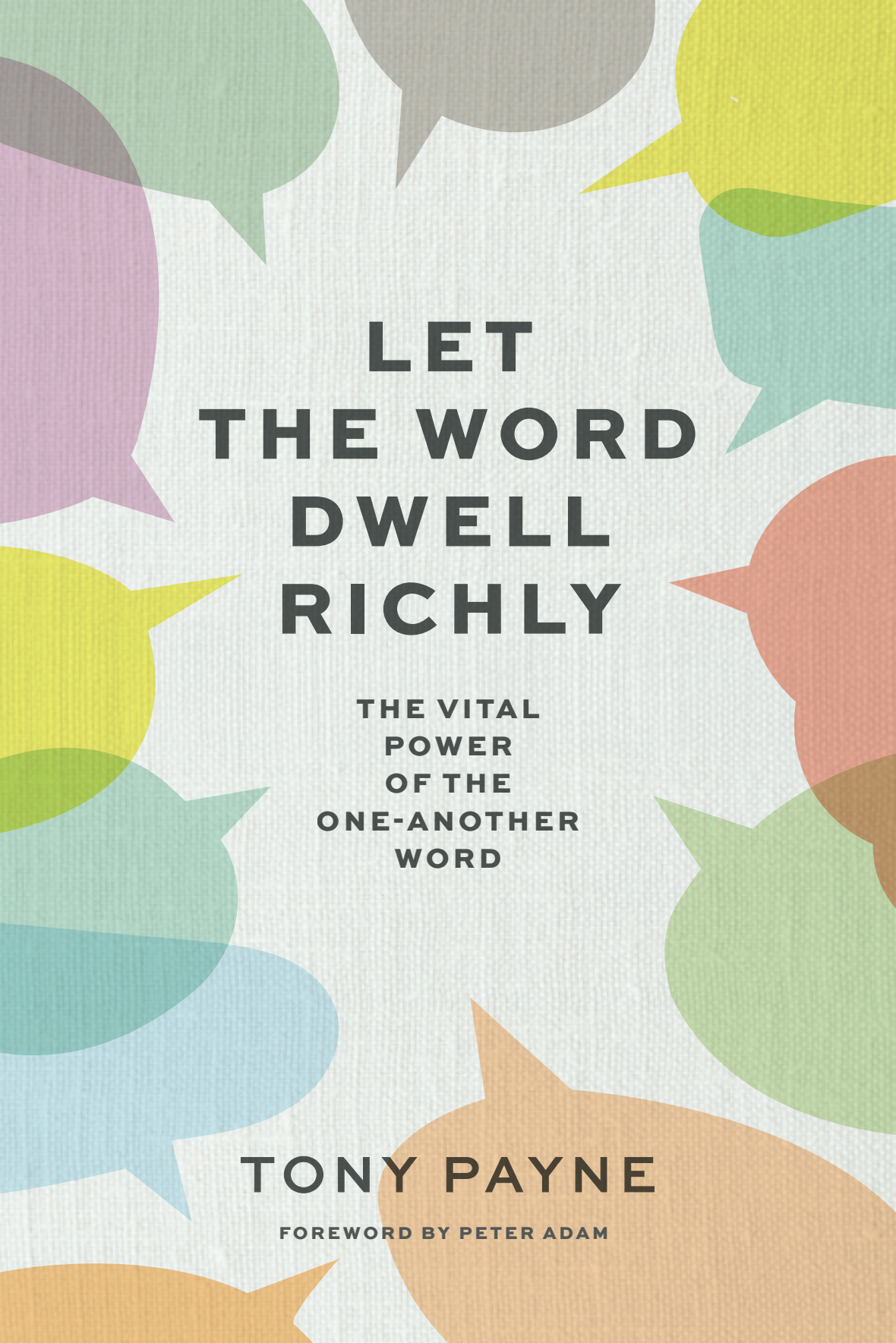




LET THE WORD DWELL RICHLY

**THE VITAL
POWER
OF THE
ONE-ANOTHER
WORD**

TONY PAYNE

FOREWORD BY PETER ADAM

I doubt I'll read a better book this year. Tony Payne has taken decades to study, reflect, practice and write this book. In brief, his idea is that the Bible teaches us that as surely as pastors are to exercise the public ministry of the word proclaimed, so surely is every Christian to exercise the personal one-another word ministry. What is one-another word ministry? It is Christian speaking to Christian to edify, correct, encourage and instruct. The book is full of careful reading of the Bible—giving special attention to 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Hebrews—thoughtful synthesizing of the truths it teaches, and experienced practical reflections. *Let the Word Dwell Richly* is a gift to pastors and churches that I pray is widely read. May the Reformational recovery of the ministry of God's word in our lives and churches continue, and may this book be used to help it.

Mark Dever

Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC, USA

Tony Payne tackles a topic central to the apostolic teaching of the New Testament—yet often neglected in our own churches—with biblical clarity, theological depth and practical wisdom. He offers rich and timely insights that we need to heed and take to heart.

Lionel Windsor

New Testament Lecturer, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia

I can't recommend this book highly enough. It offers compelling exegesis, thoughtful theology and practical application. With incisive clarity, Tony makes a convincing—and convicting—case for the vital importance of all believers speaking God's word to one another. As he observes, "a Christian congregation that lacks oneanother Word ministry is—like the Corinthian church—still waiting to grow up". I pray the Lord will use this book to help many congregations grow to greater maturity in Christ. Our leadership team is already seeking to implement the biblical vision it casts.

Mark Howard

Senior Pastor, West Valley Presbyterian Church (PCA), Allentown, PA, USA

This book is the fruit of long and patient attention to the word of God, shaped by years of careful thought, reflection and study within the life of the church. Tony has given us what may at first appear to be a timely reminder of the importance of “one-another” ministry, but which proves on closer reading to be something far more profound. It is a call to recover confidence in the power of God at work in our churches by multiplying and amplifying the word of God throughout the whole congregation, as every member takes up the calling to speak the truth in love to one another.

The pulpit is, of course, central to the church’s life. Yet when the public ministry of the word is received and carried into every part and aspect of the church’s shared life, something genuinely transformative takes place. Ordinary believers are drawn into the great dignity of speaking God’s own words to one another as instruments of his grace.

This is a stimulating, timely and potentially very fruitful book. It presses us to think carefully about ministry, maturity and mutual care, and to reckon afresh with the way God uses his word—spoken from one believer to another—as a living means of grace. I warmly commend it to pastors and church leaders who are seeking to cultivate a church life marked by the richness and fullness of the whole body of Christ at work.

Andrew Heard

Senior Pastor, EV Church, Erina, NSW, Australia

The Trellis and the Vine was only the beginning. In *Let the Word Dwell Richly*, Tony Payne now takes us to the beating heart of biblical disciple-making.

Every year sees a huge wave of new books on preaching—and for good reason. God’s word brings life, and the pastoral ministry of the word must remain central in the church. Yet the New Testament also insists that the word must not stop at the pulpit. Pastors know the bottleneck: when everything depends on the professionals, discipleship stalls and church health suffers. But the church grows when ordinary Christians ‘speak the truth in love’ to one another—encouraging, warning, comforting, instructing and building up one another with Scripture.

