

JOHN MACARTHUR
THE PREACHER
AND HIS BIBLE

STEVEN J. LAWSON
THE PREACHER AND
HIS ACCOUNTABILITY

JOEL BEEKE
THE PREACHER
AND HIS BOOKS

EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

THE PREACHER IN THE STUDY



*interview
with*
**SINCLAIR
FERGUSON**



ISSUE

06

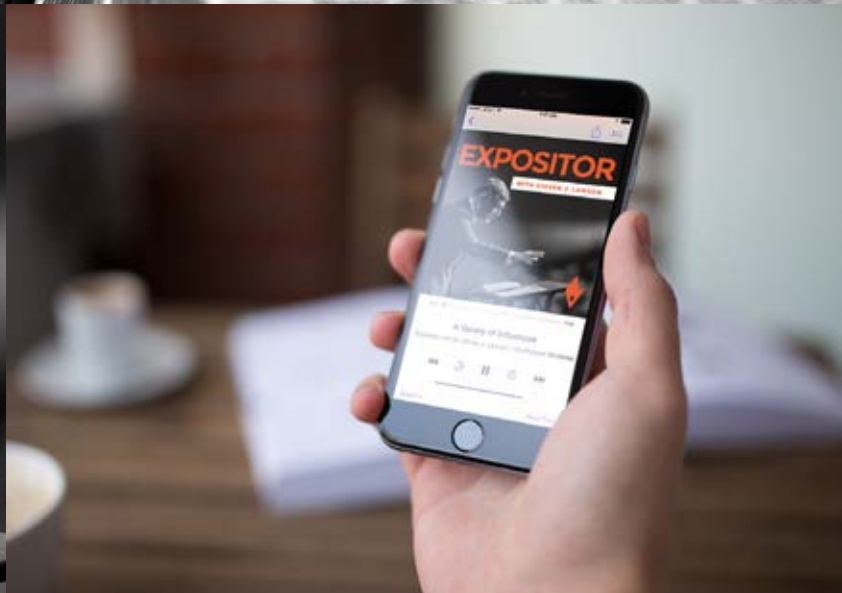
JUL/AUG15

EXPOSITOR

Podcast with Steven J. Lawson



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Expositor, hosted by Dr. Steven J. Lawson, provides an informal look into the life and ministry of the expositor. Join us three times a week as one of today's leading Bible expositors examines the details of sermon preparation and delivery, ministry, and other matters addressing the biblical preacher and teacher. Each podcast offers a glimpse into the calling and life of one who preaches and teaches God's Word.



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STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

A LIFELONG PURSUIT

Becoming an effective expository preacher is a lifelong pursuit. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once remarked that preachers are born, not made. That is to say, only God can make a preacher. True, but preachers can be developed. One specific way for any expositor to advance to the next level in his preaching is by observing and learning from other gifted preachers. In this sense, excellence in the pulpit is as much caught as it is taught.

Such examples in preaching can be found in a study of church history. Among these noteworthy models are pulpit giants such as John Calvin and Charles Spurgeon. Other shining examples can be found in present-day pastors such as John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul. However, some of the best lessons in expository preaching are to be learned from the preachers recorded in Scripture.

One individual in the Old Testament who stands out as a premiere expositor is the priest and scribe, Ezra. As a proficient expounder of the Law, this reformer of ancient Israel was used to ignite a great revival in Jerusalem. He “set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Ezra’s study of God’s Word was all-consuming and stands as a model of unwavering devotion of one who mined the inexhaustible riches of Scripture and brought them to the people.

It was by no coincidence that after fourteen years of intense study and teaching, a revival occurred at the Water Gate. In that decisive moment, Ezra was ready to step forward to expound the Law with precision and power. He read the Scripture and gave the proper explanation of the text along with an impassioned exhortation of the people. He ministered the Scripture with such fervency that the crowd was moved to lift up their hands to heaven, as though they were receiving the Word from above. Under this powerful influence, the people blessed the Lord and fell to the ground in humility and adoration.

Similarly, every expositor today must be committed to the careful study and delivery of the Scripture. Let us learn this

invaluable lesson from Ezra. Every pastor must guard against the mounting pressures of ministry that would crowd out his study in the Word. Shrinking time in the study results in shrinking power in the pulpit. Let every pastor be concerned with the depth of his message and, in turn, trust God for the breadth of its influence.

To accomplish this goal, every expositor must always be



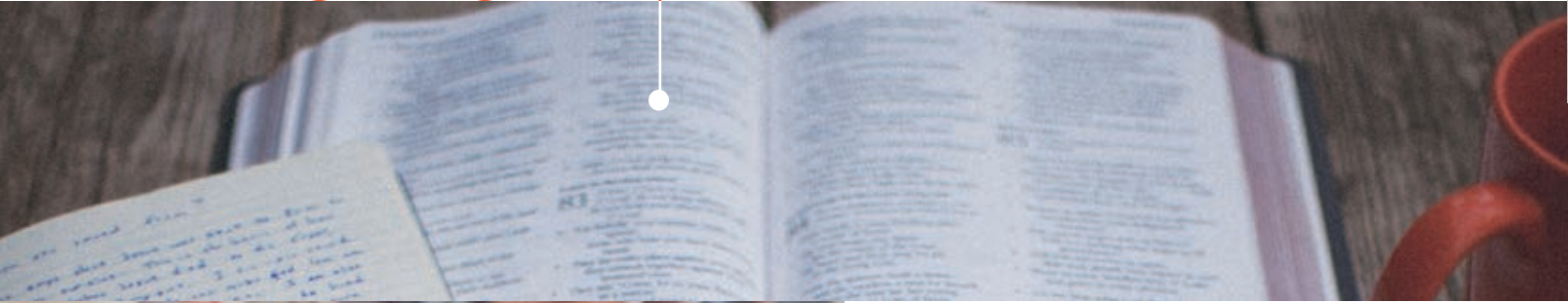
sharpening his skills in the study and pulpit. If one is to be improving in his preaching, he would be wise to study the expositional ministries of other gifted men. I want to encourage you to give careful attention to such luminous figures as Jonathan Edwards, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, James Montgomery Boice, and many more.

But do not neglect the examples recorded in Scripture. Study the preaching of Moses on the plains of Moab. Examine the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Analyze the address of Peter on the day of Pentecost. Consider the exhortations of Paul to Timothy. And note the exposition of Ezra at the Water Gate. It was his preaching that ushered in a great revival. May God do it again in this hour. ♦

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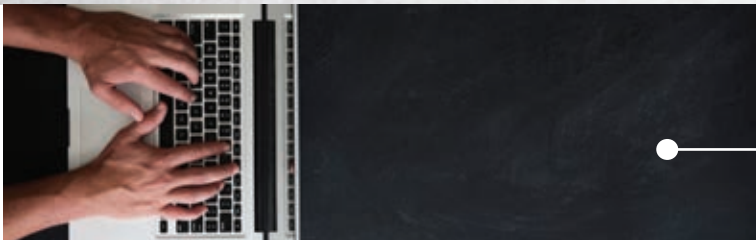


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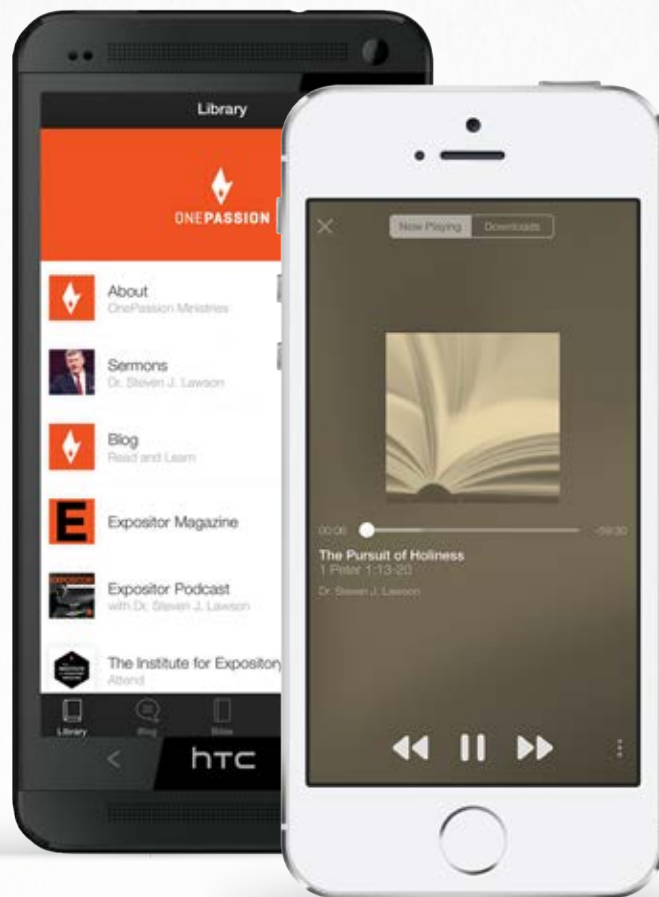
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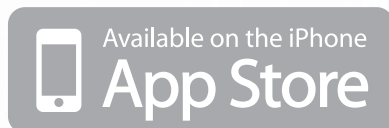
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THE STEVEN J. LAWSON PREACHER AND HIS ACCOUNTABILITY

There is coming a final day of accountability for every expositor in which he will be made subject to the searching scrutiny of the Lord Jesus Christ. Though all his sins have been forgiven and there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, the preacher nevertheless will stand one day before the One who enlisted him, as a servant to his master, and give an account for his ministry. On that last day, every preacher will be judged, though not for the size of his congregation, nor the number of his staff. He will not be examined for the volume of his budget, nor for the upward mobility of his flock. In large measure, he will be reviewed for his handling of the written Word of God.

Did the expositor rightly interpret the Scripture? Did he give the true meaning of the biblical text? Did he rightly represent what God meant in His Word? This will be the divine judgment which he will undergo at the end of the age. There will be a final testing of every preacher's doctrine. There will be a careful audit of every expositor's teaching. On the last day, that will be one of the most pressing issues.

This is the emphasis the apostle Paul is making with his young son in the faith, Timothy. The veteran minister writes, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). This signature text is a call for diligent effort in the careful study and proper interpretation of the Word of God. If Timothy falls short in this pursuit, he will suffer shame in that final examination.

Paul's Instructions to Timothy

As Paul pens this verse, he has come to the final chapter of his life and the end of his ministry. The year is AD 67, and the apostle finds himself imprisoned in Rome for the last time. Unlike his first Roman incarceration (Acts 28), the aged apostle knows that this time he will not be released. The death sentence has been issued, and there will be no escape. Consequently, Paul is concerned with the successful passing of the gospel torch to Timothy. This is no time to mince words.

Paul will soon be executed, and Timothy must pick up the reins of ministry that the apostle had held so faithfully and firmly. This is the last communication to come from his pen, and Paul majors on majors. He charges Timothy to rightly handle the Word of God. More than merely preaching the Word, Timothy must do so accurately. Precision with the inspired biblical text is elevated here to a high premium. If the young preacher is to be effective in ministry, he must rightly handle the truth of Scripture. The extent to which this is achieved, Paul writes, will be revealed on the last day.

This same divine accountability holds true for every expositor today. There is coming a final judgment before the

Lord Jesus Christ in which each preacher will be tested by fire in order to reveal the accuracy with which he handled the sacred Scripture. Jesus said, "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:19). Some will be least in the kingdom, Jesus says, and others will be first. The determining factor will be how they live and teach the Word. This is what Paul emphasizes to Timothy. This challenge is addressed to every expositor who answers the call to preach. Let us now further consider the import of Paul's words in 2 Timothy 2:15.

Perspiration with Illumination

First, *rightly handling Scripture requires hard work*. The apostle Paul says to Timothy that he, as a preacher, must be a "workman" (*engatēs*) who labors hard in seeking to understand the Scripture. In Paul's day, this word described an agricultural worker who toiled in a field under the hot sun and in driving rain. This involved grueling work to the point of exhaustion. In like manner, Timothy must travail in the biblical text. He must work hard in the study of the Scriptures. He must dig into the rich mines of the Word and extract its gold and silver if he is to rightly expound it to his listeners.

In this pursuit, Paul charges Timothy that he must "be diligent" (*spoudazō*, which means "be zealous"). This Greek word is translated elsewhere in 2 Timothy 4:9, 21 and in Titus 3:12 as "make every effort." In Timothy's persistence to accomplish this task, there is no room for him to be passive or lackadaisical. Instead, he must make every effort to study the Scriptures.

The same is true for any biblical expositor. Expounding the biblical text requires long hours of concentrated focus spent in disciplined study. The one who preaches must possess a work ethic that drives him in his exploration of the sacred writings. He must expend energy as he probes into the depths of his passage, giving careful attention to its immediate and larger context, grammatical structure, verb forms, historical background, and geographical setting. His in-depth study of the inspired Word demands arduous effort as he examines a passage's central theme, authorial intent, and cumulative argument.

This kind of diligent preparation requires strenuous effort on the part of every expositor. With spiritual sweat dripping on his forehead, his effective Bible study is as much perspiration as it is illumination. As a miner would exhaust himself searching for riches, so the preacher must sacrifice personal ease and comfort in plummeting the depths of his passage.

One Who Studied Hard

Such diligent labor was exemplified by the scribe Ezra. Fourteen years before the revival at the Water Gate (Nehemiah 8),

Ezra had returned from Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem to begin his ministry of teaching the Word. In Ezra 7:10, we read, “Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.” The word “set” (*kun*) means to be erect, established, fixed. That Ezra “set” himself means that he was determined in this endeavor to study the Scriptures. He was wholehearted about this pursuit, a man of one passion.

The “study of the law of the Lord” was his firm commitment. The word “study” (*darash*) means to seek with careful inquiry, to make inquisition. As a teacher of the Word, Ezra was digging deeper and deeper into its truths. It could even be said that the revival at the Water Gate can be traced back to when Ezra was alone with God, with the scrolls of Scripture unraveled before him. As he studied the Word, he was plunging into the text, grasping its meaning and capturing its thunder. At the same time, he was incorporating it into his soul, applying it to his life, and teaching it faithfully to others. All of this, however, was birthed in his study of the Word.

All expositors of the Bible must emulate Ezra and set themselves with unwavering devotion to study the Word. They must be steadfast in their study of the Word. Their concern is to be the depth of their study; God is the one who will establish the breadth of their ministry.

The Heaviest Lifting

Sitting before an open Bible can be far more strenuous than physical labor in a field or factory. Some may consider sitting at a desk for extended hours to be idle work. But sermon preparation requires hard work, mentally and spiritually. It requires self-denial and self-discipline in the rigorous study of the Scriptures so that the preaching will come with precision and power. Martin Luther understood this all-demanding work when he wrote:

I would like to see the horseman who could sit still with me all day and look into a book—even if he had nothing else to care for, write, think about, or read. Ask a . . . preacher . . . whether writing and speaking is work. . .

The pen is light, that is true. . . . But in writing, the best part of the body (which is the head), and the noblest of the members (which is the tongue), and the highest faculty (which is speech) must lay hold and work as never before. In other occupations it is only the fist or the foot or the back or some other member that has to work; and while they are at it they can sing and jest, which the writer cannot do. They say of writing that “it only take three fingers to do it”; but the whole body and soul work at it too.

On another occasion, Luther said: “Let ministers daily pursue their studies with diligence and constantly busy themselves with them. . . . Let them steadily keep on reading, teaching,

studying, pondering, and meditating. Nor let them cease until they have discovered and are sure that they have taught the devil to death.” Such study must be the underlying foundation for every expository preaching ministry. The German Reformer lamented: “Some pastors and preachers are lazy and no good. They rely on . . . books to get a sermon out of them. They do not pray; they do not study; they do not read; they do not search the Scripture. . . . They are nothing but parrots and jackdaws, which learn to repeat without understanding.” To fail to study the biblical text, Luther believed, was to render

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oneself unworthy of the pulpit.

Luther saw it as his God-assigned duty to toil daily in the Bible. He declared, “The Scripture alone is our vineyard in which we must all labor and toil.” Preachers, he contended, must never become sidetracked to other fields of endeavor, but must keep themselves immersed in Scripture. He said, “The call is: watch, study, attend to reading.” This, he felt, was the preacher’s first duty. The power of one’s preaching, Luther said, is directly connected to one’s depth in the Word: “The best preacher is the man who is best acquainted with the Bible, who has it not only in his memory but in his mind, who understands its true meaning, and can handle it with effect.” In other words, a thorough knowledge of the text best prepares a man to become a strong force in the pulpit. Luther

said, “He who is well acquainted with the text of Scripture is a distinguished theologian.” Such a thorough study of the Bible was true of Luther, and it deeply impacted his sermons.

Be a Walking Bible

This is like what Charles Spurgeon said to describe John Bunyan: “Why, this man is a living Bible! Prick him anywhere—his blood is bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.” Bunyan, indeed, was a walking Bible because he had invested so much time and effort in studying the Scripture. Likewise were Ezra and Luther and every other expositor who is mightily used. As a preacher, we have nothing to say apart from the Word of the living God.

Every expositor God has called is to be a serious student of the Scripture. We must excavate the Word in searching for its true meaning. Yet, countless congregations around the world are silently crying out to their pastor to feed them the Word. Sadly, many ministers, instead of hearing the hidden cry of their people, are sidetracked by other diversions. In this hour, expositors must give an unwavering devotion to master the Word of God and to be mastered by it.

