

# Speak Up!

a sermon

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I Corinthians 9:16–23

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There's something funny that happens to men after they've been married for a while. Sometimes it goes on even well before marriage, of course, even when the man is but a boy. Yet it really comes into its own well after the wedding bells have rung. It's a curious ailment that affects the hearing. Married women know the problem all too well: the guy appears to have gone deaf.

The evidence of this problem is the poor man's being unaware of questions being put to him. He continues to watch the game, or stare at the paper, while dear heart, the love of his life, asks him the same question again and again.

In many cases, this is not a medical problem. There's nothing wrong with his hearing. The cause is not headphones or rock concerts or power tools. It's simply a matter of attention. It's not that he isn't *hearing*, but rather that he's not *listening*.

Of course this is not a problem unique to men, although in our culture it seems to be characteristic of them. Women can be distracted, too, lost in *their* own little world into which sounds from the outside cannot penetrate. Maybe it's more fun to tag this as a shortcoming peculiar to males. And yet, there is something to this, the many guys who though hearing aren't listening,

because they've lost interest,  
because they don't care,  
because they've become sheltered in their own concerns,  
because they don't want to listen.

Sometimes, though, the problem isn't with the one who is supposed to be hearing but rather with the one speaking. Sometimes one is not heard because she or he does not speak in a way that *can* be heard. This, too, is usually not a physical or medical problem. Even though there are people who really have no voice, either permanently or because of something temporary like laryngitis, what I have in mind here is something more emotional or social. It's not that she *can't* speak, but rather that she *doesn't* speak. Or rather, *speak up*.

Sometimes the problem is related to the inability of someone to listen (as with some husbands), in that it concerns attention and involvement. We see it with youngsters, typically in their teens, who seem incapable of uttering anything longer than a grunt at the softest volume. (Or so I'm told. Not that I would know anything about that.)

But in others it's often because of shyness, located in a fear of embarrassment or of being singled out. In its worst cases it can be out of a sense of despair, accompanied by a quiet inward sigh of "why bother."

It can happen because the one who cannot speak up has been told again and again that nobody wants to hear what this person thinks. When this happens enough, you begin to believe it.

And that's a shame. Because the loss of voice is a loss of identity. It's a loss of *opportunity*. And the opportunity lost is not just for the one who fails to speak, but also for those who now will not hear. They, too, have missed out on something important, because the contribution of another was denied, as was that person's identity.

Those who are teachers know this. When I taught, I tried to be aware of the students who hadn't yet spoken. I do the same now in consistory meetings. Those who haven't spoken up are the ones I want to encourage to speak up. Some students (and consistory members) need no encouragement. They have no problems speaking up. Actually, a few of them find it hard to stop speaking.

It's something that inexperienced teachers have to learn: how to get a particularly talkative student to end his or her (sometimes irrelevant) monologue, so that *other* students could ask a question or make a point that might contribute to the learning.

It seems that this failure not merely to speak but to *speak up* sometimes comes out of a belief that speaking up is for other people. "I'll leave that to others who are good at it," this person might think. The world, then, is divided into two kinds of people:

those who speak up and those who remain silent,  
those who contribute and those who watch the contributors,  
the doers and the observers.

Those in the second group, the non-speakers, think they're being realistic. After all, they think, not everybody has the same talents. We don't all have the same responsibilities. So the encouragement to "speak up" cannot be for everyone. They can appreciate that there are some who can and must speak up. "But why should it be me?" they might ask.



In the Bible passage I just read, Paul is talking about himself. And let's be honest: it kind of sounds like he's bragging.

He talks about his calling as an apostle.  
He goes on about his role as a preacher.  
He speaks of how he has given up so much to do the work he is called to do.

So it seems as if very few of Paul's words apply to us. It seems that he's talking of himself and his work, not of us and our work. So we might think that all of that is good for him, but not for us.

We might especially think this when, at the beginning of these verses, Paul speaks of the obligation he feels to preach. "If I proclaim the gospel," he says, "this gives me no ground for boasting, for an *obligation* is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!"

I suppose that those words could be especially meaningful to people who do what we formally call "preaching," for me and others like me who get into a pulpit and do these strange monologues called "sermons." And I suspect that many of you really want your preachers to feel something like what Paul expresses, that they would feel this great obligation to preach

the Good News, an obligation so immense for them that they cannot but preach. You want that of them.

As an aside, I can assure you that I do. Most days. Especially on Sundays! But, honestly, there are days when I do not feel that way. But I have never believed that the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is only so strong as my emotional state at any given moment. And neither should you.

Even so, expecting something like this burning and fervor for the gospel from your preachers does not necessarily lead to expecting it from *yourself*. After all, some are good at speaking and others are not. Not all of us are called to be ministers, so, we think, not all of us are called to preach.