Throughout church history, God has used certain books to recover

neglected dimensions of the Christian life—whether Luther on justification, Carey on missions, or Packer on knowing God. In that same spirit, *Let the Word Dwell Richly* calls us back to the vital yet easily forgotten power of “the one-another word”. Tony Payne carefully traces this theme through 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Hebrews. His analysis, synthesis and conclusions are exegetically rigorous, theologically rich, and profoundly practical. This is a big book with an even bigger vision: Scripture-shaped conversation is essential for discipleship, church health and perseverance in the faith.

Champ Thornton

Author and director of children and family resources, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, USA

Let the Word Dwell Richly fills a notable gap overlooked in many Western churches: the one-another ministry of the word. Tony Payne thoroughly defines and defends this practice from the Scriptures, convincingly arguing that its neglect has adversely affected our churches. Although exegetically vigorous and thoroughly researched, the book remains engaging and practical. I found myself challenged to research the Scriptures, encouraged to examine my ministry, and convinced to mentor the church I pastor on one-another word ministry. Anyone involved in leading a ministry would benefit from this book, especially if heeding its message and incorporating its principles.

Dave Trepanier

Senior Pastor, Gospel Life Church, Evans City, PA, USA

This is a book that unsettles—in the best possible way. It confronts comfortable assumptions and gently but firmly exposes an often-unintentional neglect of the New Testament’s “one-another” ministry of the word.

Long overdue, this work addresses a strikingly under-served area of Christian thought and practice. From the outset, Tony makes clear both the biblical importance of the subject and the paucity of material devoted to it. His contribution is therefore not only timely, but also deeply needed.

With a theology-that-leads-to-practice approach, Tony calls readers

to re-evaluate the balance of their ministry. As he carefully works through 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Hebrews, I found myself confronted about my own ministry, as resistance gave way to conviction. The book demands effort—but it is the rewarding kind. Written with clarity and accessibility, it never oversimplifies. Tony is unafraid of complexity and invites his readers to grapple alongside him with the deep truths of Scripture.

Crucially, this book restores emphasis to the vital “one-another” word without diminishing the place of preaching. Instead, it elevates the often-neglected word ministry of *every* Christian. Its rigorous handling of Scripture is matched by a rich engagement with the Reformers, offering particular delight in its exploration of their understanding of preaching.

Above all, this book rekindles wonder at a great God who speaks clearly, who graciously shares his word with his people, and who uses that word—democratized and dispersed—to ensure his church remains edified, engaged and growing.

Grant Retief

Senior Minister, Christ Church Stellenbosch, South Africa

I’m delighted to enthusiastically recommend this book to you. As a pastor, I value pastoral theology, and Tony has provided a rich and deeply helpful resource that stretches my mind, warms my heart, and sharpens my pastoral focus. Preaching (one-to-many) has great value within Christ’s church, but I’ve always striven to encourage my people to recognize the value of their one-another speaking. This book has sharpened and deepened my zeal to see this vital one-another ministry flourish among my people. I need to continue working hard on preparing and delivering my Bible talks, but I also need to work hard to help my people be prepared to speak “some aspect of the word of Christ to each other, for the purposes of mutual edification and maturity in Christ”.

Tony’s exegetical study of key passages in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Hebrews, using what he calls an “apprentice to the word” methodology, is full of rich insights. His historical study of how others have connected (or not) the preached word with the one-another word is fascinating. What should a belief in the priesthood of all believers really look like within our churches?

Tony concludes the book by offering suggestions on how our clarified framework of theological understanding can be applied to our own situations. I appreciated the non-prescriptive nature of these suggestions. Tony's call is for each of us to consider how the "one-another word" can grow and become a normal feature of our Christian lives and churches. I'm excited to heed his encouragement.

Paul Sheely

Pastor, Albury Presbyterian Churches, Albury, NSW, Australia

From a careful study of the New Testament, grounded in sound interpretive method, Tony argues for a commonly neglected element of Christian discipleship. The ministry of speaking the word of God to one-another should be the normal God-given experience of the Christian life and church ministry.

From his study of historical theology, Tony concludes that the 16th-century Reformation of the church by the public preaching of the gospel word did not go far enough. Luther and Calvin expounded the revolutionary biblical truth of the priesthood of all believers. But they failed to draw the implication that all believers are servants of the word, speaking God's word to fellow-believers and to the lost. To this day, our churches suffer from this commonly neglected doctrine and practice.

The effort of equipping our members to fulfil this vision will pay huge dividends. The formal preaching of pastors will have greater impact as members help one another learn deeply. And our various ministry structures in church life will be more fruitful for maturity and mission.

Viva la Reformation!

Colin Marshall

Author, *Warriors of the Word*; co-author, *The Trellis and the Vine*

Tony Payne has gifted the church a wonderful, if strange, resource in this book. I say strange not because of its content, but because of the need for the book in the first place. As Tony points out, the task of regular church members being apprentices of Scripture and helping others become the same has often been assumed, but not carefully argued for. This work does just that. It drives at the importance and vitality of one-another word ministry in the church.

The book is helpfully dense. Payne is unapologetically not taking short cuts, but carefully examining Scripture to prove his point. It is scholarly without being pretentious. I particularly appreciate how he goes out of his way to make his task hard on himself, raising and answering many potential objections to his thesis throughout his work.

I must admit he's preaching to the choir on this one. As a theological ethicist, I deeply appreciate the emphasis on formation according to Scripture for all believers for the sake of themselves and others. As one who trains preachers, I'm encouraged that there is an elevation of one-another speech without diminishing preaching. Both are vital, based on God's word, empowered by the Spirit, but are useful for different ends (though they do overlap and serve each other). Preaching is more useful for comprehensive knowledge, and one-another word ministry is more geared towards practical immediacy.

What we need in the church today is the proliferation of the word in a variety of ways inside the Christian community. Tony gives help on why that is the case and how such things might happen. He wisely avoids over-emphasizing how the one-another word should work itself out in any particular church because each context has its own strengths and challenges. Regardless, to live in this way makes every 'regular' interaction between church members potentially significant. This practice of ministering the word to one another is not just the 'right' thing to do, but 'good' for all who speak and all who listen.

Jeremy Meeks

Director of the Chicago Course on Preaching, The Charles Simeon Trust, Chicago, IL, USA

If early church history clarified the divinity of all three persons of the Trinity, and the Reformation clarified the priesthood of all believers, then this most recent century has finally seen serious work begin on the ministry of all believers. Or has it?

With the theological and exegetical rigour we expect from Tony Payne, this book skilfully explores the neglected topic of one-another word ministry. But be prepared: you will be forced to check your assumptions at the door and rethink certain key passages of Scripture. If you're like me, you'll know you're reading a significant work when

you regret that you laid eyes on it only *after* preaching through the relevant passages.

This book is an urgent plea to unleash God's word from the mouths of all of God's people and, as Tony puts it, to no longer "constrain the communication of the word of God to one context only (the church service), by one person only (the preacher), in one form of speech only (the sermon), as many churches in history have done and continue to do today". May we heed this call, by God's grace.

Ray Galea

Senior Pastor, Fellowship Dubai, UAE

Tony Payne has made a significant contribution to the doctrine of the church by analyzing what the New Testament says about one-to-one ministry by all Christians. What he says, and the conclusions he draws, constitute a challenge to every Christian about our calling to 'speak the truth in love' to one another. His work throws light on contentious issues such as the gift of prophecy and the ministry of women. Most important, however, is the way in which we are helped to think again what church is for and the responsibilities of all who belong. I hope that his work will enrich all our churches and enable us to show forth the faith, hope and love described in 1 Corinthians 13.

