

STEVEN J. LAWSON  
PREPARING THE  
PREACHER

JOHN MACARTHUR  
A PRIMER ON THE  
IMPORTANCE OF BIBLE STUDY

H.B. CHARLES, JR.  
CRAFTING THE  
EXPOSITION

# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

1  
ONE YEAR  
ANNIVERSARY

LAYING THE FOUNDATION:  
PREPARING THE SERMON

ISSUE

07

SEP/OCT15





# 2016

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I am pleased to present you with this special issue of *Expositor*, which marks the one-year anniversary of our new publication from OnePassion Ministries. This has been a remarkable first year for us as we have seen this magazine make its initial impact upon those who preach the Word.

Our goal is nothing short of launching a movement that would see expository preaching restored in pulpits around the world. Every great season in church history has been inaugurated by a return to biblical preaching. It will be no different if such a revival is to come in this hour. Amid this present-day famine in the land for the hearing of the Word of the Lord, our passion is that God will stir the hearts of preachers everywhere to preach with renewed precision and power.

This publication is based upon a fundamental premise: biblical preaching is of strategic importance to what God is doing in the world. The pulpit should be the leading influence upon the church, and the church should be the leading influence upon the world. To restore the pulpit is to directly impact every aspect of the life of the church—its worship, godliness, fellowship. The spiritual life of any congregation will rise no higher than the high-water mark set by its pulpit. This is how important our mission is.

As we conclude our first year, I want to extend a special word of thanks to the many people who have supported our work by joining our Ministry Circle. Without your help, we simply could not produce this publication. If you are not already a member, please visit our website to learn more about the opportunities and benefits of contributing financially on a quarterly basis. I also want to thank Dr. John MacArthur, who believed in this project from the beginning and has lent his help. His confidence has propelled us forward. Dustin Bengé, our editor, who has done a superb job in designing this magazine and editing its content, is also worthy of special mention.

May the Lord cause the influence of this publication to spread across the country and around the world to encourage and equip all those who are called to preach. In so doing, may the Lord raise up an army of Bible expositors who will preach the Word in season and out of season. ♦



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“All sermons ought to be well considered and prepared by the preacher; and, as much as possible, every minister should, with much prayer for heavenly guidance, enter fully into his subject, exert all his mental faculties in original thinking, and gather together all the information within his reach.”

— CHARLES H. SPURGEON



“Preparing your sermon you must begin with the exposition of your passage or single verse...you must be expository. We are presenting the Bible and its message...what we are saying comes out of the Bible, and always comes out of it. That is the origin of our message.”

– DR. D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

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## EXPOSITOR

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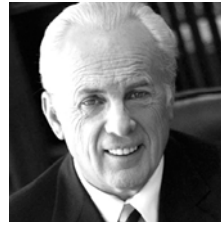
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# Preparing the Preacher

STEVEN J. LAWSON

**I**t was the famed preacher of Westminster Chapel, London, Martyn Lloyd-Jones—arguably the foremost expositor of the twentieth century—who said in his work *Preaching and Preachers*: “The preacher’s first, and the most important task is to prepare himself, not his sermon.” In other words, preparing the man takes precedence over preparing the message. The Doctor explains, “At first one tends to think that the great thing is to prepare the sermon—and the sermon . . . does need most careful preparation. But altogether more important is the preparation of the preacher himself.” This is a true assessment of the critical need for the preacher to be prepared before he prepares the sermon.

God is more concerned with our character than our careers, with who we are than with what we do. More important to God than where we preach is how we live. Our maturity is more important to Him than our ministry. God is more focused upon the depth of our hearts than the breadth of our outreach. God is more concerned with our godliness than with our giftedness. He is more interested in our piety than in our productivity. God is first concerned with what He is doing *in* us, and only then with what He is doing *through* us. He prioritizes our spirituality over our success.

Given God’s priorities for his preparation, the preacher must be, as Lloyd-Jones stressed, “a man of one thing.” The one great passion of his life must be the dominating reality of God in his soul. He must be consumed with glorifying God and following the Lord Jesus Christ. His innermost being must be driven to know God and to become like Christ through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Upon this, one’s entire pulpit ministry rests. No preacher can advance in his pulpit ministry beyond his own personal devotion to Jesus Christ. No matter how brilliant his intellect, how well he studies, or how expertly he speaks, the message will only flow out of a man who is a pure vessel. As a result, every expositor must cultivate his own heart for God.





### The Priority of Personal Holiness

As the apostle Peter writes his initial letter to the first early, persecuted believers, he begins by calling them to pursue personal holiness in their daily lives. He addresses their godliness first, immediately after the opening salutation and benediction, because this subject is of first importance. Peter writes:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:13–16).

What the apostle writes to the scattered believers in these verses underscores the importance of personal holiness for all Christians. At the same time, it applies to every preacher who stands in a pulpit. This is a matter of first priority for every expositor. The standard is the same for the pulpit and pew alike. Nevertheless, the accountability to God is stricter for the one who expounds the Scripture. It is critical that we see the close connection between how we live and what we preach. It is crucial that we understand how our personal life affects our pulpit ministry. Let us review these verses in the opening section of 1 Peter, and consider what they require from us.

### A Strict Mind

Peter begins by addressing the mind of the believer. The apostle first says, “Prepare your minds for action” (13). Literally, “prepare” (*anazōnnumi*) means “to gird up.” In common usage, the term referred to gathering up one’s long, flowing robe in order to be unimpeded in movement before taking action. If someone wanted to move quickly, he would pull up the corners of his garment so that there would be nothing dangling upon which to trip his feet. He would tuck all the loose ends into the leather belt. Metaphorically, this pictured the call to the Christian to be prepared for action in his spiritual life. Peter is saying: “Pull in all your loose thinking. Discipline your thoughts. Do not be tripped up with wrong beliefs. Do not allow any loose thinking not tied down with sound doctrine. All your thinking must be tucked in and tied down.”

Paul uses this same imagery of preparing the mind when he addresses spiritual warfare and putting on the full armor of God. He begins by making the same emphasis: “stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth” (Eph 6:14). In this analogy, the first thing a Roman soldier did before heading into battle was to tuck his loose, flowing robe into his belt so that he would not trip on it as he entered into battle. When he girded up his robe, he indicated that he was serious about entering into the conflict. Without doing so, he was easily de-

feated. To gird up with truth is to prepare the mind with the Word of God. It is to have no loose thoughts that are not tied to the Scripture.

The battle for personal holiness begins with the battle for the Christian mind. Everything in Christian living begins with the mind. Solomon writes, “For as [a man] thinks within himself, so he is” (Prov 23:7). In other words, what a person thinks is, in reality, the fountain of what he is. The Bible places the first priority for godly living with the mind. Sanctification advances by being “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). We are charged, “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Eph 4:23). Doctrine always precedes duty. All growth in grace begins with having a mind that is saturated with the Word of God.

### Saturated with the Scripture

If any man is to preach with spiritual power, his very thoughts must be tied down by Scripture. This begins with right thinking shaping his own spiritual life before it comes through his preaching. Personal purity is the prerequisite for pulpit power. There can be no loose thinking if he is to be properly prepared in his inner life. This means he must be absorbed with the Word of God.

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther, a great German preacher, became an ardent student of the Word of God. This began in the preparation of his own soul in order to preach and write. Luther wrote, “For a number of years I have now annually read through the Bible twice. If the Bible was a large, mighty tree and all its words were little branches, I have tapped at all the branches, eager to know what was there and what it had to offer.” Such hunger for the Word must mark every expositor.

Charles H. Spurgeon expressed the same: “It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord.” This is to say, every expositor must be saturated with biblical truth drawn from the whole of the Bible until it flavors the whole of his being.

John Stott likewise prioritized the importance of the preacher’s mind being saturated with the Word: “Because the Christian pastor is primarily called to the ministry of the Word, the study of Scripture is one of his foremost responsibilities.” His knowledge of God’s Word must be comprehensive. Affirming that the preacher must possess a command of the Scripture, Stott stated:

The systematic preaching of the Word is impossible without the systematic study of it. It will not be enough to skim through a few verses in daily Bible reading, nor to study a passage only when we have to preach from it. No. We must daily soak ourselves in the Scriptures. We must

As expositors, it is important that we be sober in spirit in our personal lives. We must be serious-minded as we walk before the Lord. Our minds must be riveted upon the glory of God and the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

not just study, as through a microscope, the linguistic minutiae of few verses, but take our telescope and scan the wide expanses of God's Word, assimilating its grand theme of divine sovereignty in the redemption of mankind.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones further notes that there must be the regular, devotional reading of Scripture from cover to cover:

Read your Bibles systematically . . . I cannot emphasize too strongly the vital importance of reading the whole Bible . . . Then, having done that, you can decide to work your way through one particular book, with commentaries or any aids that you may choose to employ . . . Do not read the Bible to find texts for sermons, read it because it is the food that God has provided for your soul, because it is the Word of God, because it is the means whereby you can get to know God. Read it because it is the bread of life, the manna provided for your soul's nourishment and well-being.

This is where sermon preparation begins. It starts with the mind of the preacher being prepared for action in the pursuit of personal holiness. This necessitates a man keeping

his mind pure, free from the contaminations of this polluted world. It requires that selfish thoughts and erroneous beliefs must be tucked in and tied down to the belt of truth. An eternal perspective must be maintained at all times. A Christian worldview must be the lens through which life is seen and lived. Sound doctrine must frame how you picture and pursue everything.

As any preacher sits down to prepare his sermon, he must gird up the loins of his mind. There can be no unbiblical thinking. Nor can there be loose thoughts. Neither can there be worldly beliefs. He must know the truth of Scripture and be sure there are no impure thoughts, worldly compromise, or lowered standards.

### A Sober Spirit

Second, the pursuit of holiness requires a sober spirit. Peter continues, "keep sober in spirit" (13). The word sober (*nēpho*) literally means "to be free from the influence of wine, to not become intoxicated." Figuratively, the idea is not to come under the seductive sway of the world, the flesh, and the devil. In other words, believers are not to come under the heady wine of whatever would dull their senses. They must not allow anything to cause them to lose their spiritual balance as they walk in a manner worthy of their calling. They must never become mentally inebriated or emotionally unstable and lose control of their thinking. Those who follow Christ must remain calm and collected in spirit. They must remain temperate and discreet in their judgment.

Peter is saying, "Do not lose the sharp clarity of your thinking. Do not allow the seductions and allurements of the world to cause you to become inebriated, spiritually speaking, and lose your spiritual equilibrium. Do not let the allurements of this world cause you to lose your ability to distinguish between right and wrong." In other words, we must stay sober in mind and heart.

As expositors, it is important that we be sober in spirit in our personal lives. We must be serious-minded as we walk before the Lord. Our minds must be riveted upon the glory of God and the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. We should feel the eternal weight of glory resting squarely upon us. This is a noble calling with which we have been called. Then, as we open the Scripture, the weightiness of the assignment should grip our souls. We should perceive that we are standing on holy ground and remove our sandals. The fear of God should reign supreme within us.

We can know that we are no longer sober in spirit if we find the allurements of this world more tantalizing than the treasures of heaven. Likewise, if we find friendship with the world more enjoyable than fellowship with Christ or if we find the lifestyle of the world more desirable than the prescribed lifestyle in Scripture, then we know we are no longer following Scripture's command.

### A Steadfast Hope

In order to fulfill our duty, we must fix our hope upon the certainty of the return of Christ. Peter states, “fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (13). The verb *fix* (*elpizō*) means having a settled confidence about the future. The idea behind hope is not wishful thinking about the future, but a fixed certainty. Hope is looking to something that is sure to occur in the future. It is being future-focused in a positive way. This hope is to remain firm to the end (*teleiōs*). In other words, Peter is saying, “fix your hope,” and keep it there.



The apostle states this with an imperative verb, indicating this is a command with binding authority. Like a military officer gives orders to a foot soldier, so the apostle addresses all believers in all places. This is an authoritative apostolic charge: we must fix our hope on the return of Christ. This hope is to be fixed “completely,” meaning entirely or fully. There should be no half-hearted hope that is easily blown about in the wind.

This future hope, Peter writes, is to be “on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” This future grace will be ushered in at the return of Christ. It involves all that is included in the final state of our salvation, namely, glorification. This will be the final realization and full consummation of saving grace in our lives. When Peter writes this transforming grace will “be brought to you,” the idea is that it will come to each believer in an intensely personal manner. It is as though Christ will come directly to us. There is a face-to-face reality about this approaching grace that is individual and intimate.

The future grace of glorification involves many spiritual realities. Included in this grace is the fact that we will be made like Christ. This means there will be the complete removal of our sinful body of flesh with all its sensual lusts and illegitimate desires. There will be no more sinful thoughts or conflict with the flesh. It involves being given a glorified spirit and glorified body. It means seeing Jesus as He now is, not as He

once was. It includes being confirmed in perfect holiness and entering into perfect joy. All this and more is included in this grace to be brought to us.

This occurs at the return of Christ, which is described here as “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word revelation (*apokalupsis*) means a disclosure or manifestation. It can also mean a laying bare or making naked. It communicates the unveiling of what was previously hidden in order to be seen. At His return, Jesus Christ, who is presently invisible to us, will be made fully visible. With glorified eyes, we will see Him. We shall behold Him face to face.

As preachers, we must live with our hope riveted upon the return of Christ. Too often, we are preoccupied with a myriad of deflating concerns. It may be a conflict in the church. It may be a financial shortage in the ministry budget. It may be a family that has left the church or a faction that is threatening to follow them. It may be the pressing demands of mounting deadlines. These troubles can breed discouragement in our hearts. None of us is immune to becoming weighed

down with the concerns of our pastoral charge. At such times, we live with a heavy burden upon our weak shoulders. It is in those moments that we must be reminded to fix our hope upon the return of Christ. No matter how bleak the outlook, the uplook has never been brighter.