There is something to this. Clearly, not everybody is called to be a pulpit preacher. And Paul is not in this way making his reflections on his call apply to everybody. We know that he is well aware of the diversity of gifts in the church. It was from him, after all, that we got that wonderful imagery of the Body of Christ as having different parts with different functions, an image that happens to come up just a bit further on in this very letter of Paul's.

And so we might reasonably think that Paul is speaking only of himself, and maybe of other preachers. We might think, that he has no universal intent in mind. We might think that the rest of us can simply say "good for you, Paul" and ignore it.

This lets us off too easy.

I don't believe Paul's excitement for the gospel is just something to observe. I don't believe that what he says is relevant only to those few who have been called to a ministry of the pulpit. I don't believe that this is only for those with the gift of gab. I don't believe he leaves out the more reserved or less verbal among us.

What is Paul getting at here? It's not merely a defense of his ministry. It's not just a guarding of his reputation. Instead, he is trying to demonstrate an attitude. He's wanting to show a perspective. He wants his friends to adopt this attitude and this perspective as their own.

Of course he knows that not everybody is an actual preacher. Of course he knows that not everybody is an apostle. But the gospel *means* something that is life-changing and perspective-altering, not just for him, but for all Christians.

When Paul says that he is under an obligation to proclaim the gospel and woe to him if he does not proclaim it, he is not saying something that applies only to him. No, he is saying something that applies to all those who identify as Christians, all those who know they've been touched by the Good News. Which means that he's quite likely saying something that applies to you.

And what Paul is saying is that we are *all* under an obligation to proclaim the gospel. Sure, not necessarily by preaching. But all Christians have an obligation to say what the gospel means, to share this good news, "to share in its blessings," to make clear in deeds and in words *who* we are and *whose* we are. Which means that all of us who know we belong to Jesus have an obligation *to speak up*.

I know. This may be something we don't feel much like doing. I know. We may not feel very good at it. I know. We may struggle, uncertain about our purpose, doubtful about our abilities. We may think that there are so many other people who are so much better at this kind of thing than we are. I know. I know.

In the end, it doesn't much matter, these feelings and doubts and fears of ours. They don't

matter, not compared to the love and power of Jesus Christ. The good news is that Jesus came to forgive and to set free.

For some of you, that “setting free” may be mostly “from”:

*from* your fear,  
*from* your belief that God has given you nothing special to do,  
*from* your being restricted to a very limited comfort zone.

For some of you, that “setting free” may be mostly “for”:

*for* the benefit and blessing of others,  
*for* a purpose greater than yourself,  
*for* the sake of God’s glory.

I know. I know! Some of you may be thinking I make it sound so easy when I really have no idea how difficult it is to speak up. You may be thinking, “well, easy for you to say Dan. You’ve kissed the blarney stone!”

But I get it. I know that it is not so easy for some to make audible what they believe. I know about the uncertainty and the fear. I know about the concern that you might give the wrong impression or get wrong the facts. I know about the worry of appearing as a religious nut.

But what I’m getting at here is not impossible. It is not beyond us. We are bathed in the waters of baptism, washed in the blood of Jesus, touched by the Holy Spirit. This is not impossible.

I dearly want more and more of us simply to understand that all Christians have a role in proclaiming the gospel. Because, really now, the gospel is far too important to leave only to the preachers! The Church is far too important to leave only to the ministers! If more of us could accept this simple truth, that we all share in the proclamation of the good news, in many ways both formal and informal, wow would that be great, and I believe God would bless us in it.

Here’s the other thing: speaking up comes about in many different ways. It need not be formal. It need not be long. It doesn’t have to be with particular kinds of words, or even, all the time, with words directly from the Bible.

Sure, there is a place for those, an important place. But to speak up need not involve necessarily those things. The ways in which God calls and empowers you to speak up may be a lot smaller and simpler. It may be just the briefest of things you say:

A “thank you” to someone not used to being thanked.

An “I’ll pray for you” to someone who is mourning a loss or facing a challenge.

An “I forgive you” to someone who has wounded you.

An offer of help to someone hurting.

A calming word of perspective to someone panicked or angry.

Any of these might be ways of proclaiming the good news, if they proceed from a conviction of Jesus Christ’s victory over powers of falsehood and violence and sin and death, if they come from a conviction that Jesus has come into our mess so in him we might have mastery over it.

Even more, God may use these as the groundwork for further occasions to speak up. Having shared with others our love for God in simple ways, we may find that the trust has been

established enough and the fear diminished enough to go further with someone in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.



So it is, my friends, that I urge you to understand the Good News of Jesus as something given to all of us: to declare, to share, to make apparent in what we do *and* in what we say.

For these reasons I ask you to do this, as the forgiven people set free by Jesus that I know you to be:

Speak up.

Speak up. The world is listening.

Speak up. God is listening.

Speak up.