
The First Degree of Necessity: Turretin on the Spirit's Work in Preaching

Dr. Barry J. York

President and Professor of Pastoral Theology and Homiletics
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me. These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (John 14:22–26, ESV)

Of utmost importance in the practice of the chief mark of the church, that of the pure preaching of the Word of God, is a conscientious acknowledgement of, and utter dependency upon, the Holy Spirit. For the Spirit of God is the true author of the Scriptures (2 Pet. 1:21). He is the One who has made God’s truth known to us (John 16:13–15). The Holy Spirit grants illumination to the meaning of the text (1 Cor. 2:12–13). He is the One who empowers the preacher (Acts 1:8; Eph. 6:18–20). As Jesus said in John 14, the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father in the name of Jesus to bring God’s Word to His people. Those who keep that word know the love of God and become the place where the Trinity dwells. The Holy Spirit alone uses preaching to convict, convert, and consecrate. From beginning to end, preaching is a working of the Spirit of God.

Yet with this perspective, questions arise with respect to the Spirit’s manifestation in preaching. How does the Spirit’s primary authorship of the Scriptures relate to the church being the “pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15)? How does the Spirit work with human reasoning in the preacher understanding and proclaiming a text, and the congregation receiving the Word preached? Are preachers helplessly reliant on the sovereign Spirit’s self-manifestation in their preparation and preaching, or do means exist to cultivate the Spirit’s activity?

To further understand the Spirit’s work in preaching, perhaps no theologian strikes truer with the needed clarity as does Francis Turretin (1623–1687).

The Historic Influence of Francis Turretin in the Reformed Understanding of Preaching

Born in Geneva in October of 1623, the Swiss-Italian Francis Turretin inherited, along with his brilliant mind, a full century of the development of Calvinism. Educated in Geneva and then in leading academies in Europe (in places such as Utrecht, Leiden, and Paris), Turretin returned to Geneva as a young man in 1648 to pastor the Italian congregation there. He eventually took up the position of professor of theology at the Geneva Academy in 1653.

As pastor and professor, Turretin exhibited a studied concern for Scripture and its place in the life of the church. For example, he assisted in the publication of the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675. The last Calvinistic confession of the church in Switzerland, this creedal formulation defended the Synod of Dort's doctrines against Amyraldism by beginning with a treatment of the inspiration of Scripture. Later, the Helvetic Formula speaks to the subject at hand when it states,

Those who are called to salvation through the preaching of the Gospel are not able to believe or obey the call, unless they are raised up out of spiritual death by that very power that God used to command the light to shine out of darkness, and God shines into their hearts with the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).... man by nature, and so by the law of his formation in the womb, and hence from his birth, is the child of disobedience (Eph 2:2); and has that inability that is so innate that it cannot be shaken off except by the omnipotent heart-turning grace of the Holy Spirit.¹

Turretin's greatest contribution to theology was his work *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, which he published toward the end of his life in three volumes: Volume I in 1679; Volume II in 1682; and Volume III in 1685. Turretin died on September 28, 1687, working until his death revising his *magnum opus*.

Turretin's *Institutes* had a great impact historically on Reformed theology and preaching, as it was used as a standard-bearer in seminaries. For example, even two centuries later, Turretin's *Institutes* remained "the principal textbook in systematic theology at Princeton Seminary for sixty years until Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* replaced it in 1872."² (Hodge did not intend to replace it himself, as he used it and assigned theological topics for study with readings from *Institutes* for discussion.³ Interestingly, in the days when incoming students had to know both Greek and Latin before arriving, RPTS also used Turretin as its primary systematic theology text until 1872.⁴) Both Archibald Alexander and Hodge wrote commentaries on Turretin for classroom use, so that "the influence of Turretin's scholastic theology continued at Princeton until it was reorganized in the 1930s."⁵ With the translation of his *Institutes* into English in the twentieth century, it is hoped that the church and academy will return to Turretin's insights.

