Do you know what makes for good preaching?

The pastor opens with a funny joke, strings together a series of disconnected Bible verses and clever anecdotes, and then closes with an inspirational quote. But is this the kind of preaching that most glorifies God, honors his Word, and edifies his people?

In Preaching: A Biblical Theology, pastor Jason Meyer examines the biblical precedent for preaching in both the Old and New Testaments and offers practical guidance related to the what, how, and why of expository preaching for today.

The most comprehensive biblical theology on the topic, this resource will help you identify good preaching and embrace it as a means to encounter—and be transformed by—the living God.

“Meyer offers a sterling contribution to the practice of expository preaching.”
—BRYAN CHAPPELL, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary

“A luminous, deeply grounded biblical theology for the ministry of the Word! This is a very important book.”
—R. KENT HUGHES, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton

“Going . . . going . . . gone. Jason Meyer hits it out of the park.”
—C. J. MAHANEY, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

“Meyer’s work cuts a new swath in the plethora of books on preaching and offers wisdom on a multitude of topics.”
—THOMAS SCHREINER, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Meyer has a firm grasp not only on the theology of preaching, but also on the theology we’re called to preach.”
—TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN, Senior Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale

JASON C. MEYER (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church and associate professor of New Testament at Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis. He is head over heels in love with his wife, Cara, and he is a joy-filled father of four (Gracie, Allie, Jonathan, and David).
“Jason Meyer offers a sterling contribution to the practice of expository preaching—not only affirming its historic benefits, but also helping us see how to interpret each aspect of Scripture in light of the development of the Bible’s whole message. Expository preaching can get lost in microscopic examination of a particular passage. Meyer keeps the redemptive context in view, not only providing many ‘aha’ moments for experienced expositors, but also giving a new generation of preachers even more incentive to expound the Word in a manner true to the text.”

Bryan Chapell, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary

“My friend Jason Meyer has a firm grasp not only on the theology of preaching, but also on the theology we’re called to preach. He is gripped by the Christ-centered plotline of the Bible and understands something that desperately needs to be recovered in our day if the church is ever going to experience the kind of reformation many of us long for: the preacher is not called to say many different things—but rather the same thing over and over, in many different ways, from every different text.”

Tullian Tchividjian, Senior Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; author, One Way Love

“Jason Meyer’s work cuts a new swath in the plethora of books on preaching. Meyer grounds his view of preaching in biblical theology, showing that the proclamation of God’s Word fits within the story line of Scripture. The reader will find wisdom on a multitude of other topics, such as the nature of expository preaching and the role topical preaching should play in the pulpit. The book breathes out a passion for God and a joy in Jesus Christ, so that the weight and gladness of preaching pulsate throughout the work.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Here Jason Meyer takes us on a sure-footed journey through the whole of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, unfolding for us what the entire Bible reveals about preaching. The result is a luminous, deeply grounded biblical theology for the ministry of the Word, and a winsome, compelling apologetic for expository preaching! Preaching: A Biblical Theology is a very important book that will be read and discussed by serious-minded Christians far and wide.”

R. Kent Hughes, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

“Going . . . going . . . gone. Jason Meyer hits it out of the park.”

C. J. Mahaney, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville
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I share Jason Meyer's concern that many pastors “no longer tremble at the task of preaching.” Our contemporary obsession with being casual at all costs—not just in our dress (which is minor) but in our verbal and soul demeanor (which is major)—obscures crucial dimensions of God’s reality.

David Wells’s twenty-year-old assessment is still widely true: “The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.” And taking God’s holy word on their lips does not make the preachers tremble.

But God is raising up many younger voices with the conviction that there is a radically God-centered, gospel-saturated, joyful alternative to carefree, breezy, chipper ways of dealing with divine things. This is especially true of preaching. Jason Meyer strikes the refreshing old note: “Preaching is a high calling. It is not just difficult; it is impossible with man.”

Whether a preacher is staggered at the task of preaching depends largely on whether he is stunned that God Almighty has spoken in a Book. And that God calls sinful, fallible human beings to herald with authority what he has spoken there. God could have done it without a book and without preachers. But he chose both as indispensible. Wise preachers tremble at this.

Another reason the task of preaching is impossible and wonderful is that the main aim of preaching is not the transfer of information, but an encounter with the living God. The people of God meet God

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in the anointed heralding of God’s message in a way that cannot be duplicated by any other means. Preaching in a worship service is not a lecture in a classroom. It is the echo of, and the exultation over, God speaking to us in his word.

The faithfulness of the echo will determine the authenticity of the exultation. Which is why Jason mounts a compelling biblical case for preaching as exposition of Scripture. God has spoken in the Book. All of it is marked by grammatical and historical specificity. None of it, by accident. None of it, erroneous. Preaching honors this. Bows before the specificity of this authority. Exults in the explosive power of the particulars. And shows enough of them in the message that people don’t have to take the preacher’s word for it: Look! This glorious reality over which we are now exulting is really there.