Peter F. Jensen

Former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney and Principal of Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia

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THE VITAL
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WORD

TONY PAYNE

Let the Word Dwell Richly

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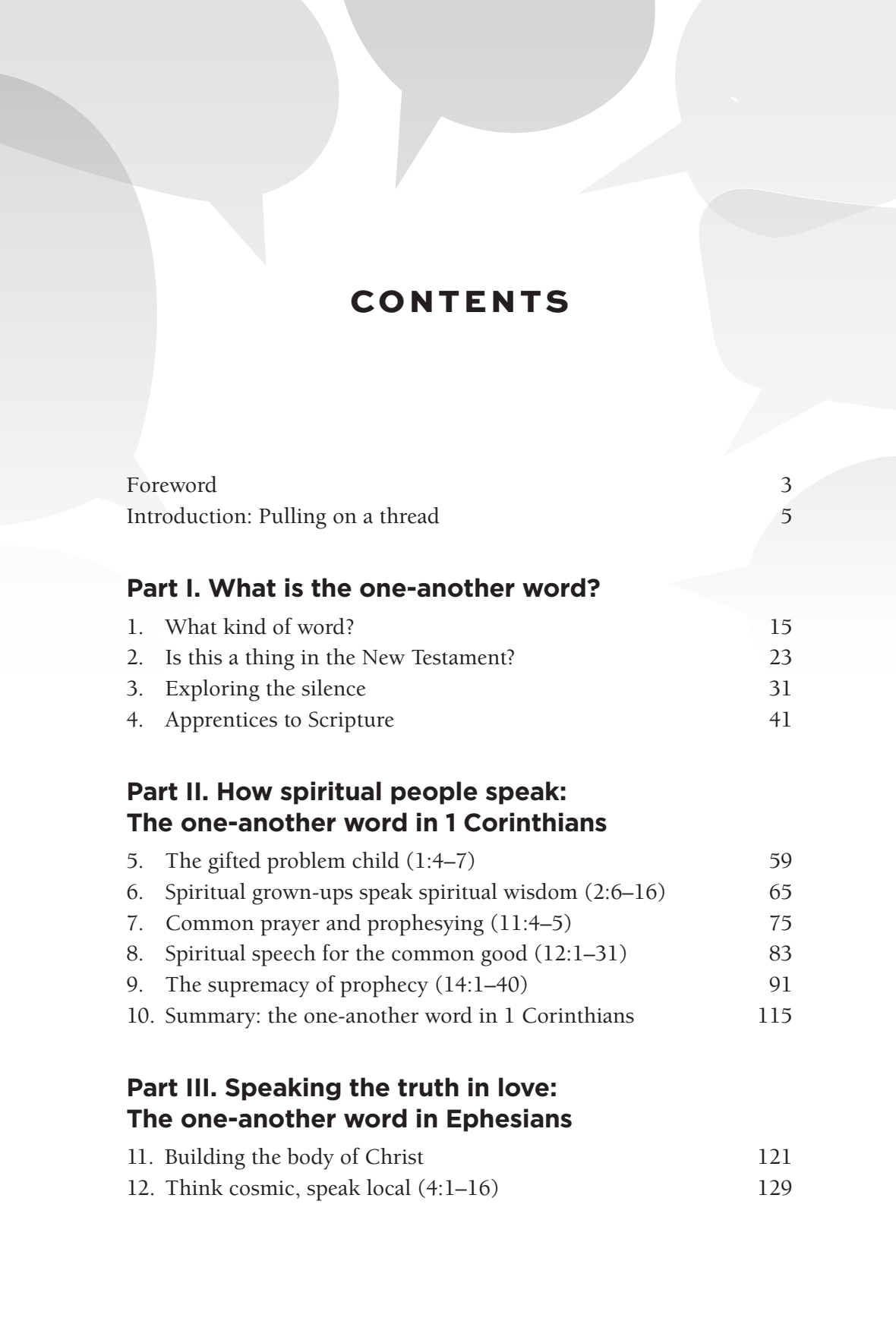
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To Alison, whose words enrich our life together.



CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Introduction: Pulling on a thread	5

Part I. What is the one-another word?

1. What kind of word?	15
2. Is this a thing in the New Testament?	23
3. Exploring the silence	31
4. Apprentices to Scripture	41

Part II. How spiritual people speak: The one-another word in 1 Corinthians

5. The gifted problem child (1:4–7)	59
6. Spiritual grown-ups speak spiritual wisdom (2:6–16)	65
7. Common prayer and prophesying (11:4–5)	75
8. Spiritual speech for the common good (12:1–31)	83
9. The supremacy of prophecy (14:1–40)	91
10. Summary: the one-another word in 1 Corinthians	115

Part III. Speaking the truth in love: The one-another word in Ephesians

11. Building the body of Christ	121
12. Think cosmic, speak local (4:1–16)	129

13. Walking and talking (4:17–6:9)	139
14. Summary: the one-another word in Ephesians	153

Part IV. A word of exhortation: The one-another word in Hebrews

15. The word of exhortation	159
16. A dangerous journey with friends (3:12–14)	165
17. The neglect of exhortation (10:24–25)	175
18. Summary: the one-another word in Hebrews	181