Cutting It Straight

Second, *rightly handling Scripture requires skillful precision*. In this same verse, Paul charges Timothy to be a workman “accurately handling the word of truth.” This participle—“accurately handling”—describes the manner with which the biblical text must be examined. It is the word *orthotomeō*, which is a composite verb. It adds a prefix (*ortho*), meaning “straight,” to the base word (*tomeō*), meaning “to cut, to divide.” When combined, it means to cut it straight. In the first century, this word indicated a workman cutting a straight road, a mason laying a straight line of bricks, a farmer plowing a straight furrow, or a tentmaker cutting a straight line. Paul had worked bi-vocationally as a tentmaker to support himself in ministry (Acts 18:3). He would lay a pattern over a tanned animal skin and carefully cut a straight line around it. He would then sew various pieces together into one garment. To do so, he had to cut around the pattern with a skilled eye and steady hand.

This is exactly what Paul is challenging Timothy to do.

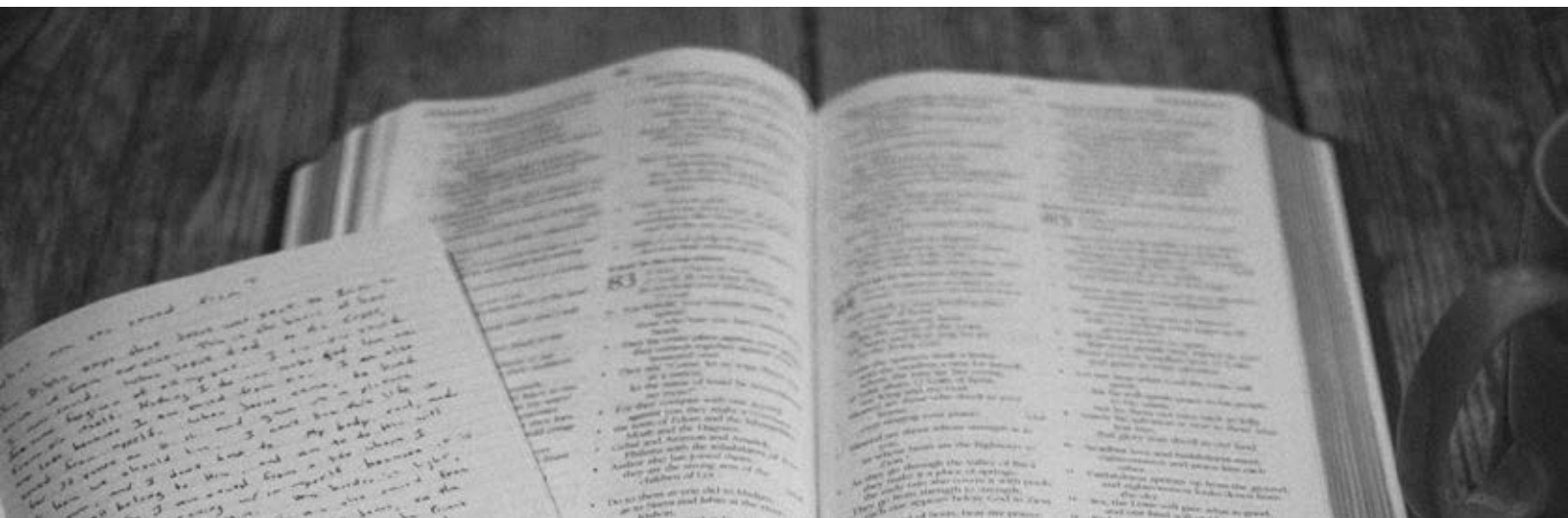
The young preacher must cut it straight in accurately interpreting the Word. Timothy must know how to rightly handle each biblical text. He must discern how each truth fits with the larger body of Scripture. He must discover how each doctrine integrates into one body of truth that never contradicts itself. He must grasp how each individual text of Scripture comes together to form one body of divinity. He must be able to harmonize the different parts of the Bible into one system of truth.

This tedious endeavor requires hermeneutical skills on the part of Timothy. The Bible gives one diagnosis of the human dilemma, one remedy of grace in Jesus Christ, one measure of personal holiness, one design for the family, one plan for history, and one consummation of the age. In order to fit together the various pieces of Scripture, Timothy must exercise meticulous precision in rightly understanding the biblical text. Sound principles of exegesis must be employed. The meaning of words must be rightly discovered. Their syntactical relationship must be rightly understood. Laws of interpretation must be properly employed. In short, Timothy must dig down carefully into every detail of the biblical text and rightly understand its God-intended meaning.

A Master Craftsman at Work

The leading pastor-scholar of the Reformation, John Calvin, believed that the individual words of a biblical text must be considered in their historical context and grammatical structure. This required his meticulous study of the biblical text. Calvin was careful to search to discover the “authorial intent” meaning of the Scripture. He was always looking for the “one definite thought” running through what the biblical author wrote. Calvin believed this was the expositor’s first duty:

Since it is almost his [the interpreter’s] only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound, he misses his mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the meaning of his author. . . . It is . . . presumptuous and almost blasphemous to turn the meaning of Scripture around without due care, as though it



were some game that we were playing. And yet many scholars have done this at one time.

Historian Philip Schaff writes: “Calvin kept constantly in view the primary and fundamental aim of the interpreter, namely, to bring to light the true meaning of the biblical authors according to the laws of thought and speaker. He transferred himself into their mental state and environment so as to become identified with them, and let them explain what they actually did say, and not what they might or should have said.”¹⁰ An example for every modern-day expositor, Calvin performed this task with exceptional skill and precision.

Capturing the Literal Sense

In pursuing the biblical author’s original intent, Calvin insisted on the *sensus literalis*, the literal sense of the biblical text. He rejected the medieval *quadriga*, the ancient interpretive scheme that allowed for literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical meanings of a text. As an expositor, he believed he was not free to play fast and loose with a passage and impose his

THE EXPOSITOR MUST STUDY UNTIL HE LAYS HOLD OF THE GOD-INTENDED MEANING OF THE TEXT.

own meaning on it. As Calvin put it, “The true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning.” Nothing else must be pursued.

Without a literal hermeneutic, Calvin believed, all objectivity and certainty would be lost. On one occasion, he wrote, “The legitimate use of Scripture is perverted when it is enunciated in an obscure manner such as no one can understand.” In this vein, the Reformer stated, “The important thing is that the Scripture should be understood and explained; how it is explained is secondary.” In other words, what the text means

must be prioritized over how it is delivered.

In finding the literal meaning of the text, Calvin achieved his hermeneutical goal. He declared: “I have observed . . . a simple style of teaching. . . . I have felt nothing to be of more importance than a literal interpretation of the biblical text.” In establishing a passage’s literal meaning, Calvin often cited other passages of Scripture. He held to the analogy of faith, the truth that the Bible nowhere contradicts itself. The Reformer believed that from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible teaches one standard of truth. The Word of God, he contended, is perfectly consistent with itself. Thus, he declared, *sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*—Scripture is to interpret Scripture. Calvin gave himself rigorously to this task. He was always studying the text, always seeking to make known its true meaning with a precise interpretation. This was the heart and soul of his pulpit work. As T. H. L. Parker writes: “Expository preaching consists in the explanation and application of a passage of Scripture. Without explanation it is not expository; without application it is not preaching.” Only when the explanation was properly given, he believed, could the sermon move forward with life-changing effect.

Finding the Meaning

John MacArthur asserts the same: “The meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture. You have to preach the sense of it as God has intended it, and He only intended it to say one thing. You have to discern what that is.” In other words, the meaning of the text *is* the text. Until you have the meaning of the text, you do not have the text. All you have is black print on white paper. Walter Kaiser notes, “The sole object of the expositor is to explain as clearly as possible what the writer meant when he wrote the text under examination.” To fulfill this task, the preacher must determine the intended thought of the biblical author.

This is where expositors must invest most of their main energies. They must commit themselves to studying the biblical text and mining from its deep quarries the unsearchable riches of God through proper interpretation. This was the focus of what Paul insisted of Timothy that he follow in his preparation to preach. It remains the *sine qua non* of all true exposition today. The expositor must study until he lays hold of the God-intended meaning of the text.

Searching Light of Judgment

Third, *rightly handling Scripture involves God’s approval*. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul further charges Timothy: “present yourself approved to God.” This verb “present” (*paristēmi*) means, literally, to stand beside. It conveys the idea of standing in the presence of God. This indicates that Timothy must study as though he is standing before God. He must handle the Scripture as one under the Lord’s penetrating examination. On the last day, Timothy will also be made subject to the strictest scrutiny of

his work in the immediate present of Christ. As a result of this divine auditing, Timothy must show himself to be approved to God by his diligent study and right interpretation.

The rest of Scripture bears witness to this sobering reality. Addressing the church in Rome, Paul writes, “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Rom 14:10). This judgment refers to all believers, as indicated by “we.” This plural pronoun indicates that Paul even sees himself in this judicial scene. Every expositor—Paul included—will give an account of himself to the Lord. Every preacher will be judged for the interpretative decisions he made. Every herald of truth will be examined concerning his handling of the biblical text.

This is precisely what Paul stated to the Corinthians. Those who preach the Word must be careful how they build upon the only sturdy foundation of the gospel. “Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work” (1 Cor 3:12–13). This points ahead to the final day when each minister will stand at the judgment seat of Christ and the divine fire will reveal the quality of each man’s handling of Scripture.

Reward Gained or Lost

Those whose doctrines survive the test shall be rewarded: “If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward” (v. 14). But if one’s message does not pass the scrutiny of the Lord’s fire, that preacher will suffer loss of reward. “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (v. 15). Such a loss in that day will be tragic. One’s entire teaching ministry, like combustible materials, will be consumed and go up in smoke. Nothing will remain.

Every preacher must seek to please Jesus Christ, because it is before Him that he will stand. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). On the last day, it will be the Lord Jesus—the Author of Scripture—who will preside in judgment over every preacher’s doctrine. His theology will be tested, and the divine verdict will be rendered. Then each man’s praise—or lack of praise—will come from the sovereign Head of the church.

The one who teaches and preaches the Word will stand with a stricter accountability before Christ than those who listen to it. The Bible says: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). Such men are entrusted by God with more. They, therefore, are accountable to God for more. Jesus says, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (Luke 12:48). The Lord clearly gives to some

more. In return, He requires of them more.

Avoiding the Shame

Fourth, *rightly handling Scripture avoids potential shame*. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul reminds Timothy of one final truth. His young protégé must rightly handle the Word as one “who does not need to be ashamed.” These words clearly imply that there is the possibility of shame on the last day. An inaccurate treatment of the Scripture will bring the painful emotion of being ashamed. If Timothy fails to cut it straight with the biblical text, his loose handling of it will result in anguishing guilt. He will suffer loss on the last day for his misrepresentation of the biblical message.

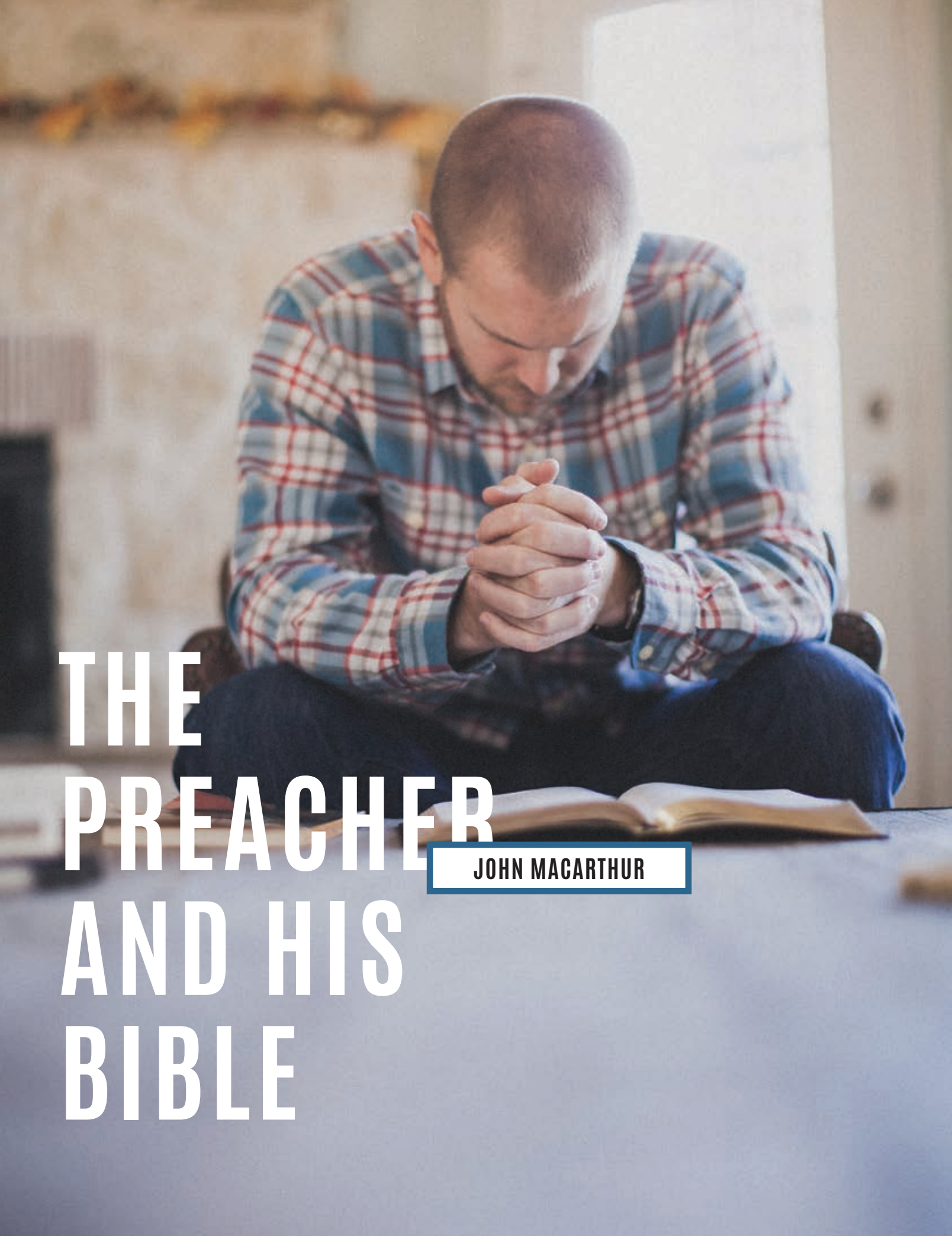
In the final judgment, every preacher will stand directly accountable to Jesus Christ, as a servant reporting to his master. He will answer for the stewardship entrusted to him. His handling of the Word will be judged. A mishandling of the Scripture will bring a sharp disapproval from Christ. If the expositor disappoints the One who called him, he will suffer disgrace. Inaccuracy with the biblical text will bring stinging shame. The expositor who used shoddy work with the written Word will bring dishonor to himself. His inaccuracies in handling the Scripture will mean loss of divine approbation.

By present standards, we are prone to judge a minister by the visible response to his preaching. That is usually measured by the number of people who come to hear him. It is often determined by the size of the congregation. However, God has an entirely different standard of judgment. It may—or may not—involve the vastness of the crowd who comes to hear the preacher. Instead, God is looking, first and foremost, at the purity of the message itself. The divine criterion is: Did this servant of the Word rightly handle it?

Charles Spurgeon puts this into right perspective when he writes:

May I beg you carefully to judge every preacher, not by his gifts, not by his elocutionary powers, not by his status in society, not by the respectability of his congregation, not by the prettiness of his church, but by this—does he preach the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation?

May you, an expositor, be reminded of your accountability to the Lord for the handling of His Word. May you strive to cut it straight with the Scriptures. May you be zealous in presenting yourself to God as a workman. And may you be found as one not needing to be ashamed. ♦



THE PREACHER AND HIS BIBLE

JOHN MACARTHUR

Direct, personal study of the biblical text is the one step in sermon preparation where the faithful preacher can least afford to cut corners. It is the starting place for me. Before I ever consult anyone else's outline or commentary, I read the biblical text, consult my Greek New Testament, note any significant grammatical features and or nuances of meaning that come out in the original language, meditate on what I've read, read the text again, note my own thoughts and observations, and ponder the connections between this text and other passages of Scripture. When I am preaching sequentially through whole books of Scripture (my preferred approach), I come to the text with the context of the previous passage in mind. I also read far enough beyond my text to get the gist of the subsequent passage. With all of that in mind, I meditate on the passage some more, re-read the text, outline the passage, and then, as time permits, read the text several more times.

Throughout that whole process, I am asking questions, seeking understanding, looking for the central point of the passage, and tracing the flow of logic built into the text and its context. By the time I turn to commentaries, the words of the text are firmly fixed in my mind. Commentaries might suggest additional insights, help untangle difficulties, affirm (or challenge) my thinking about the passage, or suggest connections that hadn't occurred to me. But my fundamental understanding of the text comes first of all from my own direct study of the passage.

If I tried to handle Scripture any other way, I would not be doing my main duty as a shepherd of the flock of God. People sometimes ask if the process has become monotonous or wearisome after more than forty-five years of ministry. My answer is that it is not burdensome at all; it is the most delightful and rewarding aspect of all my pastoral work.

Preach the Word

I was in college when I became convinced that God was calling me to pastoral ministry. Up to that point in my academic career, I had devoted most of my time and energy to athletics. Running track and playing football had taught me the importance of discipline and perseverance. But frankly, all those extra hours devoted to physical workouts had probably stunted my study skills. My father and grandfather were both pastors, and I understood that to preach well demands careful study and preparation. I knew I had some catching up to do, and because of the weightiness of the preacher's task, I knew I needed to approach the study of God's Word with even more devotion, diligence, and determination than I had brought to football practice.