Underneath these convictions about preaching, Jason exposes a massive biblical foundation by excavating the whole terrain of Scripture. I know of nothing like what he has done here in tracing the stewarding of God’s word from Genesis to Revelation. I commend it for its uniqueness and for its faithful rendering of the heart of preaching.

As many readers know, I have a personal stake in the man Jason Meyer and his message. Jason accepted the call of God to pick up where I left off after thirty-three years of preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church. I have loved and fed this people for three decades. As you can imagine, it will be a crowning joy to my life if Bethlehem continues to walk in the truth, nourished by the faithful exposition of God’s word.

This is why I am thrilled with the message of this book and the theological and expository commitments of Jason Meyer. He wrote the book, and he models the book. God’s hand is on him to “to preach . . . the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). And he is a faithful guide in how to do this.

Jason Meyer does not take preaching lightly. Paradoxical as it may sound, both he and I rejoice that we have discovered and experienced the truth of God’s statement:

This is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word. (Isa. 66:2)
A WORD FOR BUSY PASTORS

When I first wrote this book, I had a long and winding path to my main point—complete with a long preface, some soul searching, and something of a brief history of research with regard to evangelical preaching. If these kinds of things interest you, you can find vestiges of them in the appendixes of the book. I realize now that I need to just cut to the chase. I hope many busy pastors are reading this book. I know that your time is precious, the needs are overwhelming, and preaching books are legion. So the question of the hour is, why bother with this book?

BACK TO THE BIBLE: DID GOD REALLY SAY?

The first temptation was a focused attack on God’s word. Satan successfully sowed seeds of doubt in Eve’s heart concerning what God had clearly spoken. Our ancient foe hates true preaching and has set his sights on scrambling the clear signals of Scripture concerning it. He has good reason to oppose preaching. Spirit-filled preaching is still the church’s greatest weapon against Satan’s kingdom. I agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones that “preaching is the highest calling and the greatest need for the church and the world.”¹ If it is so important, we had better be clear on what it is. Has God clearly revealed what preaching is in Scripture? Ultimately, no one else can define preaching. It is God’s idea. Has he spoken?

God is not silent on this matter. He has spoken clearly and authoritatively. Paul even calls preaching a “charge” (2 Tim. 4:1) from God.

¹D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Preaching and Preachers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 9. Lloyd-Jones defends this claim in various ways. One argument he gives for the importance of preaching is that a revival of true preaching has been the defining mark of every reformation and revival in church history (24–25).
This charge is to “preach the word” of God (4:2). What does this charge mean? Where would one go to find the answer?

**Back to the Whole Bible**

Evangelicals know that the answer is the Bible, but where in the Bible? This is the key question. I fear that most attempts to answer this question have been unnecessarily selective. Some studies narrowly rely on word studies of “preaching” words. Others tip their hat to the Old Testament and then spend the rest of their time looking in the New Testament. *This book is unique in that I think the whole Bible alone can give a holistic answer to what preaching is.* We will strive for a holistic answer by looking at preaching in the light of the larger category to which it belongs: the ministry of the word.

In this study, it is important to emphasize that I did not merely set out to defend a particular view of preaching. C. H. Spurgeon said that the gospel is like a caged lion: you don’t have to defend it—just let it out of the cage. In the same way, I do not want to “defend” preaching as much as I want to let the Bible’s view of preaching out of the cage.

**Overview: Choose Your Own Adventure**

The first five chapters of this book attempt to give a broad overview of what Scripture says about the ministry of the word (i.e., not just preaching). These chapters give the essential introductory framework for the rest of the book. They are vital to read in order to make sense of the whole.

Where you go next depends upon you. When I was a kid, I used to read the “choose your own adventure” category of books. I wrote this book in a similar way. Someone could jump from the introductory chapters of part one (chs. 1–5) to part three (chs. 17–19) without much difficulty. The first five chapters are a condensed biblical theology of the ministry of the word. They form the prerequisite concepts that prepare the reader to make the necessary transition from the preaching we find in Scripture (chs. 1–5) to today’s context in which we preach from Scripture (chs. 17–19).

So what is part two? If someone could skip it, then is it really all that important? It is an eleven-chapter attempt to buttress the con-
densed biblical theology of part one. I recognize that some readers will be more than ready to make the move from part one to part three. Others, however, will not feel ready yet. They will want to examine the scriptural foundations of part one. Therefore, part two is an attempt to provide structural supports for part one. Structural supports are massively important, but not everyone enjoys examining them to see how sturdy they are. Some will appreciate this attempt to assure them that the supports are sturdy.

One television station advertises that it has movies for guys who like movies. Another way to describe part two would be to say that it has details for readers who like details. These eleven chapters are the meat of a biblical theology of the ministry of the word. Each chapter looks at a different paradigm. One could read straight through them, or they could serve as reference points for later reading.

Therefore, a reader who enjoys big-picture reading could jump from part one to part three and then move on through the rest of the book. A reader who loves double-clicking on details could read the book straight through as it stands.