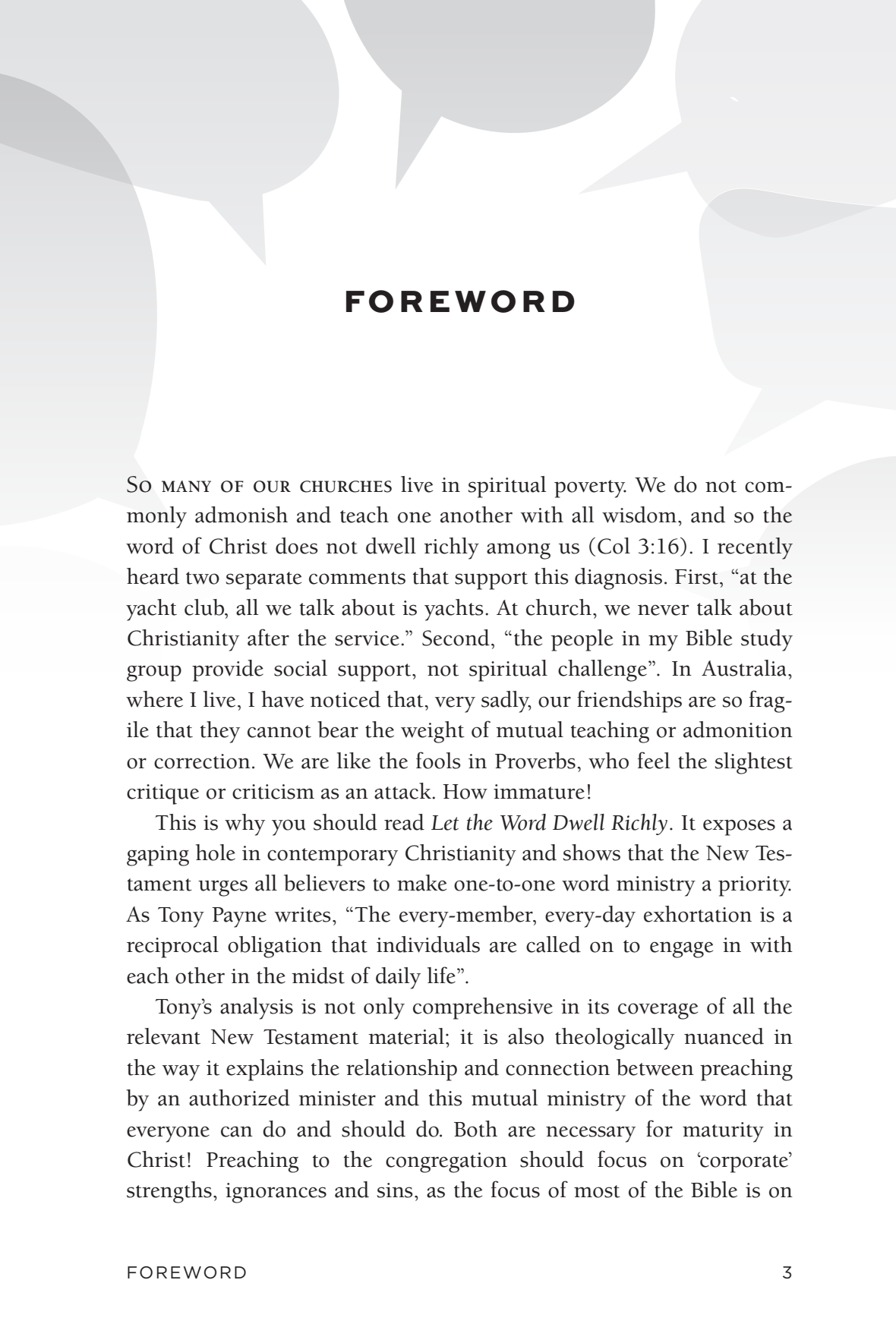
Part V. Three key themes

19. Drawing threads together	187
20. The word of God and the one-another word	195
21. Moral transformation and the one-another word	213
22. Christian community and the one-another word	249

Part VI. Letting the word dwell richly

23. The nature of the one-another word	275
24. The purposes of the one-another word	289
25. Reaching towards practice	303
26. Reverberations	327

Appendix: Men and women and ministry of the word	335
Acknowledgements	345
Bibliography	347
Scripture index	359



FOREWORD

SO MANY OF OUR CHURCHES live in spiritual poverty. We do not commonly admonish and teach one another with all wisdom, and so the word of Christ does not dwell richly among us (Col 3:16). I recently heard two separate comments that support this diagnosis. First, “at the yacht club, all we talk about is yachts. At church, we never talk about Christianity after the service.” Second, “the people in my Bible study group provide social support, not spiritual challenge”. In Australia, where I live, I have noticed that, very sadly, our friendships are so fragile that they cannot bear the weight of mutual teaching or admonition or correction. We are like the fools in Proverbs, who feel the slightest critique or criticism as an attack. How immature!

This is why you should read *Let the Word Dwell Richly*. It exposes a gaping hole in contemporary Christianity and shows that the New Testament urges all believers to make one-to-one word ministry a priority. As Tony Payne writes, “The every-member, every-day exhortation is a reciprocal obligation that individuals are called on to engage in with each other in the midst of daily life”.

Tony’s analysis is not only comprehensive in its coverage of all the relevant New Testament material; it is also theologically nuanced in the way it explains the relationship and connection between preaching by an authorized minister and this mutual ministry of the word that everyone can do and should do. Both are necessary for maturity in Christ! Preaching to the congregation should focus on ‘corporate’ strengths, ignorances and sins, as the focus of most of the Bible is on

the corporate strengths, ignorances and sins of God's people as a people, a community, a group. But one-to-one ministry of the word will, of course, focus on the spiritual condition of the person being addressed.

Over the years, I have observed that Christians who are not practising mutual ministry of the word with other believers are unlikely to go on to explain the gospel to unbelievers. But if the word of Christ flows off our lips to one another, it is far more likely to flow out in our conversations with unbelieving friends and neighbours. Therefore, putting the message of this book into practice is one of the surest ways to promote evangelism.

As Tony notes, one-another word ministry is largely neglected in the history of Christian thought. But this has not always been the case. The great reformer John Calvin encouraged this ministry:

Although not all have the office of preaching the word of God, yet a private person who is a member of the church may beget spiritual children to God if he has the occasion and ability to win a poor soul and enlighten him with the faith of the gospel.¹

And he warns people of neglecting these opportunities:

But when most people see that God provides an opening for them and a way to instruct the uninformed, they will remain silent, keep their mouths shut, and not say a word ... [Such a person] will be guilty of other peoples' sin because he had the means to admonish them and did not.²

We need this massive change in the way we live as believers. So, you need this book! I praise and thank God that Tony Payne has written it for our benefit. He has taught and admonished us with all wisdom. May the word of Christ dwell richly among us, as all believers read and heed the Scriptures, and tell and train God's people, with wisdom and love!