My dad gave me a Bible inscribed with a quotation from 2 Timothy 4:2: "Preach the Word." That charge, the centerpiece of Paul's dying words to his primary protégé, became and has remained my driving passion throughout all the years of my ministry. It is, I believe, the primary duty of every pastor.

No one can preach the Word well without studying it carefully, hiding it in one's own heart, and receiving its truth obediently.

Read the Word

Since the Word of God comes to us in written form, it ought to be self-evident that Bible study must begin with reading. But I'm convinced many preachers think they can safely skip that step. They may read commentaries or listen to other preachers' sermons, but they don't spend enough time reading the Bible itself—and it shows in their preaching. At best, they nibble at the text. Often, they totally ignore the context. I've heard countless preachers quote a partial verse of Scripture only to use it as a springboard for a topical message. They don't explain the text itself. And after quoting whatever snippet of a phrase they want to hang their message on, they don't even return to the verse that launched them. This is a sure sign that they have not carefully read whatever passage they are dealing with—because Scripture is a rich, measureless well of truth. So, when a man fills his message with ideas imported into the text (*eisegetis*), it's instantly obvious that he has not made any serious effort to sound the depths of the passage he is preaching on.

Some sermons are built on a wobbly scaffold of illustrations. The impression the listener gets is that the preacher had some intriguing anecdotes to tell, and he used a passage of Scripture to try to lash all his stories together. This approach treats the Bible as an afterthought. No matter how compelling the oratory or how captivating the stories, it is clear when preachers do this that they have not done their homework.

Reading is the simplest, yet most rewarding, aspect of Bible study. It does not require advanced skill or post-graduate instruction. What it does require is focus, concentration, and careful, single-minded thinking. That can be a challenge in this media-driven, fast-paced era. But the rewards are immense. If you have ever thought reading Scripture and meditating on its truth could be tedious, it's only because you haven't been doing it right. Find a way to block out the distractions of life, get alone with your Bible, and immerse yourself in the Word of God. What you'll find is the polar opposite of tedium. It will revolutionize both your study and your preaching.

Interpret It Correctly

The true meaning of Scripture is not terribly difficult to comprehend. Most people who insist they cannot understand God's Word simply don't want to hear what it has to say. Jesus made that point after His authority had been challenged re-

peatedly by some hostile religious leaders: “Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word” (John 8:43).

Scripture is sufficiently clear so that all who apply themselves faithfully to the task of learning its basic truths can do so with relative ease. “Those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray” (Isa 35:8). It doesn’t take a special skill set or secret knowledge to get the gist of what Scripture is teaching. God did not give us a puzzle to decipher. He gave us revelation, which, by definition, means truth is being disclosed to us in Scripture, not concealed from us.

Nevertheless, there are, as we all know, “some things [in the Bible] hard to understand” (2 Pet 3:16). The point Peter makes in that passing remark is as relevant today as it ever was. There is no shortage of self-appointed teachers who are spiritually ignorant and unstable, and they seem drawn to anything obscure or ambiguous in the Bible. Beginning with those difficult passages, they twist Scripture to their own destruction—just what Peter was describing.

But even if we take the hardest passages into consideration, the Bible is not a cryptic riddle. Still, it does require diligence, persistence, prayerfulness, and careful study to handle the Word of truth rightly (2 Tim 2:15).

Without an accurate understanding of the truth Scripture means to convey, we might as well not have the Bible at all. I’ve frequently said that the meaning of the Bible is the Bible. What I mean is that while the very words of Scripture are inspired (Mark 13:31; 1 Cor 2:13), what’s crucial is not the sounds and syllables of the words but the truth they convey. The Bible is not a magical incantation or abracadabra. It is indeed powerful, but the power lies in the truth its words communicate, not in the physical appearance of the book or its typography.

Therefore, getting the true meaning of Scripture is paramount. Nehemiah 8:8 underscores the vital importance of proper interpretation. It was the task of the priests and Levites to proclaim the truth of God to the multitudes who had returned from captivity: “They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.”

If every preacher faithfully did that, it would remedy most of what ails contemporary evangelicalism. Notice that the stress is on clarity, coherence, and understanding. In other words, the reading of the Scripture was no mindless ritual or recitation. The point was to explain the meaning of God’s Word to the common people. The priests were simply doing biblical exposition. And the people of Nehemiah’s time, starved for truth, eagerly responded and begged for more.

That’s precisely what happens today when the Word of God is faithfully and accurately taught.

By the way, the liturgy of the early apostolic church was an

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echo of that passage in Nehemiah 8. In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul tells Timothy, “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.” Notice, the words of Scripture are spoken aloud (“reading”); people are urged to obey the Word of God (“exhortation”); and the truth of the text is carefully and thoroughly explained (“teaching”). Those are the core elements of good expository preaching.

It is significant that whenever Scripture gives instructions to preachers, the theme is always the same. We are to preach the sure Word of God, and nothing else (not our opinions, pop culture, political agendas, dreams, personal visions, or other speculative notions). We are to preach scripture faithfully in season and out of season (2 Tim 4:2); whether it’s easy or hard; whether people respond enthusiastically or not. The Bible is the only message we are authorized to preach in Christ’s name. Anything and everything else is a corruption of the preacher’s high calling.

Stay with the Text

That means when you start a sermon by asking people to turn in their Bibles to a specific chapter and verse, you need to stay with that passage until you have thoroughly explained the

sense of it. Let the text speak without trying to soften it or deflect its authority under the rubric of political correctness. Don't try to make the Bible conform to your preconceived notions. Be careful not to interpret the Bible at the cost of its true meaning.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but the first sermon I ever preached was a deplorable example of what not to do with Scripture. I'm glad there is no recording of it. My text was, "The angel rolled the stone away" from Matthew 28. I entitled my sermon, "Rolling Away the Stones in Your Life." I talked about the stone of doubt, the stone of fear, and the stone of anger. Doubt, fear, and anger are all legitimate topics, but they have nothing to do with that verse! I cringe when I think of it, and I still cringe today when I hear preachers handle the text that way. Sadly, that sort of preaching has become so common that the average church member thinks that is what all preaching should be like.

Evangelicals have been courting and encouraging trite preaching for decades. The vast majority of sermons today are so superficial that it seems as if the preacher is laboring to avoid challenging anything his listeners already believe. And what's particularly stunning is how quickly preachers move away from the text into storytelling, allegory, far-fetched applications, and other nonsense. (You have to do that, of course, if you are determined not to teach any truths that might be at odds with our culture's values and belief systems.)

One of the most troubling trends in today's pulpits is the popular practice of personalizing and over-contextualizing

Scripture so that every text is ultimately about the preacher himself. If he deals with the story of Goliath, he will illustrate it by describing how he conquered some Goliath-sized conflict in his own life. If he teaches on Moses and his confrontation of Pharaoh, he will have a story about some symbolic pharaoh he outlasted and overcame. My dad used to say, "Beware the preacher who is the hero of his own illustrations." Today, we need to be warned against the narcissists who want to make themselves the subject of every biblical text.

Be faithful to the text. It is, after all, the Word of God, not a script for men to revise and amuse themselves with. In the words of the apostle, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God" (2 Cor 2:17). The word translated "peddling" is a verb in the original text—*kapēleuō*, a derivative of *kapelos*, the Greek word for "huckster." It has a clear connotation of insincerity, deceit. It signifies a shady vendor of shoddy goods whose aim is only to make a quick profit.

No preacher who truly loves Christ wants to be the evangelical equivalent of a snake oil salesman. But let's face this squarely: the tendencies of our fallen flesh make us too prone to be careless, shallow, inattentive, and lazy in the study. The pressures of life and ministry tempt us to take shortcuts we shouldn't take. We must mortify those tendencies, and we must remain constantly diligent, remembering that we are handling the Word of God and that there is no excuse for handling it carelessly. ❖





THE PREACHER IN THE STUDY: A CONVERSATION WITH SINCLAIR FERGUSON

EM: Why is it so important for the expositor to spend quality time in his study?

SF: There are several levels of answer to this question. Perhaps I can mention three here.

A very basic and yet quite serious level is this: spending time in study is a fundamental aspect in the work our congregations pay us to do. They free up our lives so that we can devote ourselves to the task of teaching and preaching the Word of God to them. Of course, we should never forget that all of our time is the Lord's, not our own. But neither should we lose sight of the fact that many people give financially, and often sacrificially, so that we may have what is surely one of the highest privileged responsibilities in the world. While our congregations are not our masters, we are still their servants for Jesus' sake. We owe it to them to work hard in order to feed them as well as we can.

The second is this: the New Testament directives for ministry place enormous emphasis on pastor-teachers devoting themselves to teaching, and therefore to study and preparation. 1 Timothy 4:11–16 and 6:2–3 are important here. We are to be “absorbed in” (*isthi en*) this.

Later Paul stresses that we are to be (i) workmen who (ii) do not need to be ashamed because (iii) we rightly handle God's word (iv) presenting ourselves to God as “approved” (*dokimos*—having passed the test! 2 Tim 2:15).

It isn't possible to be obedient, never mind fruitful over

the long term in fulfilling these exhortations, without being someone who sees that preaching and teaching are his labor (1 Tim 5:17). Alexander Maclaren, the famous nineteenth-century preacher, used to go into his study wearing workman's boots to remind him of his calling. And he always felt ashamed if he was not there *before* he could hear the sound of the boots of workmen on their way to work.

The third is that over the long haul (and the work of biblical exposition is a long-haul task!), we can only sustain the quality of our exposition and application by persistent study of God's Word and the use of whatever tools we have that help us to exegete, expound, and apply it to our people.

Ernest Kevan, the first principal of The London Bible College (and author of the fine study of the Puritan doctrine of the Law *The Grace of Law*) used to warn his students that there were two prevailing sins among ministers. Laziness was one of them (pride was the other).

In all this, it is very easy for us to forget that many of the people in our congregation work enormously hard and put in long hours—our wives may well be among them! Their labors fund ours. Shame on me if I am not willing to do the same in order to feed them!

EM: What is your first priority when you sit at your desk to begin sermon preparation?

SF: Didn't Aristotle insist that the first thing in mind must

be the final goal we intend to achieve? Insofar as that is true, my own thinking about priorities has been greatly influenced by the framework Paul provides in 2 Timothy 3:16–4:5 (with the understanding that Paul did not intend a chapter break between 3:16 and 4:1!).

Paul underlines the fourfold usefulness of Scripture: teaching, reproof, correction (in the sense of transformation, restoration), and child-training. He then goes on to imply that if these are the “uses” of the God-breathed Word, then this is how we are to preach it. His words “reprove, rebuke, exhort/encourage, with great patience and instruction” in 4:2 clearly echo what he has said about the nature of Scripture in 3:16–17.

Perhaps as beginning expositors we need to have this “grid” consciously in view; later on, we need to keep going back to it as a discipline. But it should eventually become somewhat instinctive in the way it shapes our priority—How does this preaching passage furnish us with these features; How can I expound and apply it so that these characteristics unfold in my exposition? I am, after all, a steward who has gone to the supply cupboard to get the ingredients for a meal. They are all there. But how can I best prepare the meal from these ingredients for *this particular flock of the Lord’s sheep at this particular time and place?*

There is another aspect of this that I think impacts our priorities, namely, the goal of preaching: what is our *telos*?

Ultimately this is, surely, the glory of God—which, at least in my own church’s catechism, also means enjoyment of Him. If this is the case, then doxology, worship, and yielding to the Lord will always be the goal. This, in turn, will be accomplished through the magnifying of the Person and Work of Christ within the context of the Blessed Trinity (so our exposition is God-grounded, Scripture-based, and Christ-centered; it leads to communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). The knowledge of God—with all of the implications of that knowledge for the sanctification of body, soul, and spirit (1 Thess 5:23)—is what we have in view.

This means that the priority is not merely the exegesis of the text but of the Person whose text it is and about whom every aspect of the text speaks. God’s Word is God speaking!

The priority is not merely to inform (i.e., instruct). It is to nourish through communion with the “three-person’d God” (to use John Donne’s expression. Indeed, the opening words of his sonnet “Batter my heart, Three Person’d God” might be a good description of what happens sometimes in preaching!).

It is, I think, possible for a congregation to be *well instructed* but *undernourished*. Most of us have known people like that in general. But 2 Timothy 3:16–4:5 gives us a very holistic perspective: teaching that informs and shapes the mind; rebuke that touches, convicts, and reforms the conscience and the lifestyle; correction that cleanses, heals, transforms,

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and quickens the affections; child-training that nurtures us in spiritual growth.

Jonathan Edwards is helpful here when he says that he made it his goal in preaching to see the affections of his people raised as high as possible. That—it seems to me—is very important. It shapes the goal of preparation. It leads me to ask not only “What is the truth of this passage?” but also “How does the exposition of the mood and emotion of this passage hold out its truth in such a way that it teaches, reproves, corrects and heals, and trains the children in every aspect of their beings?” Exposition of truth in the spirit of that truth will capture the affections in a way that draws the mind to love the truth and the will to obey it.

EM: What part does private prayer play within the context of the study in the life of the expositor?

SF: All of us would say it is essential—but perhaps the question is: How does this work out in practice?

We know from Scripture that prayer for preaching is vital (e.g., Acts 6:4; Eph 6:19–20; Col 4:3; 2 Thess 3:1). So, we approach study prayerfully; we pray for the Lord’s blessing on the fruit of our study.

But prayer before is, almost of necessity, not yet energized by the truth we are to preach. So perhaps for me the big thing is expressed in the old Latin dictum *Laborare est orare*—to work is to pray. I mean that there is a prayer-communion involved in working with the text itself, since it is the Word of God—we live by every word that proceeds (present tense!) from His mouth (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4).

I think of study and preparation time as a kind of allegory of Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord (Gen 32:22–32). Prayer here is shaped by the Word with which we wrestle

with a view to expounding it. It may be relatively wordless, although sometimes words will be spoken unconsciously!

The door of the study thus becomes the Wadi Jabbok. We cross it. There, at our desk, we are alone, and the Messenger of God, His living Word, meets with us and begins to wrestle us, as we wrestle with Him. We say to the Angel, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” But what in fact happens is that He “untwists” our thinking, our affections, our lives. The Angel-Word does what 2 Timothy 3:16ff. says it does. At first it may



not; we refuse to listen if it seems to be saying “let me go”! We want to know the “name”—to have the truth disclosed to us.

Several things result:

- Our hip is put out of joint—God’s Angel-Word humbles us
- We are blessed (32:29–30) because we have met with God
- We feel the sun has risen (our hearts are “strangely warmed”!)
- We *walked* into the study; we leave it *limping*
- But now we are beginning to be ready to move on to bring the Word from the presence of God into the presence of the people.

“This may be interpreted allegorically”—to borrow Paul’s words (Gal 4:24)! It expresses the engagement and communion with God in prayer that takes place *during* the work of study and preparation. In one sense, it makes the very Word I am to expound itself the sum and substance of prayer for its exposition. It then provides us with the fuel for prayer between preparation of the message and preaching it.

EM: You have written on the eminent Puritan John Owen. What study practices did he employ that the expositor can introduce into his own study patterns?

SF: Well, of all the questions I have been asked about Owen, this is not one of them!

Owen was famously reticent to speak or write about his private life—wisely so. But here are some of the things we pick up in his writings:

1. We know he sacrificed sleep for the sake of study. We also know he felt in later life that this was a mistake to the extent that he thought he might have endangered his health and therefore limited his strength to work in later life (when he was frequently unwell and unable to preach).

2. We know he read deeply and widely. He had an unusually large library for his day (he was by no means poor). He read the great theologians without neglecting wider reading (we know this partly from the references in his published works, but also because after his death his library was catalogued and sold).

Perhaps something worth mentioning here by way of application is this—I think it may have special relevance to younger preachers. Most of us are unfamiliar with what the preachers we most value and admire have read. The result is that we can

easily make the mistake of thinking that we need to read the books these men are reading or mentioning in their preaching *now*. But these are probably not the books that have *shaped* their thinking, their character, or their ministry. The danger here is that we can end up as mimics of them and not as learners from them.

I know there are exceptions to this general rule—but even then there is a danger that we then slavishly imitate and read the one or two great authors of our heroes! So Owen here is a great example. He quotes Augustine about three or four times more frequently than Calvin. He read the Fathers. Isn’t that interesting?!

3. We know that Owen wrote a great deal (how do you write twenty-four six-hundred-page volumes with a quill pen?).

This combination of wide reading and disciplined writing used to be a commonplace part of Western education. It was what through such means God produced great Christian authors and hymn writers. It also enhanced preaching. But it is no longer part of many educational curricula, unless we

belong to the privileged minority. In the busy lives we lead, we need to reintroduce these disciplines for the sake of our ministry.

4. We also know that when considering a theological issue, Owen developed the wise practice of reading the best and most able book supporting the *opposite view* to his own. Evangelicals don't always do that. But he did it for several reasons, one of which was that it made him *think*.

One way I have found helpful to combine some of Owen's habits is this: whenever I begin a new series, I try to select three commentaries (or if need be buy them!). The first is a classic commentary and the second is the most recent good scholarly commentary. The author of the latter will invariably feel responsible to discuss the views of the commentaries published most recently when he wrote the work. One can save both money (always the Scot!) and time this way—although I am not suggesting we should not read those other commentaries ourselves! The third commentary, where possible, will be one of serious substance but with which I suspect I will find myself in disagreement. This last will often stimulate thought, and it is this that makes it valuable.

To this, an additional ingredient that can be a great help to someone who knows he is going to be under lifelong pressure to prepare two, three, sometimes five or six new messages every week while still maintaining all the other aspects of pastoral ministry: I read what I can on the theme of the passage in books in my library that are *not commentaries*. In this way, we become like squirrels gathering nuts for the future.