Part four takes some soundings from systematic theology (chs. 20–21) and then offers reflections on the place of topical preaching (ch. 22). The last chapter wraps up the study with conclusions and applications (ch. 23).
PART ONE

THE BIG PICTURE:
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE
MINISTRY OF THE WORD
For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.

1 Corinthians 9:16–17

THREE CATEGORIES

The central question of this book is, what is preaching? Answering that question forces us to address a broader question: what is the ministry of the word? The ministry of the word flows from the fact that God entrusts his people with his word. His people take that word and faithfully serve others with it. The ministry of the word includes many ministries within the church, such as counseling and personal evangelism, not just preaching. This book addresses questions common to any word-based ministry, but preaching is the main ministry I have in view. Three big-picture biblical categories best sum up the ministry of the word in Scripture: stewarding, heralding, and encountering. This chapter defines them and sketches a very brief biblical overview.

THESIS

My thesis is that the ministry of the word in Scripture is *stewarding and heralding God’s word in such a way that people encounter God through his word*. Notice that this thesis highlights three components, which are actually three sequential phases of the ministry of the word.
The first phase is the stewarding phase. It focuses on faithfully receiving God’s word. The steward is entrusted with the word of God. The second phase is the heralding of God’s word. God intends for the stewarded word to be heralded. The preacher gives a human voice to the divine word so that others will hear from God. The third phase is encountering God through his word. In this step, the responsibility to steward the word passes from the preacher to the people. This phase is a time of great gravity because every word from God demands a response. These three elements are three sequential phases in the dynamic process of preaching God’s word: stewarding, heralding, and encountering.

EXPLANATION OF THE THESIS: THREE SUITCASES TO UNPACK

The three parts of the thesis statement are like three suitcases so stuffed with meaning that they are bursting at the seams and demanding to be unpacked one at a time. Let’s begin unpacking.

SUITCASE 1: STEWARDING GOD’S WORD

The first phase focuses on the content of preaching, which is the stewarded word of God. On this score, it is hard to improve upon Paul’s pithy summary in 1 Corinthians 4:1–2. He says that a steward is one who has been entrusted with something (i.e., the what) and so he must be found faithful (i.e., the how) with respect to what has been entrusted. “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (4:1–2).

Mark Dever offers a succinct definition of a steward: “A steward is someone who is not an owner but one who is entrusted with someone else’s property.”1 In other words, a steward is not a master, but a servant—a servant entrusted with something that belongs to his master. John Stott says it well: “Indeed, if the [stewardship] metaphor teaches anything, it teaches that the preacher does not supply his own message; he is supplied with it.”2 God is the Master, the word is his property, and the preacher is the appointed servant entrusted with it.

This stewardship of the word may take different forms at different times (patriarchs, prophets, scribes, just to name a few), but the same basic calling ties these stewards together throughout the pages of Scripture.

SUITCASE 2: HERALDING GOD’S WORD

The second phase of preaching is heralding God’s word. The emphasis on heralding is on tone of the delivery. Preaching is not discussing or explaining something with the tone and tenor of a fireside chat. The “herald” is the town crier that speaks with the forceful tone of “hear ye, hear ye.” In other words, the herald made his proclamation with a rousing “attention-getting noise” that could not be ignored.3

Gordon Hugenberger reinforces the gravity of the herald’s task by stressing the political or military associations of the word. He points to the work of Suidas, the tenth-century AD Greek lexicographer, who said, “A herald is in time of war what an ambassador is in peace.”4 The herald would go into “enemy territory ahead of an advancing army to warn the enemy of certain destruction unless they accepted the proffered terms for peace.”5 Therefore, the king would invest the herald with the power “either [to] accept surrender on behalf of his king or to declare war if those terms were rejected.”6 The herald’s authority is completely derived and is legitimate only to the degree that he faithfully represents the one who sent him.

Notice how stewarding and heralding go together. Peter spoke of using our gifts to serve one another “as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Pet. 4:10). He then highlights two basic gifts of grace to steward: speaking gifts and serving gifts. The herald is a faithful steward of a speaking gift of grace when he speaks “as one who speaks oracles of God” (4:11). Paul made the same connection between preaching and stewardship in 1 Corinthians 9:16–17: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.”

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4 Quoted in ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
The connection between stewarding and heralding is simple. God entrusts the word and then God calls the preacher to herald it. The calling and gifting to handle and herald the word are themselves a stewardship from God. God’s calling and gifting are prerequisites for this stewardship, as we will see in the chapters that follow.

Furthermore, the steward needs to stay faithful with what has been entrusted, and the herald needs to stay true to what he has been sent to say. He has no authority to modify the message or insert his own opinions as if they represent the revealed will of the sender. The herald proclaims a message as an ambassador representing the one who sent him.7

These two terms, *stewarding* and *heralding*, also help the reader of Scripture to understand the relationship between teaching and preaching. Preaching has an expository dimension because God entrusts the preacher with a specific message. The fact that heralding God’s word requires exposition explains why preaching and teaching in Scripture often appear together (e.g., Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 11:1; Luke 20:1; Acts 5:42; 15:34; 1 Tim. 5:17). I believe preaching refers to how something is stated (a heraldic way), while teaching focuses on the content of what is said (unpacking something).