This should be the fixed hope of every expositor. As we sit down to prepare our sermon, it should be with the anticipation that the Lord is coming and ready to burst onto the scene at any moment. The fact is, time is short. We do not know how many more sermons we have to prepare. Each time we sit down at our desk, we must capture the moment, because it may be our last. We must do today, not tomorrow, what must be done today. There is no time to waste. As our eyes are on the biblical text, we must be listening with our ears for the trumpet to sound.

### A Submissive Will

The apostle Peter further stresses the necessity of a submissive, obedient will. He writes, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance” (14). Peter begins this verse by addressing his readers as “obedient children,” or it could be rendered as “children of obedience.” The assumption is, if you are a child of God, you are marked by obedience. The distinguishing feature is the obedient will of the believer. “Obedient” (*hupakoē*) means “to

listen under.” The idea to carefully listen as one who is under a higher authority. It means to give an attentive ear while in a humble posture of submission. Such ready compliance marks every true child of God. This verse presumes that what separates a genuine Christian from a non-Christian is obedience. It reminds us that obedience is not optional, but obligatory. God has given believers a new heart of flesh which is eager to obey God.

Peter adds that we must “not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance” (14). This points back to their pre-conversion state in sin. These “former lusts” are to their sinful desires, evil thoughts, and sensual appetites. At that time, they lived in “ignorance,” a reference to being without the knowledge of God or of holiness. Now, they must not allow themselves to be squeezed back into the mold of their former lusts. Their new life of obedience has changed their desires and their actions.

Each step in the pursuit of holiness involves obedience to the Word of God. If there is no obedience, there is no growth in holiness. Disobedience causes a setback to any spiritual advancement, a stagnation in personal godliness. When there is disobedience, it necessitates our confession of sin and repentance. Obedience from the heart, motivated by grace, is the path that we travel in advancing in holiness. Every step on the narrow path of Christian living is a step of obedience.

In *The Reformed Pastor*, Richard Baxter addressed every preacher’s need for godliness. The noted Puritan writes that no pastor should be content to simply be “in a state of grace.” Rather, every preacher should be “careful that your graces are kept in vigorous and lively exercise, and that you preach to yourselves the sermons which you study, before you preach them to others.” He then pleads:

O brethren, watch therefore over your own hearts: keep out lusts and passions, and worldly inclinations; keep up the life of faith, and love, and zeal: be much at home, and be much with God. If it be not your daily business to study your own hearts, and to subdue corruption, and to walk with God—if you make not this a work to which you constantly attend, all will go wrong, and you will starve your hearers.

As preachers, we must obey the very Scriptures we preach. If anyone in the church obeys the Word, it must begin with us. We *must* practice what we preach. Otherwise, we discredit our own ministry. The old adage is true: “The way you are living speaks so loudly, I cannot hear a word you are saying.” Our congregations will live as we live before they do what we say. This necessitates a consistency between our preaching and our living. Would anyone go to a dentist who has rotting teeth? Would anyone eat at a restaurant where the cook is bulimic? Of course not. Would anyone listen to a preacher who

fails to obey his message? The answer should be, no. Thus, it is critical that we keep the Word we preach.

All expositors are like the herald at the ancient athletic games, who announced the rules to the runners. Then, by this analogy, he himself enters the same race in order to run it. God forbid that after making known the rules to others, he would fail to compete by them. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, “Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim . . . but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:26a, 27). Likewise, Paul writes, “But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim 2:5). Keeping the rules—the Word of God—begins with the preacher who proclaims them.

### A Separated Life

The summation of this opening section is found in verses 15–16, with the explicit call for personal holiness. He writes, “But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (15). In this plea, the apostle appeals to the holiness of God, the primary attribute of His nature. Holiness is the only attribute repeated in heaven three times. The seraphim around the throne of God are crying out “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts” (Isa 6:3). The same is found in Revelation 4:8. This divine attribute is affirmed three consecutive times, meaning it is His holiness raised to the superlative level. In other words, the angels are declaring God is not merely holy, but “Holy, Holier, Holiest.”

The primary meaning of holiness is “separate” or “set apart.” The word conveys the idea that God is high and lifted up above His creation. He is exalted, lofty, transcendent, and majestic. The secondary meaning indicates that God is set apart from sin, that is, He is morally perfect, blameless, perfect in His character, and perfect in His ways. This Holy One of heaven and earth has called us to Himself. He has sovereignly “called you”—all believers—into a personal relationship with Him. This refers to the effectual summons of God issued to all His elect. It is, in reality, a divine subpoena that apprehends the one called and irresistibly brings that person to appear before Him. It is by this call that we enter into a saving relationship with God. This holy God now commands our holiness.

Peter issues this command, that all believers are to be holy “in all your behavior” (15). This high calling demands a lowly walk in holiness. This stresses that the entire life of the believer must be lived in separation from sin. Charles Spurgeon said, “There should be as much difference between the worldling and the Christian as between hell and heaven.” Simply put, we are to be in the world, but not of the world. We are not to be isolated from the world but insulated from it.

Peter explains why the divine call to holiness is binding upon all believers. He writes, “because it is written, ‘YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY’” (16). By quoting Leviticus

“Abhor thy old sinful course of life, and serve God in holiness and righteousness all the remaining part of life.”

- GEORGE WHITEFIELD

11:44, 19:2, and 20:7, the apostle shows that this call for holiness is not a new way to live. Rather, it is rooted and grounded in the Old Testament law, and its moral demand is still in effect today. Here is the timeless charge to live in the pursuit of progressive sanctification. As God remains the same today, unchanging in His holiness, so are His requirements for living the same. We must be holy because He is holy.

All who preach the Word must live a separated life. There are no exceptions to this. Tragically though, we live in a day in which many who preach are trying to be as much like the world as they can be. Their desire seems to be to court the world. Thus, many have adopted the edgy lifestyles of the pagan world in an attempt to build bridges to them. Some even mimic their salty language and offer crude jesting in the pulpit. They try to sound more like a “shock jock” than a holy man, despite the fact that God says there must be no “filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting” (Eph 5:4). Some minis-

ters are involved in marital separation or inappropriate relationships, and others an unbiblical divorce, as though this has no effect upon their preaching. But nothing could be further from the truth. The Word of God remains clear. As preachers, we must pursue holiness in order to be qualified for spiritual leadership in the church.

#### Live Near to Christ

One of the godliest preachers who ever lived was the noted English evangelist George Whitefield. His piety was observed by all who knew him. Whitefield’s desire to know Christ more closely was the driving force in his life. He stated, “We can preach the Gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts.” This famed evangelist knew he must have a strong devotion to Christ in order to effectively proclaim Him.

Whitefield believed a preacher will proclaim Christ in direct proportion to the level with which he is personally acquainted with Him. Consequently, this Grand Itinerant wanted to “live near to Christ,” and to experience “a felt Christ.” This consuming passion for the knowledge of Christ produced in him about an abhorrence for whatever was not like Him and a love for whatever was like Him. Whitefield declared:

Abhor thy old sinful course of life, and serve God in holiness and righteousness all the remaining part of life. If you lament and bewail past sins, and do not forsake them, your repentance is in vain, you are mocking of God, and deceiving your own soul; you must put off the old man with his deeds, before you can put on the new man, Christ Jesus.

Whitefield’s own repentance repeatedly transformed his heart from being lukewarm to being vibrant and fervent for God. If we are to preach with power, we, too, know such integrity and purity must be present within us. Let us remember the words of Robert Murray M’Cheyne: “There is no argument like a holy life.” May this be the strongest argument for our life and ministry to a watching world. ♦





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# A Primer on the Importance of Bible Study

JOHN MACARTHUR

**T**he Bible is God's complete, inerrant, and authoritative revelation to man. It is the final rule by which all other truth claims must be tested. There is no higher authority or court of appeal. When the Bible speaks, God speaks.

Therefore, the Bible demands our careful, diligent study. Not only must we learn what the Bible *says*; we must also understand what it *means* by what it says. Furthermore, the duty of preachers is to proclaim and explain the truth of Scripture clearly and with conviction. Obviously, merely knowing *what* the Bible says is of little use to those who fail to interpret it properly.

The importance of sound, thorough Bible study might seem to be self-evident, especially for preachers, who are under a divine mandate to preach the Word of God in season and out of season (2 Tim 4:2)—and to be diligent to handle Scripture rightly (2 Tim 2:4). But when we stop and listen to a generous sampling of preaching from a cross section of the world's largest, best-known megachurches and missional church plants, we hear countless expositions of personal anecdotes, popular movies, secular psychology, and a host of other themes—but little or no biblical content. Whatever biblical passages we *do* hear quoted or referred to will most likely be mangled.

Evangelical pulpits today are filled with preachers who obviously do not study the Bible in earnest. More than any other single factor, neglect of this discipline underlies and explains the deplorable state of preaching today.





## Why Study the Bible?

Ours is an entertainment-oriented society. A myriad of distractions compete for our time. Even other “good” things can divert us from the necessary task of Bible study. The average Christian bookstore is stocked with fiction, stories about personal experiences, psychology, self-help manuals, and books about current events. Such works far outnumber the commentaries and books on Bible doctrine.

Some of those books may be helpful. Some are written by godly people and are biblically sound. No doubt God

If we neglect the consistent, serious study of God’s Word, the spiritual growth of both preacher and congregation will be stunted.

can use them in our lives to promote spiritual growth. But no matter how helpful and biblically sound they might be, they are no substitute for serious study of the Word of God.

**Bible Study Is Necessary for Spiritual Growth.** First Peter 2:2 says that the Bible is as vital to our spiritual growth as milk is to an infant: “Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.” If we neglect the consistent, serious study of God’s Word, the spiritual growth of both preacher and congregation will be stunted.

In Jeremiah 15:16, the prophet addresses this prayer to God: “Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart.” Jeremiah consumed the Word of God, and, by describing his own study with the metaphor of eating,

the prophet suggests that it brought not only joy, but also nourishment—and, ultimately, growth.

Paul employed the same metaphor in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able” (1 Cor 3:1–2). The apostle gave the Corinthians milk, not solid food, due to their immaturity. Nevertheless, he did feed them the Word of God.

Incidentally, the illustrative reference to milk and solid food should not be misunderstood. Paul was not saying that some parts of Scripture are milk, while others are solid food. John 3:16 might be “milk” for a young Christian. For a mature Christian, with a greater understanding of the love of God, John 3:16 is “solid food.” The difference is the depth of our study and understanding. The Bible contains truths that are so simple even the youngest Christian can lay hold of them, yet so profound that the most mature believer cannot fully plumb their depths.

Growth is basic to usefulness. Babies are wonderful to have around, but they’re not much help around the house. Unfortunately, that could also be said of a lot of Christians. Their lack of spiritual maturity greatly reduces their usefulness to the cause of Christ.

**Bible Study Is Necessary for Victory over Sin.** A sound grasp of Scripture is a wonderful weapon against sin. It is significant that all the armor Paul lists in Ephesians 6 is designed for defensive, protective use—except for *one* offensive weapon: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17).

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. . . . Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (Ps 119:9, 11). The apostle John describes spiritual young men as those who overcome the evil one through the Word of God that abides within them (1 John 2:14).

The more we affirm biblical truth, the stronger we are against sin. On the other hand, if we fill our minds with things other than God’s Word, the Holy Spirit has nothing of any value to bring to mind when we are tempted.

Proverbs 23:7 puts it this way, “For as [a person] thinks within himself, so he is.” Filling our minds with the truths of God’s Word will result in holiness and godly behavior. Filling our minds with other things will bear corresponding fruit.

**Bible Study Is Necessary for Effective Service.** A thorough knowledge of the Bible is absolutely essential for effective spiritual service. In Joshua 1:8–9 we see how God prepared Joshua for the formidable task that lay before him: the conquest of the Promised Land.

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

How was Joshua to prepare for his task? Did he need to study management and leadership techniques? Did he need to read a book on how to motivate people? No. Joshua's first and central priority was to study and meditate on the Word of God. That, the Lord told him, would bring him success in his ministry.

The apostle Paul, writing to his young protégé Timothy, gave him this wise counsel on how to be a success in the ministry: "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following" (1 Tim 4:6).

What makes a good minister, or servant, of Christ? Constant feeding on the Word of God and sound doctrine. Those who know the Word of God are equipped to be good servants of God.

*Bible Study Is Necessary to Make Us Effective Coun-*

**selors.** What is the best way to help a person who is struggling? By showing them God's solution to their problems. But how can we do that unless we study the Bible? How can we share principles with others that we ourselves haven't discovered? A prerequisite for helping others is knowing God's Word.

Paul told the Corinthians that God "comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor 1:4). Certainly, one of the ways God comforted Paul in his trials was through the Scriptures. Paul in turn used what God taught him to minister to others.

Knowledge of Scripture is also essential for discipling others. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul urges Timothy, "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." Once again we see the truth that we can't pass on to others things we haven't learned ourselves.

If we would be effective in evangelism, we must know the Word. Peter writes, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope



that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet 3:15). There’s nothing more frustrating than not knowing the answers to the questions people ask us, or knowing the answer, but not remember a verse that supports that answer. Knowing Scripture is crucial to effective evangelism.

### How to Study the Bible

Bible study is not to be done perfunctorily. Just before urging us to desire God’s Word in the same way newborn infants crave milk, Peter says we should prepare our hearts by “putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” (1 Peter 2:1). James likewise says sin must be put away if the Word is to benefit us: “Putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21).

What does that tell us? Before we can study the Bible with any spiritual profit, we must deal with sin. An excellent way to begin our Bible study is with a time of confession of sin and prayer for God’s guidance.

The method of study I prefer is a short series of simple and straightforward exercises.

**Read the Bible.** Become familiar with what it says. This may seem an obvious step, but it needs to be stressed, because too many people (preachers included) seem to skim lightly over the text. I find it’s best to read and re-read, even if it means studying short passages rather than long ones. The point is to become familiar with the text, not to see how much you can get through in the shortest possible time.

I used to struggle with retaining what I read in the Bible. I would read a large portion, and by the next day I’d forget details of the passage. The more of the text I read, the harder it was to retain everything. I was wasting a lot of time and effort and not really accomplishing very much.

