



**Speak Boldly, Authentically, Truthfully, Redemptively:**  
**A Conversation with Tom Long and Cynthia Hale**  
**March 25, 2026**

Mark Ramsey: Hello everybody. This is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative. What a feast we have today. Cynthia Hale and Tom Long are with me to talk about preaching. Hello to both of you.

Tom Long: Good morning.

Cynthia Hale: Good morning, Mark.

Mark: Cynthia, could you just tell us a little bit about where you are and what your ministry is?

Cynthia: Yes. I am located in Decatur, Georgia, and I am pastoring the church that I founded 39 years ago.

Mark: Wow.

Tom: Wow.

Cynthia: The Ray of Hope Christian Church.

Mark: That's phenomenal.

Cynthia: And it's a wonderfully progressive congregation, in that we do justice ministry: housing, education, food, human trafficking, voting. We try to hit all of those spots, because we believe in impacting and transforming the world.

Mark: Fabulous. Thank you. Tom?

Tom: Yeah. After 40 plus years of teaching preaching in various seminaries, I am happily retired and not required.

Cynthia: Woo.

Mark: That's great. Between the two of you, you have so much experience and vitality when it comes to preaching. I should also say, in our Compelling Preaching cohorts, you were two of the advisors we've called on with universal acclaim for what you've contributed to our cohort. So, thank you on that. Let me just start by asking, where are you seeing joy and hope in preaching today?

Tom: I think I'm seeing it in preachers who recognize that they're in the news division of the church, that there is good news, that they look through Biblical texts and they see God at work in the world, and they get to be able to announce how they see that and what that means for us. Rather than a book report on some Biblical passage, they are actually seeing the activity of God and that gives hope.

Mark: That's great.

Cynthia: And I agree with you, Tom. I feel like when people stay with the text, and walk through it, and allow God to speak-

Tom: Absolutely.

Cynthia: ... first to them, and then through them to the people, that's hope and that's joy, also. And there needs to be a real passion for the preaching. When there is no passion, then there's no change. There's no hope proclaimed.

Tom: I absolutely agree with what you said, especially the part about when the text speaks to you as a preacher, then you can't keep me out of the pulpit.

Cynthia: That's right. We as preachers need to have an active devotional life.

Tom: Absolutely.

Cynthia: We need to meet God in the text every day. It may not be the same. There may not be an excitement and joy depending on where you happen to be in life, but it ought to speak to us daily, so that we preach out of the overflow.

Tom: There are some weeks when the word I hear is more powerful than others. I have to simply admit that the rhythm of preaching is like the rhythm of the Christian life itself,

Cynthia: Yeah

Tom: ...sometimes it's up and sometimes it's down. Sometimes I stand to the pulpit and say, "Gold and sober have I none, but what have I give you? " I think it's the manna principle...

Cynthia: Yeah.

Tom: ... that we get enough to go on and the excitement sustains itself, even in low Sundays and valley experiences.

Mark: Yeah.

Cynthia: That's exactly right. And, you know, I always think about a devotional that I read, I think it was Hannah Whitehall who said, "On Monday, don't become a Monday morning quarterback going back over your sermon and thinking to yourself, 'Well, I didn't do very well.'" You may not have done very well, but God did it.

Tom: That's right.

Cynthia: And God did what God wanted to do with that text through you.

Mark: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. I've been working on the parables lately, and there's a parable in Mark about a person who sows seed on the ground and then doesn't know how it grows.

Cynthia: Yes.

Tom: And they go about the ordinary rhythms of life, and the seed is growing under a power not given to us under the power of the spirit.

Mark: Yeah.

Cynthia: We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

Tom: Yeah, that's right.

Mark: I was up in Michigan last week for meetings, and visited a couple of people from a congregation I served in the late '80s and early '90s. And in one of the conversations the person said, "You remember that sermon you preached? It changed my life." I have no memory of that sermon at all. It is not us. The corollary is also true. Where are you seeing hard challenges in preaching today?