Another reason why people should not sharply distinguish preaching and teaching is that the two are often used interchangeably in Scripture. For example, the response to Jesus’s most famous sermon (the Sermon on the Mount) defines the sermon as “teaching” (Matt. 7:28). In the same way, a verse in Romans sheds light on the interchangeable nature of the terms. Paul lays down a general statement for the Jews: “You then who teach others, do you not teach yourselves?” (Rom. 2:21). When he gives an example of this principle, he uses the term “preach”: “While you preach against stealing, do you steal?” (2:21).

Therefore, the combination of the terms *stewarding* and *heralding* honors the intricate connection in Scripture between preaching and teaching. One could say again by way of summary that the word *herald*
focuses on the preaching aspect or the heraldic tone of the delivery, while the word "teaching" places more stress on the entrusted content that the herald as teacher must unpack.

**SUITCASE 3: IN SUCH A WAY THAT PEOPLE ENCOUNTER GOD**

The third phase of preaching brings the burden of God’s word to bear upon the hearers. The sequential nature of the first two phases of preaching leads to a moment of truth for the hearers. The preacher in Scripture has spoken God’s word. The people now must steward God’s word. Properly stewarding the word leads to life and blessing. Improper stewardship of the word leads to death and curse.

We cannot allow our definition of "encounter" to emphasize only positive transformation. I do not use "encounter" as a synonym for what Henry Blackaby has called “experiencing God,” which he describes as a positive experience. The encounter can be negative or positive, depending on how people respond to God’s word. Consider, for example, Paul’s description of the effects of his ministry of the word upon his hearers: “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor. 2:15–16).

Sometimes an encounter with God through the preaching of the word brings the sweet smell of life, while for others it brings the stench of death. The Scriptures sing with examples of the power of the word to change lives. The word also contains stinging examples of powerful judgments.

**THE SWEET SMELL OF LIFE**

The great hope of preaching is the power of God. Paul knew that Satan had blinded the perishing (2 Cor. 4:3–4), but Paul kept preaching Christ because Satan’s ploys are no match for God’s power. God can create light out of darkness by his word and save those who are perishing: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:5–6).
The Bible makes clear that faith is a gift (Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). God gives the gift of faith through his word. Sometimes this dynamic is encapsulated in a single verse: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

The new birth comes through the word of God. Peter reminds us that we “have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). James makes the same point: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18).

THE STENCH OF DEATH

As strange as it may sound, the ministry of the word can be a ministry of judgment. Paul calls Moses’s ministry a “ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:9). Not only did Isaiah’s whole ministry have a negative result upon the people, but God makes it stunningly clear that he intended this result, which means it is not only a result but a purpose. In the famous passage in which Isaiah sees the Lord seated upon his throne, most people stop reading the passage with Isaiah’s declaration, “Here am I! Send me” (Isa. 6:8). The next verse, however, which rarely gets preached in connection with “calling” sermons, describes the ministry God is calling Isaiah to do. The people’s encounter with God through Isaiah’s word will bring judgment upon them:

And he said, “Go, and say to this people:

‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isa. 6:9–10)

This same dynamic appears in Jesus’s ministry. His preaching of the parables is a preaching of judgment that reveals the people’s hardened hearts:
To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that

“they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.” (Mark 4:11–12)

Notice that Jesus even quotes the same text from Isaiah. These two texts are statements not merely of effect, but of purpose! Jesus makes the effectual link between speaking and judgment explicit in John 15:22: “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.” John 8:45 is even more striking in stressing a causal effect between the truth spoken and the unbelief that results: “But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”

Even an anointed ministry of the word can bring death—not only for the hearer, but for the speaker as well. Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 is portrayed as an anointed sermon. No one could resist the wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke (Acts 6:10). His face shone “like . . . an angel” (6:15). However, the encounter between God and the people led to Stephen’s death because of the people’s hard-hearted rejection. Most people would never imagine that the anointing of the message and the death of the messenger could be put in the same frame of reference. They are both unmistakably there in Acts 6–7.

This discussion on the results of preaching raises the question of the relationship between human responsibility and God’s sovereignty. We must be careful not to blur the line between these two biblical categories. How do we know where to draw the line of responsibility?

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF STEWARDSHIP

When the truth is preached, the responsibility of stewardship shifts from the preacher to the hearer. If someone has preached what is false, then judgment falls upon the preacher and the hearer must judge it to be false. This principle is abundantly clear from Scripture. I will limit myself to three examples: Ezekiel, James, and Paul.

8The peoples’ zealous rejection of what Stephen said did not make Stephen’s sermon false or a failure on the part of the Spirit or Stephen. Far from it. The text tells us of God’s Trinitarian presence at the sermon (the Spirit, the glory of God, and Jesus): “But he [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’” (Act 7:55–56).
Ezekiel 3:18–21 shows that the herald must not remain silent when the Lord summons him to speak. He must speak when, where, and what the Lord wills. If he does not, then judgment falls upon him.