I decided that the best way for me to learn the Bible was to read repetitiously. Isaiah said we learn “line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there” (Is 28:13). It’s like studying for a test in school. You don’t just read the material once; you go over it repeatedly. (For details

on how to do this, see my article “The Preacher and His Bible” in the Jul/Aug 2015 issue of *Expositor* magazine.)

As you read through the Bible systematically, you will become increasingly familiar with its contents. You will be able to cross-reference passages on your own, without being totally dependent on a concordance. Often, a topic or theme in one passage will remind you of a similar theme in another passage. You will gradually develop a good understanding of what the Bible teaches on various topics.

Reading the Bible is a crucial first step, and we learn much from that step alone. We must not stop there, however.

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Bible with  
any spiritual  
profit, we  
must first deal  
with sin.

**Study the Bible.** We need to dig beneath the surface of Scripture by doing a careful, systematic study of the details in the text—language, grammar, facts, chronologies, cross-references, commands, principles, and a host of other specifics. There are various ways to approach this.

You might, for example, study a Bible topic, trace a character’s biography, follow a doctrinal or historical theme, or do a word study.

But the most important and fruitful method for me is to study a short passage, paragraph, or narrative section intently. I will outline the text and study each section of the outline. My outline of the passage will often be the framework I use to prepare a sermon—helping to insure that my message

accurately reflects in a balanced and thorough way what the text actually teaches.

Look for the key concepts in your passage—the main truths it focuses on. Those will become clearer the more you read the passage. Write them down, along with any questions or problems that you come across. Try to learn as much as you can from the passage itself before you turn to outside sources. Finally, put together a preliminary outline of the passage.

The next step is to study the passage verse by verse, using commentaries, word studies, Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias, and any other reference tool that might be helpful. Reading what godly scholars have said about a passage will help keep us from misinterpreting it. Be sure to take notes as you read.

The last step is to prepare a final outline, taking into account all the material you've gathered during your study. If you are going to teach the passage, you will want to find ways to illustrate and apply the truths you have found. I try to use biblical illustrations whenever possible, since Scripture is best explained by other Scripture. A helpful tool in finding other passages with similar themes is *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*. This book contains cross-references for nearly every verse in the Bible. It is similar to the marginal references found in many Bibles, but far more extensive.

**Hear the Word taught.** I like to listen to gifted Bible expositors (many of them now available at SermonAudio.com.) or read the sermons of great preachers of the past to see how they have handled the passage I'm work-

ing on. The work of other preachers cannot substitute for your own personal study, but it is a necessary supplement to it.

**Meditate on the Word.** All of these means are important ways of filling your mind and heart with the truth of God's Word, but don't ever fall into the trap of viewing Bible study or preaching as academic exercises. Having loaded your mind with the language, grammar, history, facts, and commandments of Scripture, meditate on those things. Let the truth of God's Word permeate all your thoughts, and the power of the Word will naturally permeate your preaching as well. 🔥

(Parts of this article are abridged and adapted from *The Keys to Spiritual Growth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 141-51.)



## THE EXPOSITORY PREACHING OF DR. S. LEWIS JOHNSON, JR.

SLJInstitute.net provides multimedia distribution of roughly 1,500 of Dr. Johnson's messages compiled from the 1960's through the 1990's.

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# Crafting the Exposition: Introductions, Illustrations, and Conclusions

H. B. CHARLES, JR.

**T**here are two extremes preachers fall into when it comes to introductions, illustrations, and conclusions.

Some preachers build the sermon using the homiletical elements, neglecting the priority of the text. They take off strong. They get to a cruising altitude and pilot the sermon without running into turbulence. Then they land smoothly at the same airport from which they took off. It was good flight. The important homiletical policies and procedure were followed. And the congregation enjoyed the ride so much that it never noticed they did not actually go anywhere. These craft-first preachers are lauded as great communicators. But they fail to preach the Word, to the spiritual detriment of the large crowds that

sit under their preaching.

Other preachers rightly focus on the God-intended meaning of the text. The process is saturated in prayer for illumination (Ps 119:18, 34). The meaning and grammar of the words are carefully studied. The literary and historical context is considered. Cross-references are looked up. The best commentaries on the text are reviewed. The doctrinal themes and theological significance of the passage are unearthed. The preacher does his best to rightly divide the Word of truth. But there is a heavy fog in the pulpit, because diligent research was not fleshed out in sermon preparation. Careful study became sloppy preaching because the preacher did not craft his introduction, choose his illustrations, or plan his conclusion.

Expositional preaching often gets a bad rap for being dry, boring, and lifeless. But zombie preachers should be indicted, not expository preaching. The problem with some expository preaching is that it is exposition but it is not preaching. It is obvious the preacher knows a lot about the text. But the divine message of the text is not



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preached. Or, the various elements of the sermon fail to make the biblical message clear.

When the craft of the sermon overrides the message of the text, it is performance, not preaching. But the burden for truth that drives the expositor to study hard should also drive him to prepare well. The ancient herald was under orders to proclaim the message of the king to the people. This all-consuming duty shaped the herald's message and the presentation of that message.

This is the expositor's charge. True expository preaching strives to be both faithful to the text and clear in the presentation. It is for this reason that introductions, illustrations, and conclusions should matter to the expositor. It is not about being creative, eloquent, or impressive in the pulpit. It is about preaching the Word faithfully and clearly to the glory of God and for the salvation and sanctification of those who hear.

Christ-exalting preaching is text driven. It is also clearly communicated. Faithful preachers do not impose their own ideas on the text. They also do not ramble through their introduction, manipulate in their illustrations, or crash-land during their conclusions.

### Craft the Introduction

I typically begin my sermons with a word of prayer. I pray publicly to express dependence on God to help us speak faithfully and hear clearly. Then I read the sermon text without comment. I will have the rest of the sermon to explain and exhort. I believe this practice of beginning the sermon by reading the text affirms the authority of scripture. After praying and reading the text, I state the title of the sermon. The title is intended to be an encapsulated preview of the message. Next, I proceed to the formal introduction of the sermon.

The introduction is the front porch of the sermon. The front porch welcomes guests to your home. But you do not arrange the living room furniture on the porch. You do not hang a big-screen TV on the porch. You do not serve dinner on the porch. The front porch is only transitional. It welcomes guest to your home and leads them to the front door to enter the house. Sermon introductions work the same way.

Sermon introductions should be brief. Too often preachers spend a major chunk of their allotted time in the introduction. It seems they are sticking all the material they could not find another place for into the introduction. Then they get to a point where they say, "I wish I had more time to deal with this." You did! But you spent it in the introduction. Don't spend too much time setting up the message of the text. Get to the text and trust it to do the work in the minds and hearts of the congregation. The introduction should point toward where the sermon is headed. But the goal of the travel agent is not to captivate with descriptions of exotic locations. It is to get the traveler on a plane to that destination.

The introduction should set the text in its proper context.

A text without a context is a pretext. Expository preaching seeks to explain what the text means by what it says. Context is essential to understanding what the text says and means. The three rules of real estate are location, location, location. The three rules of Bible exposition are context, context, context. The introduction should sketch the big picture of the text. Likewise, the introduction should state the main point of the sermon. You don't have to prove, defend, or apply that point yet. Tell them where you are going in the introduction and then take them there in the body of the exposition. Presenting the literary and historical context roots the text in the world of the text. Stating the point of the sermon in a clear,

Faithful preachers do not impose their own ideas on the text. They also do not ramble through their introduction, manipulate in their illustrations, or crash-land during their conclusions.

present tense, active sentence roots the text in the world of the congregation. The expository sermon then becomes a bridge between the text and the congregation that connects them to the truth of God's Word.

### Choose the Illustrations

Sermon illustrations are like windows on a house. They help the listeners see the point and understand how the point lives in the world beyond the sermon. This is one of the key lessons we can learn from the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels. The preaching of Jesus was sound, faithful, and



profound. It was also filled with illustrations, word pictures, and parables. Many times Jesus preached remarkable sermons by telling simple stories. Jesus exemplified the power of illustration in preaching.

Normal people do not build houses with no windows. They also do not build houses that consist of only windows. Similarly, you must not allow illustrations to dominate the text of the sermon. So, keep them short. Don't use too many of them. Select them carefully. Practice integrity with the facts. Avoid manipulating emotions. Be careful of "indecent exposure" in the pulpit. Guard family and counseling confidentiality. Don't be the star of your own stories. Make sure the illustration speaks for itself. Comedians say that if you have to explain the joke, it bombed. So it is with illustrations. Sermon illustrations are to make the exposition clear. You should not have to do an exposition of the illustration. Sermon illustrations are servants of the text in expository preaching. If you have to choose between the text and the illustration, always side with the text!

One way to keep illustrations in their place is to make sure the illustrations actually illustrate. Do not tell a story just to tell it. It may be humorous, memorable, or compelling. But you are not to be a pulpit storyteller. You are to be a faithful expositor of the Word of God. Any illustration you use should be to shed light on the text. It should illustrate the exposition of the text and exhort the hearers to be doers of the Word.

Practice scrutiny in choosing illustrations. Ask hard questions before you insert the illustration into the sermon. What is the point of this illustration? Is this illustration about what the text is about? Does it make the text clearer? Does it get in the way of the text? Will this illustration connect to the listening congregation? Could this illustration shade the mood of the congregation in a way that hinders them from continuing to think through the text? Am I using an illustration to clarify or to cover for a weak argument?

Consider the principle of illustrative mention. Every major truth of scripture has a corresponding biblical illustration. Joseph illustrates fleeing temptation. David illustrates the danger of sexual immorality. Ananias and Sapphira illustrates consequences of lying. And many other persons or events illustrate biblical truth. Use scripture to illustrate. All of the sermon illustrations in the world are not as rich with meaningful illustration as the Bible itself. As you use scripture to illustrate, you continue to teach scripture as you illustrate. And, your illustrations will carry the divine authority.

### Plan the Conclusion

A sermon should be a self-contained unit, consisting of an introduction, main body, and conclusion. There are exceptions. But exceptions are not the norm. Very few preachers are skilled to preach one sermon over three or four weeks. From week to week, the sermon should formally begin and

decisively conclude. My advice to pastors is to preach series through books of the Bible. I reject the notion that pastors must keep the series under six weeks to keep the congregation's attention. I acknowledge that we live in a mobile generation with a short attention span. This is no reason to abandon consecutive exposition. But as we preach extended series, each sermon in the series should stand on its own. For this reason, the sermon conclusion is just as important as the sermon introduction.

The sermon conclusion should be an actual conclusion. Do not start with a bang and end with a fizzle. Do not preach until you run out of time or material. Do not plan the sermon and just "let the Spirit lead you" at the end. The conclusion of the sermon should be strategically planned and skillfully executed. The pilot's ability to take off and climb to a cruising altitude is all for nothing if he cannot land the plane. The conclusion of the sermon safely lands the plane. The purpose of the sermon should be clear in the preacher's mind. The elements of the sermon should be united around the main idea of the text. And, there should be a sense of movement forward toward a logical conclusion.

The conclusion of the sermon is not the introduction. This is not a time to introduce new material. The exposition of the text should be done in the body of the sermon. Do not use the end of the sermon to stick in everything you did not get to say yet. The conclusion is the time to review where you have been, not a last chance to get in a few more sermon nuggets. All that has been preached should be brought to bear on the hearer in the conclusion as a call to action. To hear the Word without doing what it says is self-deception (James 1:22). The wise man builds his house on the rock by doing what the Lord commands (Matt 7:24–27). The conclusion should issue the sermon's final challenge to observe all that Christ commands (Matt 28:20).

There are two groups in the audience who need this final challenge. As pastors-teachers, we regularly preach to professing believers. The pastor who is committed to expository preaching must think about the sermon in practical terms, not just exegetically, theologically, or homiletically. What we preach on Sunday should equip our people to follow Jesus where they live on Monday. Yet we must not assume that professing believers are true Christians (Matt 7:21–23). There will be many in our pews who walk in a false presumption of salvation. This Sunday-morning mission field should burden us to conclude by calling unbelievers—be they professing Christians or conscious unbelievers—to repent of their sins and call on the Lord for salvation. Point the congregation to the Lord Jesus Christ in the conclusion. Finish strong by calling your hearers to trust and obey Christ. "Him we proclaim," declares the apostle Paul, "warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col 1:28, ESV). ♦

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# Crafting the Exposition: The Central Ideas and Outline

IAN HAMILTON

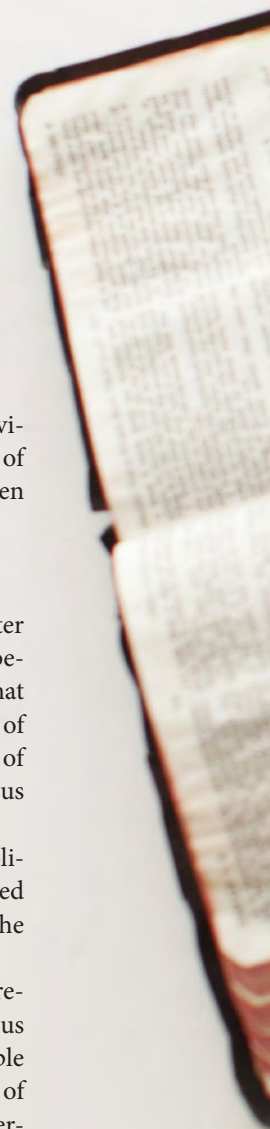
**P**reparing a sermon is the most exciting and exhausting, delightful and demanding, privileged and humbling experience in the life of a gospel minister. After thirty-five years of preparing and preaching sermons, I feel more, not less, out of my depth than I did when I first began to preach. But I trust that that is a hopeful sign.

## **The Preacher's Fundamental Conviction**

My primary concern in saying this is to establish at the outset how vital it is for a minister of the gospel to approach the living Word of the living God with a palpable sense of being out of his depth. When Paul comes to conclude his astonishing exposition of what he calls “the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1), he cries out in doxology, “Oh, the depths.” As we approach the text of holy Scripture, if we are not constrained by a felt sense that we are about to enter the unfathomable depths of the revealed wisdom and knowledge of God, we urgently need to either turn aside and cry out to our gracious Lord in prayer, or lay aside any thought of preaching His Word.