Cynthia: It's difficult to preach in the climate that we're living in. These are such difficult times, and people are – at least, the people that I preach to – have moments of fear and anxiety. What's going to happen next? Of course, uncertainty, and how to speak to that. Of course, without sounding Pollyannish, like we have the solution...of course, the word of God has a solution for us, but there are times when I've had to say, "It may get worse before it gets better;" and how God will walk with us through the difficult moments. The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light, but maybe the light isn't shining so brightly right now.

Tom: Preaching is a form of communication, and it exists in the communicational environment of our society. And right now, we have a toxic communicational environment.

Cynthia: Right.

Tom: And that causes a lot of us who preach to, kind of, walk on eggshells and fear the backlash that honest communication can create. And I know it's easier said than done, but I think it's a call to us to be bold.

Cynthia: I agree.

Tom: People need not the kind of waffling communication that people who are frightened have, but a bold one who say, "Here is the truth that is beyond all of us that saves all of us..."

Cynthia: That's right.

Tom: "In the midst of this."

Cynthia: Tom, I couldn't agree more. I think it's the passion, but also the faith: our "ruthless trust" in God, like Brennan Manning says, that allows us to speak boldly...

Tom: Absolutely.

Cynthia: ...to just throw caution to the wind, be willing to take a risk because it's God's word through us and, allowing the Holy Spirit to give us the power and the boldness to speak the truth.

Tom: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Mark: How do we discern as preachers when the boldness is serving the word of God and the boldness is serving either the pressures we feel from our congregation, or our own internal need to be pundits?

Tom: Well, that's the \$64,000 question, Mark. There is a distinction to be made between getting up in the pulpit and saying what we want to say, and getting up into the pulpit and saying what the Spirit wants to say through us. And I think a life of prayer, and also a sense of being surprised by the Biblical text...

Cynthia: Yeah.

Tom: ...that we hear a word there that we would not have brought to the table, that comes to us and not from us. And then to get up and tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about it, so help you God.

Mark: Yeah.

Cynthia: And that does require prayer, and listening, and listening, and listening, because initially you may think you know the answer, but there are so many voices that are coming at you at one time. That was good, Tom, when you said surprised by the text and like, am I really supposed to say that? I mean, I'm pretty bold. I'm a bold chick, but there's something, but I think it is important to listen and to hear and then to fearlessly step out there.

Tom: Yeah. And I think the authentic sound of a voice crying in the wilderness...

Cynthia: Oh, yeah.

Tom: ...and the wilderness that is our communicational environment right now is a deep and dark wilderness. And to speak boldly, authentically, truthfully, redemptively. And that makes a difference, and people recognize it.

Cynthia: Yeah. And you have to be authentically who you are.

Tom: Yeah.

Cynthia: And so, there are moments when I'm afraid, and I can't pretend that I'm not.

Mark: Right.

Cynthia: And it's okay to name that. Not continuously, now, and not every Sunday, and not the whole sermon, because you got to end with some hope, and God's word speaks to that. But, to say that I am concerned about this, and I'm wrestling with this, but here's what the word of God says and speaks to me and to you.

Tom: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah.

Tom: Amen.

Mark: In our introductions, both of you spoke of 40 years or more of ministry. How has your own preaching changed over those four decades?

Cynthia: I've become much more confident in my preaching, confident in the sense that I was very insecure in preaching. I was raised in the Disciples of Christ denomination, and so much of what I heard was speaking or teaching, but not preaching, particularly in the African-American tradition. And so, I felt like I wasn't a good preacher because I didn't whoop. And so, you know, I was just teaching, but the young people who I started Ray of Hope with, and who came, enjoy that kind of preaching or teaching. And so the congregation began to grow qualitatively and quantitatively. And I began to grow and became much more relaxed, and also realized that my passion began to spill over. And so no, I've never whooped, but I'm excited.

Mark: Yeah.