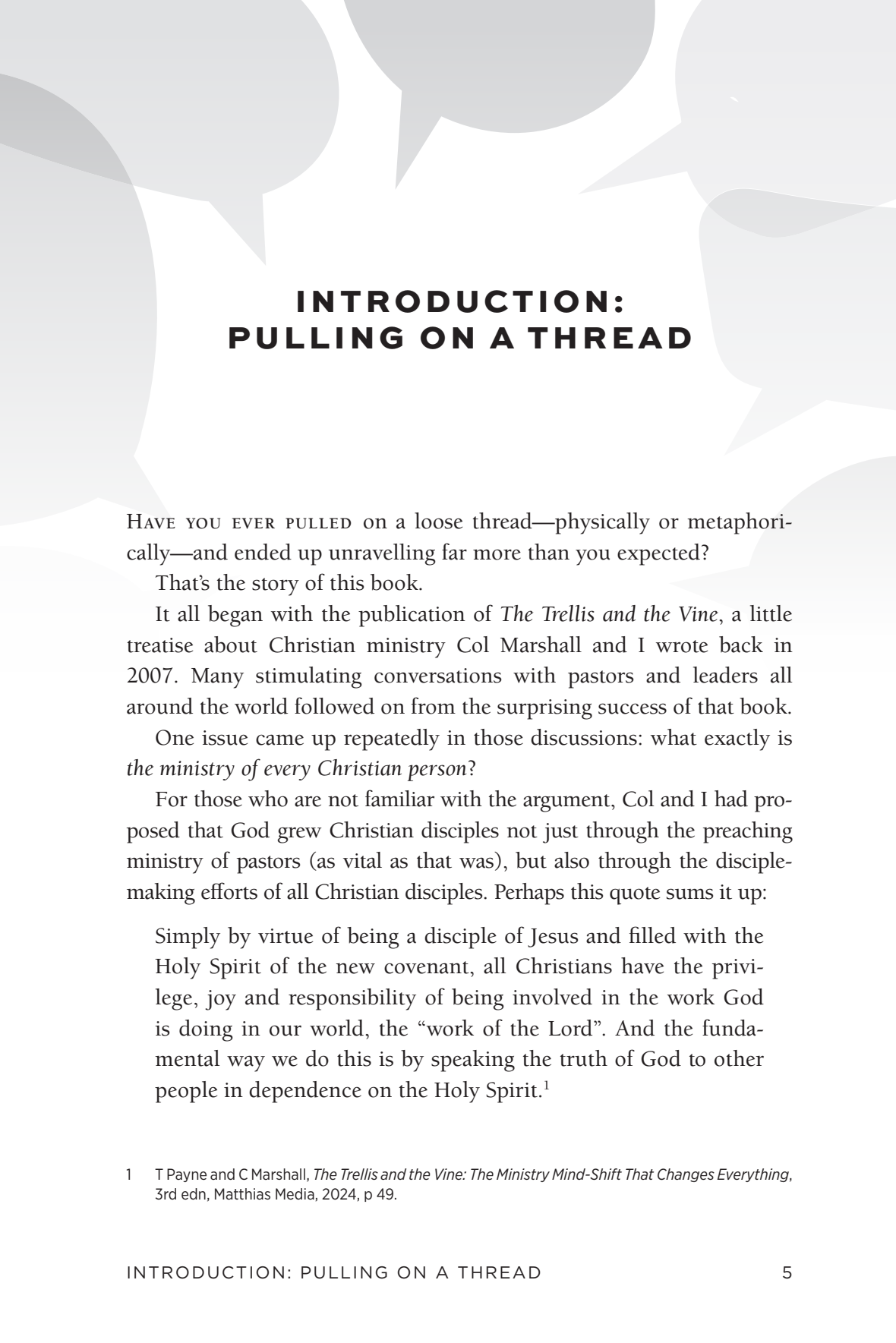
Peter Adam

Vicar Emeritus, St Jude's Carlton, Melbourne, Australia

Former Principal, Ridley College

1 J Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (A Golding trans), Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, p 883.

2 J Calvin, *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 1-7* (RR McGregor trans), Banner of Truth Trust, 2008, p 337. I have modernized the language in these two quotes.



INTRODUCTION: PULLING ON A THREAD

HAVE YOU EVER PULLED on a loose thread—physically or metaphorically—and ended up unravelling far more than you expected?

That's the story of this book.

It all began with the publication of *The Trellis and the Vine*, a little treatise about Christian ministry Col Marshall and I wrote back in 2007. Many stimulating conversations with pastors and leaders all around the world followed on from the surprising success of that book.

One issue came up repeatedly in those discussions: what exactly is *the ministry of every Christian person*?

For those who are not familiar with the argument, Col and I had proposed that God grew Christian disciples not just through the preaching ministry of pastors (as vital as that was), but also through the disciple-making efforts of all Christian disciples. Perhaps this quote sums it up:

Simply by virtue of being a disciple of Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit of the new covenant, all Christians have the privilege, joy and responsibility of being involved in the work God is doing in our world, the “work of the Lord”. And the fundamental way we do this is by speaking the truth of God to other people in dependence on the Holy Spirit.¹

¹ T Payne and C Marshall, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything*, 3rd edn, Matthias Media, 2024, p 49.

As we talked about this idea with Christian ministers from all over the world, we found almost universal agreement with the first sentence of that quote. Hardly anyone wants Christian ministry to be an elite sport conducted by priests and professionals; we want every Christian to pitch in as best they can and be a fellow worker in the work of the Lord.

However, the sting is in the second sentence. We were suggesting that the fundamental mode of every-member ministry was *every-member speech*. We advocated, in other words, not just for the keen *involvement* of all members in the programs and teams and activities of church life, but for Christians to actually open their mouths and ‘speak the truth in love’ (in the words of Ephesians 4:15) to others for mutual spiritual growth. You might say that we were contending not just for ‘every-member ministry’, but for ‘every-member *word* ministry’.

This emphasis was the loose thread that kept sticking out in our conversations. Col and I frequently found ourselves trying to answer questions like these:

- What sort of ‘word ministry’ or ‘speaking’ are we talking about, exactly? Do we mean counselling, or quoting Bible verses to each other, or doing one-to-one Bible reading, or family devotions, or more informal and casual conversations like the ones we have after church on Sunday, or what?
- How ‘spiritual’ do these conversations have to be to qualify? If I ask how your week has been, and you say, ‘Oh not bad, pretty busy, can’t complain’, is that the kind of one-another word ministry we’re thinking about?
- What about personal witness and evangelism? Is that also included in what we’re thinking about, or is it just the mutual encouragement of Christians?
- How does this every-member kind of speaking relate to the primacy and centrality of the preached word? Are we saying that biblical expository preaching isn’t enough? And what if promoting the word ministry of every Christian ends up undermining the central importance of the pulpit?
- And finally, is focusing on this subject really important or necessary? If our church has been able to make decent progress without

expecting or training every Christian to be involved in this kind of ‘word ministry’, why should we change? If our existing systems and programs seem to be doing a good job of growing the church, what will this additional layer of thinking and training and activity really add (apart from giving us all more work to do)?

I’ve often fielded this last sort of question from two quarters: from program-rich evangelical churches in the United States who are wondering how their well-developed and often complex ministry trellises could cope with this additional facet of ministry thinking or activity; and from churches here in Australia, where there has been a recent burst of enthusiasm for a more structured, systemic style of ministry, and a corresponding shift away from training individual Christians for word ministry.

The concern in both instances is not so much that a focus on teaching and equipping individual Christians for word ministry is unbiblical or unhelpful, but simply that it is inefficient and ineffective—that if we recruit people as volunteers into a well-structured pipeline of ministry, then the ministry will get done much more efficiently and effectively than if we train a small army of disorganized individuals to speak the word.

There is something to this objection, but it leads us to think about the larger question of how we should make decisions about ministry structure and practice. If the Bible’s emphasis and theology push us in one direction, and yet our perception and experience of what actually works best on the ground push in a different direction, how should we proceed? More on this in due course.

On top of these various questions, perhaps the most common response was simply a desire to hear and think more: ‘I agree—I’ve always thought that all Christians have a role to play in bringing the word to each other. But I’m struggling to understand what it looks like for my church, or how I could change the convictions and practice of our people so that every-member word ministry might flourish.’

In other words: ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’

All of this convinced me that the seemingly innocuous topic of the ‘word ministry of every Christian’ required further exploration, both theoretical and practical. There was a thread here worth tugging on,

not only to discover what the Bible says about these various questions, but to think with greater clarity about the real-world implications for Christian ministry.

When I first set out to do some of that further investigation and thinking, I had in mind a short supplement to *The Trellis and the Vine*—an additional chapter for a future edition, perhaps, or possibly an essay that explored the issues.

Nearly ten years later, let us just say that there turned out to be far more to the project than I first thought.

I seriously underestimated the task in two ways.

Firstly, I felt sure that plenty of others in the history of Christian thought would have considered this subject, and that I would have some solid shoulders to stand on. This turned out not to be the case; I found far less than I expected. I found a number of works that mentioned or alluded to the word ministry of Christians, and many that, in passing, recognized its importance, but almost none that actually addressed it head on.

For example, in an important passage from his book on the theology of preaching, Peter Adam recognizes that there are other forms of word ministry in church life apart from preaching:

While preaching ... is one form of the ministry of the Word, many other forms are reflected in the Bible and in contemporary Christian church life. It is important to grasp this point clearly, or we shall try to make preaching carry a load which it cannot bear; that is, the burden of doing all that the Bible expects of every form of the ministry the Word.²

Preaching does a great many wonderful things, Adam argues, but it doesn't do *everything*, and problems emerge if it tries to. The questions that then arise are obvious: what *are* those "other forms" of word ministry that Adam mentions, and what "*burden*" or "*load*" do they bear in the life of churches? What does the Bible expect those other ministries of the word to achieve, and what is therefore not being achieved if these word ministries are neglected?

2 P Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching*, IVP, 1996, p 59.

Adam poses the question astutely, and he should not be blamed for not answering it in his book, which is about preaching. The question is: has *anyone* answered it?

