the Lord would speak with Moses” (Exodus 33:9). God blesses His church with His holy presence. “You also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22).

Three, God fulfills the Covenant of Grace, the covenant to be with His people and walk with them, to tabernacle with them, in His presence with the church, the New Testament people of God. Christ promises, “Where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst” (Matthew 18:20). And, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). The final fulfillment, prefigured in the church, comes in the consummation. “And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them’” (Revelation 21:3). This final enjoyment of God is corporate. Four, as just noted, God covenants with His people to make His ordinances and oracles effective unto salvation.

What can we therefore expect with regard to the ministry of the Word in preaching and teaching within the Church? I assume the description of preaching set forth in previous lessons. Scriptural preaching is the faithful proclamation of the Word of Christ by the power of the Spirit of Christ with the evident grace of Christ.

The optimum context for Scriptural preaching is the assembly of God’s people. Here God dwells with power for the purposes of endowing His church with oracles and ordinances, fulfilling the Covenant of Grace, and making His ordinances effectual for salvation. This is the most spiritually powerful setting within which men and women may meet with the living God. In this setting, preaching becomes the power of God for salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:441.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 441-442.