

How to Preach with Supernatural Power

One question I am not asking in this message is: What are the natural things that a preacher can do to increase natural knowledge and natural feeling? I have no interest in that question whatsoever.

What I mean by natural is what Paul meant by it in 1 Corinthians 2:14:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

What are “the things of the Spirit of God” that the natural person does not accept and is not able to understand? They are the content of preaching. Paul had just been referring to what he imparted through preaching: the glories of Christ crucified and risen and reigning, and all that God is for us in him. He had just said:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:13)

This is what the “natural person” cannot grasp. This is what is “spiritually discerned.”

More Than Mere Rhetoric

The chief and ultimate aim of preaching — namely, to bring people to see and savor and show the glory of Christ, and all that God is for us in him — is an aim that cannot be accomplished by merely natural means. It cannot happen in a preacher or a hearer who is what Paul calls a “natural person.”

So, I am not asking: What are the natural things that a preacher can do to increase natural knowledge and natural feeling? Preaching is not a subspecies of natural rhetoric. It is not a means of using language to persuade the natural mind to simply act differently. Rhetoric — natural oratory — can move the natural mind in stunning ways. Whole movements in society can be awakened and sustained by such rhetorical skill. Recall Winston Churchill or John Kennedy. Indeed, very large churches can be grown by natural rhetorical skill.

But this natural effect on the mind is not a spiritual taste for the beauty and worth of God. Natural oratory does not impart the miracle of seeing and savoring and showing the glory of Christ. And therefore, Christian preaching has no interest in merely natural rhetoric.

Preaching aims to bring about the spiritual sight of the glories of God in Christ. It aims to awaken and sustain the spiritual “taste” that God is supremely beautiful and satisfying. Rhetorical successes short of this are fatal — especially in the church.

Miracle of Miracles

What makes preaching unique is that it is a miracle in the preacher aiming to be the agent of miracles in the people. And the main miracle it aims to experience (in the preacher) and bring about (in the people) is the spiritual sight and spiritual savoring and spiritual showing of the glory of God revealed in Scripture.

A word of clarification about the word “spiritual.” When Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 2:14 (“the things of the Spirit of God . . . are spiritually discerned”), he does not mean “religious” or “mystical” or “otherworldly.” That’s the way most people would hear the word “spiritual” today. Instead, it means originating by the Holy Spirit and having the quality of the Holy Spirit — formed by the character of the Holy Spirit.

Hardened Against God

We can see this in Romans 8:6–9 where “the natural person” of 1 Corinthians 2:14 is described as having “the mind of the flesh.” And the problem with the mind of the flesh is not that it is irreligious or that it fails to be mystical or otherworldly. In fact, the mind of the flesh may be very religious and mystical and otherworldly. The problem with the mind of the flesh is that it is hardened against God. It is unable to welcome God or please God.

The mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace. The mind of the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (my translation)

But notice that the opposite of “the mind of the flesh” is not a vague spirituality. It is called “the mind of the Spirit” and it is explained in verse 9: “You [namely, you who have “the mind of the Spirit”] are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” So, the opposite of a natural person is not a religious or a mystical person, but a person who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and who is experiencing the miracle of “spiritual discernment.”

Natural Power or Supernatural Marvel?

So back to the distinction between rhetoric and preaching. Rhetoric relies on natural powers — mental and volitional and emotional powers — to create natural mental and volitional and emotional effects in the people. And they can be stunning, and very religious. But that is not Christian preaching. What makes preaching unique is that it is a miracle in the preacher aiming to be the agent of miracles in the people. And the main miracle it aims to experience (in the preacher) and bring about (in the people) is the spiritual sight and spiritual savoring and spiritual showing of the glory of God revealed in Scripture.

Do the Impossible

Therefore, the chief and ultimate aim of preaching is not possible apart from the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit. Without his supernatural work, neither the preacher nor the people can see or savor or show the beauty and worth of God. Because the natural mind can only see these things as foolish. They cannot be seen as precious. They cannot be treasured by the natural mind.