If I say to the wicked, “You shall surely die,” and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. (3:18)

Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. (3:20)

If the steward faithfully speaks the word, then he is not held guilty for someone else’s response.

But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. (3:19)

But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul. (3:21)

The New Testament continues this theme concerning the responsibility of teachers. James states that teachers of the word will receive a stricter judgment: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1). Acts 20:26–27 clarifies that preachers will not be judged for the unfaithful response of the people if they have faithfully declared the whole counsel of God: “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all [of you], for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” This is important because Paul explicitly states that some will not respond positively: “and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them (Act 20:30). Even so, he remains innocent of their blood.
THE CYCLE OF STEWARDSHIP

I have stressed how encountering God through his word can lead to judgment. Let me also emphasize the positive side of stewarding, heralding, and encountering. One of the most important effects of the ministry of the word is the principle of repetition.

God’s word → steward of the word → herald of the word ← audience
stewarding and heralding repeated by audience ← audience

The ministry of the word done well on the part of the pastoral shepherd leads to an effective ministry of the word on the part of the congregation. This cycle of stewardship will make an impact at home and abroad.

First, the ministry of the word is needed at home. Hebrews 3:12 warns that some may have an “evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” The author calls for congregational action: “take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” This action is defined in terms of a congregational ministry of the word practiced daily. “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (3:13). Once the baton of stewardship passes from the preacher to the congregation, the congregation will look for ways to herald the truth of the word within the realm of their relationships (home, work, school, etc.).

Second, the ministry of the word is needed abroad. The happiest thing that can happen to a minister of the word is to see the word do a work of missions mobilization. Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). People will hear what Jesus said, and God will do a miracle for the cause of missions by burdening their hearts to go preach the gospel to the nations. Some will adopt Paul’s ambition “to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named” (Rom. 15:20). The cycle of stewarding, heralding, and encountering at home will lead to stewarding, heralding, and encountering abroad. This cycle says that one cannot spread a flame of the word abroad unless people are first aflame with the word at home.
CONCLUSION

It did not dawn on me until after most of this book was written that my three categories fit with the perspectival approach of well-known theologian John Frame. The “normative perspective” focuses on the unchanging authority of the word of God. The “situational perspective” traces the changing steward and herald paradigms throughout the word. The “existential perspective” stresses the reality of encountering God through his word.

These concepts give the ministry of the word a balanced and wide-ranging biblical base. This chapter has argued that the concepts of stewarding, heralding, and encountering allow the whole Bible to speak with respect to what preaching is. In the next chapter, I will attempt to show that there is a link between the what and the how of preaching. We end this chapter on the note of encountering God. Isaac Watts's hymn “How Sweet and Awful Is the Place” strikes the right balance on this score. Some encounter the feast with thankful tongues, while others “make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come.” Some may starve, but it will not be because the feast is fake (like a fake fruit basket that looks appealing but does nothing to satisfy one's hunger). The real gospel is a feast of good news. God sovereignly opens our eyes so that we taste and see with the result that we are satisfied for all eternity. All who have tasted the goodness of the gospel long for this all-satisfying Savior to be named where he is not named.

Pity the nations, O our God,
constrain the earth to come,
send Thy victorious Word abroad
and bring the strangers home.

Let it be, Lord.

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THE STEWARDSHIP OF JOSHUA, THE JUDGES, AND SAMUEL

Paradigm 4

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.

Joshua 1:7–8

The following short survey of the stewardship of Joshua, the judges, and Samuel will once again focus on three aspects: (1) calling, (2) stewarding and heralding God’s word, and (3) the effects. I will give more space to tracing the narrative of Israel’s downward spiral of sin.

JOSHUA

JOSHUA’S CALL

God calls Joshua to lead Israel after the death of Moses (Josh. 1:1–2). This calling to lead God’s people has three points of continuity with the leadership of Moses: (1) continuity of God’s presence (“just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you”—1:5; cf. 1:9), (2) continued steward-
ship of the same word (“all the law that Moses my servant commanded you”—1:7), and (3) the same promises of blessing for stewarding the word. The dynamic relationship between stewarding and blessing is clear in Joshua 1:7–8 (fig. 7).

Figure 7. Stewarding and blessing of the word in Joshua 1:7–8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stewarding the Word of God</th>
<th>Blessing from God</th>
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<tr>
<td>. . . being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you.</td>
<td>that you may have good success wherever you go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left . . .</td>
<td>For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.</td>
<td></td>
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Notice as well that Israel recognizes God’s call upon Joshua. The people confess their allegiance to Joshua as part of their overall commitment to follow the word of the Lord while remembering the consequences of failing to heed God’s word. The word of the Lord and the words of his steward Joshua become intertwined in all of the second-person-singular uses of “you” and “your” in the following verses:

All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you. Only may the Lord your God be with you, as he was with Moses! Whoever rebels against your commandment and disobeys your words, whatever you command him, shall be put to death. Only be strong and courageous. (Josh. 1:16–18)