This combination is a great help to keep us steady theologically, to keep us abreast insofar as we are called to be scholarly, and to keep us on our toes intellectually, as well as keeping us growing and thinking theologically—so that we really do develop the equipment we need to think through the text and its applications.

EM: What is the most effective way the expositor can affect people with his pen, and how does the pastor “write” for the people in his congregation?

SF: One is to say that not every preacher is a writer, and of course the reverse is true. Some are, some are not. Preaching and writing are for almost everybody quite different, if overlapping, disciplines (both use words!).

So, we should not place false burdens on ourselves.

On the other hand, we live in a day of enormous opportunity to communicate by writing (although I imagine not too many readers of this magazine will do so, as the question suggests, “with his pen!”).

Beside traditional print media, we are awash with technological means of “writing”—blogs and websites that others read, and the like.

Perhaps here a couple of words of caution are in order:

The first is that the *immediacy* of technological communication (e.g., websites, blogs) often comes with the *liability* that what we write lacks the advantage of the slow production of a book—it never passes before the eyes of an editor who will be our guard and helper. So, if pastors do use these media, they need to learn to be their own self-conscious (and self-critical) editors.

The second is this. But before mentioning it I should confess that while not a Luddite, I don't blog, tweet, Facebook, or do social media (anything of that order with my name on it has been created by third parties unknown to me!). Older men (among whom I now discover myself) marvel at the Owen-like abilities of younger men to write so much on social media. But we also sometimes wonder if they ever think of buying a pen, ink, paper, envelopes, and stamps in order to write even tweet-length personal notes to members of their own flock to show that they love and care for them, think about them sympathetically, and want to serve them. That is the writing that shows that we are pastors who love, and who are much more interested in our own flock than we are in being “out there” simply because we can do it. It is very easy to confuse activity with pastoral ministry!

EM: Why is it important for the expositor to develop proper study habits early in his ministry and how do we discipline ourselves to keep those patterns in our busy ministry context?

SF: I have met many men who have told me they wished they had studied more when they were younger. I have never met a single minister (I was born long after Owen's time!) who has told me he regretted that he developed study habits when he was young!

It is true in life: “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” Something similar is true of every hour we redeem in order to study well.

How do we discipline ourselves? I think we feel the weight of Paul's exhortation to Timothy, don't we? “Devote yourself . . . so that your progress will be evident to all” (1 Tim 4:15). I have often thought in the churches I have served: “I wonder if anyone in the congregation has ever thought I have made any progress in my ability to expound Scripture, or in the quality of the exposition since I came here?” It is this desire for growth, for “progress”—in the knowledge of the Lord and in His Word, and in our ability to feed the people we love, that keeps us pressing on. And in many ways, it is this that sustains a ministry over the long haul—this wonderful sense that God has more light to break out of His holy Word, and that we are on the move as He continues to speak to us through it.

This does not come by the decision of a moment but by the disciplines of a lifetime. ♦





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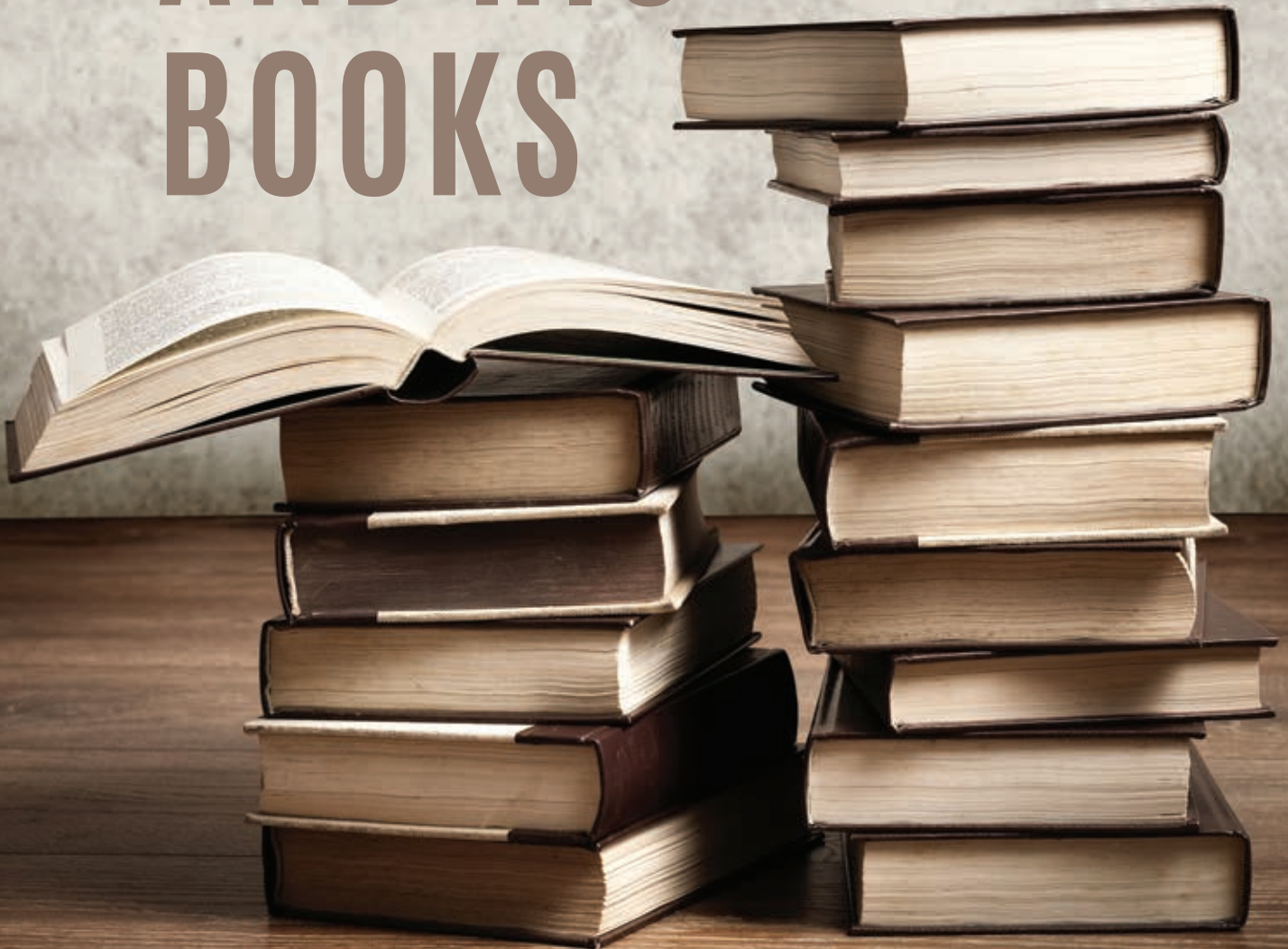
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THE PREACHER AND HIS BOOKS

JOEL BEEKE



If you were to visit the shop of an old carpenter, you would no doubt find yourself surrounded by tools for measuring, cutting, shaping, and finishing wood. Some tools would be very simple, and others very expensive. The carpenter might show you a well-worn hammer that he has used daily for decades; it is now an extension of his hand. On the wall you might spy some unusual instrument and then hear him explain that he uses that tool only once a year—but when the time comes, it is invaluable. You realize that over the years the carpenter has invested a small fortune in tools, for they are critical to his life's work.

Preachers are craftsmen of words, and they need tools. The preacher's tools are his books. Over the years, if he is able, he will develop a significant library. The selection, purchase, and use of books is an essential part of his life's work. Therefore, the preacher's library merits careful consideration and substantial investment.

There is nothing inherently worldly about pastors buying and reading books. If there were, I for one would be terribly guilty as charged. I am almost embarrassed to admit that I have collected a library of some 30,000 titles over more than half a century, since I was nine years old. This is not to say that I have read all of them, not by any means. A library is to be used by a minister as just that—a library—so that he has helpful sources to turn to for every biblical and practical subject he is called upon to address.

Reading books is part of a minister's calling. Over the years, a faithful minister of the Word will grow to love reading sound books as an important "means of grace" for his own mind and soul. A young man I interviewed fifteen years ago as an applicant for Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary told me, "I feel called to the ministry, but I hate reading, so I want to get through seminary quickly, reading as few books as possible." I told him that I appreciated his honesty but that I hoped that his time with us in the seminary would result in his realizing how little he knew and move him to study more and to come to deeply appreciate sound biblical literature. Happily, that's exactly what happened. After he graduated with high honors from our seminary, he went on to get his Ph.D., and today is the president of a seminary with a wide-ranging ministry throughout Africa. Now he complains that he can't find enough time to read!

Studying books can and must be a spiritual exercise. Some of the best moments of my life have been when the Holy Spirit moved me through reading, interspersed with praying, to have fellowship with the Father and the Son. As Benjamin Warfield wrote in *The Religious Life of Theological Students*, "Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. 'What!' is the appropriate response, 'than ten hours over your books, on your

knees?' Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God?"

In this brief article, I offer some personal advice on how to read for a lifetime of growth in grace and fruitfulness, and then, more specifically, on how to use good books in sermon preparation.

How to Read for a Lifetime of Growth

First, it is important to know that, as a general rule, great preachers of the past were avid readers. They viewed the reading of sound biblical literature as the backbone of their sermon preparation, often commenting that their sermons took decades to prepare because behind each one was a lifetime of reading. When Paul was preparing to die as a martyr, he made two requests of Timothy (2 Tim 4:13). First, he asked for a cloak (winter was coming, v. 21). Second, Paul asked Timothy to bring "the books, especially the parchments." Even to his last days, the apostle remained a reader. Spurgeon regularly read at least one if not two or three books a week. A lifetime of reading for your own growth is foundational for great preaching.

Read Regularly

While you must not neglect your duties in administration, leadership, and personal pastoral care, you also must not allow such things to consume your time so that you are not reading. Do not become like Martha, so busy serving Christ, that you have no time to be like Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet to listen to Him (Luke 10:38–42). Here are some practical guidelines for maintaining good reading habits:

1. Guard your daily devotions. In addition to reading the Scriptures each day, spend at least ten minutes a day reading material that edifies your mind and soul. Personally, I have found the Puritans to be the best group of writers in this regard. They have it all: clarity of thought, depth of exegesis, experiential discrimination, practical and heartfelt applications—all grounded in the Word.
2. Block out time to study for every sermon and teaching occasion. Preachers vary here considerably, but typically about one third of my average length of sermon preparation time, which ranges from ten to twenty hours, is given to reading.
3. Be a perpetual student of sound doctrine. Read more about a doctrine that especially interests you. For example, if you want to marinate your mind and soul more in the saving work of Christ, read John Flavel's *Fountain of Life* (*Works*, vol. 1). If you want to grow in holiness, read Walter Marshall's *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*.

4. Work through major books by classic Reformed theologians. Focus on one author for a while as a theological mentor. Outstanding examples are William Perkins, John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

5. Relax with a book that feeds your soul, such as Richard Sibbes' *The Bruised Reed*, Anthony Burgess' *Faith Seeking Assurance*, or Thomas Brooks' *Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices*.

Read Wisely

1. Read the Bible first, most, and last. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

2. Return often to the Reformed confessions and catechisms.¹ They are succinct sources of pastoral wisdom on a host of issues, carefully formulated by the best of theologians and approved by the church for centuries.

3. Read more old than new. The Reformers and Puritans have a biblical and spiritual depth in their writings that is seldom matched today. George Whitefield wrote of the Puritans, "Though dead, by their writings they yet speak: a peculiar unction attends them to this very hour."² Whitefield predicted that Puritan writings would be read until the end of time due to their scriptural truth. Spurgeon agreed, saying, "In these [writings] they do live forever. Modern interpreters have not superseded them, nor will they altogether be superseded to the end of time."³

I would suggest that for every hundred pages you read from books published after 1800, read two hundred pages from books published before 1800. Martin Luther said that most of his best friends were dead—they were the authors of his library books! What great "friends" I have in Theodore Beza (presently I am reading with much profit a great old book [1587!] of his on the first three chapters of the Song of Solomon); Samuel Rutherford (reading his *Letters* has often led me closer to Christ); Wilhelmus à Brakel (the practical

applications at the end of each chapter of his great classic *The Christian's Reasonable Service* have greatly helped me shepherd my own soul as well as the souls of others); and J. C. Ryle (his profound simplicity has, I trust, made me a more sincere Christian and a simpler preacher).

4. Pause to think and write. Don't just plow through a book with your mind half asleep. Stop periodically to think, interact, underline (in pencil), or jot a note—i.e., take "ownership" of the books you read. As Paul said to Timothy, "Take pains with these things" (1 Tim 4:15, KJV).

5. Read what you find useful, and a bit more. Don't feel obligated to read a whole book. Look for the marrow. But then keep reading, to get context and avoid misunderstanding.

6. Choose carefully the authors that you read. Avoid unsound books. As John Trapp said, "Be careful what books you read, for as water tastes of the soil it runs through, so does the soul taste of the authors that a man reads."

Read Experientially

1. Pray before, while, and after you read. The best reading, as the Puritans taught us, runs through a continual cycle of reading, meditation, and prayer. Meditation, they said, is the halfway house between reading and prayer.

2. Let your books study you. If the book is representing

God's truth, then allow it to speak to your soul. Take time for self-examination. As Warfield asks, "Are you, by this constant contact with divine things, growing in holiness...? If not, you are hardening!"⁴

3. Read to seek Christ and know Him better. Desire to see His glory in all that you study, so that you may exercise more faith in Christ's all-sufficiency for your needs. Make use of every book to lift up your love to Christ. Caleb Evans said that when a young man asked an older minister "how he might learn to be a good and useful preacher," that minister replied, "You must learn to be a zealous lover of Christ."⁵

4. Find books that stir your heart to love, but not that puff up

LET YOUR BOOKS STUDY YOU. IF THE BOOK IS REPRESENTING GOD'S TRUTH, THEN ALLOW IT TO SPEAK TO YOUR SOUL.

your mind to pride. A heart that is continuously being stirred up to love Christ more will bear fruit in the pulpit.

5. Do not glory in books; use books to glorify God. Cotton Mather said, “If you aim no higher nor better [in your studies] than to render yourself considerable, and make a figure among your fellow-mortals, or perhaps, to gain a comfortable subsistence in the world, all you do is wrong and mean [i.e., ‘low’], and vile, and the holy God looks down with abhorrence upon you.”⁶

How to Use Books in Sermon Preparation and Ministry

For sermon preparation, it is paramount to have good resources for the original languages, to make diligent use of lexicons and grammars, and to build a collection of the best commentaries and books of sermons. Though I can’t speak for other ministers here as our methods of sermon preparation differ widely, my habit in sermon preparation is to move from the original languages and word studies to commentaries, and from commentaries to printed sermons. I suppose that I would average two hours per sermon on doing word study and developing my main theme and points, and then another two hours reading and interacting with commentaries, tweaking my theme and points as I read, followed by the skimming of five to ten sermons on the text from our forefathers, which takes me another hour or two. Combined, this accounts for about fifty percent of my preparation time. The next six hours or so are then devoted to fleshing out my manuscript.

In reading commentaries, I try to use a mix between technical commentaries to understand languages and cultural settings (such as the NICOT/NICNT) and more popular commentaries that connect the text of Scripture to sound doctrine, love in the heart, and practical Christian living (such as Calvin, Henry, Poole, Hendriksen/Kistemaker). I also use three to five commentaries written on the particular book of the Bible my text is drawn from.⁷

As for sermons, I go to PERT (Puritan Electronic Research Tool) on our Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary website at <https://prts.edu/library/pert/> to use our online Scripture index. Linked to our library of over 70,000 volumes, this homiletical search engine is a great tool that provides every source and page number on a given text. Typically, dozens or even a few hundred sources will be readily available for each text. Most ministers will own a fair number of these sources, so this is a great tool to assist them in using their own library. From these sources, I select sermons from five to ten preachers that I know will be helpful in sermon preparation. I usually skim those sermons in about five minutes each, sometimes lingering longer if there are striking thoughts, ideas, illustrations, or applications. At times, I will read the entire sermon, if it is especially good.

I also refer frequently to the Reformed confessions and

catechisms, and to expositions of them, such as *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Beeke/Ferguson), *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in English Translation* (4 vols.; Dennison); Johannes VanderKemp’s *The Christian Entirely the Property of Christ* (Heidelberg Catechism); Thomas Watson’s *Body of Divinity* (Westminster Shorter Catechism); and Thomas Ridgeley’s *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*.

In addition to this, I would suggest that you periodically read a book that increases your compassion and sharpens your skills as a shepherd of the flock and evangelist of the lost (such as Charles Bridges’ *The Christian Ministry*; William Perkins’ *The Art of Prophecy*; Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ *Preachers and Preaching*; or Jeremy Walker’s *The Broken-Hearted Evangelist*). That will help you immensely both in the preparation of your sermon and in its delivery.