As I trawled through the history of Christian thought, I was surprised and a little disconcerted to discover that virtually no-one had. I struggled to locate *any biblical or theological works of any substance* that sought to investigate and understand the ‘word ministry’ of the everyday Christian.

I will say more about this strange silence within the Christian tradition below (in chapter 3). However, the practical effect of not having good shoulders to stand on was that I had to start my exploration largely from scratch. It means that my investigation (and this book) has involved far more foundational, biblical spadework than I was anticipating.

Secondly, when I began fossicking around in the New Testament to see what it had to say about this subject, I found *far more than I expected*—not just in the quantity of references to this kind of one-another speech, but in theological richness and complexity. I found myself, for example, not only having to think more deeply about the word ministry of Christians, but also about the living word of God itself in all its facets. I ended up needing to explore the nature of pastoral preaching, because I discovered that the one-another word ministry of Christians was closely related to it. I also needed to think again about what it means for believers to grow to maturity in Christ, and the place of the biblical word (in all its forms) in that whole process. I was also driven to consider the subject of church far more than I expected, because I found that the purposes of every-Christian word ministry were intimately connected with the nature of Christian churches and communities.

In other words, I was driven to rethink and re-examine not just the question of ‘every-member word ministry’ but, through that lens, many of the most important issues of the Christian life and of church and ministry.

Needless to say, the little investigation I began in 2015 became a much more significant research project, eventually turning into a PhD

dissertation and finally into this book. Tugging on the loose threads of *The Trellis and the Vine* has led me to attempt something that (to my knowledge) has not been done systematically before: *to examine and understand what the Bible says about the nature, purpose and practice of the word ministry of Christian believers, and to explore the ramifications of this for our church communities.*

Those ramifications are far-reaching. If I am right, a clear theological understanding of the ‘one-another word’ challenges the way we think about Christian transformation and maturity; it clarifies what Christian community really is, and how each member of the fellowship is related to all others; it sharpens and enhances our appreciation for the role of congregational teaching and preaching; it shapes how we think about the teaching, training and equipping of believers; it places our understanding of the evangelistic witness of believers on a fresh and firm footing; it even offers a helpful framework for thinking about how men and women should work together in church life and ministry.

Establishing this argument and teasing out all these implications will require a broader and deeper biblical and theological exploration than *The Trellis and the Vine* attempted. In the absence of an existing body of literature that lays out the basic shape of this subject and the key issues, we’re going to have to start from the ground up. A fair bit of careful Bible reading and reflection will be necessary.

No doubt this possibility will delight some readers and dismay others (those of us who like to get to the practical gist of things quickly). I will do my best to keep the main argument flowing along, and to consign as much supportive detail as possible to appendices and footnotes, where the nitty gritty can be explored by those who wish to do so. I will also at times refer to my PhD dissertation, which is freely available to download.³

However, I don’t want to apologize for or downplay the importance of thinking deeply and biblically about this subject. Not only is it well overdue, but the rewards of doing so are substantial. The word

3 T Payne, *Truthing in Love: The Theological Nature, Purpose and Practice of ‘One-Another Edifying Speech’ in the Christian Community* [PhD thesis], Moore Theological College, 2019 ([jstor.org/stable/community.36801692](https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.36801692)). I will refer to this thesis in what follows with the abbreviation *TIL*. Page numbers are those of the PDF document that can be downloaded at the above website.

ministry of every Christian believer is a rich and vital component of the ministry of God's word among his people. Its neglect, both historically and in many churches today, is unjustifiable and unfortunate; it significantly diminishes the richness and productiveness of Christian communities. Its renewal, God willing, will not only open up new possibilities for ministry and mission within our fellowships; it will also help us to understand and improve many of the ministries we already undertake (such as small home groups).

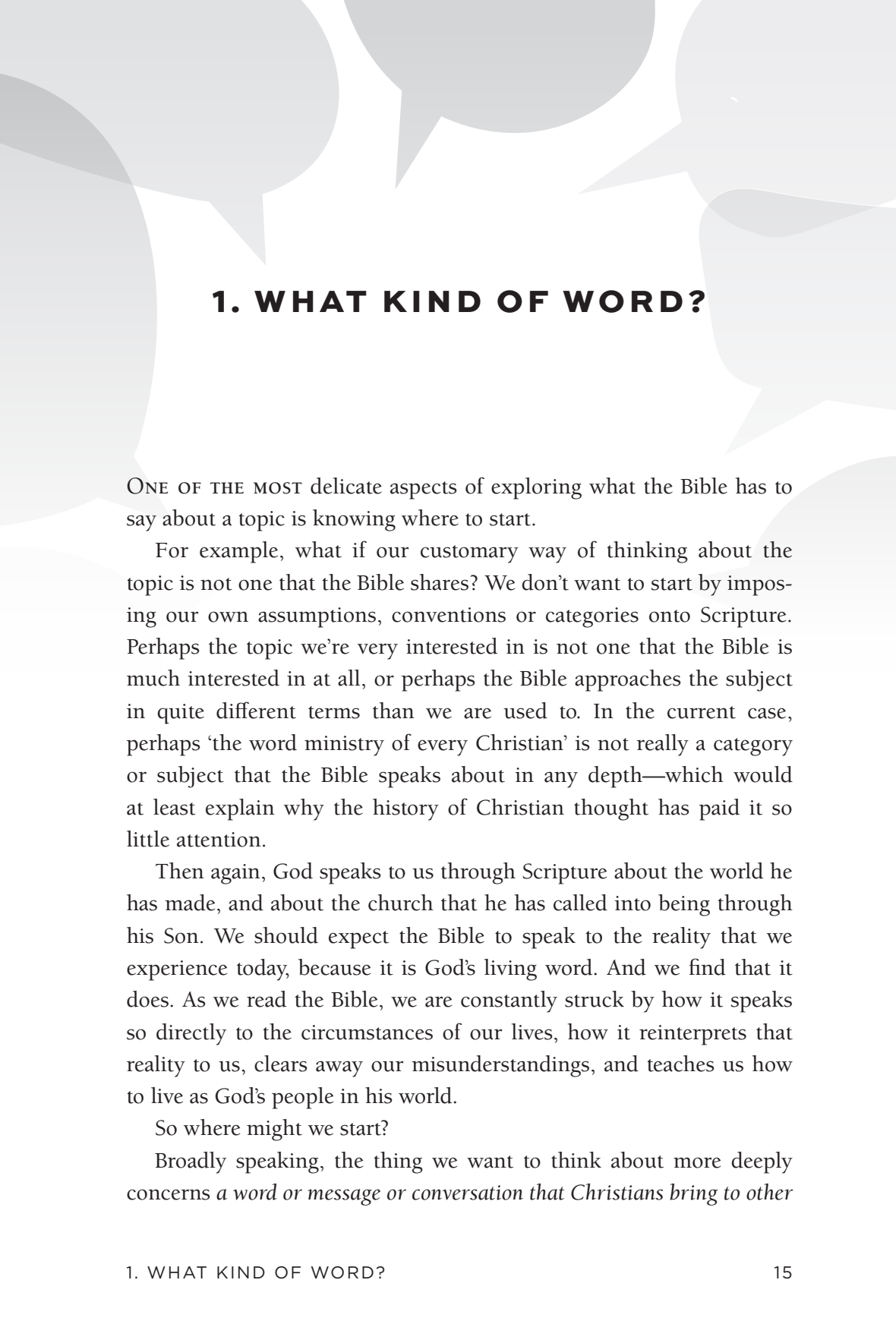
The plan of what follows is simple enough:

- In part I, I'll define the kind of 'speech' or 'word ministry' we're talking about, and I'll offer a broad survey of where it can be found in the New Testament and in the history of Christian thought.
- In parts II–IV, I'll dig into key biblical passages and trains of thought to see what they teach us about this kind of Christian speech.
- In part V, I'll draw together and explore the key themes that emerge from the biblical study of parts II–IV.
- In part VI, I'll summarize the essential nature and purposes of the one-another speech of Christians, and I'll explore the implications for church and ministry life today.