“What makes preaching unique is that it is a miracle in the preacher aiming to be the agent of miracles in the people.” TweetShare on Facebook

But when the Spirit does his miracle work through preaching, he raises the spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:5–6). He takes out the heart of stone and puts in the soft heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). He goes beyond what “flesh and blood” can do and reveals the truth of Christ like he did for Peter in Matthew 16:17. He removes our blindness to the glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4). He shines “in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). He enlightens “the eyes of your hearts” (Ephesians 1:18). He unveils our face, and reveals the beauty and worth of Jesus, and transforms us from one degree of glory to another: “This comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). In other words, without the sovereign, life-giving, blindness-removing, heart-illuminating, glory-revealing work of God’s Spirit, preaching cannot achieve its aims — indeed it cannot exist.

Awaken New Affections

Preaching is a miracle in the preacher aiming to be the agent of miracles in the people. Or to put it another way: Preaching is spiritual worship seeking to awaken spiritual worship. Preaching is spiritual seeing seeking to awaken spiritual seeing — spiritual treasuring in the pulpit seeking to awaken spiritual treasuring in the people.

So, to say it again: I am not asking the question: What are the natural things that a preacher can do to increase natural knowledge and natural feeling?

Instead, I am asking: How can a preacher become the means by which the Holy Spirit works the miracle of worship in the hearts of the people? How can he become the means, or the instrument, by which the Holy Spirit grants the seeing and savoring and showing of the beauty and value of Christ? How do I preach so that it is not I, but the Spirit preaching through me? You can hear that this question is the same question Christians must ask about all of life. That’s why this message, by the way, is relevant for all of you, not just preachers.

The Paradox of Christian Living

Listen to Paul’s description of the Christian life — including preaching:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10)

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:6–7)

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12–13)

In each of these texts, I live — and that includes preaching — in such a way that it is in some crucial sense not I, but God living. So, I ask the question again: How does the preacher — how do I — become the means, the instrument, by which the Holy Spirit works the miracle of seeing and savoring and showing the glory of Christ in the hearts of the people?

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Now, bring this in relation to preaching. I would paraphrase Galatians 3:5 like this: Does he who supplies the Spirit to you as you preach and works miracles among you and your people through preaching do so by works of the law, or by hearing some precious blood-bought promise with faith? Answer: The Spirit is supplied to the preacher and works the miracle of worship by means of the preacher's trusting the promises of God for his ministry in that hour. This is why the first T of A.P.T.A.T. is all-important.

Now at this point, I think many preachers who don't know A.P.T.A.T., but know intuitively that faith is the key to power, miss out on the fullness of God's blessing by defaulting to vague generalities instead of specific promises. Instead of focusing on very concrete, particular biblical promises for this task and this moment, they don't focus on any promise at all. They think generally about God's goodness or his power. There is nothing wrong with this, but I think God is offering us something more. At least this has proven true for me.

So, here are three practices that became wonderfully habitual for me over the years. And I commend them to you: three habits or three habitual ways of practicing the first T of A.P.T.A.T. in the time just before preaching.

FIRST HABIT: SERVE IN THE STRENGTH GOD SUPPLIES

The first is to call to mind 1 Peter 4:11 in the prayer room with others who are praying about half an hour before the service. I am sure that this text was the most often cited in the prayer gathering before our worship services.

Whoever speaks, [let him speak] as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies — in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

What this makes plain is that it is I who must speak and serve. God the Spirit does not remove or replace the preacher. But it also makes plain that my speaking and serving are to be done “by the strength that God supplies.” And it makes plain why that is important: “in order that in everything God may be glorified.” The giver of the strength gets the glory for the message. That text has been the launching pad for hundreds of messages over the years. This sets the stage half an hour before the service starts: we call it to mind and remind ourselves. We must trust in the promise of God’s power, not in ourselves. When this trust happens, the Holy Spirit is on the move.

SECOND HABIT: DEPEND ON SPECIFIC PROMISES

The second practice is to keep a precious store of all-purpose promises in my memory ready to be trusted at any moment when nothing more specific comes to my mind. These are my default treasure. They are of such a breadth that they’re always relevant no matter what the preaching setting is or what the topic. For example, here are four of my ever-ready-to-hand swords of promise:

Fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

No eye has seen a God besides you, who acts [or works] for those who wait for him. (Isaiah 64:4)

My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)

The habit is: make sure these promises are always memorized and ready for any preaching challenge — ready to be trusted in case God doesn't give you anything more specific. And as they are trusted, they become a channel for the "supply" of the Spirit.