In preparation, as much as in preaching, attitude is everything. A sermon is not the mere recitation of biblical truths, however precious. A sermon is more than, if not less than, accurate exegesis. A sermon is mined from the living Word of God by men whose lives have been captured, captivated, and overwhelmed by the glorious gospel of the blessed God—or better, by the blessed God who is Himself the glorious gospel.

How we go about the task of “crafting an exposition,” isolating the text’s central idea (if it has one), and creating an exegetically faithful pastoral outline is paramount. The use of the adjective “pastoral” in the previous sentence is intended to make an important point. All preaching should be pervasively pastoral for the simple reason that our hearers are God’s precious sheep. Preachers are under-shepherds called to feed the flock of Christ. Therefore, how preachers construct the various elements of their sermons should reflect the inherently pastoral, caring, feeding nature of their calling. When the Lord Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15–18), He was clarifying and establishing the principal (and I mean “principal”) character of the Christian





pastor's calling to preach the Word.

The minister of the gospel, therefore, must never approach the text of God's Word clinically or dispassionately. He must always come to the text as a man constrained by doxology and with the pastoral heart of a true under-shepherd in the flock of God. Preparation as much as preaching is to be punctuated with a spirit of exclamatory doxology and a pervasive sense of loving care for the Lord's sheep.

The primary concern of this essay is to reflect on how we craft a sermon, especially how we isolate a text's central idea and thereafter create an outline that faithfully, biblically, theologically, and pastorally reflects the text's central idea.

### The Preacher's First Task

The preacher's first task is to locate his text, one verse or a discrete pericope or larger section, within the flow of redemptive history. God's Word is an organic whole. It is the unfolding and developing story of God's predestined purpose to make His Son 'the firstborn of many brothers' (Rom 8:29). It is not a string of pearls, far less a disconnected arrangement of divinely inspired literary genres. Every section of Scripture relates organically to every other section of Scripture. It is only by locating our preaching text within Scripture's organic whole that we can rightly understand what the central idea of our text is.

The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered cloth nearly 230 feet long and 20 inches tall that depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England in the eleventh century. It is a magnificent embroidery, but it can only be truly appreciated when the viewer stands far enough back to take in the panorama of the embroidered drama. So it is with preaching. The perennial danger facing the preacher is that of getting too close to the text in front of his eyes and failing to grasp the panorama of the biblical drama within which the text is located.

Let me illustrate the point I am trying to make. Our preaching text is Luke 9:28–36. Jesus is *en route* to Jerusalem. He has just told his disciples that "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day" (Luke 9:22). In his account of the transfiguration, Luke uses

a striking word that casts us back to the Exodus. He tells us that Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about His "departure" (ἔλεγον τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ). *ἔξοδον* (v. 31) literally means "way out," exodus. Luke is telling us that Jesus is the greater one than Moses who will lead His people out of their bondage to sin and into freedom. One key word can alert us to the keynote that the author is seeking to strike in his narrative.

A second concern of the preacher is to locate and explicate his text within the flow and purpose of the particular book of the Bible he is expounding. Again let me illustrate. If our preaching text is located within John 14–17, what is called The

Upper Room Discourse of Christ, two things in particular must be in the forefront of the preacher's mind: First, the dominant note or motif that John expressly tells us runs like a golden thread through his Gospel (20:31). John's Gospel is a self-conscious evangelistic tract for the times. Throughout his Gospel, John's primary concern is not merely to inform his readers but to persuade his readers and win them to a living, saving faith in Jesus. This principal (\*I mean "principal," not "principal"!)) hermeneutical note must inform and shape in some way any textually faithful exposition of John 14–17. Second, within that larger, overall concern, the immediate context of these verses features our Savior ministering comfort and hope to His deeply distressed disciples. There is little doubt that John 14:1 shapes and informs the words our Lord Jesus will speak to His disciples in the following chapters. Jesus is not giving them teaching unconnected to their troubled hearts and

distempered minds. Rather, He is seeking to set before them the perichoretic life and ministry of the Triune God, a life and ministry they are to sink their lives into and where they will find the greatest comfort and hope. As we have often read and heard, the first rule of biblical interpretation is context, context, context.

We will now turn our focus on a particular biblical passage, further examining how these introductory comments will help us to expound God's Word faithfully. The example under consideration here is Mark 2:13–17, a passage describing Jesus' call of Matthew and His eating with the sinners and tax collectors..

The perennial danger facing the preacher is that of getting too close to the text in front of his eyes and failing to grasp the panorama of the biblical drama within which the text is located.



### Mark 2:13–17: Understanding the Text

When we preach from one of the four Gospels, we must keep in mind that these Gospels were a unique form of literature in the ancient world. Biographies had been written of famous men, but the Gospels are not in any sense biographies of Jesus. They are “Gospels,” messages of good news to a world sunk in sin and rebellion against God. Jesus Himself sets the fundamental template that will shape and style Mark’s Gospel: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:14–15). The central idea that runs through Mark’s Gospel is the coming, the long-promised coming, of God’s kingdom in the person of Jesus, God’s Messiah King. Throughout the Gospel, and not least in 2:13–17, Jesus is acting as a king, fulfilling what was prophesied in the Old Testament concerning God’s Messiah.

### The Principal Idea: A Man on a Mission

It would be wrong to think that a particular text of Scripture, small or large, necessarily contains one principal idea. However, it is often the case that one idea or motif does shape and permeate biblical pericopes. We are perhaps now able to ask the question whether indeed one, or more than one, principal idea dominates Mark 2:13–17. The answer surely is that one note overshadows and defines Mark 2:13–17, and indeed the whole of Mark’s Gospel: Jesus is “a man on a mission.” However, although this is the principal idea that dominates the horizon of this text, it is an idea with a number of related adjuncts.

First, Jesus Himself both identifies and defines the nature

of His mission. In 1:14–15, He tells us His mission is to announce and inaugurate the kingdom of God, the personal reign and rule of God in His creation.

Second, in 2:17, Jesus further explicates what this coming of God’s kingdom involves: “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” There is a deeply personal dimension to Jesus’ mission. He has come to populate the kingdom of God with repentant sinners.

Third, if we are to make biblical sense of Jesus, “the man on a mission,” we need to stand back from the parameters of our text and understand that Jesus is on a mission entrusted to Him by His Father. To see Jesus here as pursuing a mission of His own initiative would be to miss the whole point of Mark’s Gospel. He is where He is as the Sent One of the Father. He has come from heaven not to do His own will but the will of the One who sent Him (John 6:38). He is a man on a divinely ordained mission.

Fourth, it would also be wholly wrong to think of Jesus merely dutifully fulfilling this mission the Father entrusted to Him. Jesus is in perfect harmony with the will of His Father to seek and save the lost. Although in the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole, love is almost always predicated of the Father (John 3:16; 1 John 4:10), Jesus, no less than His Father, loved the world (Matt 9:38). It is the love of God that has brought Jesus into this broken, sin-defaced, sin-darkened world.

Fifth, in the story of the healing and saving of the paralyzed man (2:1–12), Mark introduces us to one of the underlying themes in his Gospel: the conflict between the religious lead-

ers and Jesus over the character of God and the offer of free forgiveness through Jesus. But the conflict was deeper than that. Jesus, the “man on a mission,” is living out the elemental conflict announced by God in Genesis 3:15, the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, between God Himself and “the evil one.” The whole Bible from Genesis 3:15 to Revelation 22:22 is a commentary on the conflict God inaugurated between the seed of the woman and Satan. Mark highlights this note of elemental conflict in the four stories which follow the healing of the paralyzed man.

### The Sermon Outline

One of the dangers preachers face in preparation is imposing an outline on the preached text that is memorable but artificial. Any outline must reflect the context, the content, and the redemptive character of the text, and must do so manifestly. The outline is not an opportunity for the preacher to display his fertile ingenuity. He is himself always to be a man *under* the Word.

In these verses, what does Mark tell us about Jesus and His mission that will enable us to devise a helpful outline, that is, an outline that will help God’s people better understand God’s Word? What follows is but one (hopefully helpful and textually faithful) outline. Following the central thought of “Jesus, a man on a mission,” we can see three fundamental characteristics of His mission in these verses:

First, Jesus’ mission showcased the extravagant, unsettling grace of God. He called Levi, a tax collector, to follow Him. To identify with a tax collector was both culturally and religiously “unthinkable.” Tax collectors were collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers. They were excoriated by Jewish society. But Jesus called Levi to follow Him. The grace of God is religiously surprising and socially unsettling.

Second, Jesus’ mission confronted the spiritual corruption of the covenant people’s religious leaders (vv. 16–17). The narrowheartedness of the Pharisees is strikingly contrasted to the large-heartedness of Jesus. This is a note that runs throughout the Gospels. The Gospel writers take every opportunity to highlight the sheer generosity of God’s grace in Christ to men and women written off by the Pharisees and their acolytes. Jesus’ mission is a mission pre-eminently of grace (John 3:17).

Third, Jesus’ mission summoned sinners to a life of unconditional discipleship: “Follow me” (v. 14). The unilateral character of Jesus’ summons is intended to search out the hearts of would-be disciples. Mark, throughout his Gospel, wants his readers to understand that to follow Jesus is to follow Him fully and without conditions. The kingdom’s King is worthy of our utmost and our everything.

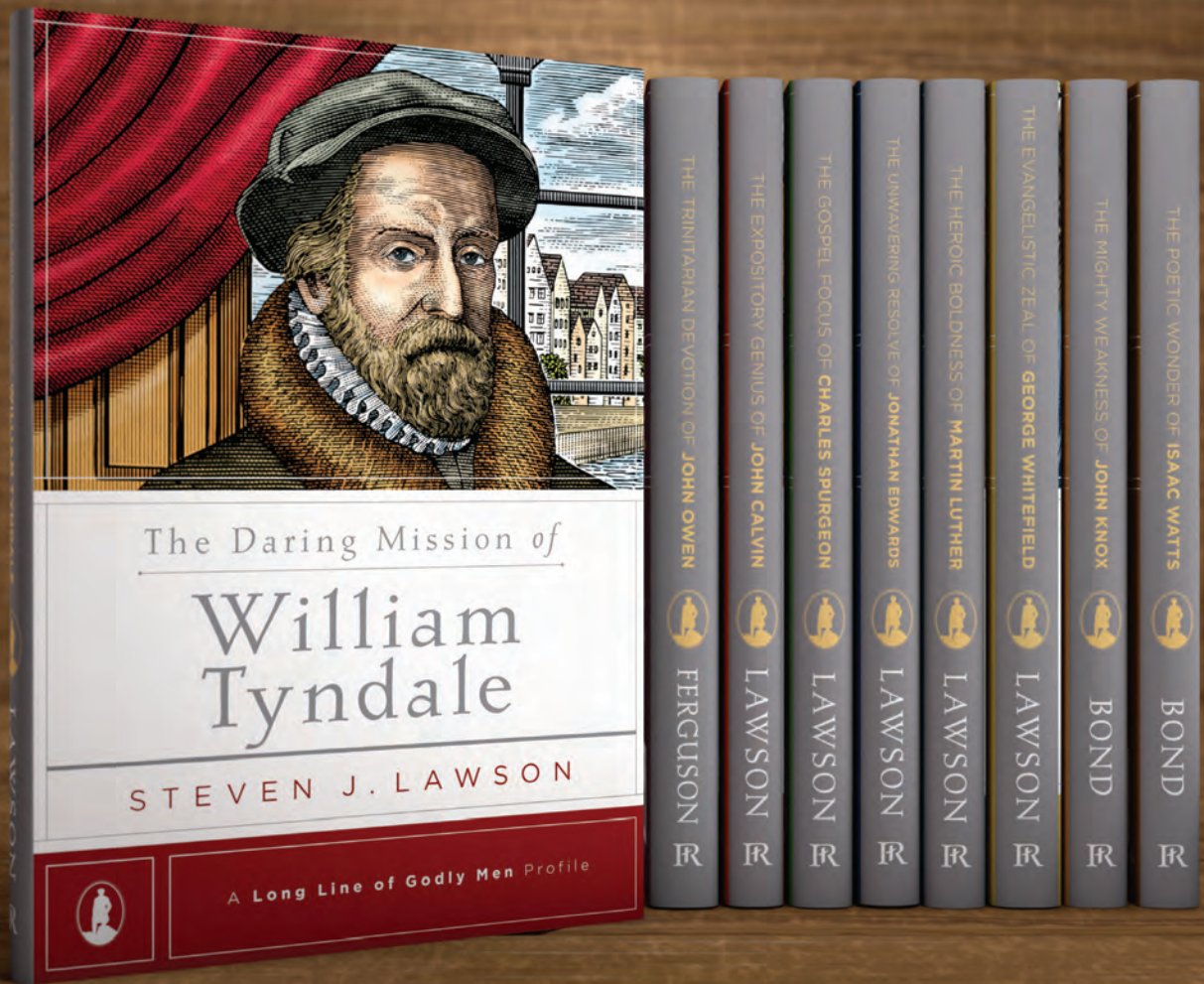
Each of these three points further unpack what it meant for Jesus to “proclaim the gospel of God” (1:14–15). The gospel of the Kingdom of God is the primary thematic note that runs through the whole of Mark’s Gospel. As such, it casts

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its instructive shadow over the unfolding redemptive drama that Mark records. It is therefore imperative that the preacher should relate whatever discrete section of the Gospel he is preaching on to its principal thematic note.