My hope and prayer is not just that the questions raised by *The Trellis and the Vine* will be answered, and the loose ends tied off. I hope to theologically stimulate and invigorate you for gospel ministry just as much as I've been invigorated by working on this book.

PART I

**WHAT IS
THE
'ONE-ANOTHER
WORD'?**



1. WHAT KIND OF WORD?

ONE OF THE MOST delicate aspects of exploring what the Bible has to say about a topic is knowing where to start.

For example, what if our customary way of thinking about the topic is not one that the Bible shares? We don't want to start by imposing our own assumptions, conventions or categories onto Scripture. Perhaps the topic we're very interested in is not one that the Bible is much interested in at all, or perhaps the Bible approaches the subject in quite different terms than we are used to. In the current case, perhaps 'the word ministry of every Christian' is not really a category or subject that the Bible speaks about in any depth—which would at least explain why the history of Christian thought has paid it so little attention.

Then again, God speaks to us through Scripture about the world he has made, and about the church that he has called into being through his Son. We should expect the Bible to speak to the reality that we experience today, because it is God's living word. And we find that it does. As we read the Bible, we are constantly struck by how it speaks so directly to the circumstances of our lives, how it reinterprets that reality to us, clears away our misunderstandings, and teaches us how to live as God's people in his world.

So where might we start?

Broadly speaking, the thing we want to think about more deeply concerns *a word or message or conversation that Christians bring to other*

people for their spiritual benefit—a word that contributes in some way to their growth in Christ.

Looking for examples of this kind of speech in the Bible, our eyes alight on a well-known verse like this one in Colossians 3:

Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly, teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God, and whatever you do, in word or in deed, let it all be in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:16–17)

Without delving too deeply at this point, we can simply notice that what we have here is an exhortation to the Christian community in Colossae to engage in a form of mutually helpful speech, the content of which is related to “the word of Christ”, the mode of which seems to include “teaching”, “admonishing” and “singing”, and the eventual outcome of which is a thankful life built on “the name of the Lord Jesus”.

This is a good start. In fact, this verse in Colossians is particularly interesting as a starting point because it mirrors very closely (in both content and vocabulary) a statement Paul makes earlier in the letter about his own preaching ministry:

Him we proclaim, admonishing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom, that we may present everyone complete in Christ. (1:28)

This is like the mission statement of Paul’s preaching ministry. The “him” who forms the content of Paul’s proclamation is Christ himself, the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). The mode of his preaching includes “admonishing” and “teaching”, and is directed to every person. The goal or purpose is that every person might be presented “complete [or mature] in Christ”.

All of this is strikingly similar to Colossians 3:16–17, even down to the structure and vocabulary of the two statements.

	Col 1:28	Col 3:16–17
Content	<i>Him</i> [Christ] we proclaim,	Let the <i>word of Christ</i> dwell among you richly, ¹
How it is done	<i>admonishing</i> every person and <i>teaching</i> every person <i>with all wisdom</i> ,	<i>teaching</i> and <i>admonishing</i> one another <i>with all wisdom</i> , singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God,
The desired outcome	that we may present everyone <i>complete in Christ</i> .	and <i>whatever you do in word or in deed</i> , let it all be in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

These similarities are thought-provoking.

Does Paul think that what he and the other apostles do in their proclamatory ministry is connected in some way with the “teaching and admonishing” that the Colossians should practise with one another? Are they different facets of the same task or activity?

Maybe so, but that is a question for later. At this point, we should also notice the *differences* between the two verses.

Colossians 1:28 describes a form of *proclamation by individuals* who have been set aside for this task—in this case, Paul himself, whom God has commissioned to make known the ‘mystery’ of the gospel among the Gentiles.² This speech is directed to everyone—to “every person”, as Paul makes a point of repeating—but it is the speech of one to many. It ‘proclaims’, but it also ‘teaches’ and ‘admonishes’. In other words, it

- 1 It’s possible that the expression “word of Christ” (*logos tou Christou*) means the word that comes from Christ, or the word that Christ himself speaks. The more likely possibility is that the genitive is objective and refers to the message or content that has ‘Christ’ as its subject matter, like “the word of the truth, the gospel” (Col 1:5; parallel to Paul’s proclaiming ‘Christ’ in 1:28). Perhaps the difference is not great, given that Christ himself is the revelation of God, and that the word he speaks reveals himself.
- 2 Interestingly, as he describes his ministry in this whole section (1:24–2:5), Paul constantly uses “I” to describe the ministry he personally had been given (1:24–25), his toil and struggle in doing it (1:29–2:2), and his personal feelings about his absence from the Colossians (2:4–5). But in 1:28, in the middle of the passage, he switches to “we”: “Him we proclaim”. Is this to emphasize that his ministry is the same as all the apostles in proclaiming Christ? Or is it to include Timothy, from whom the letter is also addressed? It’s hard to say.

declares and preaches the received truth about Christ, as well as teaching and explaining and applying that truth to its hearers. For convenience in what follows, we will refer to this kind of speech simply as ‘preaching and teaching’.

By contrast, Colossians 3:16 exhorts the Colossians to engage in *mutual speech with one another* as the means by which the word of Christ will dwell among them richly. Whether the “singing ... with thankfulness” is the sole way in which Paul envisages this happening, or just one example of it, or is an activity that goes alongside it, we can consider later in the book. For now, we should simply note that 1:28 and 3:16 envisage a varied ministry of the word within a Christian community—one that includes both the proclamatory speech of certain leaders *and* the mutual, one-another speech of believers generally.

Is this pattern of thinking reflected more widely in the New Testament? It is. We will look more closely at many of these instances in the rest of the book. But to help define the general terms of our investigation, we can briefly note three further examples:

- The author of Hebrews describes his whole exposition to his readers as a “word of exhortation” (13:22). He also urges his readers to “exhort one another” in the midst of daily life (in 3:12–13) and as they gather together (in 10:24–25), in order to fortify and spur each other on to faithfulness, love and good deeds.³
- Paul describes his original gospel preaching to the Thessalonians as (among other descriptions) an ‘appeal’ or ‘exhortation’ (1 Thess 2:3).⁴ Later in the letter, he commands his readers (often using the same vocabulary) to exhort or encourage one another with the words he is writing to them (4:18),⁵ to keep on exhorting and building up one another (5:11),⁶ and to admonish each other (5:14). He also urges the Thessalonians to respect and sit under the admonition of their leaders (5:12).

3 “I exhort [*parakalō*] you brothers to bear with my word of exhortation [*tou logou tēs paraklēseōs*]” (Heb 13:22); “But exhort each other [*parakaleite heautous*] daily” (Heb 3:13); “... not neglecting to gather with each other ... but exhorting [*parakalountes*]” (Heb 10:25).

4 “For our appeal/exhortation [*gar paraklēsis hēmōn*] does not spring from error ...” (1 Thess 2:3).

