

The Herald as the Contemporary Identity of the Preacher:

A Theological and Homiletical Defence

Jason Strange May 2026

Introduction

Preaching has never been a neutral or merely functional activity. It is a theologically charged event that determines the identity of the church and forms the imagination of its people. Across Christian history, the church has repeatedly returned to the question of what a preacher is and what preaching is for. This question has become particularly urgent in a contemporary context typified by institutional fragility, digital saturation, suspicion of authority, and a renewed longing for genuineness and encounter. Today's congregations inhabit a world shaped by fragmented narratives, experiential spirituality, and ambivalence toward traditional religious structures. In such a landscape, the identity of the preacher cannot be assumed; it must be theologically articulated and pastorally justified.

This essay will argue that the heraldic identity offers the most theologically faithful and pastorally effective model for contemporary preaching. While the metaphors of teacher and liturgical artist illuminate important dimensions of the preacher's vocation, neither fully captures the biblical, theological, and missional nature of proclamation. The herald, by contrast, grounds preaching in divine initiative rather than human technique, emphasising what God has done and is doing. This identity appeals to contemporary listeners who seek authenticity, immediacy, and hope. The ministry of Gerald Coates, though not without controversy, provides a persuasive case study: In a culture hungry for meaning, we will pass through the other two metaphors to ascertain how the herald aligns authenticity with divine agency. But first, a word about the cultural context:

Cultural context and the need for a Heraldic Identity

The contemporary ministry landscape is shaped by considerable cultural shifts that have altered how people perceive authority, truth, and meaning. Digital media has altered patterns of attention, narrative, and trust, decentralised traditional religious gatekeepers and creating new forms of participatory authority (Campbell, 2020 pp. 1-22). Many congregations now inhabit a world where meaning is constructed through story, image, and experience rather than through linear argument or institutional authority. The rise of social media has democratised communication, creating a culture in which each voice competes for attention and where traditional gatekeepers of knowledge have lost their privileged position.

Simultaneously, post-Christendom scepticism has eroded confidence in religious institutions. Churches in the UK and across the West no longer occupy a central cultural position but operate on the margins of public life. This marginality is not simply sociological but epistemological: many contemporary listeners are suspicious of authoritative claims,

especially those that appear dogmatic or institutional, a dynamic well documented in post-Christendom analysis (Murray, 2004, pp. 56-63). In such a setting, the preacher cannot rely solely on didactic clarity or liturgical creativity. The teacher may be dismissed as another voice in an overcrowded marketplace of ideas, while the liturgical artist may be perceived as offering aesthetic experience rather than divine encounter. Postmodern scepticism toward institutional truth claims has created an epistemological crisis that demands renewed forms of proclamation grounded in narrative and divine agency (Greene, 2025, p. 996). As we will see, what is required is a mode of preaching that speaks with derivative authority — authority not rooted in the preacher’s personality, intellect, or creativity, but in the conviction that God is the primary speaker.

The Teacher Metaphor

The teacher metaphor has deep roots in Christian tradition. The New Testament affirms teaching as a core ecclesial function, with passages such as Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Timothy 3:2 showing its importance. In this model, the preacher is primarily a communicator of theological truth, responsible for explaining Scripture, persuading the congregation through reasoned argument, and cultivating intellectual understanding. Thomas Long notes that Protestant preaching has historically been shaped by didactic aims, particularly within traditions emphasising the primacy of Scripture (Long, 2005, pp. 41–46). This emphasis expresses a commitment to the cognitive dimension of faith, recognising that Christian belief involves understanding as well as experience. Unfortunately, in my experience, many repressed misogynistic teachers, across legacy denominations, fully embraced this dull way of preaching – as well as inflicting it upon their somewhat estranged families.

Notwithstanding, in a perfect world or a simpler time, the strengths of the teacher metaphor are significant. It honours the intellectual formation of believers, ensuring that faith is grounded in theological coherence rather than emotionalism or cultural trends. It provides doctrinal clarity, delivering a framework for ecclesial accountability and theological integrity. David Ford argues that Christian teaching must cultivate “wisdom for living” in contexts marked by uncertainty and plurality (Ford, 2011, p. 112). David Day similarly emphasises the importance of clarity and order in preaching, suggesting that teaching helps congregations deal with the complexities of modern life (Day, 2005, pp. 18–20).

Yet the teacher metaphor also has limitations. It risks reducing preaching to information transfer, a mode of communication that often doesn't engage contemporary listeners. Fred Craddock argues that modern audiences are increasingly resistant to authoritative instruction and more responsive to inductive, participatory forms of communication (Craddock, 1971, pp. 22–27). The teacher model can unintentionally privilege cognitive learning over spiritual encounter, narrowing the scope of preaching and neglecting the affective and relational dimensions of faith. This appears prevalent in white middle-class churches, where encounters with God may become stymied by a cerebral filter, as if the congregation extends the weekday schooling typical of the venues they inhabit on Sundays.