A sermon is, at heart, an occasion when God speaks to men and women of Himself and His surpassing grace in His Son, the God-Man Jesus Christ. The sermon’s aim is faithfully to explain and apply God’s Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is never to be a vehicle for the fertile imagination, far less the theological hobby horses of the preacher. In all of his sermonic endeavors, the preacher is to be shaped and directed in his thinking and preaching by the epicenter of God’s saving revelation, the grace and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2). It needs hardly to be said, but say it I will: under-girding all the preacher’s preparation and preaching will be the heartfelt conviction that “without You, Lord, I can do nothing.” Deeply conscious, prayerful dependence on God will, of necessity, be the manifest heartbeat that registers in the preacher’s words and in the listeners’ ears. ♦





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# Exegesis and Expository Preaching

LIAM GOLIGHER

**I**n 1 Corinthians 4:1–2 the preacher of the gospel is described as a “servant of Christ” and a “steward of the mysteries of God.” The revealed mystery is linked to the wisdom of God, which is the content of the gospel—“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9). To be a “faithful” steward means to preach as the apostle did: avoiding ungodly rhetorical methods; approaching the task with “fear and trembling” because it is performed before the face of God; and preaching in accordance with the revealed content of the gospel.

What was revealed to the prophets and apostles is now written in Scripture. This means that, if the preacher’s primary task is to “handle” the Word of God faithfully, then the first part of that task is exegesis—that is, the unpacking, exposition, or explanation of the text (a paragraph, a sentence, a word, or an idea). Having chosen a passage to preach on (and the *lectio continua*—that is, the systematic exposition of the text—is the best method, for it entails the assumption that our people need us to expound all the Bible), the first move is to excavate the text for its meaning with a view to explaining or expounding it to the people



of God. Unlike a prophet, the preacher does not receive the message directly from God, but rather he receives it indirectly from the Spirit through the Scriptures, which are God's Word written. Analogous to a prophet, that written Word provides the message that the preacher must expound, proclaim, and apply to the church. The preacher's message is therefore derived from and determined by that revelation which God the Holy Spirit has caused to be once and for all delivered to the saints.

### The Work Begins

Convinced of this, preachers begin their greatest work. When approaching a passage, book, or text for the first time, we should consult a good Old or New Testament Introduction and read the relevant introductions in good, technical commentaries. These often yield helpful insight into the nature of the text and its setting and themes. Each text has a meaning or message, and the first task is to understand precisely what that text is saying. As well as our own reading, we will want to consult helps such as technical commentaries, wordbooks, and lexicons to confirm we are not "out in left field" when it comes to our interpretations. Next, we must analyze the text in its context and the circumstances in which it was written for added color. If possible, we should translate the text into English from the Greek or Hebrew or consult commentaries to help resolve any longstanding textual problems. Any preacher should be aware of disputes surrounding the given text and have a reason for making the decisions required before opting for any one particular reading.

In addition, we need to look for the main "movements" or thought flow of the text—the sequence and logic of the thought. We should have a keen eye for how repetitions, key words and phrases, and the structure of sentences and paragraphs contribute to the overall sense of the passage. Other English translations and knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek are helpful at this point. Each unit is like a river, fed by tributaries, that flows to a conclusion, which is the main thought or prevailing idea. The key is to isolate that thought and be able to express it succinctly and clearly. Once we have done that and written it down, we return to the text and examine the truth tributaries that feed into it; these will become the points of the sermon. Write down the theme sentence that captures the message of the passage. Ask questions such as the following: what spiritual purpose is served by this particular emphasis? what threat was it intended to counter? what heart issue was it intended to address? what sin does it expose? what action does it require?

### Using Both Old and New Testaments

We begin with the whole of revelation before us and should move freely through Old and New Testaments. Compare how the passage's key words are used by the same human au-

thor; by other human authors in scripture; or in the LXX if using the Old Testament. Use cross-references to find texts that compare or contrast with your text. In New Testament exposition we will want to identify allusions to or quotations from the Old Testament to help us see the continuity of God's work and Word. In the Old Testament we will want to look see how particular texts are handled or used in the New Testament to give us help in explaining their meaning for today. One of the basic rules for understanding texts is to compare scripture with scripture, letting the clearer parts of the Bible dictate how we handle the more difficult.

Each text falls within a particular genre, whether prose or poetry, prophecy or history. Because the Bible is a Library of Truth, we need to be flexible in handling the various genres we find there. One thing is clear: *Christ* (His person, His work, and His church) is the main topic of Scripture, for "beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

When handling the Old Testament, Romans reminds us, "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" (Rom 15:4). As we read the Old Testament, themes such as "seed," "land," and "covenant" emerge. Events such as David's rise to prominence as the Lord's anointed prepare us to see typological echoes of Christ.

The language of the New Testament is also defined by the Old Testament. Words such as "church" are defined by the assembly of Israel as they gathered to God; in 1 Peter 2:4, "as you *come* to Him . . ." is alluding to the people approaching God in the temple in worship, though now the gathered church *is* the temple, the place where God meets His people. When Jesus and the apostles use the worship words of the Old Testament, they assume that their usage refers to the corporate activity of approaching God to worship Him. In handling history, we will want to keep an eye not only on lessons learned (all scripture was written for our learning and was especially written for the church), but also on insights into the history of redemption. In the book of Samuel, for instance, we follow the story of two anointed ones; both were appointed by God, but one (Saul) was an anti-messiah figure sent as judgment for Israel's rejection of God's rule and the other (David) was sent as the forerunner and father of the true Messiah. We will want to keep a sharp eye for applications to the church and to Jesus. The New Testament itself gives us help in interpreting Old Testament stories and ideas.

The New Testament describes the outworking of the Old Testament revelation. When Jesus preaches His Sermon on the Mount, His Beatitudes are replete with Old Testament references. The key verse of the entire Sermon is Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus, Paul, and the writer to the Hebrews particularly (along with the earliest

church fathers such as Clement, Justin Martyr, and many others) teach us to listen for the “voices” of Old Testament saints such as David, Isaiah, and others. In Psalms we hear the voice of the Father and the Son in words supplied to David by the Holy Spirit (e.g. Ps 2; 22; 68; 110); in Psalm 22 we hear the voice of the Son give His report on His work on the cross and its experience to the Father. In Romans 10:20–21 the apostle Paul refers to Isaiah 65:2, and he “hears” the voice behind Isaiah’s voice, the voice of the Son of God, as He addresses the Gentiles (Is 65:1).

While it’s true to say that each text or unit may have one unifying or prevailing thought or theme, it is also important to note that Paul (for example) will often appear to go off on a tangent by introducing some other theme to back up his main theme. These “tangents” are breathed out by the Spirit to help us see the interconnectedness of truth and shed light and perspective on Christian teaching and life. To rest on one thought and ignore the rest would be to quench the Spirit.

Of course, there are dangers to this approach to handling the text; one is that we become diverted from the priorities of Scripture as a whole. It is possible to advance an approach to exegesis that is effectively Biblicist or atomistic in the worst sense of that world. The cry of “Bible alone” has often been coopted by cults and special interests to avoid doctrinal controversy and subvert doctrinal conviction. It is imperative that we do not view exegesis in isolation from other biblical disciplines such as biblical and systematic theology; in fact, exegesis is the foundation for both these other disciplines. As we study any given text, we believe the Bible to be one book with a consistent message; therefore, the parts co-inhere with the whole. As I study any given text or passage, I move constantly from textual priorities through biblical theology and systematic theology’s insights—each of these disciplines serves as a check and balance as we compare scripture with scripture and strive to be faith-

ful to all of scripture as we do to the particular text.

A good Bible student will want to check how his interpretation of scripture adheres to the great ages of gospel and doctrinal clarity captured in the creeds and confessions of the church. Often, specialized studies (monographs; PhD dissertations; theological studies by Beale, Vos, Turretin, Berkhof, Bavinck, or Kelly, for example) will help fill out what is gleaned from reading the text alone. The church’s confessions also provide us with deeper reflection on the text and the integration of biblical themes. Beware of those who boast that they have no system; everyone has one, so those who deny this fact probably have something to hide!

### **Pulling Everything Together**

By the time you have done all this, you will have accumulated a massive amount of material. It is now time to revisit the text and evaluate the weight put on each truth within the text itself. As you prepare your final outline, you will want to weight your sermon to reflect the weight given to each part by the Holy Spirit, who is the first author of scripture. Only then, once you have the theology of the text and its meaning firmly established, should you begin to connect these ideas with issues you know to be alive within your church or the wider world. Even from your research, you will find material that will point you to illustrations and applications to life and the world.

Above all, of course, a sermon must exalt God and preach Christ to the heart; and when the truth of God’s Word has been adequately studied and inhaled (so to speak), the soul of the preacher will rise. When he opens his mouth, the preaching of the Word will be the Word of God as the Spirit takes up the preached Word to create faith in the unbeliever, give life to the dead, and bring comfort to the comfortless, all so that God in Christ should be glorified. ♦





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# Grammatical Analysis and Expository Preaching

JON PAYNE

Charles Simeon (1759–1836), the eminent British preacher from Cambridge, advised his students in homiletics “to give every text its just meaning, its natural bearing, and its legitimate use . . . to ascertain from the original and from the context the true, faithful, and primary meaning of every text.” He adds that the aim of every preacher must be to “bring out of scripture what is there and not to thrust in what . . . might be there.”

Simeon’s advice seems simple enough. Yet this no-nonsense exegetical approach to preaching is not easily found today. What we often encounter are well-intentioned ministers employing homiletical methods that marginalize and misuse the text rather than explain and apply it. All too frequently the preacher is sovereign, not the text. The Word of God is a servant to the preacher, not vice versa. Scripture becomes a launching pad for all manner of subjects loosely related to the text, rather than a mine from which to excavate the abundant treasures of divine truth. God’s Word gets eclipsed by man’s word.

This approach is illustrated by the enthusiastic seminarian who told his homiletics professor that he was excited about the sermon he was writing for class and only needed a good passage of scripture to go with it. Albert Mohler, Jr. explains:

In far too many cases, it seems that the text becomes a point of departure for some message . . . which the pastor wishes to share with the congregation. Beyond this, the text of Scripture is often emptied—evacuated—of biblical content when, regardless of a passage’s textual form or context, the content is uniformly presented as a set of pithy “points” that come together in a staple outline form.

Regrettably, I have observed this approach in a number of popular evangelical churches. After the minister reads his passage, he rarely refers to it again. His message is filled with humorous stories, engaging anecdotes, and punchy application. The pastor is a winsome, entertaining, and inspiring communicator. But the text is virtually ignored. God’s Word is overshadowed by the pastor’s cleverness and personality. Christ and His gospel get an honorable mention, but they are not clearly heralded from the text. Sadly, this is what a large percent-





age of evangelical Christians meet with on a weekly basis. T. David Gordon writes in his book, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*:

I have come to recognize that many, many individuals today have never been under a steady diet of competent preaching . . . As starving children in Manila sift through the landfill for food, Christians in many churches today have never experienced genuine, soul-nourishing preaching, and so they just pick away at what is available to them, trying to find a morsel of spiritual sustenance or helpful counsel here or there.

To avoid the common hermeneutical infidelity described above, it is essential that ministers practice a method of expository preaching that is informed by an orthodox view of Scripture, are committed to careful exegesis and grammatical analysis, and remain devoted to the spiritual maturity of the flock.

#### **Informed by an Orthodox View of Scripture**

Faithful preaching *always* flows from an orthodox view of Scripture. Belief in the Bible's inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility, authority, sufficiency, and efficacy has a profound bearing upon biblical proclamation. The apostle Paul underscores this connection in his second letter to Timothy. At the end

of chapter three, he reminds Timothy of the divine origin of Scripture. "All Scripture is inspired by God [*theopneustos*] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17). It is no coincidence, therefore, that on the very heels of this foundational instruction on the nature of Scripture that Paul imparts his weightiest injunction on preaching.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Tim 4:1–2).

A Spirit-wrought confidence in the Bible—the voice of God inscripturated—compels the minister to let the Word speak for itself. He does not want to add to, detract from, or misuse the Word of God. A high view of Scripture inclines the minister to do careful exegesis and not creative eisegesis. He is a humble servant *of the text*. His aim is to study, observe, understand, explain, and apply the biblical content before him. He wants God's people to hear the Word of Christ and not some other word, for it is the Word of Christ that the Spirit wields to create, nourish, and grow saving faith in the souls of the elect (Rom 10:17). The Word must be faithfully preached. It is necessary for salvation. No other word will do.



Our Reformed and confessional heritage recognizes and reinforces this paramount relationship between the exalted nature of Scripture and faithful biblical preaching. For example, the opening chapter of the Second Helvetic Confession (1562), after a sublime statement on the divine origin of Scripture, states:

*Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei* [the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God]. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven.

Of course, the only way that the preaching of the Word of God can be described as the Word of God is if the minister is truly preaching the text. That's the point, and the Protestant Reformers were staunchly committed to it. Furthermore, they believed that to preach the text faithfully, the expositor must be thoroughly committed to careful exegesis and grammatical analysis.

#### **Committed to Careful Exegesis and Grammatical Analysis**

The Bible teaches that pastors are called to rightly handle the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). They are to accurately and courageously proclaim the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). This demands hard work. There are no shortcuts to sound preaching. Indeed, before the preacher ever enters the pulpit on the Lord's Day, he is required to labor over the passage during the week—to study its background, redemptive-historical context, grammar and syntax, and literary genre. Let's briefly consider each of these important aspects of sermon preparation.

**Background:** Every biblical text is set in a particular context. Explaining the background of a passage of Scripture, therefore, will help the congregation to understand the passage more clearly. Who is the author? Where is he writing from? Who is the original audience and where do they live? What is the geo-political scene? What are the original recipients experiencing? Persecution? Worldliness? False teaching? These kinds of questions concerning the background of a text

will greatly assist the minister in his expositional task.

**Redemptive-Historical Context:** God has revealed Himself progressively throughout history, culminating in the glorious revelation of Jesus Christ (Col 1:26–27; Luke 24:27; Heb 1:1–3). Consequently, the minister's preparation and preaching must be informed and shaped by his understanding of redemptive history. As he approaches his text, he must consider how it relates to the big picture of redemptive history as well as the more narrow scope of the passage.

