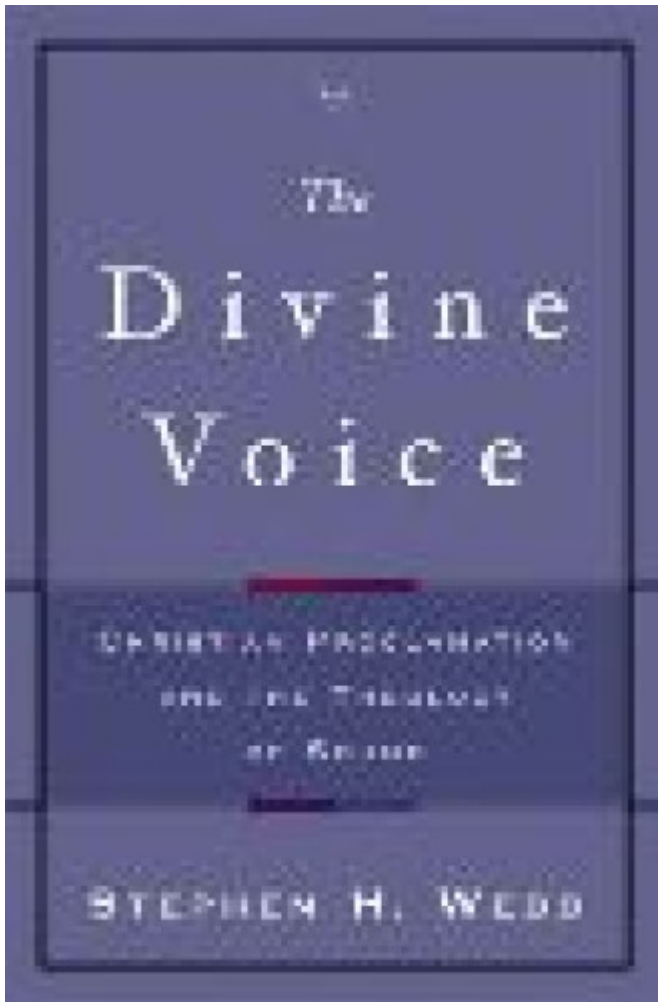


The Divine Voice

reviewed by [Stephen E. Fowl](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound

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Over the past several years Stephen Webb, professor of religion and philosophy at Indiana's Wabash College, has directed his highly tuned theological senses to a variety of subjects outside the typical confines of academic theology. He has examined food production and consumption in *Good Eating*, and the relationship between the teaching of religion and education in *Taking Religion to School*. In *The Divine Voice* Webb focuses on sound, particularly the act of proclamation. "This is a book about what it might mean to take sound seriously as the most characteristic medium of biblical revelation and Christian mission," he writes.

Since Christians believe that God speaks creation into existence and that the chief end of humanity is the praise of God, it is strange that Christian thinkers have not paid more attention to sound and acoustic imagery. Webb does not, however, offer a systematic approach to a theology of sound. Rather, his book offers a series of distinct and loosely connected explorations into the Christian "soundscape."

Focusing on Romans 10:17, "Faith comes through hearing," Webb engages the work of the late Jesuit scholar Walter Ong, whom he sees as a prophet of the primacy of the oral over the written. "Regardless of questions about his historiography and his metaphysics, Ong succeeds in articulating a social theory of the spoken word that shows how the reality of sound entails a relational and transformative account of truth. We are called by the Word, just as we are brought into relationship with others through words," Webb states. His reading of Ong sets up an argument for sound as the medium of revelation—an argument that includes a reflection on deafness.

Webb is convinced that proclamation is the central Christian activity, and that this activity is undermined by Christian inattention to sound and the voice. Hence, the chapter "Freeing the Christian Voice" focuses on the work of Kristin Linklater, who teaches actors how to free their "natural voice." This leads to a reflection on women as proclaimers of the gospel, paying special attention to the end of Mark's Gospel, where the women who discover the empty tomb are told to go and tell the disciples.

In a chapter on stage fright, Moses and Paul play central roles as reluctant speakers. George Whitefield, the influential extemporaneous, open-air preacher of the 18th century's Great Awakening, also suffered from severe anxiety over public speaking. Webb locates the beginnings of modern-day evangelicalism in the new type of proclamation pioneered by Whitefield. He claims that "much of the subsequent history of Christianity in America can be told from the perspective of sound; simply

put, some denominations permit more vocal modulation than others.” Webb sees the Reformation as a recovery of the centrality of proclamation, and his account of that historical period plays a central role in his theology of sound. But Lutherans and Calvinists may find much to disagree with in the broad picture he paints.

Accounts of hearing God’s voice and an argument for thinking of the Bible as a document to be heard as well as read conclude the book. Hermeneutics becomes “acoustemology.” These chapters present Webb at his best—imaginative, thoughtful, wide-ranging and provocative. The broad brush which makes the historical chapters on the Reformation unsatisfying produces something much more compelling when turned in the direction of theory.

The book’s main argument may overemphasize the importance of sound, but this is understandable given the enormous emphasis on the visual in Christian theology and worship. In his conclusion Webb implicitly counters this overemphasis by speaking of the beatific vision as the completion or unification of all the senses. Webb gives us a vital supplement to the overwhelmingly visual nature of our culture. He invites us to listen and speak more attentively both to each other and to the God who speaks all things into being.