5 “Exhort/encourage one other [*parakaleite allēlous*] with these words” (1 Thess 4:18).

6 “Therefore, exhort one another [*parakaleite allēlous*] and build up each other” (1 Thess 5:11).

- First Corinthians begins with a vigorous defence of Paul's Spirit-enabled preaching of "the word of the cross" (1:18), and an application of it to the factionalism of the Corinthians. Later in the letter, he discusses at length how the same Spirit enables the Corinthians to bring the word of God to each other, a task they should eagerly pursue in love and good order (chapters 12–14).

What we begin to see in these instances is a point reflected in many other places in the New Testament: in the thinking of the apostles, the word ministry of the Christian community did not consist solely of the proclamatory or expository preaching of apostles, elders, pastors or teachers (as foundational and important as that was). It also included the spiritually beneficial speech of Christians more generally. The two seem closely related (as one would expect), but there are also obvious differences.

To be systematic in identifying those differences, and defining the particular kind of speech we are thinking about, we can list the following key characteristics of the one-another word ministry of Christians, using Colossians 3:16 as an example of the type.

1. It is a form of speaking undertaken by Christians as Christians.

To state the obvious thing first, the kind of thing we're looking at is a form of *speech*. It's not as if speaking is the only godly or loving thing the Colossians are urged to do for one another—chapter 3 contains exhortations to kindness, compassion, patience, forbearance, and so on (3:12–14). But what is being commanded in verse 16 is inescapably verbal—"teaching", "admonishing", "singing"—and the people uttering those words are Christian believers considered generally. Those whom Paul is exhorting in 3:16 are "God's chosen ones" (3:12), the "saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae" (1:2). He makes no distinction as to who should engage in this "teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom"; it seems to be the prerogative and responsibility of all the Colossian believers, whether men or women, Greek or Jew, slave or free (see 3:11).

2. *The hearers are other believers.*

Later in the letter, Paul will also urge the Colossians to engage in gospel-oriented conversation with “outsiders” (4:5–6), but in 3:16 the teaching and admonishing is addressed to “one another”—to fellow believers. (Is there are relationship between these two kinds of conversation: to those inside and those outside? That’s another issue to return to later.)

3. *The content of the speech relates to God’s revelation in Christ, including the hearer’s response to that word.*

The main command of 3:16—to “let the word of Christ dwell among you richly”—is enacted as the rest of the activities of the verse take place (the teaching, admonishing, singing and giving thanks). There are some important questions as to the exact relationship between the command at the start of the verse and the following clauses, which we will return to. But at this point, we just need to observe that *the word of Christ* is what becomes richly present in their midst as they undertake these various forms of speech.

4. *The force or mode of the speech is varied.*

When you ‘admonish’ someone, you are doing something slightly different from when you ‘teach’ them. The underlying content may be similar in both cases, but what you’re *doing* with the content is different. The kind of mutual speech we see in 3:16 looks like it may take different forms on different occasions, depending (for example) on whether I need something taught to me for the first time, or whether I need admonishing to stop doing something that is inconsistent with what I have been taught.

5. *The desired outcome is spiritual growth for the hearer.*

From the beginning of Colossians 3, Paul has been urging his readers to set their minds on their new dead-and-risen life in Christ, and therefore to kill off what remains of their own old sinful life and to put on the new righteous clothes of the kingdom. The mutual teaching and admonition of 3:16 forms part of this process, leading the Colossians to seek a life in which every word and deed is done “in the name

of the Lord Jesus”. Their one-another speech is directed towards their growth in Christian character.⁷

TO SUMMARIZE: THE KIND OF THING we see in Colossians 3:16 involves *Christian believers speaking some aspect of the word of Christ to each other, for the purposes of mutual edification and maturity in Christ*. For the sake of convenience, in what follows I will describe this kind of speech as ‘one-another word ministry’, or simply ‘the *one-another word*’.

How does this rough working definition help us as we begin our exploration?

It firstly clarifies what we’re *not* investigating.

For example, there are many instances of godly Christian service and love of others in the New Testament that have most of the characteristics listed above, *but not number 1*—that is, *that aren’t centred*

7 Some readers may recognize the influence of speech-act theory in identifying the various characteristics of the speech of Colossians 3:16 in these terms. Speech-act theory—first put forward by JL Austin and later developed by John Searle and others—builds on the recognition that any kind of speech is also a form of action. When we speak, we are always *doing* something: telling, asking, promising, declaring, criticizing, urging, and so on. In fact, in Searle’s expression of the idea, there are four different kinds of action that we engage in simultaneously when we speak:

- A. The utterance act: when we speak, we make sounds or inscribe marks on a piece of paper. We act to bring words into the world in some way.
 - B. The propositional act: when we speak, we always point or refer to something, and say something about it. For example, in the sentence “Stop hitting the cat” we are referring to a cat and saying something about the hitting of it.
 - C. The illocutionary act: when we speak, we always *do something* with the propositional content of what we are saying. When we say “Stop hitting the cat” we are commanding. Whenever we speak, we are performing some kind of action by means of the speaking, whether that is telling, stating, explaining, teaching, admonishing, asking, promising, begging, or whatever it might be.
 - D. The perlocutionary act: this is the act that the speech brings forth (or at least intends to bring forth) in its hearer. We intend and expect that the person we are speaking to will stop hitting the cat.
- All this may seem like a complex way of describing something very simple, but its usefulness will become apparent later in the book.

In terms of Colossians 3:16 and our definition of the one-another speech of Christians, we could say that:

- The utterance act is undertaken by Christians as Christians.
- Its propositional act is to refer to and predicate something regarding “the word of Christ”.
- The illocutionary act is varied, and could include “teaching” and “admonishing”.
- The perlocutionary act is to see other members of the Christian community ‘taught’ and ‘admonished’, and thus moved towards maturity in Christian character.

See JR Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp 23–25; building on the work of JL Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (JO Urmson and M Sbisà eds), 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 1976.

on speaking. The Bible often urges believers to love one another, be generous to one another, forgive one another, show hospitality to one another, and so on. There are many such ‘one-another’ commands in the New Testament, but the kind of thing we see in Colossians 3:16 is one particular kind of one-anothering: it is *speaking* to one another.

There are also many instances in the New Testament where Christians engage in speech that has all the characteristics listed above *except number 1*—that is, where the word of Christ is spoken to bring spiritual growth, but where the speaker is *specially set apart to do so*. We could consider the multiple examples of the preaching of Old Testament prophets and priests, and of New Testament apostles, evangelists and pastors. It may be that this kind of specially commissioned, ‘preaching-and-teaching’ word has a connection with the general one-another speaking of believers, but the two kinds of speaking are also distinct and different. It’s the latter that we see in Colossians 3:16.

Finally, there are occasions in the New Testament where Christian believers engage in spiritually beneficial Christ-centred speech, but where the hearers are *unbelievers* rather than believers—that is, where every characteristic above is present *except number 2*. We see an instance of this just a few verses later in 4:5–6, where the Colossians are urged to engage in spiritually beneficial conversation with outsiders. Again, it would be surprising if these two kinds of speech were not closely related (and we’ll come back to that). But the kind of speech we find in 3:16 takes place within the Christian community.

Given this initial definition, then, what do we discover when we look further afield in the Bible? Is the kind of ‘one-another edifying speech’ we find in Colossians 3:16 a prominent or significant activity in the New Testament?