Preaching as a Sign *Tekmeria* (τεκμήρια)

Turretin believed it necessary to know "how of the various assemblies which profess the name of Christ, the true and orthodox can be distinguished from the false and heretical, which are unworthy of the name of the true church."⁶ His reason for this distinction was simple. He states what the Scriptures teach and what the Protestant church has always upheld regarding the church's importance: "salvation cannot be obtained except in communion with the true church."⁷

¹ Helvetic Consensus Formula Canon XXI.

² Donald K. McKim, *The Authoritative Word: Essays on The Nature of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 216.

³ Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 266.

⁴ Robert M. Copeland, *Spare No Exertions: 175 Years of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary* (Pittsburgh: RPTS, 1986), 84-85.

⁵ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 216.

⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997), 3:87.

⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:87.

Turretin lays out the importance of discernment in no uncertain terms, declaring it to be a matter of salvation:

[Since] many glory in this sacred name [“church”] who are destitute of its truth, it is of great value to know its true marks that we may be able to distinguish the true fold of Christ from the dens of wolves; and the genuine society of pious Christians (to whose communion we are called) from the conventicles of heretics, which must be shunned by us; also that thus we may know what that assembly is to which it is necessary that we should join ourselves that we may obtain salvation.⁸

Turretin then discusses the nature of a mark, arriving at the need for it to be both “proper” (i.e., not a characteristic common to an object but formal and pronounced) and “somewhat known” (i.e., the mark cannot be of an intangible quality but must be able to be measured in some way). To locate the true, visible church, he taught that the invisible presence of God’s Spirit must be indicated not by mere probable or accidental adjunct signs, which he called the *eikota*, meaning “merely appearing” or “seeming” to be associated. This word is the one we get “icon” from. Think of how an app on your smartphone is an icon—it is associated with the program, but separate from it. Similarly, some signs that may indicate the Spirit’s presence are merely probable, such as saying a place is a Christian assembly. That group may or may not be in Christ.

Rather, necessary and essential signs were needed, which Turretin used the Greek word *tekmeria* to define. *Tekmeria* means “demonstrative proofs” or “essential signs,” and they are so much of the essence of the thing signified that they are inseparable from it. He used examples such as smoke indicating fire, respiration proving life, or the rays of light from the sun to illustrate what he meant. Then, he applied this concept to the church. The internal, mystical, invisible church consisting of true believers is revealed in an external, visible, instituted way. How so? As a true representative of the Reformed tradition, Turretin said that “the pure preaching of the word with lawful administration of the sacraments, to which some add the exercise of discipline and holiness of life or obedience given to the word” are those signs.⁹

Yet Turretin made a sharp distinction between these signs or marks, for he upheld they had “different degrees of necessity.... In the first degree of necessity is the pure preaching and profession of the word, since without it the church cannot exist.”¹⁰ The sacraments were not of the same degree as preaching, since a generation of Israel existed in the wilderness without being circumcised yet still set apart by the Word of God. Using biblical references and church fathers, Turretin states that “such is the preached and received word, which constitutes, conserves and nourishes the church so that, it being posited, the church is posited, and it being removed, the church is removed.”¹¹ He makes clear that the mere claim of possessing the marks is insufficient for any assembly; rather, a demonstrable adherence to the truth is necessary for the claim of being a true congregation of Christ. After treating various objections and difficulties, he concludes, “it is evident that truth of doctrine or conformity with the word of God is the true and genuine mark of the true church.”¹²

The Holy Spirit’s All-Encompassing Role in Preaching

Having established preaching as the church’s sign *a priori*, the Spirit’s role in this mark can be explored. For Turretin, the Spirit is present in all aspects of preaching as He uses God’s Word to

⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:86.

⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:87.

¹⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:87.

¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:88.

¹² Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:96.

mark the church. This working of the Spirit in preaching can be seen in three primary areas: the Spirit's self-attesting authority in the Scriptures; the Spirit's presence in the proclamation of the Scriptures; and the Spirit's powerful operation in the hearers of the Scriptures.

1. *The Spirit's self-attesting authority in the Scriptures*

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which maintains that the church authorizes the Scriptures, Turretin taught the Protestant view of *sola Scriptura*, that Scripture is the sole authority of the church. He believed the Scriptures were self-authenticating, saying, “But although we do not deny that the testimony of the church has its own weight..., yet we maintain that primarily and principally the Bible is believed by us to be divine on account of itself (or the marks impressed upon it), not on account of the church.”¹³ For the Word of God was breathed by the Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16), and the human authors were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21).