THIRD HABIT: RANSACK SCRIPTURE FOR A TAILOR-MADE PROMISE

The third habit is to ransack the Scripture for a special, God-given promise early Sunday morning during my private time of prayer and meditation. In other words, as I walk through my usual Bible reading for the day — or broaden my reading — I am on the lookout for a specific, tailor-made promise that God may apply to me in a special and personal way as suitable for this very morning.

For example, suppose my wife and I have had a serious conflict in the past few days. I feel guilty and discouraged. I have taken steps to make it right. But I feel defeated in my sinful attitude. This looms as a huge obstacle to preaching with freedom and joy. How will I be able to preach? How will I be able to count on the Lord's help when I feel like such a failure at home?

As I cry out to him for help, early Sunday morning, he leads me, perhaps, to Psalm 25 and I read,

Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way. (Psalm 25:8–9)

The Lord takes this (he has done this often!) and preaches it to me. He reminds me that he will guide me as I preach, sinner though I am, because "he instructs sinners in the way." There it stands. Right there in Scripture! Here is a concrete, specific, particular promise, tailor-made for my situation.

It's this specificity of God's word to my situation that has proved more powerful than the generalities about grace that I have in my head (glorious as they are!). Perhaps this is a weakness of mine. Perhaps it shouldn't be this way. But it seems to me that the reason God has given so many concrete, specific, particular promises in the Bible about so many situations is precisely so that they will take hold of us and give us a very specific word to trust.

Indeed, there are many tailor-made promises for the preacher. For example, if I am anxious about not preaching clearly or powerfully, he may give me this:

Do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. (Matthew 10:19)

If I am discouraged by the thought that it seems very little comes from my preaching, he may give me this:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10–11)

If I am attacked by thoughts that what I have to say is of little account and will probably be discounted by the people, God may give me this:

The precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes; . . .
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:8, 10)

If I am in a hostile setting and fear for my life in preaching, God may give me this:

Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. (Acts 18:9–10)

If I am sick and my nose is running and I have a tickle in my throat that puts me on the brink of coughing, he may give me this:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

If I made the mistake of reading my email just before coming to the church, and saw there a stinging criticism because of a conviction that I hold, the Lord may give me this:

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. (Luke 6:22–23)

So there I sit on the front pew, having admitted (A) that I will be utterly ineffective without the Spirit's help, and having prayed (P) for the kind of help I especially need, and having laid hold on a promise to trust (T). Now comes the real test: Will I, in this hour of actual preaching, trust the promises of God? In Galatians 3:5, God did not promise the supply of the Spirit to A — admitting need, or P — praying for help. He promised the

supply and power of the Spirit to T — trusting the blood-bought promise: hearing with faith.

So, right there on the front pew, seconds before I preach, I recite the promise to my own soul. And I say to the Lord, “I trust you.” Sometimes I say, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). I consciously turn my mind away from myself. I turn to the promise, and I say it to myself again, often as I am walking to the pulpit.

I say the promise to myself as if God himself is saying it to me. I seek to hear his voice, as it were, in my heart, saying it to me. I have a special affection for the very word of God spoken to me personally by God himself in these moments. So, I say it in the words of God from Scripture,

“I will help you.”

“I will strengthen you.”

“I will uphold you.”

“I will give you what you need to say.”

“I will protect you from the evil one.”

“I will make your words effective.”

“I love you.”

“I have called you.”

“You are mine.”

“I have helped you a hundred times, have I not?”

“Now go! Be strong. Be of good courage. I am with you. I am with your mouth.”

I actually say these words, to myself, or ones like them, as I walk to the pulpit. I know of no other way to experience the exhilaration of saying with the apostle Paul, “The Lord stood by me and strengthened me” (2 Timothy 4:17). This is how the Holy Spirit is supplied in power.

Act

This is the great paradox: Act. Paul says, “Work out your own salvation, . . . for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work” (Philippians 2:12–13). You work, because God is bringing about the working. He creates the miracle of Spirit-sustained speech. You act the miracle.

Rarely while preaching does my mind return to the promise I took hold of as I entered the pulpit. I am so utterly focused on the text and exposition at hand that I seldom have the mental freedom to look away to another text as I am preaching. But it does happen. There may be split-second acts of God when he inserts his promise in the preaching: “I’m here. I’m at work. Trust me.” Or if I get distracted by something that happens, he comes: “Focus with me. I’m still here.”