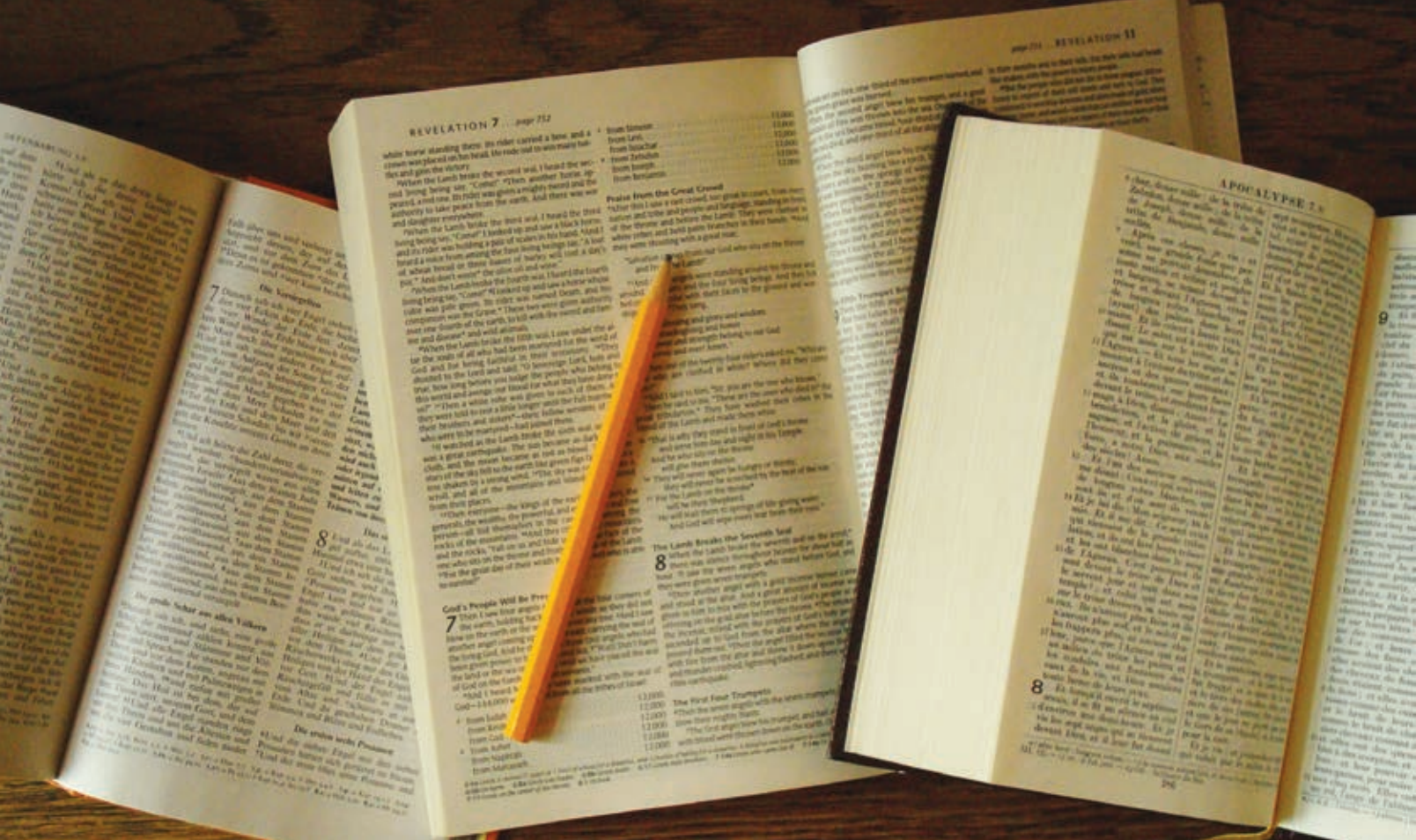
Then, too, don’t forget to read biography and history, such as Augustine’s *Confessions* or Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*. Such books will lend color to your sermons. Find encouragement in the lives of godly men and women who persevered through suffering while remaining faithful.

To make your sermons contemporary, read about current issues. Whether it is defending Christianity against raging atheists, communicating about homosexuality with clarity and compassion, contending for the faith against “open theism,” or leading the church into ethnic integration, pastors have the responsibility to be informed about current problems facing the church.

For preaching and pastoral ministry, try to keep in mind, frequently consult, and promote in your church families some of the great Reformed theologians throughout the ages, such as:

- The Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Henry Bullinger
- The Puritans: Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, John Bunyan
- The Dutch Further Reformation: Willem Teellinck, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Herman Witsius
- The Scottish Presbyterians: Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine
- Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Writers: Jonathan Edwards, Archibald Alexander, Charles Spurgeon
- Contemporary Writers: R. C. Sproul, Sinclair Ferguson, Derek Thomas

Finally, get excited about good books. Promote them among your church members. Engage in book studies with young people and young adults. Help children build libraries. Give good books to your people. Provide them with a substantive church library and with helpful books at discounted prices. Encourage them to read.



Conclusion: Get the Most Out of Your Books

The relationship between good preachers and good books is a close one. Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679) was a Puritan pastor and theologian of the first rank. He served as president of Magdalene College at Oxford from 1649 to 1660. After the restoration of the monarchy, Goodwin left for London with much of his congregation. He continued his studies, avidly reading Augustine, John Calvin, William Ames, and other Reformed divines. Yet, as his son later recounted, “the Scriptures were what he most studied,” and to assist his meditations on the Word of God, he consulted many good commentaries.

It was a terrible blow when the Great Fire of London swept through in 1666, destroying more than half of Goodwin’s books. He remarked that God had touched him in a very tender place, humbling him for loving his books too much. Yet he responded to this divine chastening with a discourse on James 1:2–4, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” In other words, he dealt with the loss of his books by publishing another book.

May the Lord teach us not to love books for their own sake, but to make diligent use of books out of an all-encompassing love for God and His Word, and love for our fellow human beings, aiming to do good to their souls. Strive to get the most out of your books, for your own mind and soul, and for the minds and souls of those to whom you preach the Word. By

God’s grace and the help of the Holy Spirit, doing so will make you a much better preacher and pastor. ♦

¹ The seven most widely used historic Reformed confessions are collated in *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

² George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A....: containing all his sermons and tracts which have been already published: with a select collection of letters* (London: printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771–72), 4:307.

³ Cited in Steven C. Kettler, *Biblical Counsel: Resources for Renewal* (Newark, Del.: Letterman Associates, 1993), 311.

⁴ Warfield, *The Religious Life of Theological Students*, 7.

⁵ Caleb Evans, *Advice to Students Having in View Christian Ministry* (Bristol: n.p., 1770), 3.

⁶ Cotton Mather, *Dr. Cotton Mather’s Student and Preacher: Intituled Manuductio ad Ministerium; or, Directions for a Candidate of the Ministry* (London: printed for Charles Dilly, in the Poultry, 1781), 26.

⁷ For a list of commentaries that have been most helpful to me in sermon preparation, see my blog at www.joelbeek.org.

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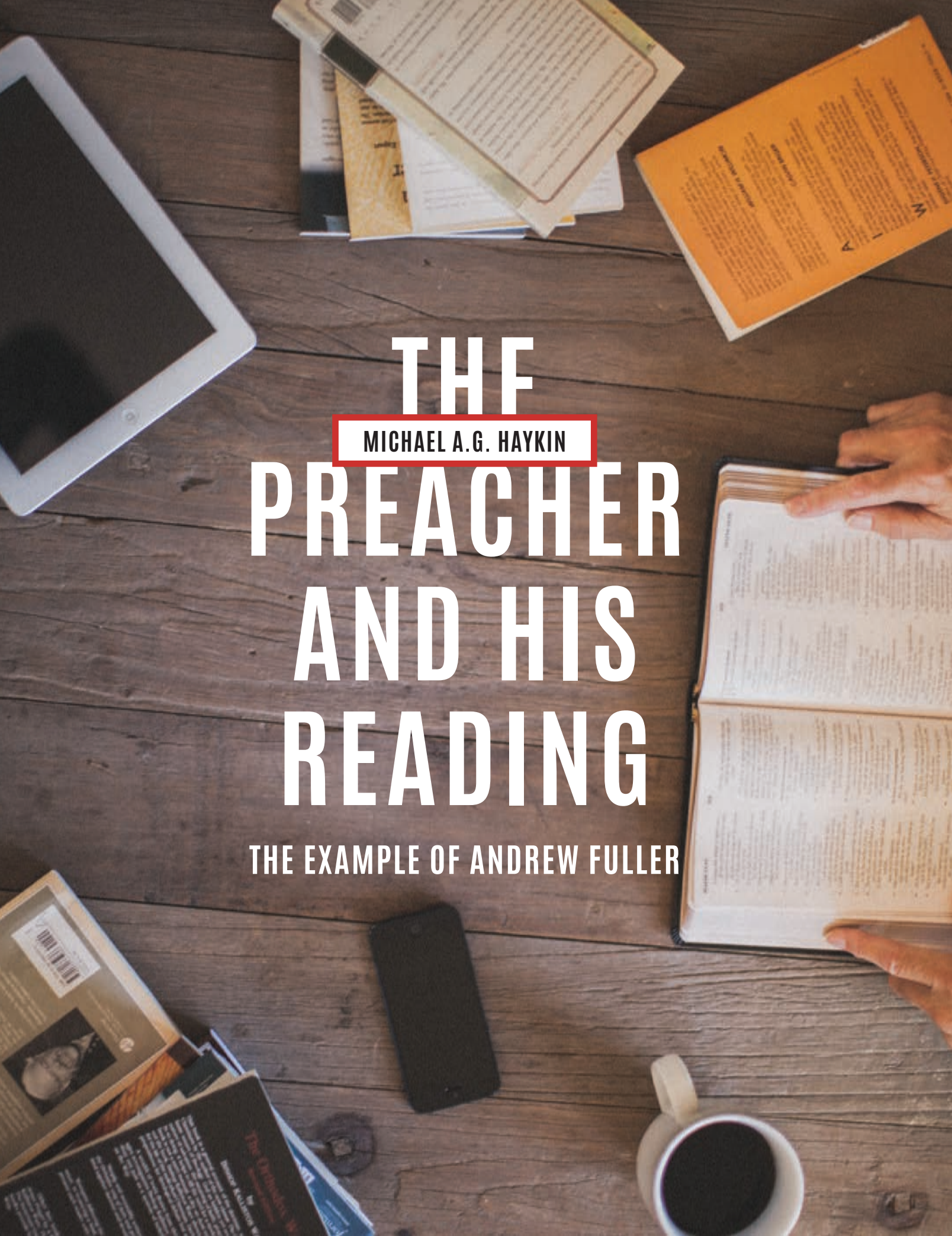
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THE MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN PREACHER AND HIS READING

THE EXAMPLE OF ANDREW FULLER

In his magisterial biography of William Wilberforce (1759–1833), William Hague notes that among the deepest joys of the great abolitionist’s life were his friendships and that he made it a rule to “never omit any opportunity to become acquainted with any good or useful man.”¹ This meant, as his sons later observed, that his house was “seldom free from guests,” some of whom would arrive early enough in the day to join Wilberforce at his breakfast and all of whom would provide a field for Wilberforce’s remarkable conversational skills.² Among the guests whom Wilberforce received at his home was the Baptist pastor-theologian Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), whose theological abilities Wilberforce deeply admired.³

On one occasion, Wilberforce endeavoured to quickly introduce Fuller to one of his sons after his arrival had been announced. “You know Andrew Fuller?” he asked him. “No, I never heard his name,” came the reply. “Oh then you must know him,” Wilberforce said, “he is an extraordinary man, whose talents have raised him from a very low condition.” Fuller came in, Wilberforce later noted in his account of the visit by the Baptist author, “a man of considerable powers of mind,” but looking “the very picture of a blacksmith.”⁴

True to Wilberforce’s description, Fuller lacked formal education beyond the basics of reading and writing, but a passion for reading enabled him to become the leading Baptist theologian of his day. In what follows, we look briefly at some of the key books that he read.

A Bible Reader

It goes without saying that Fuller was, above all, a reader of the Scriptures and that, for him, the Bible was “the book by way of eminence, the book of books.”⁵ It occupies such a place of pre-eminence because, unlike all other books, it is “unerring”⁶ and is characterized by “Divine inspiration and infallibility.”⁷ As Fuller once commented:

Many religious people appear to be contented with seeing truth in the light in which some great and good man has placed it; but if ever we enter into the gospel for purpose, it must be by reading the word of God for ourselves, and by praying and meditating upon its sacred contents. It is “in God’s light that we must see light” [cf. Ps 36:9] . . . The writings of great and good men are not to be despised, any more than their preaching: only let them not be treated as oracular. The best of men, in this imperfect state, view things *partially*, and therefore are in danger of laying an improper stress upon some parts of Scripture, to the neglect of other parts of equal, and sometimes of superior importance. . . . If we adopt the principles of fallible men, without searching the Scriptures for ourselves, and inquiring whether

or not these things be so, they will not, even allowing them to be on the side of truth, avail us, as if we had learned them from a higher authority. Our faith, in this case, will stand in the wisdom of man, and not in the power of God. . . . Truth learned only at second-hand will be to us what Saul’s armour was to David; we shall be at a loss how to use it in the day of trial.⁸

Fuller here differentiated between the books of fallible men, albeit good thinkers, and the truth of God in Scripture. The writings of fallible men are, at best, unable to provide the nourishment necessary for genuine spiritual growth. And because they stem from fallible minds, they are inevitably partial perspectives on the truth and inadequate to support the believer in a time of trial. By contrast, Scripture is a sure guide for the believer; it brings godly balance and perspective to his life, as well as providing him with a wholly adequate support in the face of life’s challenges.

The importance Fuller placed on this conviction is evident from the fact that he made essentially the same point in an ordination or installation sermon based on Ezra 7:10. “Learn your religion from the Bible,” Fuller told the prospective minister:

Let that be your decisive rule. Adopt not a body of sentiments, or even a single sentiment, solely on the authority of any man—however great, however respected. Dare to think for yourself. Human compositions are fallible. But the Scriptures were written by men who wrote as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.⁹

Reading Calvinist Theologians

In his preparation for preaching the text of Scripture, Fuller’s regular habit was to “consult the best expositors,” comparing their ideas about a text with his.¹⁰ Yet, Fuller firmly believed that the books of such authors should not be read as “oracular,” that is, placed on the same level as the text of the Bible. “We regard what no man did or taught as oracular,” Fuller adamantly affirmed, “unless he could prove himself Divinely inspired.”¹¹

Fuller, for instance, had a deep admiration for John Calvin (1509–1564), though he could admit in 1803 that he had not read him as deeply as another Baptist author of his day, Abraham Booth (1734–1806), had.¹² In a catalogue of his books that Fuller drew up in the late summer of 1798, Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* appeared fourteenth on the list.¹³ This list also records Fuller’s ownership of Calvin’s commentaries on Acts and the Gospels.¹⁴ Fuller was quite happy to describe himself as “a strict Calvinist,” though he was at pains to stress that this did not mean he believed everything Calvin taught. Nor, he stated, did this mean that he believed something simply because Calvin taught it.¹⁵ As he argued near the close of the second edition of his *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems*

Examined and Compared (1802):

If that system which embraces the Deity and atonement of Christ, with other correspondent doctrines, be friendly to a life of sobriety, righteousness, and godliness, it must be of God, and it becomes us to abide by it, not because it is the doctrine of Calvin or of any other man that was uninspired, but as being ‘the gospel which we have received’ from Christ and his apostles; ‘wherein we stand, and by which we are saved.’¹⁶

Even more telling in this regard is Fuller’s reading of those American theologians known as the New Divinity, in particular, Joseph Bellamy (1719–1790), Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), John Smalley (1734–1820), Stephen West (1735–1819), and Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1745–1801). Fuller read the works of these men avidly, and they, along with their teacher, the elder Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), occupied a central place in his literary world. As he told Edwards’ grandson, Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), during his tenure as the president of Yale College, “the writings of your grandfather, President Edwards, and of your uncle, the late Dr. Edwards, have been food to me.”¹⁷ And when Bellamy’s *True Religion Delineated* (1750) was reprinted in England in 1812, Fuller wrote a preface for the edition. “Without pledging myself to advocate every sentiment contained in it,” he stated, “I do from my heart wish it may meet with a candid and careful attention from the religious public. Were the doctrines here inculcated to prevail among us, I should hope to see more true religion than I have yet seen.”¹⁸

Eighteen or so years earlier, during the mid-1790s, Fuller had especially pored over the New Divinity’s writings on the atonement. In a letter to his close friend John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825), written on April 21, 1794, Fuller thanked his friend for sending him a copy of “Dr. Edwards [i.e. Jonathan Edwards, Jr.] on Free Grace and Atonement.” He had read it

“with great pleasure. I suppose I read it sometime ago; but I never relished it so well before.” The following January, Fuller informed John Sutcliff that he had just received a package of pamphlets from the younger Edwards. Among them was Stephen West’s *The Scripture Doctrine of the Atonement Proposed*

to Careful Examination (1785), a book that helped to make popular the governmental theory of the atonement among certain sectors of New England Calvinism. So precious did Fuller regard this item by West, that he told Sutcliff, “I w[oul]d not take 1/1 [a guinea]” for it.¹⁹

Fuller subsequently embraced certain aspects of the New Divinity’s governmentalism, but he did not accept everything that he read in the books and pamphlets of his New England mentors. In the letter to Ryland, for instance, in which he praised the younger Edwards’ book on the death of Christ, he admitted: “I do not coincide with every thing it contains.”²⁰ Fuller appreciated much of the thinking of the New Divinity theologians about the atonement, but he did not restrict himself to merely repeating what they wrote. This is evident from the fact that Fuller continued to talk of Christ’s death in substitutionary terms. Fuller was determined not to be a blind devotee of any man, no matter how gifted.

A Love for Jonathan Edwards

Greater even than his relish for the publications of the New Divinity men, Fuller loved the books of their teacher, Jonathan Edwards, Sr. “A great writer,” Fuller once called Edwards,²¹ and there is little doubt Fuller would have heartily endorsed the assertion by Miklós Vető that Jonathan Edwards was “the great-

est Christian theologian of the eighteenth century.”²² Yet, as Fuller commented to Edwards’ disciple Samuel Hopkins on March 17, 1798:

I have observed that whenever an extraordinary man has been raised up, like Pres’t Edwards, and who has excelled in maintaining some particular doctrine . . .