Again, Mike Higton warns that teaching can become “disembodied” if it fails to integrate the communal and affective aspects of Christian formation (Higton, 2008, pp. 74–76). Moreover, the teacher metaphor does not adequately account for the divine initiative in preaching. It risks portraying the preacher as the primary agent rather than the vessel through whom God speaks. Bemoaning, I have lost count of the number of services in which the prophetic is confined to a narrow corridor of five minutes, while the teaching remains dominant. Such an imbalance reveals the limitations of a purely didactic model, and people’s heart issues are predominantly reduced to an unnecessary inconvenience of the post-service coffees.

The Liturgical Artist Metaphor

The metaphor of the preacher as liturgical artist emerges from developments in performance theory and embodied theology. Anna Carter Florence argues that preaching is not simply the delivery of content but a performative event in which preacher and congregation together “rehearse” the gospel (Florence, 2014, p. 67). Samuel Wells similarly emphasises the performative nature of Christian ethics, suggesting that the church learns truth through embodied practices (Wells, 2004, pp. 38–40). In this model, the preacher is an artist who shapes the liturgical environment, using imagination, symbol, and narrative to evoke the gospel’s transformational power.

The strengths of the liturgical artist metaphor are considerable. It recognises that preaching is an embodied act, not an abstract discourse. It honours the communal nature of worship, resisting individualistic tendencies and emphasising the mutual experience of the gathered community. It opens space for creativity, allowing the preacher to connect listeners through symbol, story, and affective resonance. Pete Ward’s work on “liquid church” suggests that contemporary spirituality is increasingly experiential and participatory (Ward, 2002, pp. 55–60). Paul Scott Wilson stresses the importance of narrative and symbol in preaching, arguing that the gospel is often best communicated through imaginative structures (Wilson, 1995, pp. 44–47).

However, the liturgical artist metaphor also has weaknesses. It risks aestheticizing the gospel, making the preacher a performer whose craft becomes the centre of attention rather than the medium of divine address. Willimon warns that preaching must resist becoming a form of “religious entertainment” that prioritises affect over truth (Willimon, 2000, p. 12). Similarly, Elaine Graham argues that performative approaches can become “self-referential” when they lose sight of the transcendent referent of Christian worship (Graham, 2000, pp. 91–93). This danger has been vividly illustrated in the industrialisation of contemporary worship culture, where performance aesthetics — shaped by figures such as Jimmy Swaggart, Lyndal Cooley, and later the global brands of Hillsong and Bethel — have typically overshadowed proclamation and elevated worship to a proprietary, market-driven product. In many contexts, preaching became an adjunct to the performance environment, its theological depth diminished, and its prophetic edge blunted.

Recent movements within new expressions of Christian fellowship have begun to resist this trajectory, recognising the theological risks of pluralistic, entertainment-driven worship and intentionally restricting certain songs or artists from their liturgies. Yet the decline in preaching quality over the past three decades reveals how deeply the performance paradigm has shaped ecclesial expectations, leaving congregations undernourished and ill-equipped to discern the existential threats embedded in such practices (Smith, 2009, pp. 55–58; Miller, 2017, pp. 102–105). Therefore, while the liturgical artist metaphor offers meaningful perspectives on embodiment, imagination, and communal participation, it ultimately lacks the theological clarity and missional urgency that characterise the heraldic identity — an identity that has consistently warned against the distortions produced by performative excess and is anchored in divine initiative rather than aesthetic craft. This contrast emphasises the conviction that God should remain the primary speaker.

The Heraldic Identity

The heraldic identity is strongly grounded in Scripture and theological tradition. The Greek term *kērix* (herald) appears frequently in the New Testament to describe apostolic proclamation (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). The herald announces a message on behalf of another, speaking with delegated authority. Karl Barth famously emphasised that preaching is the act of announcing what God has already said, not generating new religious insight (Barth, 1936, p. 52). The herald does not speak on their own authority but reflects the divine “Yes” revealed in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). This theological orientation foregrounds several essential convictions: God is the primary speaker in preaching; the gospel is an announcement, not a proposition or performance; preaching is an event of encounter, not merely instruction; and authority derives from divine commissioning, not personal expertise.

Walter Brueggemann argues that prophetic proclamation disrupts dominant cultural stories by announcing God’s alternative future (Brueggemann, 2001, pp. 3–5). The heraldic identity corresponds to this prophetic dimension, emphasising the preacher’s role in naming God’s action and calling the community to faithful response. John Stott similarly emphasises the preacher’s role as a “bridge” between Scripture and contemporary life, grounded in divine authority rather than personal charisma (Stott, 1982, pp. 92–94). The heraldic identity, therefore, integrates theological fidelity, pastoral sensitivity, and missional urgency.