Cynthia: And then I also realized my content was important. But if you're used to hearing, or you've seen people in other settings who had this wonderful little sing-song and just made it happen, I thought I should be doing that. No, I needed to be who I am. I found my voice and I've stayed with it.

Tom: Good.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. I'm very much in transition in my own preaching right now. I have moved gradually, over time, from thinking that the crisis and the pew was boredom to thinking that it's formation...

Cynthia: Yeah.

Tom: ...that I'm looking out there at a whole lot of "near Christianities". While boredom is still a reality, that's not really the crisis that's most forefront. It's, "I don't know how to be a Christian in this world."

Cynthia: Wow.

Tom: And the task of preaching, it's almost Pauline with the early churches, to form Christian communities where there have been none, or there's a faint memory of one. So, I do much more teaching in my preaching, and much more interested in things that I was not interested in before like, okay, what does this mean with your money? What does this mean with how you raise your kids? What does this mean with how you do your job? I think most of our congregation, who have jobs, have to make a million moral compromises every week.

Cynthia: That's right.

Tom: And if their preacher doesn't get down in the ditch and wrestle with that with them, I think that we've forfeited a great responsibility.

Mark: Yeah.

Cynthia: That is great to hear you say that you are still wrestling with preaching and changing, because I think that sometimes some of our colleagues think that they have arrived. I think you never stop growing. I hope you never stop growing and wrestling with who you are as a preacher.

Tom: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah. A friend of mine who's in publishing says, "If you want to sell a book, do a compare or contrast or the seven best whatever, and then it'll sell double the copies." I don't want to fall into that shallow trap, but if you had a young starting out preacher in front of you right now, do you have a few rules of the road, don't do this, and do this?

Tom: I have one sort of rule of thumb, and it's very much a rule of thumb, not an iron-clad rule. And that is, try not to use the word "I" before three paragraphs into the sermon. Somebody who starts off a sermon, "My favorite poet is so-and-so, and she said in one of her poems," just say what the poem is. Don't bring yourself in. You bring focus in on yourself, when it should be a centrifugal force, moving out from you into the world, rather than drawing centripetal force in.

Cynthia: And my rule of thumb has always been, be who you are. Be authentic, because what I'm finding is a lot of young ministers that are just starting, we all have the tendency to try to be someone else. We want to preach like Tom Long, but you're not Tom Long and you must be who you are, and you will grow, but you can listen to other preachers, read other preachers to be informed, but allow that to shape who you are as a person and as a preacher. So, that's the primary thing that I tell preachers, and have tried to develop that in the life of our congregation, because we have several preachers there, and I want each of them to have their own authentic voice and sound.

Tom: When I was a young preacher, I very much admired Edmund Steimle, the great Lutheran preacher, and I imitated him for a long time. And by doing that, I learned a little bit about preaching, a lot about preaching actually, but I also learned that I couldn't wear Saul's armor, that I had to finally get my own suit of armor.

Mark: Having appreciatively listened to many of both of your sermons, I don't think you fall into this, but it has been said of me anyway, and of a lot of preachers, we all have one sermon, and we simply cast it into different forms. If you had one sermon, if people said, "Cynthia, Tom, you have one sermon that I keep hearing." What's your one sermon?

Cynthia: My one sermon is based on Psalm 139. "I will praise you because I'm fearfully and wonderfully made."

Tom: Beautiful.

Cynthia: "Marvelous are thy works and that my soul knows right well." I know that that is my one sermon. I know that that comes up time and time again, because I preach to a people who struggle with

their own self-esteem, and sense of identity, and every day get messages that said, "You're less than." And so, I am trying to help people understand how powerful and wonderful they are.

Mark: Oh, that's beautiful. Thank you.

Tom: Mine's from Corinthians. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." There's something going on that we're not in charge of, that is powerfully redemptive and restorative.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Mark: I got to tell you, Cynthia and Tom, thank you. I have the best job in the world, that I get to listen to conversations like this. Thank you so much.

Tom: Thank you, Mark.

Mark: What a rich blessing.

Cynthia: Thank you so much.