“TRUTH
OUGHT
TO BE
DEARER
TO US
THAN THE
GREATEST
OR BEST
OF MEN.”

- ANDREW FULLER

it is usual for his followers and admirers too much to confine their attention to that doctrine, science, or manner of reasoning, as tho' all excellence was there concentrated . . . I must say it appears to me that some of your younger men profess a rage of imitating his metaphysical manner, till some of them become metaphysic-mad.²³

Given Fuller's own love for Edwards, this comment is noteworthy indeed. But it is completely in line with Fuller's fundamental biblicism. As Fuller once commented elsewhere: "Truth ought to be dearer to us than the greatest or best of men."²⁴ ♦

¹ William Wilberforce: *The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), 506.

² Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (London: John Murray, 1839), III, 388.

³ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁴ *Idem.*

⁵ "The Apostolic Office" (*Complete Works*, III, 498-499).

⁶ *On Spiritual Declension and the Means of Revival* (*Complete Works*, III, 629).

⁷ *The Nature and Importance of an Intimate Knowledge of Divine Truth* (*Complete Works*, I, 160).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁹ *On an Intimate and Practical Acquaintance with the Word of God* (*Complete Works*, I, 483).

¹⁰ *Thoughts on Preaching* (*Complete Works*, I, 714).

¹¹ *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Complete Works*, II, 165).

¹² *Six Letters to Dr. Ryland respecting the Controversy with the Rev. A. Booth* (*Complete Works*, II, 711).

¹³ "List of Books belonging to Andrew Fuller of Kettering" (Ms. G95B, Bristol Baptist College Library, Bristol, England).

¹⁴ "List of Books," nos. 126 and 127.

¹⁵ Andrew Gunton Fuller, "Memoir" (*Complete Works*, I, 77).

¹⁶ *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Complete Works*, II, 233).

¹⁷ Letter to Timothy Dwight, June 1, 1805 [cited in Andrew Gunton Fuller, "Memoir"] (*Complete Works*, I, 85).

¹⁸ "Address to the Editor" in Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated* (3rd ed.; repr. London, 1812), vii.

¹⁹ Letter to John Ryland, April 21, 1794, in John Ryland, Jr., *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope Illustrated; in the Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller* (London: Button & Son, 1816), 365-366; Letter to John Sutcliff, January 22, 1795 (Letters of Andrew Fuller, typescript transcript, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford).

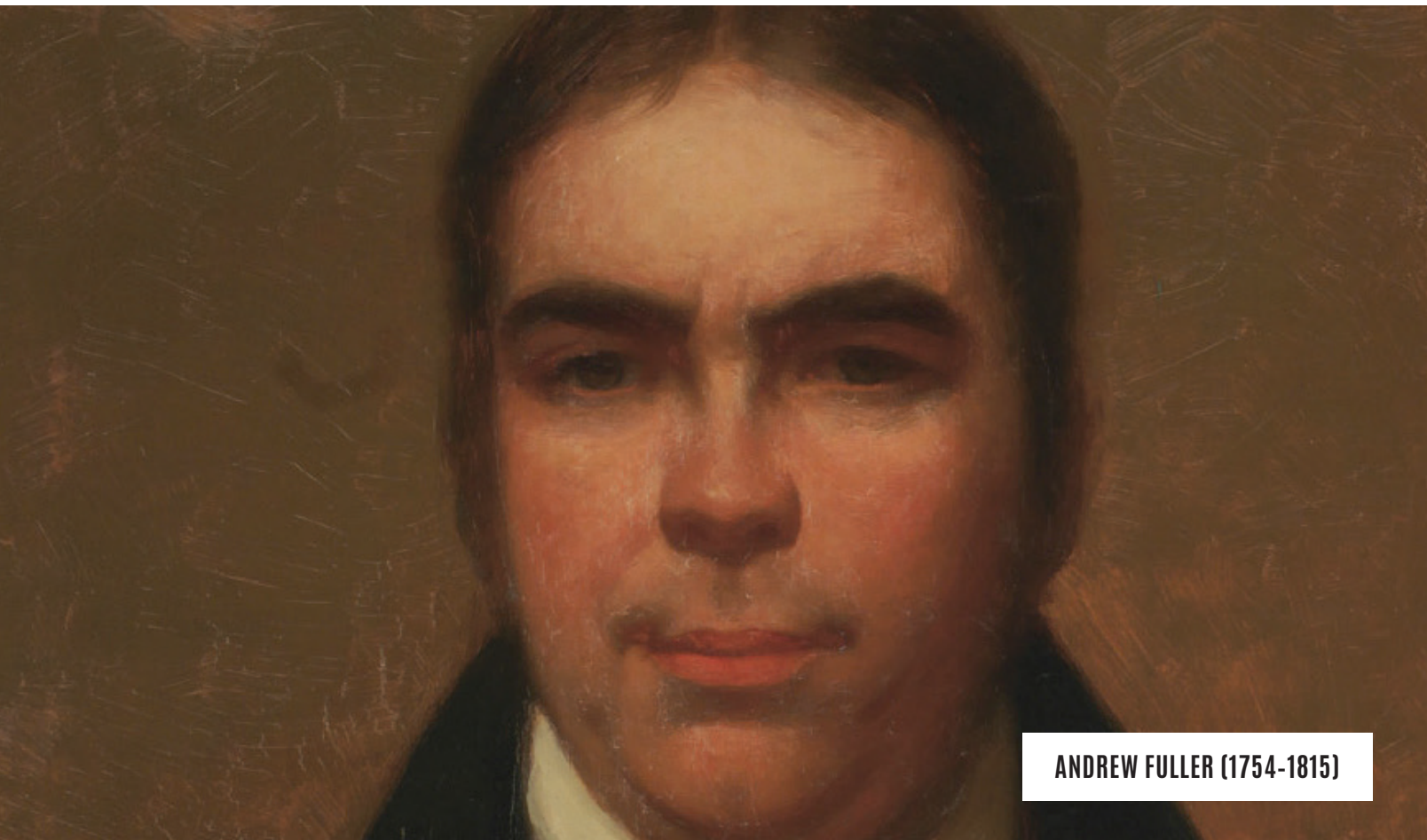
²⁰ Letter to John Ryland, April 21, 1794 in Ryland, *Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller*, 366.

²¹ *Expository Discourses on the Book of Genesis, interspersed with Practical Reflections* (*Complete Works*, I, 63).

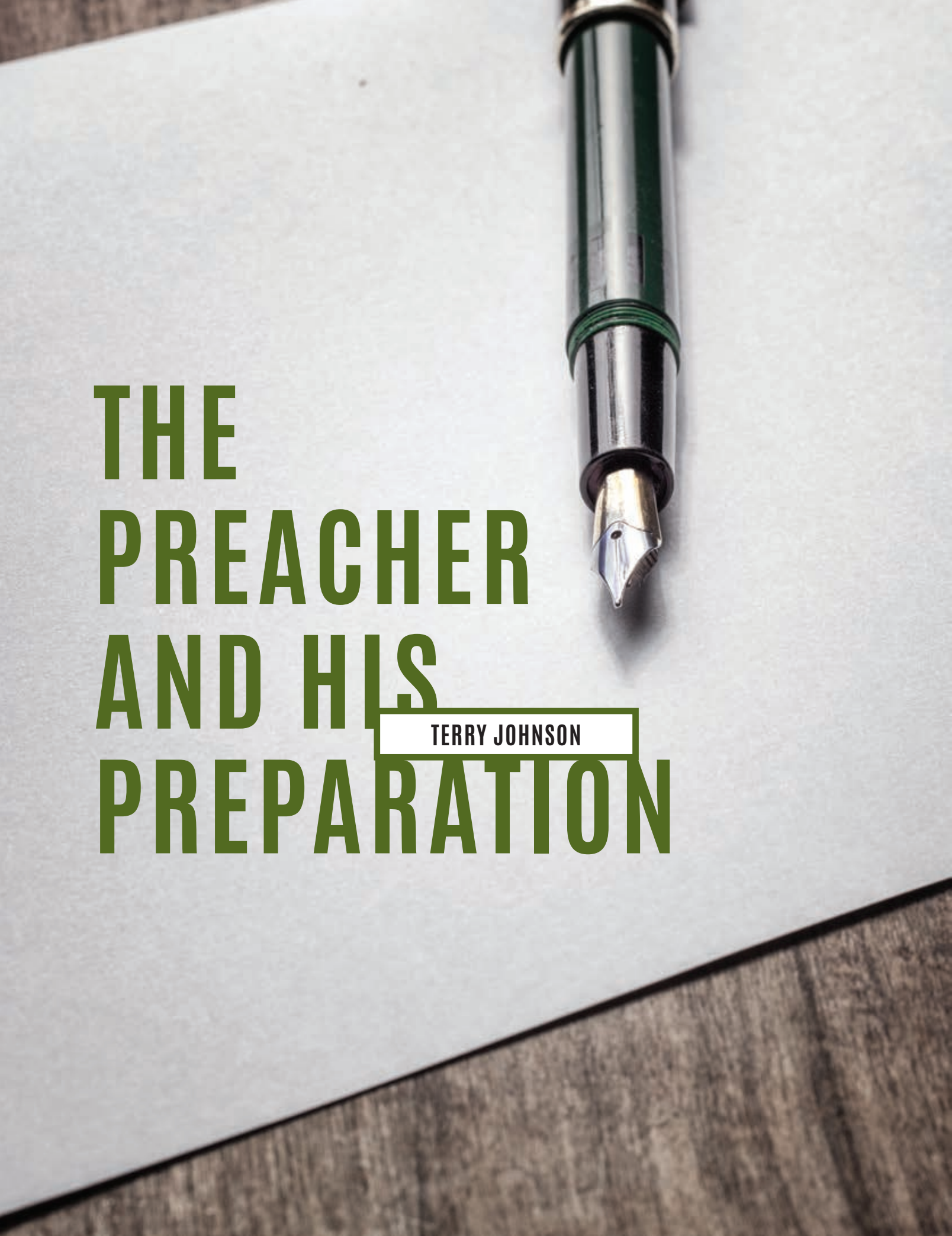
²² "Book Reviews: America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards. By Robert W. Jenson," *Church History*, 58 (1989), 522.

²³ Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 88.

²⁴ *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation, or the Duty of Sinners to Believe in Jesus Christ* (2nd ed.; *Complete Works*, II, 397).



ANDREW FULLER (1754-1815)



THE PREACHER AND HIS PREPARATION

TERRY JOHNSON

How do I prepare to preach? We preachers are fascinated with this subject. We all have our methods. We're quite committed to our approach. Yet we suspect that there may be more effective means of preparation than those we now utilize. The discovery of new and improved methods may lead to better sermons and happier congregations, hence our interest. Let me divide the preacher's preparation into three categories: life preparation, weekly preparation, and Sunday morning preparation.

Life Preparation

Irish-born and Princeton-educated pastor Thomas Murphy (1823–1900), writing in his *Pastoral Theology* (1877), says, “It should be laid down as our first principle that eminent piety is the *indispensable qualification* for the minister of the gospel.” He places piety before talents, learning, study, “favorable circumstances, or skill in working, or power in sermonizing.” Without what he calls “high tone” or “eminent piety” or “elevated spirituality,” then “nothing else will be of much account” in a given ministry. “It is not possible for us to overestimate,” he claims, “the importance of the deepest piety in those who are called to (the ministry’s) sacred duties.” He devotes fifty-three pages to “The Pastor in the Closet,” and fifty-nine pages to “The Pastor in the Study,” before he ever deals with public ministry. For Murphy (and all pre-twentieth-century writers on the subject of pastoral ministry: e.g. Baxter, James, Porter, Bridges, J. W. Alexander, Shedd, Dabney, Brooks, Spurgeon, Beecher, etc.), the foundation of public ministry is personal piety.

Preparation for the pulpit begins long before Saturday night. Behind the Sunday morning sermons stands a theological education, years of biblical and theological study, and a rich, deep devotional life. Behind a preaching ministry worthy of the name is a life of holiness. “How devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers,” says the apostle Paul of his own ministry (1 Thess 2:10).

What David Wells calls the “managerial revolution” has been tragically misleading at this point. The keys to success, one is told, are to be found in discovering one’s market niche, creative advertising, establishing a culture (e.g., casual), a format (late-night talk show), a style of music (pop), a type of building (non-churchy), and a kind of message (topical sermons addressing felt needs). Success for the church (it has been implied) is found in programs and services, promotion and marketing, top-of-the-line sound and light systems, therapeutic or “practical” messages, managerial skill, and professional leadership. The godliness of those leading the church is almost entirely overlooked. Alec Motyer (b. 1924) states simply, “It is not the most able who are blessed in ministry, but the most holy.”

Weekly Preparation

Out of a life lived based on *sola Scriptura, solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia*, and *soli Deo Gloria*, that is, a life lived based on faith in Christ, dependence on the Holy Spirit, zeal for God’s glory, and a burden for lost souls, the nuts and bolts of sermon preparation may begin. I rise early on Monday morning to enjoy my cup of tea and devotional time. Typically this consists of several chapters of the Bible, several pages from a favorite Puritan work (e.g. Baxter’s *Saint’s Rest*, Owen’s *Mortification*, Edward’s *David Brainerd*, Charnock’s *Existence and Attributes*, Swinnock’s *Incomparableness of God*, Gurnall’s *Christian in Complete Armour*, etc.) and prayer. Let me say that nothing so warms the heart or challenges the soul like a morsel or two from the Puritan giants. Then I get right to my study. Many ministers take off Monday. I find that my week is impossible if I do. Consequently, Monday is a work day for me, though I stay home so as to avoid interruption during sermon preparation.

I first survey the original text, making observations about the vocabulary and points of emphasis. I then begin the frankly tedious process of reading ten or so commentaries on my text. I like to have a variety of types of commentaries, from the older sort that are rich with application and insight (e.g. Calvin, Henry, Ryle, Hodge, J. A. Alexander), to the modern evangelical exegetical commentaries (e.g. Morris, Carson, Marshall, Bruce), to the writings of a liberal or two (just to know

**BEHIND THE SUNDAY
MORNING SERMONS
STANDS A THEOLOGICAL
EDUCATION, YEARS
OF BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL STUDY,
AND A RICH, DEEP
DEVOTIONAL LIFE.**

what the other side is saying). John Stott urged young seminarians at a Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) conference in 1978 to take notes on 4x6 index cards, which has been my habit ever since.

Once the reading and note-taking is complete, I create a rough outline. From that point, I write out the sermon long-hand, since I think better with a pen than with a keyboard. Typically, the writing takes two to three hours. Writing is important for me because it is only as I write that it becomes apparent whether my thoughts are clear and complete or not. Half-baked thoughts won't survive the black and white of a written page. Tuesday morning, I hand over to my secretary the handwritten manuscript, which she types, adding Scripture text as indicated. The rest of the week I am free to ponder the sermon.

Friday morning is reserved for reducing the manuscript to an outline. I follow my usual morning "closet" routine, then arrive at the church early. I grab Mozart's piano and horn concertos, or Beethoven's *adagio* movements for background noise, and go to a quiet corner of the church for uninterrupted concentration. I allow myself two-and-a-half pages of outline, revising the manuscript as I go. Only the outline goes with me into the pulpit. Once the process is completed, I take off the day and a half from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning.

Sunday Morning Preparation

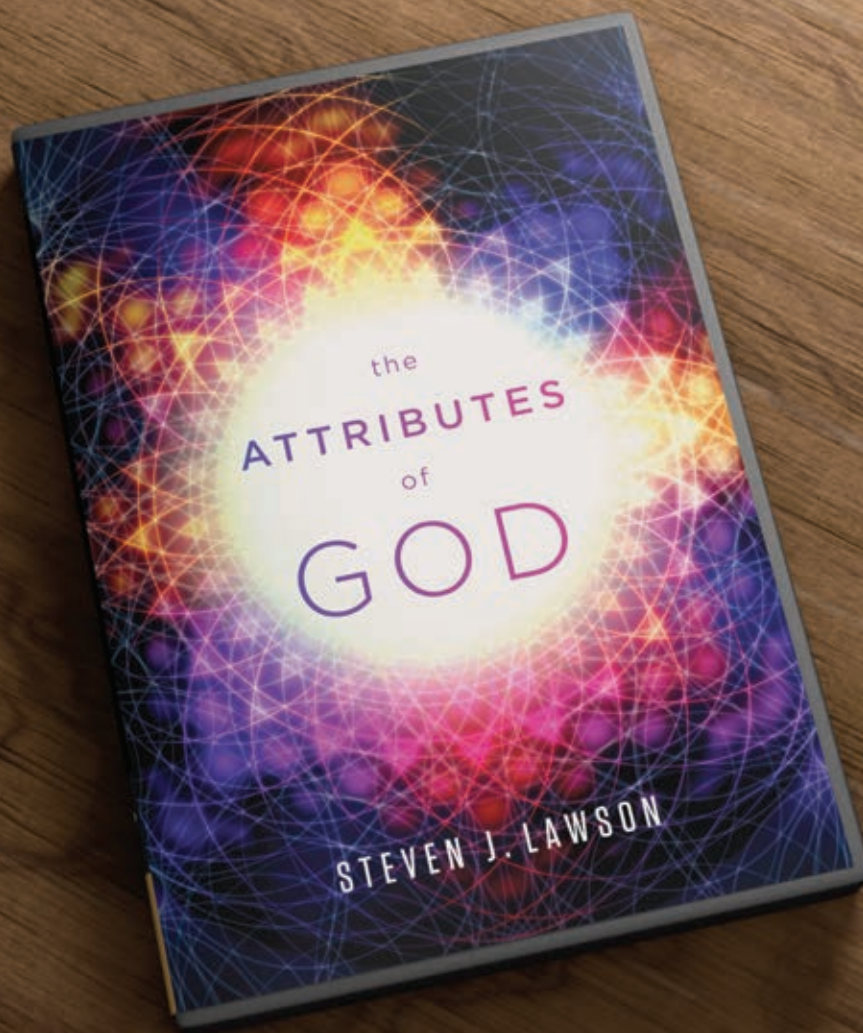
On Sunday, I again follow my "closet prayer" routine at home. I prepare my tea, enjoy the quiet, pray, and contemplate the goodness of God in making such a beautiful world and allow-

ing me the exceptional honor of preaching His gospel. I review out loud my outline as my final preparation for preaching, further revising the outline as I go. It is not unusual for me to figure out, this far along in the process, what the passage is *really* about and what I *really* need to be saying. This is the benefit of the constant manuscript revision. Reading and re-reading, revising and re-revising both the manuscript and the outline means that the Holy Spirit has considerable opportunity to get through my foggy notions what He means to say through what He wrote so many years ago. Getting it right is a source of inspiration for me. I find that once I understand what God means to say, zeal to relay it well and with passion naturally follows.