Turretin used numerous illustrations to help his readers understand the self-attesting authority of the Scriptures. “For as the works of God exhibit visibly to our eyes by certain marks the incomparable excellence of the artificer himself and as the sun makes himself known by his own light, so he wished in the Bible (which is the emanation [aporroē] from the Father of lights and the Sun of righteousness) to send forth different rays of divinity by which he might make himself known.”¹⁴ He also spoke of how “objects of the sense presented to faculties well disposed are immediately distinguished and known without any other external argument.... Light is immediately most certainly known to us by its own brightness; food by its peculiar sweetness; an odor by its peculiar fragrance without any additional testimony.”¹⁵ He continues,

Thus the Scripture, which is set forth to us in respect to the new man and spiritual senses, now under the symbol of a clear light (Ps. 119:105), then of the most sweetest food (Ps. 19:10; Is. 55:1, 2; Heb. 5:14) and again of the sweetest smelling savor (Cant. 1:3), may easily be distinguished of itself by the senses of the new man as soon as it is presented to them and makes itself known by its own light, sweetness and fragrance (euōdia); so that there is no need to seek elsewhere for proof that this is light, food or a sweet smelling savor.¹⁶

Turretin’s view of the Scriptures come out dramatically in his teaching of what it means for the church to be the “pillar and bulwark (or support or ground) of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). These images can sound as if the church must hold up or support the truth of God’s Word for it to be authoritative. But, as Turretin explains,

The church is called “the pillar and ground of the truth” (stylos kai hedraiōma tēs alētheias, 1 Tim. 3:15) not because she supports and gives authority to the truth (since the truth is rather the foundation upon which the church is built, Eph. 2:20), but because it stands before the church as a pillar and makes itself conspicuous to all. Therefore it is called a pillar, not in an architectural sense (as pillars are used for the support of buildings), but in a forensic and political sense (as the edicts of the emperor and the decrees and laws of the magistrates were usually posted against pillars before the court houses and praetoria and before the gates of the

¹³ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:87.

¹⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:63.

¹⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:89.

¹⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:89-90.

basilica so that all might be informed of them, as noted by Pliny, *Natural History*, lib. 6, c. 28+ and Josephus, *AJ* 1.70–71 [Loeb, 4:32–33]).¹⁷

The church does not authenticate the truth but proclaims it and preserves it: “We prove the Scriptures by the Spirit as the efficient cause by which we believe. But we prove the Spirit from the Scriptures as the object and argument on account of which we believe.”¹⁸

2. *The Spirit’s presence in the proclamation of the Scriptures*

The Spirit of God is not only present objectively in the inscripturated, God-breathed Word. For He uses the one who preaches to breathe out his word with its life and power in the present generation. The preacher should consider that every time he preaches, he is imitating God the Father through Christ’s breathing out His Word. This was Turretin’s conviction. According to Cunningham, “Turretin was clear that the Spirit expressed himself both externally in Scripture (through preaching) and internally through his ‘testimony impressed upon the conscience and speaking in the heart.’”¹⁹

In John 14:23–24, Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” Where the word of God is kept, God the Father and God the Son through the Spirit of God dwell. As Turretin states, “where Christ dwells with the Father, there it cannot be denied that the true church is, since it is his house and temple.”²⁰ Furthermore, “Christ cannot be found without his church also being found (in which he dwells and which is his body, which cannot be separated from him).”²¹ So the preaching of the Word of God is a Spirit-wrought, Spirit-abiding activity. Brilliantly, Turretin said, “The church shows the Scripture by her ministry and *a posteriori*, as the effect the cause and a light the candlestick; the Scripture shows the church by her authority and *a priori*, as the cause the effect.”²²

3. *The Spirit’s powerful operation in the hearers of the Scriptures*

Some scholars in the past few decades, because of what they perceive as the dry scholastic approach of the seventeenth century, have sought to separate Turretin from Calvin in their view of Scripture. One area of concern they raise is the claim that “Turretin departed from Calvin in not relying upon the internal witness of the Holy Spirit to persuade readers of the authority of Scripture.”²³ One almost wonders if the critics have even read Turretin! For he develops clearly the relationship between the church being marked by those who have heard the internal witness of the Spirit of God. He states, “the same Spirit who acts objectively in the word by presenting the truth, operates efficiently in the heart by also impressing that truth upon our minds.”²⁴

Turretin goes on to say of the Spirit that

¹⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:93.