The preacher must keep in mind the grand unifying theme of Scripture—redemption fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He also must be sure to understand every passage in its immediate context. In other words, the minister must always keep the view from thirty thousand feet as he examines the specific details of a text's landscape. Taking seriously the redemptive-historical context of every passage will help the minister to faithfully preach “Christ and Him crucified” from all of Scripture without failing to bring out the full weight, meaning, and application of each individual text. Dennis Johnson argues:

[We need] to read each Scripture, first in the context of its original redemptive-historical epoch, and then in terms of the focal point and climactic “horizon” toward which the particulars of God's plan

always pointed, namely Jesus the Messiah, who is the second and last Adam, seed of Abraham, true Israel, royal descendent of David, and obedient and suffering Servant of the Lord. Redemptive-historical hermeneutics, therefore, offer a framework for preaching Christ from all the Scriptures (cf Luke 24:44–49) in a way that treats each text's and epoch's distinctiveness with integrity and at the same time does justice to the progressively unfolding clarity by which God sustained his people's hopes for the redemption that has now arrived in Jesus.

**Grammar and Syntax:** Expository sermon preparation is by nature exegetical and inductive. Therefore, it involves a careful examination of the grammar and syntax of every text. Grammar pertains to the general rules of language relating to words, clauses, phrases, and the overall structure of a passage. Syntax, a subset of grammar, refers specifically to word or

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# The Christian must always beware of drifting away from Christ, the anchor of our souls.

der and the relationships of words one to another. To do this well, one should have a basic understanding of the original languages.

While recently studying for an exposition of Hebrews 2:1–4, the verses came into focus upon a simple consideration of the grammar and syntax of verse one.

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it (Heb 2:1).

Notice that the verse begins with the conjunction *dia touto*, usually translated “therefore” or “for this reason.” It indicates that the truth and logic of the previous chapter have significant bearing upon the text. The conjunction communicates a kind of retrospective force—powerfully reminding the reader that the majestic portrait of the nature and works of Christ painted in the first chapter of Hebrews is not without serious implication for the church. It is doctrine for life.

Next comes the Greek verb *perissoterōs*, a comparative adverb that translates to “greater” or “more.” Here the adverb describes *how* the church should be “heeding” or “paying attention to” [*prosexein*] the gospel in consideration of their current situation. They are to pay much “closer” or “greater” attention to what they have heard. Why? So that they do not “drift away from it.”

The Greek word *pararuōmen* [lest we drift away from it] is in the second aorist passive subjective, first person plural. This is important because it reminds us that the danger of drifting is always before the believer (aorist tense). Spiritual drifting is a very real possibility for those who do not presently take heed (subjunctive tense). The verb *pararreō* [drift] is a nautical term. It describes a ship that has lost its moorings and is dangerously drifting out to sea. The Christian must always beware of drifting away from Christ, the anchor of our souls.

As we can see, studying the grammar and syntax of a text helps to bring out the true meaning, sense, and application of God’s Word.

**Genre:** All literature is identified by different genres or clas-

sifications. The Bible is comprised of numerous genres, each with varying literary functions. Poetic texts (e.g., Psalms) function differently than historical texts (e.g., 1 Kings). Law (e.g., Deuteronomy) functions differently than apocalyptic literature (e.g., Revelation). Therefore, it is crucial that the expositor understand the specific genre of his biblical passage as he seeks to explain and apply it accurately to the flock. The major genres of biblical literature are history, law, wisdom, poetry, prophecy, narrative, gospel, epistles, and apocalypse. To ignore or confuse the literary genre of a text is potentially hazardous to an exposition.

## Devoted to the Spiritual Maturity of the Flock

There is a stewardship to sacred ministry—“to make the word of God fully known” (Col 1:25 esv; 1 Cor 4:1; Eph 3:2). Pastors, therefore, must be blood-earnest in the task of expository preaching. Their congregation’s spiritual maturity largely depends on it. Disciples are made through biblical proclamation teaching all that Christ commanded (Matt 28:20; Acts 2:42). Pastors are under-shepherds—called by Christ, the Chief Shepherd, to “shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). They are to feed and nourish the sheep upon the verdant pastures of the life-giving Word of God (John 21:15–19; 1 Pet 2:2). Isn’t this why the framers of the Westminster Larger Catechism so solemnly addressed the task of preaching?

Q. 159. *How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?* A. They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

Charles Simeon’s exhortation for preachers “to ascertain from the original and from the context the true, faithful, and primary meaning of every text” is much needed in our day. We need a new generation of bold preachers who will not “shrink from declaring . . . the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). Therefore, let us pray for faithful ministers whose expository preaching is marked by an orthodox view of Scripture, a commitment to careful exegesis and grammatical analysis, and a devotion to the spiritual maturity of the flock. Let us pray for ministers who will preach the unadulterated Word of God. ♦

# THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

WE TRAIN MEN BECAUSE LIVES DEPEND ON IT

The Master's Seminary, founded as a non-denominational graduate school in 1986 in association with The Master's College, exists to advance the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping men to be pastors and/or trainers of pastors for excellence in service to Christ in strategic fields of Christian ministry. Students are provided a thorough educational program and environment which emphasize unreserved commitment to the worship of God, submission to the authority of the Scriptures, a life of personal holiness, the priority of the local church, and the mission of penetrating the world with the Truth.





# Hermeneutics and Expository Preaching


TOM ASCOL

If any pastor has called into question the importance of hermeneutics or of the serious challenges arising within the field over the last fifty to seventy-five years, then the June 26, 2015, United States Supreme Court ruling in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case should have removed all doubt. The court determined that the fourteenth amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees same sex couples the right to marry. Specifically, in the words of Justice Kennedy, who wrote the official opinion for the majority, “The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity.” One searches the Constitution in vain, however, to find where the original authors or the later amenders used words revealing that they intended to communicate the right

of citizens to “define and express their identity.”

Therein lies the rub. Until the middle of the last century, it was commonly understood that meaning was a function of the creator of information (the author, speaker, or poet) and not the recipient of information (the reader or listener). With the rise of “reader response criticism” and the so-called “new hermeneutic,” this long-held common sense approach to interpretation has been turned on its head. Now, as the Supreme Court’s *Obergefell* ruling graphically illustrates, it is common to regard meaning as a product of the interpreter.

Free from the restraints of authorial intent, interpreters today can be guided by any number of considerations, including politics, ideology, and psychology, in their search for meaning. This is why legal scholars have found the right to abort and the right to so-called “same sex marriage” in the Constitution even while acknowledging that the authors and



framers of the document had never intended to communicate such ideas. It also explains why the Bible has received the same kind of treatment from those theologians and biblical scholars who purport to find support for women pastors and Christian homosexuality in the Bible. In the new hermeneutic, meaning is now firmly in the hands of the interpreter.

Fortunately, we have not yet granted such authority to pharmacists. We still expect them to be guided by the intention of our physicians when filling our prescriptions. Fortunately, there are laws that require such, because the consequences of making interpretive mistakes in the pharmacy can be both immediate and lethal.

What we have failed to realize, though, is that, while not quite as instant, mistakes in interpreting the Bible are even deadlier than those made in the pharmacy, because they have eternal rather than temporal consequences. This is what Peter means when he warns of those “ignorant and unstable” interpreters who “twist to their own destruction” Paul’s letters (2 Pet 3:16). Misinterpreting Scripture is spiritually disastrous.

Seeking to contravene such mishandling of Scripture, Paul admonishes Timothy to do his best to present himself to God “as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). This “word of truth” is the gospel of salvation (Eph 1:13) that is revealed in the Scriptures. The man of God is required to handle the Word with integrity, that is, to accurately understand and communicate its genuine meaning. To handle it wrongly, which is obviously a possibility, would be shameful for the communicator and detrimental to the hearers.

Every biblical expositor committed to handling the Word rightly must be governed by three convictions.

### **Conviction about the Bible**

*The Bible is the Word of God written. It is authoritative, sufficient, and understandable.*

The classic text in Scripture regarding the nature of God’s Word is 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

Though Scripture has been written by human authors, it ultimately comes from God and therefore carries the full weight of our Creator’s authority. Thus, in the New Testament, whenever an appeal was made to Old Testament Scripture with the designation “it is written,” the question is settled. This phrase is, in effect, a declaration that God has spoken.

The things about which God has spoken in the Bible include everything necessary to equip the man of God for “every good work.” This does not mean that the Bible is all we need to guide every worthy endeavor (such as the study of physics or the building of a website), but it does mean that, as the *Second London Baptist Confession* puts it, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.”

Such conviction will prevent the man of God from looking outside the Word of God for instructions in shepherding the people of God in his preaching and teaching.

A corollary of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture is its clarity. As Charles Hodge explains, “The Bible is a plain book. It is intelligible by the people.”

This is why it is called a “lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). Children are expected to be able to com-

# The written Word of God must be preached, and in such a way that those who hear can understand its meaning.

prehend it (Deut 6:6–7; 2 Tim 3:15) and common people can evaluate apostolic preaching in its light (Acts 17:11). While all of its parts are not equally clear (2 Pet 3:16), the whole of it is sufficiently clear that, under the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, all of God’s people can understand the revelation of Jesus Christ in it.

The biblical expositor will approach his work with confidence that, in the Scriptures, God has spoken all that He wants His people to know and has done so in a way that can be understood.

## Conviction about Preaching

*Preaching is God’s prescribed method of authoritatively proclaiming His Word.*

God is pleased to save people, 1 Corinthians 1:21 says, “through the foolishness of the message preached.” In 2 Timothy 3, Paul warns his young colleague of perilous times that will come when wickedness increases in the world and in the church. The one thing that Timothy must do in such times is stated in serious, sober language: “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:1–2).

The written Word of God must be preached, and in such a way that those who hear can understand its meaning. Nehemiah 8:1–8 gives us an example of what such preaching entails. All the people gathered at one place. Ezra and his associates stood on a platform and “read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (v. 8).

Those appointed for the task read and explained the Word so clearly that the people understood it. This is the goal of expository preaching—to explain the text in such a way that people understand it. This is God’s ordained way for people to receive His authoritative Word.

The biblical expositor will always have this goal before him. In order to attain it, he will embrace the responsibility to work hard to understand accurately the text that he preaches. This leads to the third conviction that all expositors must have.

## Conviction about Interpretation

*For the Word of God to be properly preached, it must be accurately interpreted on its own terms.*

The nature of the Bible gives rise to two types of principles that must govern our interpretation of it. Since all Scripture is God-breathed, we must approach our efforts to interpret any portion of it with specific principles that grow out of His revealed character as honest (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Heb 6:18), faithful (Ex 34:6; Heb 10:23) and consistent (2 Tim 2:13). Because God accomplished this revelation through human authors, when interpreting the Bible we must also consider other, more general interpretive principles that apply to the way we read *any* text. *any* text.

How do we live out these principles in our daily work of interpreting Scripture? First, we must approach the Bible with humility and dependence on the Lord. It is, after all, the Word of the living God, and we are at our best “frail creatures of dust.” So, we come to be instructed, expecting at points to be not only enlightened but corrected and reprovved (2 Tim 3:16). Prayer for the Spirit’s illuminating work is fundamental to the expositor’s work because He is the one who enables us to understand spiritual things (1 Cor 2:10–14).

Next, we recognize that the Bible has an innate unity that does not allow for inherent contradictions, since it all comes from God. No one part of Scripture will genuinely contradict another part, though there may well be apparent contradictions due to our limited understanding.

This leads to a principle that has been known historically as the “analogy of faith.” Scripture is its own best interpreter, and any one part should be compared to other parts and to the whole in order to gain insight into its meaning. Clearer passages should be used to shed light on less clear ones.

To apply the analogy of faith wisely, one must also give due consideration to the context of the passage under consideration. What is its role in the larger argument or narrative?



What is the purpose of the whole chapter or larger section, as well as of the complete book, testament, and Bible? All of these questions must be brought to bear on any and every passage in order to gain an accurate understanding of it.

Because the Bible was written by various authors in diverse cultural contexts, other considerations also contribute to an accurate interpretation of any passage. Just as we want anything we write to be understood in the way that we meant it, we must interpret Scripture by seeking the original author's intent. Before asking, "What does it mean?" we must ask, "What *did* it mean?" The following principles will assist us as we seek to ascertain what a particular passage meant and means.

First, the historical setting of the passage needs to be considered. Who is the human author? Who are the original recipients? What was going on in the lives of the author and recipients when it was written? What was the occasion that resulted in this book's being written? Asking and answering these types of questions helps provide important boundaries in our quest to discover the original meaning of a text.

Next, the particular genre of a passage must be identified. Though narrative passages are truthful descriptions of what happened, they do not necessarily prescribe what *should* happen. For instance, it is illegitimate to say that the Bible supports polygamy simply because it reports that David had multiple wives. Similarly poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic liter-

ature, law, wisdom literature, and letters must be recognized for what they are and interpreted according to the purposes that they serve.

For example, to interpret Proverbs 26:4–5 (a pair of wisdom sayings) as law would be to accuse the Bible of blatantly contradicting itself in the space of two verses ("Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will also be like him," v. 4 and "Answer a fool as his folly deserves, that he not be wise in his own eyes," v. 5). Similarly, didactic passages must be allowed to interpret narrative and other types of texts: Jesus's direct teaching on monogamy (Matt 19:3–9) confirms that the Bible not only fails to support polygamy, but also clearly forbids it.

Finally, the actual words of the text must be analyzed—individually with respect to their definition, background, and usage; and grammatically, with respect to the meaning that they convey in connection to other words in clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. What does the author want us to understand through the words he uses?

These principles are trustworthy guides that will help expositors come to the plain sense of the biblical text, that is, the meaning that the author intended to convey. Because God Himself is the One who breathed out the text through human authors, we can be sure that, having come to understand it, we have come to know what God has said. That confidence makes for effective, authoritative preaching. ♦



## JOHN CALVIN: LIFE AND LEGACY, PT. 2

BY STEVEN J. LAWSON



While in route to Strasbourg, John Calvin was providentially redirected. A war between Charles V, the holy Roman emperor, and Francis I resulted in troop movements that blocked the road to Strasbourg, and Calvin was forced to detour through Geneva, Switzerland, nestled under the snow-capped Alps on the shores of Lake Geneva, the largest lake in Europe. Calvin intended to spend only one night there, but he was recognized by William Farel, the Protestant leader in this newly-Reformed city. Their meeting proved to be one of history's most pivotal encounters, not just for the church in Geneva, but for the world. As Calvin later recounted it:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.