Conclusions

Clearly, the most important factor in sermon prep is the preparation of life by the power of the Spirit of Christ. Yet the process isn't nothing (pardon the double negative). Pondering the original text is important. Consulting the heritage of interpretation (i.e. older commentaries) is important. Gleaning insight from the best scholars of today is important. The constant review and revising is important. The process is critical because getting it right is critical, for integrity's sake, and also for the sake of impassioned communication. ♦





WHO DOES GOD SAY THAT HE IS?

Misconceptions about God abound. But they don't have to. God has revealed His character in Scripture, illuminating the attributes that define Him. While we, being finite creatures, can never truly comprehend everything that God is, we should begin with what He Himself has said. This is the focus of Dr. Steven J. Lawson in *The Attributes of God*, a fifteen-lecture, in-depth study articulating a biblical understanding of fifteen divine attributes and exploring how a right understanding of God can affect every aspect of our lives.



THE PREACHER AND HIS TECHNOLOGY

DAVID P. MURRAY



Technology can be a wonderful servant but a terrible master. Nowhere is that more true than in the area of Christian ministry, especially for the preacher preparing sermons. My aim in this article is to help preachers use technology in such a way as to get the most out of this willing servant, but also to avoid it becoming a damaging tyrant. To do that, we will honestly face some of the dangers of technology in sermon preparation; then, we will outline a number of ways technology can help in sermon preparation; and finally, I'll give you a brief description of the primary ways in which I use technology in sermon preparation.

The Dangers of Technology

Distraction

Even someone writing sermons with a quill and parchment can be distracted from his task. However, the time and the effort it takes to get and read another scroll from the vault would usually be sufficient disincentive to distraction. Modern technology, however, makes it much easier to be distracted. We're just a couple of clicks away from Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and so on. It's so fast, so quick, and so, so easy. And so damaging to deep thought. Thankfully, we can use technology to keep technology under control, by using software such as LeechBlock to limit Internet access.

Dependence

When all the early preachers had was a Bible, they had to wrestle with the text and prayerfully seek the help of the Holy Spirit, especially in dealing with difficult passages. With the availability of the Internet and Bible software, it is so much easier to ask Google than to ask God. Admittedly, books pose a similar danger, but the ease of Internet searching and the huge capacities of modern Bible software make it all the more tempting to rely on these resources rather than on the hard work of prayerfully striving to understand God's Word with a dependent spirit.

Deception

Digital books and the Internet have made it so fearfully easy to simply cut and paste swathes of text that some preachers are just parroting collations of other men's sermons and passing the material off as their own. This is deception that not only damages the preacher's relationship with God, but also undercuts his hope of God's blessing.

Degradation

The more we depend on electronic resources and the more we simply cut and paste, the more we degrade our own thinking abilities. The less thinking we do for ourselves and the more we let others do our thinking for us, the harder and harder it

becomes for us to think. Yes, it's easier just to lazily reach for the commentary or to open Bible software, but we must resist those urges in order to develop the muscle of our own mind which, like all muscles, gets stronger with use.

Division

In my thirteen years of teaching seminary students, I've noticed that students take far fewer notes in class than they used to. One reason for this is that they think they know where they can find information on the Internet when they need it. However, there's a big difference between knowing where to find something and knowing something. Also, when we take knowledge into our minds, information on one subject is no longer separated from another subject as it is on the Internet. Instead, the knowledge of different subjects is mingling in our minds, cross-pollinating and fertilizing, all while renewing our minds and building a godly worldview.

Devotion

Many preachers will concede that there is often a devotional deficit associated with using technology to prepare sermons, compared to writing with pen and paper. I'm not sure why that should be, apart from the fact that it just takes longer to write things out and that we write more carefully than we type. Somehow, using a computer can make sermon writing a more mechanical and automated process rather than a spiritual and devotional exercise.

Despising

If we're older, there's the danger that we'll despise the use of technology in ministry. If we're younger, there's the danger of despising those who don't use technology much at all. It's important that we don't make our preference the rule for others, but find whatever works best for our minds, talents, and methods. Let's be careful that we don't let use lead to abuse, or abuse lead to non-use.

The Benefits of Technology

Affordability

Although some modern Bible software is expensive to buy, on the whole, they are good value. If you keep your eye open, you can usually pick up software packages and individual books at significant discounts. There are also websites that offer many free books for *Logos*. Or, if you use the Kindle App on your computer, you will be able to buy some of the quality Christian books that Amazon offers daily.

Accessibility

With the help of my Mac and my Kindle, I can now carry thousands of books with me wherever I go and access my books even without Internet access. This allows me to prepare sermons in airports, on planes, in hotel rooms, and literally any-

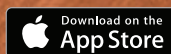
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where ministry requires me to go. *Logos* also syncs its software with its tablet and Smartphone App.

Accuracy

Most Bible software and some online software are regularly updated with the latest morphological, syntactical, and archeological research, lending increased accuracy to our studies. That helps us to avoid relying on dated information that is no longer credible. Remember, the wide availability of Bible software has also made it easier for people to check what we are saying on their smartphones in their pews as they listen to us. That should challenge us to do thorough research!

Efficiency

Technology has the potential to save us hours of time. It is simply much quicker to hover over a word on *Logos* and get immediate parsing and lexical information than to do this using parsing guides and lexicons. The same goes for counting up how many times a word is used in a chapter, a book, or in the whole Bible. Some software will even present this information in color on pie and bar charts.

Searchability

If I want to study a topic, such as justification, I can enter that word on *Logos* and it will open every resource in my library that refers to justification. This is like standing in front of a library of hundreds of books, saying “justification,” and having all the books that reference justification appear immediately, open on our desk at just the right page. In addition, I have all my preached sermons filed in Evernote, which allows me to search my previous sermons for specific words, phrases, or topics.

Linguistic Ability

Although it might be thought that the use of technology for original language study would undermine a preacher’s ongoing development in Greek and Hebrew, I have found the opposite to be the case. Most “purists” who don’t use technology for this eventually discover that their approach is unsustainable given the demands of pastoral ministry, and they not only give up their idealism but also their Greek and Hebrew. Those who take a more pragmatic approach, using some of the God-given tools to make the task easier, usually find that over the years they are using the technology less as they have absorbed so much Greek and Hebrew through regular exposure to the languages through the initial use of the technology.

Durability

Technology allows us to extend the life and usefulness of sermons by uploading them to sites such as www.sermonaudio.com. We might also use parts of some sermons as blog posts or take out certain sentences to use as quotations on Twitter or Facebook. I know many ministers who use the *Logos* “notes”

feature to attach their sermons to specific texts, so that if they are studying them in the future, the notes are right there for them to access, again extending their usefulness into the future.

Examples of How I Use Technology

Although *Logos* is more expensive than other options, and it is bulky and frustrating at times, on balance I have found that it is the best option for me. Following are some of the ways I use *Logos* in weekly sermon preparation, but much of what I write here is also transferrable to other programs.

Delimiting the Text

Once I have spent some time working on delimiting my text, I usually check it using the *Logos Compare Pericope* tool, which lets me compare how different Bible versions have decided where the paragraph begins or ends. That can either help me confirm my decision or else challenge me to think further.

Comparing the Text

Before beginning to look at the text in Greek or Hebrew, I usually use the *Logos Text Comparison* tool to study five or six different English versions of the passage, looking for how several versions use different vocabulary, tenses, order, omitted words, added words, etc. I do this to make my original language study more efficient by focusing my study on the words and phrases where there is some significant disagreement. It’s not that I don’t spend any time studying the words and phrases that are uniformly translated; rather, use of this tool helps me know where I have to spend most of my time in analyzing and selecting disputed options.

Word Study

Logos allows me to hover over a word, discover its lemma, and then do a number of kinds of word studies of varying complexity using different tools. Each word study probably takes about five or ten minutes, compared to perhaps an hour of similar study using books and concordances, and it produces far more accurate, independent, and comprehensive results.

Grammar and Syntax

Depending on which version of *Logos* you use, and which additional books you have bought, you may be able to access Greek and Hebrew grammars that reference the specific text you are studying. If we look up these links each time a sermon is prepared, our Greek and Hebrew knowledge will gradually expand, in addition to the help we will gain in the immediate context of sermon preparation.

Annotation

I use the *Visual Filters* tool on *Logos* to automatically color code Greek and Hebrew verbs, pronouns, and conjunctions according to my presets. If I choose to see the verbs, *Logos* puts colored

highlights, boxes, and underlinings on each word so that I can immediately see their stems, tenses, voices, etc., as well as any significant patterns and sequences. I can also add notes to the text as I go on. I will sometimes print out this color-coded annotated version of the text and carry it around with me so that I can familiarize myself with it at various points in the week.

Outline

Logos offers a number of outlining tools, from simple block diagramming, to sentence diagramming, to much more complex line diagramming. Although, of course, this can also be done on paper, using technology allows much greater trial and error in trying to decide how words relate to one another. As a check on your work in Greek, you can buy the *Lexham Clausal Outlines* add-on for *Logos*.

Cross References

It's very easy and quick to bring up a range of cross references

relevant to the passage, and also any parallel passages to compare two accounts of the one event.

Commentary

Most *Logos* packages come with a number of commentaries. Although the quality of them varies, they can be supplemented with a good range of excellent modern commentaries. And, of course, you can access many commentaries and sermons online (see below). The only thing to emphasize here is to delay this step until as late as possible in the sermon preparation process so that you have struggled with the text yourself before reading commentaries and sermons and do not just copy what others have said. Wrestling with the text yourself will make your sermons more original, more personal, and more authoritative.

To conclude, here's a list of Bible Software programs and Internet resources that I hope will prove useful as you decide how best to use technology in your ministry. ⚡

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

from DAVID P. MURRAY

Bible Software

Logos Bible Software: www.logos.com

Bibleworks: www.bibleworks.com

Accordance (for Mac): www.accordancebible.com

Online Resources

The Word: www.theword.gr

Net Bible: www.net.bible.org/home.php

Lumina: www.lumina.bible.org

Free books for Logos: www.stilltruth.com/2015/pbooks

Ages Software: www.ageslibrary.com/categories_download.html

Christian Classics Ethereal Library: www.ccel.org

John Macarthur's Sermons: www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/scripture

John Piper's Sermons: www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/scripture-index

Sermon Audio: www.sermonaudio.com/main.asp



THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

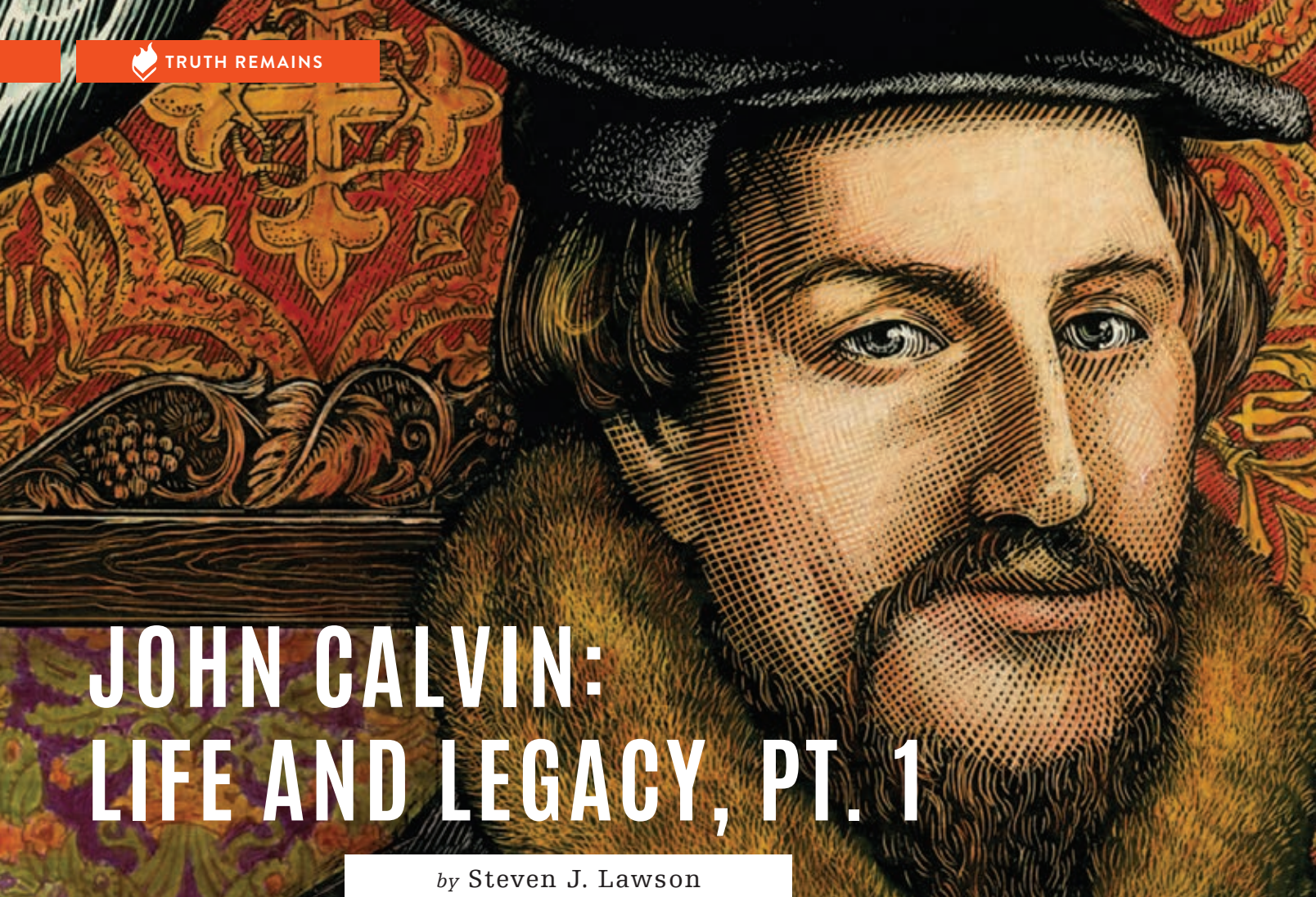
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JOHN CALVIN: LIFE AND LEGACY, PT. 1

by Steven J. Lawson

Towering over the centuries of church history, there stands one figure of such monumental importance that he still commands attention and arouses intrigue, even five hundred years after his appearance on the world stage. Called “one of the truly great men of all time,”¹ he was a driving force so significant that his influence significantly shaped the future of the church. Moreover, his lofty ideas helped fashion the founding principles of Western civilization, giving rise to the republican form of government, the ideals of public education, and the philosophy of free-market capitalism.² But his most substantial contribution came through his masterful expositions of Scripture, which laid down the doctrinal distinctives of the Protestant Reformation. He was arguably the leading architect of the Protestant cause, and his theological thunder defined and articulated the core truths of that history-altering movement in sixteenth-century Europe. His name was John Calvin.

A world-class theologian, a revered exegete, a renowned teacher, an ecclesiastical statesman, an influential Reformer—Calvin was all of these and more. The German Reformer Philip Melanchthon labeled him simply “the theologian,” as

though Calvin stood alone in the church as its most able interpreter of Scripture. Indeed, apart from the biblical authors themselves, Calvin looms as the most influential minister of the Word of God the world has ever seen. No man before or since has been so prolific and so penetrating in his handling of Scripture. His exegetical insights address most of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament except Revelation. By overwhelming consent, Calvin remains the greatest biblical commentator of all time.

First and foremost, however, Calvin was a pastor—the faithful shepherd for twenty-five years to a local flock in Geneva, Switzerland. Every pastor has many demands upon his time, and Calvin, because of his status in Geneva, had more responsibilities than most. Reformation historian J. H. Merle D’Aubigné wrote:

On Sundays [Calvin] conducted divine service, and had daily service every other week. He devoted three hours in each week to theological teaching; he visited the sick, and administered private reproof. He received strangers; attended the consistory on Thursday, and directed its deliberations; on Friday was present at the conference on Scripture, called the *congregation*; and, after the minister in office for the day had presented

his views on some passage of Scripture, and the other pastors had made their remarks, Calvin added some observations, which were *a kind of lecture*. He wished, as he afterwards said, that every minister should be diligent in studying, and that no one should become indolent. The week in which he did not preach was filled up with other duties; and he had duties of every kind. In particular, he devoted much attention to the refugees who flocked to Geneva, driven by persecution out of France and Italy; he taught and exhorted them. He consoled, by his letters, “those who were still in the jaws of the lion”; he interceded for them. In his study he threw light on the sacred writings by admirable commentaries, and confuted the writings of the enemies of the gospel.³

But amid these many pastoral duties, Calvin was primarily a *preacher*, a biblical expositor of highest order. In his years in Geneva, Calvin viewed the pulpit as his principal responsibility, the first work of his pastoral calling. Thus, this magisterial Reformer gave himself to the exposition of the Word as perhaps no one else in history. He esteemed and elevated biblical preaching to be of highest importance, and so he made it his lifelong commitment. On his deathbed, when Calvin reviewed his many accomplishments, he mentioned his sermons ahead of even his vast writings. For Calvin, preaching was job number one.