¹⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:92.

¹⁹ Ralph Cunningham, “Did Turretin Depart from Calvin’s View on the Concept of Error in the Scriptures?” *Foundations* (No. 61, Autumn 2011), 51.

²⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:89.

²¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:89.

²² Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:94.

²³ Cunningham, “Did Turretin Depart from Calvin’s View”, 45.

²⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:90.

He is not given to us in order to introduce new revelations, but to impress the written word on our hearts; so that here the word must never be separated from the Spirit (Is. 59:21). The former works objectively, the latter efficiently; the former strikes the ears from without, the latter opens the heart within. The Spirit is the teacher; Scripture is the doctrine which he teaches us.²⁵

Turretin says that the effect of the Word and Spirit is “sharper than any two-edged sword, it pierces to the soul itself, generates faith and piety in the minds of its hearers, as well as invincible firmness in its professors, and always victoriously triumphs over the kingdom of Satan and false religion.”²⁶ As a result, a gathered flock of people come around the preached Word, showing that they belong to Christ. “For if the church is a flock of sheep and the sheep are no other than they who hear the voice of Christ, wherever the voice of Christ is heard, they are the sheep of Christ (and so the true church) must necessarily be.”²⁷

Cultivating the Spirit’s Activity in Preaching

Does this authoritative, sovereign activity of the Spirit over the Word of God in the church of Christ mean pastors and congregations must simply wait idly for the Spirit’s action? By no means! Preachers can pursue the Spirit’s assistance in ministering the Word in at least three ways. Everyone can encourage their pastors along these lines.

1. Preach the Scriptures confidently because of their Spirit-granted authority.

We are living in an age where many places calling themselves churches are not hearing and experiencing what we have just described. Covid is causing many people to walk away from a faith they did not truly possess. Many of them were in houses of God where the Word was not proclaimed and so were a house of God in name only. The Cambridge Declaration of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals is right to confess that “The work of the Holy Spirit in personal experience cannot be disengaged from Scripture. The Spirit does not speak in ways that are independent of Scripture.”²⁸

How preachers need to be men confident to preach the Word of God because they know that the authority lies in the Word they proclaim! A paucity of expositional, gospel proclaiming churches exists. Too many pulpits lie empty. People are being fed lying doctrines in too many other pulpits. A need exists for men who, confident in the sole authority of the Word of God, to arise and preach with confidence this Word.

2. Preach in the prayer-derived power of the Spirit.

When it comes to the presence of the Spirit in preaching, perhaps James’ proverb rings true for too many preachers: “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2). I wonder how many preachers are asking. Like a father honoring a request for food from a little child, he delights to grant the Spirit in increasing measures to those who ask. There is a need to pray, and there is a need to ask others for prayer. Even Paul recognized his dependence on the Holy Spirit when he entreated the Ephesians to “keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim

²⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:59.

²⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:64.

²⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:89.

²⁸ Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Cambridge Declaration (1996), sec. “Sola Scriptura: The Erosion of Authority”.

the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak" (Eph. 6:18-20).

3. *Preach by faith in the Spirit's inner working.*

I love to rake leaves, paint a room, and even help clean up the kitchen. Why? Because I can directly see my work. But preaching! Sometimes you preach and wonder if anything happened! That is why we must preach by faith. God promised that His Word would not return void, and we believe Him! When you plant a seed, and water it, you expect it to grow. We should expect no less of our preaching.

Conclusion

For Turretin, the Word of God and Spirit of God were distinct but inseparable. "We prove the Scriptures by the Spirit as the efficient cause by which we believe. But we prove the Spirit from the Scriptures as the object and argument on account of which we believe."²⁹ As the old song says, like love and marriage, or a horse and carriage, they go together and we cannot have one without the other.

²⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:92.