Gerald Coates as a Contemporary Herald

The preaching ministry of Gerald Coates yields a compelling contemporary embodiment of the heraldic identity. Coates was widely recognised for his charismatic presence, prophetic sensitivity, and improvisational delivery. His sermons carried a distinctive sense of immediacy, suggesting responsiveness to the Spirit’s prompting rather than reliance on a pre-constructed homiletic structure. His preaching consistently emphasised divine initiative — God’s presence, God’s action, God’s invitation — over human achievement. As I recall from my years within Cobham Christian Fellowship and the wider Pioneer network, listeners

frequently felt that “God had spoken,” rather than that a preacher had merely performed. My own dramatic conversion in July 1986 exemplifies this dynamic. No alternative homiletic mode could have enabled the encounter I experienced. Coates’ heraldic style created a moment in which I felt addressed directly by God, bypassing or dismantling the rational defences I had constructed to resist faith. In that moment, I found myself without excuses, compelled to say “Yes” to God once and for all. This sense of divine address — mediated yet not manufactured by the preacher — is precisely what the heraldic identity seeks to articulate.

Coates’ writings reinforce this heraldic orientation. In *An Intelligent Fire* (1991), he insists that Christian proclamation requires “a readiness to say what God is saying now” (Coates, 1991, pp. 52–59), a statement that epitomises the preacher’s derivative authority and dependence on divine initiative. In *What on Earth is This Kingdom?* (1983), he describes the Kingdom as something that “breaks in upon us,” emphasising divine action rather than human construction (Coates, 1983, pp. 40–55). Likewise, in *Kingdom Now!* (1993), Coates argues that the preacher’s task is to “name what God is doing in the present tense” (Coates, 1993, pp. 21–34), stressing the immediacy and urgency characteristic of the heraldic identity. In *Non-Religious Christianity* (1998), he critiques “religious packaging,” insisting on authenticity — a hallmark of heraldic proclamation that resists performance-driven or institutionally curated forms of spirituality (Coates, 1998, pp. 88–96). *The Vision* (1995) further frames preaching as a Spirit-initiated event, reinforcing the herald’s dependence on divine agency rather than on personal creativity or rhetorical craft (Coates, 1995, pp. 61–70). Ralph Turner’s biography, *Gerald Coates – Pioneer* (2016), notes that listeners often reported a tangible feeling of divine encounter during Coates’ ministry, a striking confirmation of heraldic preaching’s capacity to mediate immediacy, conviction, and encounter (Turner, 2016, pp. 112–118). Together, these works demonstrate that Coates’ ministry consistently embodied a heraldic posture — one that privileges divine speech, prophetic attentiveness, and spiritual authenticity beyond aesthetic performance or institutional authority.

Coates’ personal flaws, while undeniable, illuminate an essential element of the heraldic identity: the preacher’s authority does not arise from moral perfection but from the message they bear. This resonates with Paul’s theology of “treasure in jars of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7). Coates’ ministry demonstrates how heraldic preaching can strike a chord with contemporary audiences who value authenticity over institutional polish.

Congruence and Discernment

However, no herald can claim perpetual ascendancy. Coates was a man of his time, and from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, he dominated a particular charismatic-evangelical landscape, frequently overshadowing other voices. Knowing him personally, I witnessed his unusual combination of common touch, ethereal magnetism, and an ability to place

individuals directly in the path of what he perceived to be God's intentions for their lives. Only with hindsight can the motivations and impulses be more fully discerned.

Criticisms of his form and style were not unfounded. The publication of the Christian Safeguarding Services Report (CSS, 20 May 2024) confirmed concerns long familiar to me and others within the church. The report noted "an avoidance of, or discomfort with, properly recognising and responding to safeguarding risks associated with concerning aspects of GC's ministry practices." While the report also acknowledges that by the mid-2010s Pioneer Trust leaders were actively seeking external safeguarding advice and implementing corrective measures, the earlier failures remain significant.

These scenarios — personal failures, professional misconduct, and the manipulation of prophetic nuance — may appear to justify critics of both Coates and the heraldic mindset. I witnessed inconsistencies first hand. Yet I remain grateful for the ministries that flourished under his leadership, which allowed prophetic dimensions that more cerebrally oriented churches might never have permitted. As I remarked recently, it is not programmes or services that determine a church's trajectory, but the heart of its founder. Coates was flawed, yet the heraldic impulse remains alive in me — purified, I hope, of its chaff. Not because I am without impurity, but because, unlike Coates, I allowed myself to be sifted *early* by God, rather than resisting his tribunes. That, surely, is worth heralding.

Conclusion

This essay has examined the metaphors of teacher, liturgical artist, and herald, arguing that the heraldic identity offers the most theologically faithful and pastorally effective model for contemporary preaching. While the teacher metaphor honours the intellectual dimension of faith and the liturgical artist emphasises embodied, communal participation, both fall short of capturing the full biblical and theological nature of proclamation. The herald, by contrast, embodies the conviction that preaching is fundamentally an act of divine initiative.

The preaching ministry of Gerald Coates illustrates how Spirit-attentive, prophetic, and responsive preaching can create space for genuine encounter with God. Yes, there are risks; without robust, transparent accountability, all who enter the pulpit can fall as far as its height. Yet contemporary preachers should not fear reclaiming the heraldic identity. Rather, they should ground their ministry in divine initiative, Spirit-led proclamation, and pastoral attentiveness. Trust that God who speaks, still seeks heralds willing to echo His voice; once they too are purged or scourged — depending on how deep you want to go.

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