The Real Calvin

This estimation of the priority of biblical preaching in Calvin’s ministry is not novel. No less an authority than Emile Doumergue, the foremost biographer of Calvin, stood in the great Reformer’s pulpit on July 2, 1909, the four-hundredth anniversary of Calvin’s birth, and said: “That is the Calvin who seems to me to be the real and authentic Calvin, the one who explains all the others: Calvin the preacher of Geneva, moulding by his words the spirit of the Reformed of the sixteenth century.”⁴ In that same memorable address, Doumergue remarked: “While he has come to be remembered as a theologian who recovered the doctrinal landmarks which had been buried under the debris of confused centuries, or as a powerful controversialist whose name opponents have sought to fasten upon beliefs which they judged odious, the truth is that Calvin saw himself, first of all, as a pastor in the church of Christ and therefore as one whose chief duty must be to preach the Word.”⁵ D’Aubigné has likewise affirmed the primacy of Calvin’s preaching amid his many ministries. Calvin’s principal office, D’Aubigné remarked, was the one he assigned to the minister: to proclaim the Word of God for instruction, admonition, exhortation, and reproof. To this end, Calvin’s preaching was replete with practical instruction and application, which he saw as a fundamental necessity.⁶ Thus, accord-

ing to D’Aubigné, Calvin’s chief mission was the explication and application of the Holy Scriptures. This was the *real* Calvin—the biblical expositor who considered the pulpit to be “the heart of his ministry.”⁷

Calvin the Man

If the real Calvin was pre-eminently a preacher, who was Calvin the *man*? What was the road God marked out for him to travel? What were the times in which he lived? What were his accomplishments? More important, what contributed to his greatness?

The world into which Calvin was born was ripe for reformation. At Calvin’s birth, Martin Luther was 26 years old and already had commenced his teaching ministry at the University of Wittenberg. Eight years later, in 1517, the German Reformer posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, a protest that proved to be “the shot heard round the world.” The Diet at Worms followed (1521), where Luther took his now-famous stand for the Word of God. Soon after, Reformation fires began to burn brightly in Germany and to spread rapidly across Europe into Scotland and England, especially to the universities. Meanwhile, the five *solas* of the Reformation—salvation by *grace alone*, through *faith alone*, in *Christ alone*, to the *glory of God alone*, based upon *Scripture alone*—were being forged upon the anvils of minds that were being renewed in the Scriptures.

Molding a Preacher’s Mind

Calvin—his French name was Jean Cauvin—was born to Gerard and Jeanne Cauvin on July 10, 1509, in the farm country of Noyon, France, sixty miles northeast of Paris. Calvin’s father, a financial administrator for the Catholic bishop of the Noyon diocese, raised his son to enter the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. When John was 11, Gerard used his influence to gain a chaplaincy for his son at the Noyon Cathedral. Then, when John was 14, he entered the

University of Paris to study theology in formal preparation to become a priest. Calvin’s time at the university resulted in a master of arts degree at age 17. But more importantly, the future Reformer emerged with a solid grounding in the basics of a classical education, including Latin, logic, and philosophy.

Upon Calvin’s graduation from the University of Paris, his father attempted to gain two more appointments for him in the Catholic Church. But a conflict with the bishop of Noyon resulted in a falling-out with the church, prompting Gerard to redirect his brilliant son to study law. To this end, Gerard sent John to the University of Orléans (1528). During his time there, and later at the University of Bourges, Calvin learned Greek, the powers of analytical thinking, and persuasive argument, skills later to be used in his Genevan pulpit. Armed with such abilities, Calvin would later be nicknamed “the ac-

cusative case” for his penchant to argue his point convincingly.

When Gerard died (1531), the 21-year-old Calvin was freed from his father’s dominant influence and moved back to Paris to pursue his first love, the study of literature, especially the classics. He later returned to Bourges, where he completed his legal studies and received his doctor of laws degree (1532). In that same year, Calvin published his first book, a secular treatment of *De Clementia (On Mercy)* by the Greek philosopher Seneca. The book, which was Calvin’s doctoral dissertation, revealed his growing ability to break down language and grasp the intentions of an author. In the future, this was precisely what Calvin would do with the Scriptures, both in the pulpit and in print—giving the God-intended meaning by explaining the message of the biblical writers.

A Sudden Conversion

It was while he was studying at Bourges that Calvin came in direct contact with the biblical truths of the Reformation. Upon being introduced to the gospel, a growing restlessness with his way of life came upon him, and a deepening conviction of his sin drove him to seek relief in the grace and mercy of God. Here is how Calvin later described his “sudden conversion” to Christ:

Lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one

which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought us back to its fountain . . . to its original purity. Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted . . . to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error. . . . I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, in what a sty of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen . . . as in duty bound, [I] made it my first business to betake myself to Thy way [O God], condemning my past life, not without groans and tears. God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame. . . . Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress.⁸

God subdued and made teachable a heart which, for my age, was far too hardened in such matters. Having received some foretaste and knowledge of true piety, I was inflamed with such a great desire to profit by it that, although I did not give up my other studies, I worked only slackly at them.⁹

Of this “sudden conversion,” Alexandre Ganoczy wrote, “Calvin understood his life story as analogous to that of the Apostle Paul, who on the way to Damascus suddenly turned

“GOD BY A SUDDEN CONVERSION SUBDUED AND BROUGHT MY MIND TO A TEACHABLE FRAME . . . HAVING THUS RECEIVED SOME TASTE AND KNOWLEDGE OF TRUE GODLINESS, I WAS IMMEDIATELY INFLAMED WITH AN INTENSE DESIRE TO MAKE PROGRESS.”

- JOHN CALVIN, RECOUNTING THE EXPERIENCE OF HIS CONVERSION

from the sin of opposing Christ to unconditionally serving Christ.”¹⁰ Indeed, though he had been raised in the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin immediately joined the growing Protestant cause upon his conversion.

Reformer in the Making

Calvin soon met opposition for his new faith in Christ. In November 1533, Nicolas Cop, rector of the University of Paris and a friend of Calvin, preached the opening address of the winter term at the university and was resisted strongly for his expressed “Luther-like” views. The speech was “a plea for a reformation on the basis of the New Testament, and a bold attack on the scholastic theologians of the day.”¹¹ Calvin, who is believed to have written the speech for Cop, was forced to flee Paris in the middle of the night, lowering himself out a window by means of sheets and escaping to safety in the guise of a vine-dresser with a hoe on his shoulder. This virulent opposition was but a harbinger of things to come for the rest of Calvin’s life.

After suffering imprisonment for a short time, Calvin fled to the estate of Louis du Tillet, a well-to-do man who was sympathetic to the Reformation cause. In this “quiet nest,” as Calvin described it, he had the opportunity to spend five months in du Tillet’s extensive theological library, where he read the Bible, along with the writings of the church fathers, most notably Augustine. By hard work, genius, and grace, Calvin was becoming a self-taught theologian of no small stature.

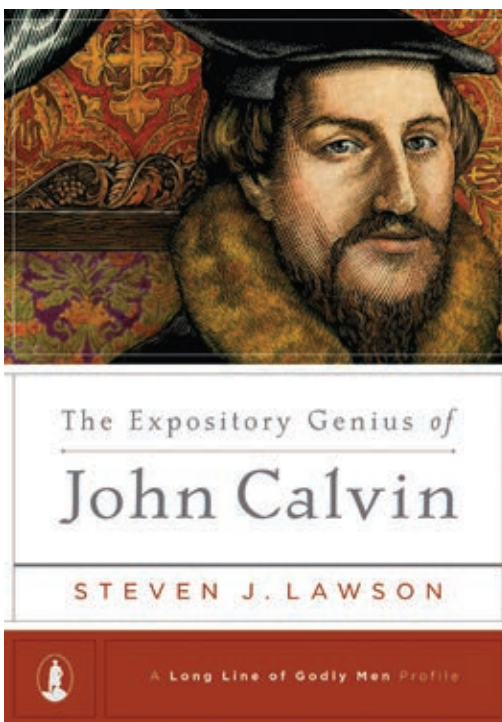
Finally, under the deepening conviction of the truth of Scripture, Calvin renounced the income he had been drawing from the Catholic Church since childhood for his supposed Noyon pastorate. The die was cast. He was fully aligned with the truths and cause of the Reformation.

The *Institutes*: Calvin’s Masterpiece

After a brief journey to Paris and Orleans, Calvin went to Basel, Switzerland (1534–1536), and began writing his magnum opus, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* would become the defining masterpiece of Protestant theology, the single most important book to be written during the Reformation. It would take its place ahead of even Luther’s

most revered work, *The Bondage of the Will*. During the next twenty-three years, the *Institutes* would undergo five major expansions until reaching its present form in 1559. Addressed to King Francis I of France, this work explained the true nature of biblical Christianity. Calvin hoped the book would ease the hostile persecution that was being brought against Protestants by the Roman Catholic Church in France. It was a theological *tour de force*, presenting a compelling argument for core Reformed teachings, and its publication instantly thrust Calvin into a recognized leadership role among the Reformers.

When a temporary amnesty was granted to French exiles, Calvin quickly returned to France, where he gathered his brother, Antoine, and sister, Marie. He then set out for Strasbourg, then in southern Germany, intending to study and write in seclusion and tranquility. He would never return to his homeland. ♦



¹ Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism* (Dallas, TX: Scholarly Reprints, 1993), 24.

² For further reading, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford, England, and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990, 2001), 219–261; John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (London, England; Oxford, England; and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1954, 1967), 411–425; and Jeannie E. Olson, “Calvin and Social-Ethical Issues,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 153–172.

³ J. H. Merle D’Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, Vol. VII (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1880, 2000), 82.

⁴ Publisher’s introduction, “John Calvin and His Sermons on Ephesians,” in John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA, and Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1562, 1577, 1973, 1975, 1979, 1987, 1998), viii.

⁵ Idem.

⁶ D’Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, Vol. VII, 82.

⁷ Douglas Kelly, introduction to John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1–13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Carlisle, PA, and Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), ix.

⁸ Calvin, “Introduction” *Commentary on the Psalms*.

⁹ Calvin, “Preface” *Commentary on the Psalms*.

¹⁰ Alexandre Ganoczy, “Calvin’s Life,” trans. David L. Foxgrover and James Schmitt, in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9.

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VIII (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1910, 1984), 318.

MAKING THE GOSPEL KNOWN: ICHABOD SPENCER

by Dustin W. Bengé

As Christians, we have a biblical responsibility to make the gospel known. Christ's command to his disciples, "Go...and make disciples..." (Matt 28:19) was not exclusively for the crowd to whom Jesus was then speaking, but to the whole church. It is the responsibility of every Christian to share the gospel message and "make disciples." Therefore, all children of God must continually ask themselves whether they are doing all they can to share the good news of the gospel. In order to be the most effective, we must have a clear strategy concerning how we will obey the command to evangelize the world.

One example of an effective strategy to evangelize was the nineteenth-century preacher and author Ichabod Spencer (1798–1854). Spencer was born in Vermont and converted in Granville, New York. He became a school teacher in his early years but moved on to fulfill a strong calling to preach the gospel.

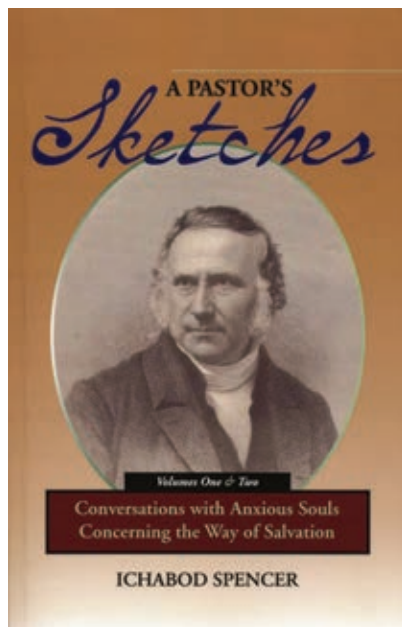
Spencer began his ministry in the very church that Jonathan Edwards made famous in Northampton, Massachusetts. His ministry there from 1828 to 1832 was remarkably blessed, with more than 250 people coming to Christ during those years. Later, he became the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York. During his laborious pastorate in Brooklyn, he resolved to make frequent pastoral visits to those in his congregation. After each visit, he would carefully note the details of their spiritual conversation. After twenty-five years of pastoral ministry, he had over 20,000 accounts of these personal conversations. It is no wonder he came to be known as the "Bunyan of Brooklyn."

Spencer was a faithful pastor who was committed to the doctrines of grace, and he preached these themes both publicly and from house to house. After many years of decision and contemplation, he finally decided to release his first series of *A Pastor's Sketches*, which contain seventy-seven visitation accounts in two volumes taken from the over 20,000 that were available to him. These two volumes spread like wild fire, giving readers an intense passion for evangelism.

There is much present-day Christians can learn from Ichabod Spencer with respect to their own evangelistic efforts. Much of his thought and practice should be emulated and put into practice within one's own Christian life. However, it is somewhat difficult to pinpoint Spencer's strategy of evangelism because he did not use only one clearcut method in his presentation of the gospel. *A Pastor's Sketches* reveals that he used various methods and arguments to present the gospel in an effective manner. In other words, Spencer was not a "cookie-cutter" evangelist; he adapted to all situations and people. The overarching theme of Spencer's life and evangelistic approach was love. He began all of his evangelistic efforts with love for people. This expression of love was

seen in his great desire to spend as much time with people as they needed. In one account, he says to a woman whom he is helping to think through the issues of having the Holy Spirit, "Certainly, certainly, madam; I can talk with you as long as you please to favor me with your company." To another woman he said, "Mrs. K-, I have been very anxious about you for a long time. I love and respect you."

Spencer would purposefully make appointments with



people he wanted to talk with and was under great pains to make those appointments as meaningful as possible. He would often begin his conversation by expressing how much he deeply cared for and loved the person he was meeting with. The numerous accounts of his dialogues indicate that Spencer had genuine compassion for these individuals' souls and that he cared about where they would spend eternity.

Spencer's strategy of evangelism also emphasized the truth of Scripture, for only the message contained in Scripture could inevitably change lives. The biblical revelation was at the heart of his evangelism. It was only from Scripture that he would argue his case and point people to Christ. He often began his conversations by discerning the spiritual state of the person. After investigating and making initial observations of this person's spiritual position, he would decide on the best course of action. In the first sketch, for example, he talks with a young Irishman with whom he realizes, early on, will require a defense for the existence of God. He does not usually employ such an apologetic for those who already believe in God. However, with this young man, he quickly recognizes that he must lay the groundwork on which the claims about Christ will rest. In other words, he could not begin the conversation by saying "Turn to God" or "Trust in Christ" if the listener did not believe in God. He once said to a doubting lady, "I may be wrong; but the Word of God is right." His confidence, then, did not lie in his ability to persuade people with his own knowledge but with love and the very words of the truth of God.

In *Sketches*, Spencer speaks with people in all walks of life who have varying backgrounds and stories. One true strength of his evangelism was his ability to engage people on a number of intellectual levels. In some conversations, Spencer very carefully crafted his argument to suit the intellect of the person to whom he is speaking. At other times, he simplified the message for those who are less knowledgeable about spiritual matters. In other words, there is not one particular group to whom Spencer spoke, leaving the rest to themselves.

He engaged people at all levels. The conversation, while suited differently to each particular situation, had the same goal in mind. This goal was not intellectual assent to the gospel but was focused on the heart. He urged, "You must have more. You must trust Him. You must receive Him as your own Savior, and give yourself to Him."

Throughout these recorded conversations, it is evident that Spencer exhibited great reliance upon the power and sovereign control of the Holy Spirit. The difference between Spencer and most people today with respect to our evangelistic efforts is that he greatly expected to see genuine conviction and conversion in the life of a sinner. This was not due to any particular gift or persuasive tactic he used, but completely because of his reliance on the Holy Spirit to bring about the conversion of the soul. He said, "No man can preach so powerfully as the Holy Spirit. It is vastly important to know when to stop." In this clear reliance upon the power of the Spirit in the gospel is also a reliance on the Spirit to bring about conversion. Spencer did not walk away from these conversations in a downcast demeanor when the response was not what he desired. He took very seriously the biblical injunction that the seed sown is cultivated, watered, and brings fruit under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Leading a woman through Scripture to explain how she might be saved, he said, "We need the aid of the Holy Spirit to renew our hearts, and bring us to faith and repentance." Not only did Spencer depend upon the Holy Spirit while sharing the gospel, but he also instructed others to depend upon the Spirit in their conversion.

Ichabod Spencer stands as an example of how Christians should engage others, speak the Word of God to them, and then rely upon the Holy Spirit to transform their hearts. I highly recommend *A Pastor's Sketches* as a manual for biblical evangelism, one which will equip a new generation of men and women to punch holes in the darkness with the light of the gospel of Christ. ✦

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