JOSHUA’S STEWARDING AND HERALDING

Joshua proves to be a faithful, fearless, and reverent minister of the word. He gives authoritative commands based on the words of Moses and brings them to bear upon the people and the situation at the appropriate times (e.g., Josh. 1:13–15). Perhaps the clearest example of
Joshua stewarding the written word of God in the Law of Moses comes in Joshua 8:32–35:

And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. . . . And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them. (8:32, 34–35)

Joshua also stewards words that God spoke directly to him. This dynamic is on full display in Joshua 3. The Lord first speaks his words to Joshua:

The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. And as for you, command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, ‘When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” (3:7–8)

And then Joshua delivers this word to the people. “And Joshua said to the people of Israel, ‘Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God’” (3:9). He not only accurately conveys the message, but also insists upon reverence and consecration because of God’s presence: “Then Joshua said to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you’” (3:5).

Joshua also worshipfully responds to God’s revelation when the commander of the Lord’s army appears. He removes his sandals like Moses before him (Ex. 3:5) because of the holy ground on which he stands (Josh. 5:14–15). The author of Hebrews also stresses the faith of Joshua and the people in God’s word at the destruction of Jericho: “By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days” (Heb. 11:30).

Examples like these could be multiplied as the Lord speaks to Joshua about the need for circumcision (Josh. 5:2), the details of battle instructions (6:1–5; 8:1–2, 18), or how the land should be apportioned. Joshua’s belief in God’s word makes him effective not only in steward-
ing and heralding God’s words to the people, but also in carrying out the Lord’s instructions (7:10–15) when people do not obey his word (7:16–26).

THE EFFECTS

The book of Joshua follows the pattern of the Pentateuch in highlighting the consequences that flow from stewarding or failing to steward God’s life-giving word. The rest of the book brings this dual focus to bear. Conquest flows from obedience to God’s word, not from the Israelites’ military might (at Jericho); defeat comes hard on the heels of failing to heed God’s word (at Ai following the disobedience of Achan).

Many summary statements throughout the book of Joshua read like a stunning success story of God accomplishing his word of promise. For example:

> Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass. (Josh. 21:43–45)

The end of Joshua comes full circle back to the beginning of the book with the same themes of being strong and courageous, God’s presence, no man standing against them, and stewarding the word. The difference is that Joshua now passes along his calling to all of Israel, including this specific call to steward the word: “Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left” (Josh. 23:6; cf. Josh. 1:7–8).

The fact that God entrusts Joshua’s calling to all of Israel and does not appoint a specific individual as his successor does not bode well for Israel. The nation will fail in the stewardship of the word, and so the book sounds an ominous note that paves the way for the rest of Israel’s history of rebelliousness against God’s word:
But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” (Josh. 24:19–20; cf. Deut. 29:1)

Despite this warning concerning their spiritual infidelity, the people once again reaffirm their covenantal commitment to the Lord at Shechem (Josh. 24:21, 24–25). Just as Moses wrote down God’s word and provided a song as a witness against Israel, Joshua writes down God’s word and sets up a stone as a witness against Israel.

And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.” (24:26–27)

JUDGES: THE WORD OF DELIVERANCE

The book of Judges picks up the narrative where the book of Joshua left off: with the mention of Joshua’s death (Josh. 24:29; Judg. 1:1; 2:8). Thereafter, things begin to unravel quickly as a generation that does not know the Lord comes on the scene (Judg. 2:10). The Lord’s word of judgment for Israel becomes a centerpiece of the Former Prophets from this point forward, as made clear by the angel of the Lord:

Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.” (2:1–3)

The rest of the narrative unveils a tragic tale of how the Israelites progressively become like the nations they have dispossessed because
they fail to steward God’s word of life and blessing. In fact, God leaves the nations in their midst as a test to see whether his people will rightly steward his word. “They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses” (Judg. 3:4).

The people do not steward the word but begin to do what is right in their own eyes, which the Lord already warned against in the Pentateuch. Compare the following verses, with my emphasis added:

The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. (Num. 15:37–40)

“You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the LORD your God is giving you. (Deut. 12:8–9)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judg. 17:6)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judg. 21:25)

In their disobedience to the word of God (e.g., Judg. 2:1–3), God delivers them over to their enemies and they are enslaved (2:10–15). At this point, what happened in a large scale in the book of Exodus takes place many times on a much smaller scale. The Israelites call out to God in their bondage, and God hears their cry for deliverance and raises up deliverers, called judges (2:16).

We will briefly survey the stewards and heralds among the judges, following our threefold grid of calling, stewarding and heralding, and the effects of encountering God through his word.
THE JUDGES’ CALL
Judges 2:16 says that the Lord raised up all of the judges, and it is striking to note how frequently the book of Judges makes this point explicit with examples such as Othniel (3:9), Ehud (3:15), Gideon (6:11–14), and Samson (13:1–25). Gideon and Samson deserve more focus here because they have somewhat lengthy call narratives that resemble the earlier callings of Moses and Joshua.