In response to Farel's challenge—"If you do not assist us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you"—the young theologian agreed to stay, acknowledging that this was the direction of God for his life. Rather than study in the cloistered quietness of Strasbourg, Calvin was suddenly thrust into the visible spotlight of Geneva, with its many demands. He was first appointed professor of sacred Scripture in Geneva, then, four months later, pastor of Saint Pierre Cathedral.

### **Banished to Strasbourg**

Calvin and Farel immediately began working to reform the church in Geneva. Drawing up a confession of faith and oath, they audaciously sought to bring the lives of the ten thousand citizens of the city into conformity with Scripture. But they soon met with strong opposition. Their attempts to fence the Lord's Table by excommunication—that is, restricting those living in open sin from partaking of the elements—

resulted in their banishment from the city in 1538.

Once again, Calvin went into exile, this time to Strasbourg, the place he had intended to go to study and write. For the next three years (1538–1541), Calvin pastored a Protestant congregation of some five hundred French-speaking refugees in Strasbourg. He also taught the New Testament in the local theological institute, wrote his first commentary (on Romans), and published the second edition of the *Institutes*.

During these years in Strasbourg, Calvin also found a wife, Idelette Stordeur, a member of his congregation. An Anabaptist widow, she had a son and a daughter from her first marriage. They married in 1540, when Calvin was 31. In future years, this union would bring much heartache to his soul. Idelette would miscarry once, lose a daughter at birth, and deliver a son who would die at two weeks of age. Calvin later wrote, “The Lord has certainly inflicted a bitter wound in the death of our infant son. But He is Himself a father and knows what is good for His children.” Idelette herself would die of tuberculosis in 1549 at age 40. Calvin would never remarry. For the rest of his life, he would devote himself to the work of the Lord with singular vision.

### Returning to Geneva

Meanwhile, the City Council of Geneva found itself in much struggle, and called for Calvin to return as the city’s pastor. After a ten-month hesitation, he reluctantly accepted the invitation, knowing that much hostility awaited. Calvin re-entered the city on September 13, 1541, never to relocate again. In Geneva, he made his mark as the Reformed church leader and the Reformation’s brightest light.

Upon his return, Calvin hit the town preaching. Reassuming his pulpit ministry precisely where he had left off three years earlier—in the very *next* verse of his earlier exposition—Calvin became a mainstay, preaching multiple times on Sunday and, during some weeks, each weekday. His verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture, week after week, even day after day, would make Geneva a shining beacon of truth.

During this tumultuous time, French Protestants, known as Huguenots; Protestant saints from Scotland and England, who were escaping the martyr’s stake of Bloody Mary; and refugees from Germany and Italy began pouring into Geneva, seeking safety from the life-threatening dangers they faced in their native lands. In a short time, Geneva’s population doubled to more than twenty thousand. The city was alive with students of the Word, and Calvin was their teacher.

Among these refugees from abroad was a Scotsman named John Knox, who commended Calvin’s church in Geneva as “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.” While in Geneva, Knox was part of a team of Protestant exiles who sat under Calvin’s exposition and translated the *Geneva Bible* for English-speaking refugees. It was the first Bible to have theological notes print-

ed in the margin, a direct extension of Calvin’s pulpit. This Bible became the predominant Bible among English Puritans for the next one hundred years. Additionally, it became the official version of the Scottish Protestant church and the household Bible of English-speaking Protestants everywhere. It was the *Geneva Bible* that the Pilgrims brought with them on the Mayflower to America and was the Bible of choice among the early Colonists.

### An Expanding Influence

As the chief expositor of Scripture in a bastion of biblical teaching, Calvin found himself wielding an international influence of no small proportions. A thousand of the men who fled to Geneva to sit under his preaching eventually returned to France, carrying biblical truth with them, Knox later became the leader of the Reformation in Scotland. Others left Calvin’s side to plant Reformed churches in anti-Protestant countries such as Hungary, Holland, and England. Because persecution was certain and martyrdom probable for these saints, Calvin’s school of theology became known as “Calvin’s School of Death.”

The printing press also spread Calvin’s influence. For some time, a man named Denis Raguenier, a refugee from Barsur-Seine, had been taking down Calvin’s sermons for his own use by means of a private system of shorthand. Eventually, he was employed to produce a transcript of each one-hour sermon, which contained about six thousand words. Raguenier did his work with amazing accuracy, hardly a word escaping him. These written expositions were soon translated into various languages, gaining a far-reaching distribution. Scotland and England especially came under the sway of Calvin’s pulpit via the printed page. Later, the Synod of Dort in Holland (1618–1619) and the Westminster Assembly in England (1643–1649), which drafted the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, became direct outgrowths of Calvin’s biblical preaching. To this day, many of Calvin’s sermons remain in print.

### In the Face of Adversity

For Calvin, these prolific years in Geneva were anything but an “ivory tower” experience. While ascending his pulpit regularly, he met much difficulty on every side. Frail in stature, Calvin suffered many ailments, including migraine headaches, insomnia, shortness of breath, coughing fits, fevers, colitis, colic, spitting of blood, ague, gout, hemorrhoids, and kidney stones. He also endured physical threats to his life. Yet Calvin never ceased his exposition.

Further, groups of Geneva’s citizens caused him much pain, not the least of them being the Libertines, who boasted in sinful licentiousness. Sexual immorality was permissible, they claimed, arguing that the “communion of the saints” meant that their bodies should be joined to the wives of others. The

Libertines openly practiced adultery and yet desired to come to the Lord's Table. But Calvin would have none of it.

In an epic encounter, Philibert Berthelier, a prominent Libertine, was excommunicated because of his known sexual promiscuity. Consequently, he was forbidden from partaking of the Lord's Supper. Through the underhanded influence of the Libertines, the City Council overrode the church's decision, and Berthelier and his associates came to church to take the Lord's Supper with swords drawn, ready to fight. With bold audacity, Calvin descended from the pulpit, stood in front of the Communion table, and said, "These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned and dishonor the table of my God." Berthelier and the Libertines withdrew, no match for such unflinching convictions.

### Faithful to the End

As the end of his life approached, Calvin faced death as he had faced the pulpit—with great resolution. The theocentricity of his faith appears in his last will and testament, which he dictated on April 25, 1564:

In the name of God, I, John Calvin, servant of the Word of God in the church of Geneva, weakened by many illnesses, . . . thank God that He has shown not only mercy toward me, His poor creature, and . . . has suffered me in all sins and weaknesses, but what is much more, that He has made me a partaker of His grace to serve Him through my work. . . . I confess to live and die

in this faith which He has given me, inasmuch as I have no other hope or refuge than His predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded. I embrace the grace which He has offered me in our Lord Jesus Christ and accept the merits of His suffering and dying, that through them all my sins are buried; and I humbly beg Him to wash me and cleanse me with the blood of our great Redeemer, . . . so that I, when I shall appear before His face may bear His likeness. Moreover, I declare that I endeavored to teach His Word undefiled and to expound Holy Scripture faithfully, according to the measure of grace which He has given me. In all the disputations which I led against the enemies of the truth, I employed no cunning or any sophistry, but have fought His cause honestly. But, oh my will, my zeal, were so cold and slug-

gish that I know myself guilty in every respect; without His infinite goodness all my passionate striving would be only smoke. . . . Thus my only confidence is that He is the Father of mercy, who . . . desires to reveal Himself to such a miserable sinner.

Calvin died at age 54 on May 27, 1564, in the arms of Theodore Beza, his successor. Looking back on Calvin's life, Beza concluded:

Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years, I have given a faithful account both of his life and of his death, and I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian Character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.

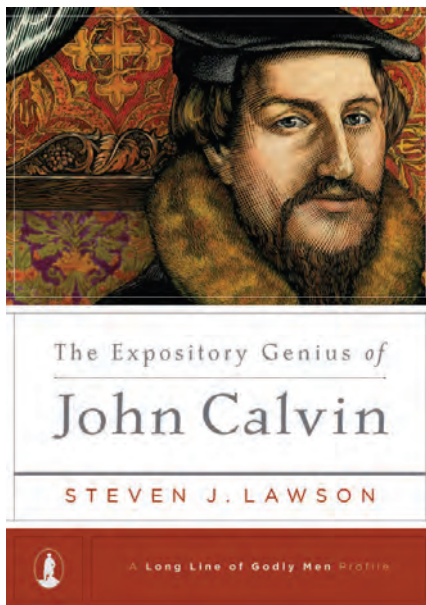
It is appropriate that Calvin's last words—"How long, O Lord?"—were the words of Scripture. He literally died quoting the Bible, having expended himself in the work and will of God, faithful to the very end.

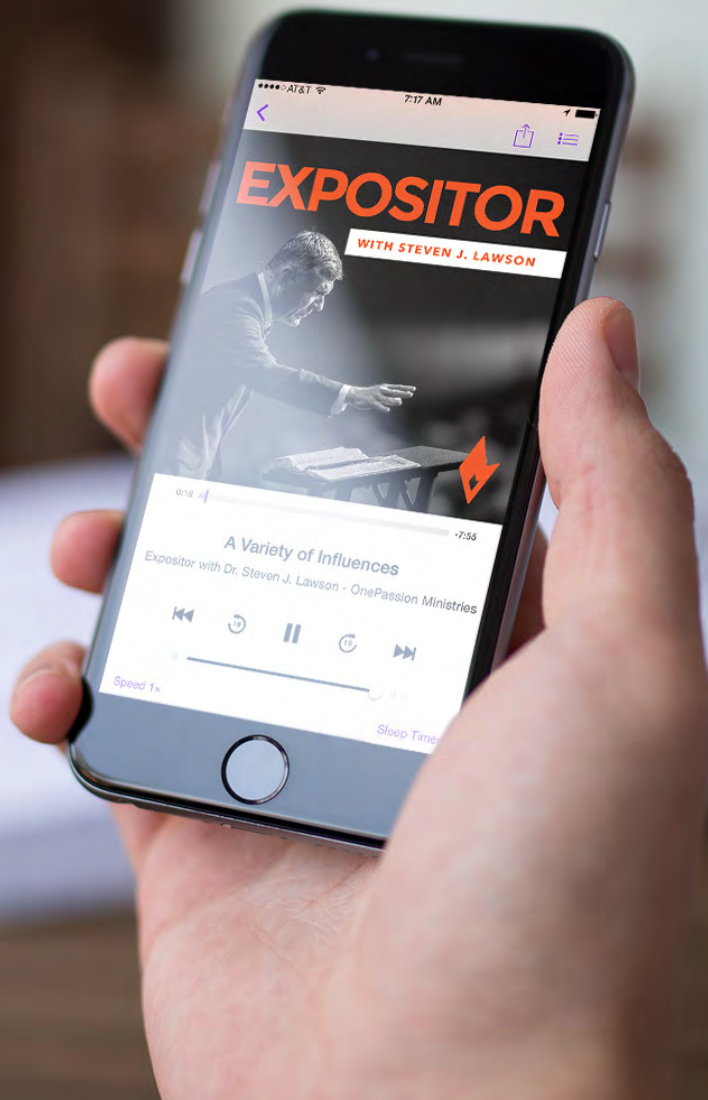
### Calvin: A Preacher for the Ages

Given the momentous life of the Genevan Reformer, and especially his devotion to the pulpit, certain questions beg to be asked: What kind of preacher was this remarkable man? How did he approach this sacred duty of expounding the Word of God? What were the distinctive features of his famed pulpit? And what can present-day preachers learn from him? What follows is an attempt to set forth the distinguishing marks of Calvin's expository genius.

As a result of this study, my prayer is that now more than ever, those who stand behind the sacred desk would

recover the lost art of expository preaching. The church is always looking for better *methods* in order to reach the world. But God is looking for better *men* who will devote themselves to His biblically mandated method for most advancing His kingdom, namely, preaching—and not just any kind of preaching, but *expository* preaching. This being so, nothing could be more relevant for preachers in this hour—a time when fads and gimmicks seem to be hypnotizing church leaders—than to revisit the pulpit power of the Genevan Reformer, John Calvin. May a new generation of expositors arise to embrace his core distinctives in their preaching ministries. And as they recapture the timeless marks of his exposition, may God be pleased to usher in a new Reformation. ♦





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## THE SPIRIT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT: SEEKING THE FACE OF GOD

BY DUSTIN W. BENGE

Robert Louis Wilken is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor Emeritus of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and has taught at colleges and seminaries around the world. He is a foremost historian in early Christian history and has published extensively in that area. Notable works include *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (Yale, 2003), *Remembering the Christian Past* (Eerdmans, 1995), and *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (Yale, 1984). *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* began as a sequel to *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, but Wilken soon decided to examine only the subject of early Christian thought (xvi).

### Book Summary

*The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* sets out to describe the early period in which Christians considered their faith within a society engrossed with Hellenistic culture. The purpose of this work is to examine the *spirit* of early Christian thinking. Unlike many previous works on the subject, Wilken does not closely examine individual doctrines that shaped the early Church, but instead seeks to demonstrate the uniqueness of how early Christians thought about their faith. Reviewer Chase Vaughn states, “Exploring the deeper currents of thought...allows Wilken to connect the intellectual labor of the early church to its ultimate goal, a goal greater than intellectual precision: to ‘win the hearts and minds of men and women and to change their lives’” (xiv). Thus, many of the chapters are good introductions to various topics central to the early church.

Wilken demonstrates how early Christian thinking was rooted in biblical history, scriptural language, and Christian worship. Contrary to the long-held view of Adolf von Harnack, who asserted that biblical thought was translated into Greek philosophy, thus bringing about the “Hellenization of Christianity,” Wilken argues that the result was not a Hellenized Christianity, but rather a Hellenism transformed by the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ (xvi–xvii). In essence, he seeks to describe the truly distinctive marks of early Christian thinking and reasoning “from history, ritual, and from text” (xvii).