The calling of Gideon is preceded by the Lord’s calling an unnamed prophet to come and speak to Israel (Judg. 6:8–10). The angel of the Lord comes and speaks to Gideon, describing his call and his commissioning to send Gideon (6:12, 14, 16). Gideon responds like Moses before him in a way that emphasizes his own weakness and uncertainty (6:13, 15), even to the degree that he asks for signs so that he can be certain (6:17–21, 36–40). Gideon comes to understand that he has encountered the angel of the Lord himself, and yet Gideon does not die (6:22–23).

The calling of Samson is even lengthier and features a birth narrative like that of Moses before or Samuel later. The angel of the Lord appears to Manoah and his barren wife at separate times describing the upcoming birth of this deliverer whom they will name Samson (Judg. 13:1–20). They both come to realize that the angel is the angel of the Lord, and they marvel that they see God and live (13:21–23).

In other words, the calling narratives of Moses, Gideon, and Samson (his parents) are all similar in that all three meet the angel of the Lord (Ex. 3:2; Judg. 6:11–23; 13:1–23), while Moses and Gideon are similar in further ways because of their reticence to answer the call and God’s gift of helpers (Aaron for Moses [Ex. 4:14] and Purah for Gideon [Judg. 7:10]).

THE JUDGES’ STEWARDSHIP AND HERALDING
The judges are entrusted with instruction from the Lord (Judg. 4:6–7, 14; 6:25–26; 7:2, 4–5, 7, 9–11), sometimes including ongoing revelation concerning the details of battle. Although they have a word-based ministry in receiving instruction from the Lord, the aspect of military action dominates the narrative. Sometimes the “message from God” is a literal sword (Judg. 3:16–22)!
The narrative in Judges stresses one other consistent thing concerning these judges: the presence of the Lord through his Spirit empowering them in their work (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). In other words, the Lord’s grace is evident from first to last in the lives of these stewards and heralds because he has raised them up and then empowered them so their work will succeed.

The author of Hebrews mentions four of the judges as examples of faith (Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah—Heb. 11:32), even if the narrative of Judges also points out their moments of weakness and unbelief.

THE EFFECTS

The whole of Judges stresses the cycle of blessings or curses that flow from obeying or disobeying God’s word. Disaster follows when everyone does what is right in his own eyes instead of what is right according to God’s word. Judges 2:17–19 summarizes this cycle:

Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

The last section of the book (Judges 17–21) contains two powerful pointers to the downward spiral that flows from Israel’s failure to steward God’s word. The story of Samson is not only a painful narrative of an individual’s failure; it is also a mirror image of Israel’s failure. Stephen Dempster gives us this summary:

Samson, the supernaturally born Israelite, was set apart as a Nazirite with a distinctive vocation. He constantly breaks his religious vows, is enamoured of Philistine women, loses his identity and physical strength through these encounters, becomes a slave and has his eyes
gouged out by the enemy. He represents his own people, who had a supernatural origin, were set apart from among the nations with a distinctive vocation, broke their vows and were enamoured of foreign idols, until finally they lost their identity and spiritual power and became the blind slaves of their oppressors in exile.¹

Judges sounds a terrifying note of judgment near the end of the book, in Judges 19. The Israelites do not risk spending the night at a Canaanite city (Jebus or Jerusalem). They decide instead to seek shelter in the Israelite city of Gibeah. The Israelite city proves to be worse than the pagan city as one of the sojourners is gang-raped and then murdered. The point of this gruesome story is to provide a telling link between the depravity of Sodom and the depravity of the Israelites (Gen. 19:4–9; Judg. 19:22–25). If God judged the former group, then certainly the destruction of Israel is not far behind. Dempster makes this point explicit: “Israel has become Sodom! ‘A holy war must be conducted on the people of God’ (Judg. 20–21).”²

The end of Judges provides a link with the book of Samuel via the theme of kingship. The last line of Judges reminds us again that “in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). The book of Samuel will introduce the emergence of the monarchy. Maybe a godly king will lead people back to God’s word so that they will do what is right according to it.

The ministry of the word enters a transitional phase with the arrival of Samuel as one who fulfills functions like prophet, priest, and judge. Samuel is a transitional figure between the monarchy and the prophets because as prophet and judge he prophesies and rules, whereas those roles are later reassigned to prophets and kings. The relationship between God’s prophets and kings will show up several times throughout this survey. God calls the prophets to appoint kings in his kingdom. The kings are also called to steward God’s word. The kings who steward God’s word well are invariably identified as the kings who rule well and bring blessing to Israel; those who don’t, bring the curse.

²Ibid., 130.
The prophets come back into the picture at this point of failure to steward God’s word. When his words are not heeded, God calls prophets as servants of his word to rebuke Israel and her rulers (e.g., Samuel with Saul, Nathan with David, Elijah with Ahab). We will begin with Samuel as both judge and prophet, and then move to the kings and the prophets that appear alongside them.

**SAMUEL**

**SAMUEL’S CALL**

The fact that the prophet Samuel has a birth narrative shows his importance in the story line of Scripture. The opening of the book of Samuel also paves the way for the distinction between Eli and his sons as false stewards and Samuel as a true steward of God’s word.

Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, prays in agony to the Lord because she is barren. Eli the priest observes her praying, but thinks she is drunk (1 Sam. 1:13–14). The irony is that he falsely rebukes Hannah, but he fails to rebuke his own sons who truly need it.

Eli’s sons are false stewards because they do not know the Lord: they are greedy, are sexually immoral, and do not follow the Lord’s instructions (1 Sam. 2:12–17, 22–25; 3:13–14). Eli also proves to be a false steward of God’s word because he fails to rebuke his sons, and thus he honors them above the Lord. Failing to uphold the Lord’s word accurately, he thus fails to carry out his calling with reverence for the Lord’s honor. Consider the following texts:

Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded . . . , and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel? Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares: “I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,” but now the Lord declares: “Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.” (1 Sam. 2:29–30)

And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. (1 Sam. 3:13)
Hannah bears a son, names him Samuel (1 Sam. 1:20), and devotes him to the Lord’s service (1:22–28). Samuel serves alongside Eli for a time, but the Lord raises up a man of God to speak his words of rebuke to Eli (1 Sam. 2:27–36), which includes the announcement that Eli’s ministry is coming to an end. This announcement is fulfilled in the calling of Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1–18), the death of Eli’s sons (1 Sam. 4:11), and the death of Eli himself (4:18).

SAMUEL’S STEW ARDING AND HERALDING
Samuel as a prophet is a true steward and herald of God’s word, as the description in 1 Samuel 3:19–21 makes clear. The Lord is with Samuel so that his words do not fall to the ground, all Israel confirms his call, and the word of the Lord continually comes to him.

And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord. (3:19–21)

It is hard to overstate the importance of this summary. Notice the link again between the Lord and his word. “The Lord revealed himself . . . by the word of the Lord” (1 Sam. 3:21). Samuel stewards and heralds the word of the Lord boldly, without the fear of man, because he is a man of faith in God and his word (Heb. 11:32). Samuel is grieved by Israel’s sin (e.g., 1 Sam. 8:6), and both he and the people of Israel testify of his integrity (1 Sam. 12:1–5). This picture of fidelity to God is not passed on to his sons, who prove to be false stewards: “Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice” (1 Sam. 8:3).

EFFECTS
Samuel stewards the word in a way that causes the people to return to the Lord (1 Sam. 7:3–4). He intercedes for them and the Lord answers, giving them victory over their enemies (7:7–11, 13–15). When the people see that Samuel’s sons would not be good judges like Samuel, they ask for a king. The Lord tells Samuel to listen to the people,
even in their rejection of the Lord, which has been the scarlet thread of Israel’s spiritual condition since Egypt (1 Sam. 8:7–8). Israel’s motive in asking for a king shows the nation’s true condition. They refuse to hear Samuel’s warnings about what the monarchy will be like. Even if it means that the Lord will not answer them, they still want to have a king, like the nations, because Israel has in fact become like the nations (8:18–20).

Therefore, Samuel listens to the Lord and appoints Saul as king over Israel (1 Sam. 9:17; 10:1). Samuel speaks as a witness against Israel in showing them how great their sin is in choosing a king when God is their king (1 Sam. 12:16–19). Despite this great sin, the Lord shows them that if they and the king properly steward God’s life-giving word, blessing will follow.

If you will fear the Lord and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king. (12:14–15)

The test is clear: will the king and the people properly steward the word? The reader does not have to wait long to know the futility that comes from their lack of faithfulness. One thing we see for sure is that God’s word will be fulfilled.

APPLICATION: GOD’S WORD DOES NOT RETURN VOID

One event links Joshua to the time of the monarchy in the next chapter. The curse predicted by Joshua concerning Jericho becomes a reality: “In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun” (1 Kings 16:34).

We are once again reminded of the sufficiency and power of God’s word. A story from the ministry of Puritan John Flavel exemplifies this point. Michael Boland, in his 1963 introduction to Flavel’s Mystery of Providence, tells the story in a nutshell:
Luke Short was a farmer in New England who attained his hundredth year in exceptional vigour though without having sought peace with God. One day as he sat in his fields reflecting upon his long life, he recalled a sermon he had heard in Dartmouth [England] as a boy before he sailed to America. The horror of dying under the curse of God was impressed upon him as he meditated on the words he had heard so long ago and he was converted to Christ—eighty-five years after hearing John Flavel preach.³

As Isaiah 55:10–11 says, God’s word does not return to him empty. It will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it. Many will not have to wait eighty-five years, but other works of God may not be seen until they are viewed in the bright light of heaven.

Blessed is the man who believes in the unfailing reliability and unsurpassed power of God’s word. Those who take their stand on the word of God in this way can testify with the words of the old hymn “Standing on the Promises” by R. Kelso Carter:

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.

³Michael Boland, “Publisher’s Introduction” to John Flavel, The Mystery of Providence (London: Banner of Truth, 1963), 11.
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