As Wilken explores this pattern of early Christian thought, he emphasizes that it was always grounded

in reflection on the Church's sacred book, inspired Holy Scripture, with reflection that was inevitably Christ-shaped and redemptocentric. Wilken approaches patristic thought by examining a series of doctrinal foci and highlighting early bishops and/or theologians whose insightful Christian reflections on that particular question, issue, or doctrine were formative for the church as a whole. For example, chapters address how God is known (Chapter 1: "Founded on the Cross of Christ"), worship and sacraments (Chapter 2: "An Awesome and Unbloody Sacrifice"), the Holy Scriptures (Chapter 3: "The Face of God for Now"), and the Trinity (Chapter 4: "Seek His Face Always"). These subjects are examined via the lives and writings of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Alexandria. Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor are also of central importance throughout the work. Standing as the giant among them all, for Wilken, is Augustine.

As noted above, the first three chapters of Wilken's volume deal with foundations: how God is known, Christian worship and sacraments, and the Scriptures. In particular, chapter one explores the culmination of God's revelation in history in the person of Jesus Christ. The incarnation of the Son of God challenged the categories of thought available within the Greek philosophical traditions, especially those pertaining to humans' understanding of the divine. This marks the foundation and beginning of Christian thinking (xx). Wilken writes, "The way of God begins not with arguments or proofs but with discernment and faith, the ability to see what is disclosed in events and the readiness to trust the words of those who testify to them" (7). Chapter two describes Christian thinking within the context of Christian worship. All the figures portrayed in this book prayed regularly, and their thinking was never far removed from the church's worship. Whether the task at hand was the defense of Christian belief to an outsider, the refutation of the views of a heretic, or the exposition of a passage from the Bible, their intellectual work was always in service of praise and adoration of the one God. In chapter three, Wilken seeks to demonstrate how the Bible appeared to thinkers schooled in ancient literature and even goes so far as to imagine a world where the Bible was absent.

Chapters four through six outline Christian thinking

through the lens of specific biblical doctrines. Wilken does not present a full development of these doctrines but does present early Christian thinking on subjects such as the Trinity, the work of Christ, and the creation of the world and of human beings. Chapter four recapitulates points made in the first three chapters to illustrate how history (the Resurrection of Christ), the Trinitarian formulas of Christian worship, and the Scriptures all worked together to forge a Christian doctrine of the Trinity (85). Chapter five examines Christological thinking, primarily focusing on the thinking of Maximus the Confessor in the context of the monothelite controversy. Early Christians, it is sometimes alleged, were given to squabbling over picayune points of doctrine. In the great debate over the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century,

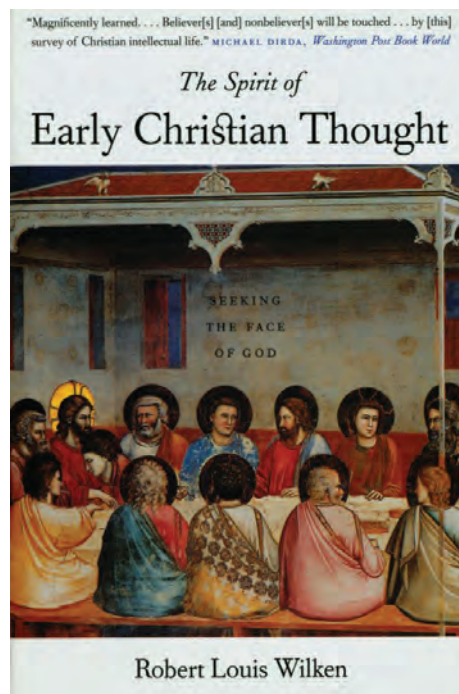
the issue seemed to turn on a single letter. This is the issue discussed and examined throughout chapter five. Chapter six centers on the account of creation and the doctrine of humanity. Wilken states, "Few passages from the Bible have resounded more thunderously down the centuries than the account of the creation of the world and of human beings in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis" (136).

The next two chapters, chapters seven and eight, focus primarily on the believer. The organizing theme of chapter seven is faith as a way of knowing. Chapter eight, "Happy the People Whose God Is the Lord," is a helpful survey of Augustine's *City of God*. Wilken writes,

The *City of God*, then, is not the defense of an idea or a set of beliefs, . . . but rather a defense of a

community that occupies space and exists in time, an ordered, purposeful gathering of human beings with a distinctive way of life, institutions, laws, beliefs, memory, and form of worship. The most characteristic feature of the city of God is that it worships the one true God. (191)

Chapters nine and ten deal with Christian culture. Chapter nine examines the artistry of iconography and poetry, and their theological ground in creation and incarnation is explored in chapter ten. Chapter nine may be useful for readers with cultivated literary tastes, for it adds a level of depth to the discussion of Christian fiction and the use of "worldly" genres and modes of thought in the intellectual Christian life. Wilken draws careful attention to the poetry of Prudentius,



# THE CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION IN ITS EARLIEST ITERATION WAS AN EXERCISE IN THINKING ABOUT GOD WHO IS KNOWN AND IN SEEKING THE ONE WHO IS LOVED.

who (so far as we know) was the first great Christian artist, and the first to put Christian life and theology into verse for use outside of a formal worship service. The final two chapters of the book deal with Christian spirituality and moral philosophy. The fathers did not seek intellectual excellence out of a desire for academic achievement, nor did they pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake. Rather, the Christian intellectual tradition in its earliest iteration was an exercise in thinking about the God who is known and in seeking the One who is loved. Intellectual labor was not an end in itself; its goal was transformation before the face of God.

## Evaluation

Unlike other major works in the area of early Christian history, Wilken stays true to his original intent and does not get bogged down with the nuances and argumentation that could accompany such a study. This work is accessible to the reader looking for a general introduction to early Christian thought and is also a worthy companion for the most seasoned of scholars. This work also carries with it a devotional and pious sense, causing readers to feel as if they truly know these early Christian thinkers and believers.

As already stated, Harnack's thesis is contradicted throughout the work. Wilken moves beyond the surface-level popularity of Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity and probes more deeply into the sources that engendered the Christian and intellectual tradition; he adopts the more accurate thesis that early Christianity entailed a transformation of Greek

thought, not a capitulation to Greek thought.

More than simply asserting his thesis, Wilken carefully documents the transformation of Hellenism over time. Wilken argues that early Christian thought was propelled by the reality of God's revelation in the person of Jesus Christ and the participation in that reality in the event of worship. Therefore, as Wilken clearly shows, early Christian thought was firmly rooted and grounded in the reality of biblical faith. He also demonstrates that Christian knowledge is participatory and relational, not just mere historical knowledge (18–22). A devotional tone permeates the work at this point, emphasizing that the goal of Christian thought was not merely abstract knowledge but was grounded in love for God, His revelation in Christ, and His creative action in the world.

Wilken points out the need to make the potent Christian thinking of the early church a significant aspect of Christian thought and life. As he sets doctrines and early Christian thought within their cultural contexts and the church's life, he thereby makes clear how theology is hammered out on the anvil of history. In the end, Wilken concludes that Christianity repeatedly proved to be more intellectually, morally, and spiritually vibrant than its rivals.

Even though I agree with and appreciate the work Wilken has done in this area, I also concur with reviewer John Douglas Morrison that there seems to be an anti-Protestant point of view underlying Wilken's scholarship in this volume. Morrison notes, "He not only chooses Fathers who are of doctrinal usefulness to him and his particular intellectual point about Christian faith, but Wilken is always redacting their thought in order to portray both the thinker/theologian and his thought well within the agenda of the desired argument." In addition, Wilken can be caught defending the Fathers or giving a new perspective on their wrongs and misdirection. The Fathers must be kept in the context of their period and examined under the scrutiny of a proper theological understanding; individual readers will have to discern whether and where Wilken has strayed from this approach.

## Conclusion

I recommend *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* as a work that makes a significant contribution to understanding the thinking of the early Christian church. A lacking element within the church today, and one Wilken seeks to revive, is the practice and discipline of thinking. Perhaps if the church took note of the Fathers in this area, we, too, would return to more solid foundation of Christian and biblical understanding. ♦



## “EXPLAINING THE SCRIPTURES”: A REVIEW OF THE MACARTHUR NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

BY GEORGE R. MATTERN

The MacArthur New Testament Commentary is an unrivaled demonstration of Bible exposition at its finest. Launched by Moody Publishing in 1983, the series is now complete, with 33 volumes covering the entire New Testament, and an Index soon to follow. The Commentary is the result of John MacArthur’s long-standing dedication to thorough sermon preparation, and the fruit of those labors is presented in a clear, readable style and user-friendly format, reflecting an editorial commitment to quality and excellence. That combination of words “fitly spoken” is truly “like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov 25:11). This commentary series is immensely valuable for both the credibility of its content and the convenience of its format.

### Credibility of Content

The essence of John MacArthur’s credibility as a Bible teacher is his unswerving devotion to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. MacArthur has said, “The only logical response to inerrant Scripture is to preach it expositively. By that, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented entirely and exactly as it was intended by God.” This dedication to the correct meaning was nurtured in MacArthur by his mentor and seminary professor, Charles Lee Feinberg, the first (and longest serving) Dean of Talbot Theological Seminary (“Talbot School of Theology” since 1981) in Los Angeles. “To this day,” MacArthur has said, “when I come to the text each week and begin to study its richness and depth, I can still hear Dr. Feinberg’s heartfelt admonition ringing in my ears. If you don’t have the meaning of Scripture, you do not have the Word of God at all. If you miss the true sense of what God has said, you are not actually preaching God’s Word!”

Upon this foundation of faithfulness, Dr. MacArthur has built an enduring legacy of “gold, silver, and precious stones” that is scrupulously evangelical—because, as he explains, “Over the years of teaching the Word of God without a lot of presuppositions, I tend to conclude whatever I believe the exegetical process yields.”

MacArthur’s fidelity to that methodology of careful discovery undergirds his clear presentation of what the Bible means by what it says—refreshingly undistorted by the agenda-driven hermeneutical inqui-

sitions of human tradition and opinion by which the Scriptures are so often tortured mercilessly until they surrender to the interpreter’s preference. Dr. Robert L. Thomas, Professor Emeritus at the Master’s Seminary, captured the essence of objective hermeneutics when he said, “Theology must always yield to textual integrity . . . Regardless of what one might want the text to say, it must be allowed to say what God wants it to say, and thereby dictate one’s theology.”

But if John MacArthur exults in the freedom of an expositor who has successfully disentangled himself from the straight-jacket of tradition-mandated, outcome-based theology—owing no tribute to conformity with any human opinion—he is by no means a doctrinal libertine. He is manifestly committed to declaring “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27 *ESV*), and yet equally determined “not to exceed what is written” (1 Cor 4:6), being careful to “not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left” (Deut 17:20). Furthermore, like the student who wins his math teacher’s enthusiastic commendation, MacArthur is always eager to “show his work” by explaining exactly how and why he arrived at his particular conclusions. Where ambiguity of the biblical text will not warrant a dogmatic assertion, he forthrightly admits that any opinion he offers is merely a conjecture or supposition and does not carry the same weight as an exegetically justified conviction.

This unwavering dedication to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of God is evident on every page of MacArthur’s commentaries, and this is extremely gratifying in this age when so many of God’s foes and friends alike elevate human opinions and preferences in opposition to His Word. But faithful men of God like John MacArthur confront and rebuke this tendency, just as the prophets of old who boldly declared: “Listen and give heed, do not be haughty, for the Lord has spoken!” (Jer 13:15). Thank God for such men, for they are “destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor 10:5). Let them always be “honored . . . with many marks of respect” (Acts 28:10), because “we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth” (3 John 8).

The concern for accuracy is also reflected in the selection of Bible translation for this commentary series. Dr. Robert L. Thomas has observed that “the best choice of Bible transla-

tions on which to base expository preaching is one that more literally follows the original languages.” MacArthur’s use of the New American Standard Bible in his preaching and commentaries answers admirably to that purpose

In addition to the trustworthy doctrinal content, MacArthur’s commentaries are rich with fascinating historical and cultural details that bridge the gap of millennia and bring the reader closer to the events, people, and settings of the Bible. Many informative linguistic insights are also provided; these further enhance the understanding of words and passages. Extensive quotations from various authors on related subjects and issues add a stimulating variety of perspective. Above all, the subject matter of Scripture is always presented with credence as trustworthy, dynamic, living truth that has urgent and immediate relevance for every reader.

And, of course, Dr. MacArthur is a master at “explaining



the Bible with the Bible” by carefully comparing parallel passages, citing extensive cross-references with similar details, doctrines, or concepts, and using Scriptural examples as the best demonstration of Scriptural principles. As a result, his sermons and commentaries have broad, universal appeal in any culture or time period. This strategy is remarkably effective in magnifying the “big picture” of Scripture, thus enriching the reader’s apprehension of the vast interconnected scope of divinely-revealed truth. MacArthur is very good at carefully handling the specific shades and colors of the Bible even while, at the same time, preserving an appreciation for the marvelous portrait that God has painted with the combination of those details. The commentaries maintain an impeccable balance between the brilliance of the constituent parts and the beauty of the unified whole of the biblical body of divinity. And how very appropriate, since the psalmist affirmed to God that “the sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting” (Ps 119:160).

### Convenience of Format

The MacArthur New Testament Commentary series is designed for maximum convenience on three different levels of study—quick reference, devotional reading, and in-depth examination.

**Quick Reference.** Helpful features provide efficient and rapid accessibility. A textual notation at the top of each page (like a dictionary guide word) identifies the range of verses being addressed on that page. Phrases or words quoted from the Scripture passage being expounded in each section are printed in boldface type in the commentary text. These features enable the user searching for a particular reference to locate the desired passage, verse, phrase, or word as quickly and easily as possible. Indexes arranged by subject and scripture text also contribute to the usefulness of the commentaries for reference purposes. Now that the series is complete, the anticipated supplemental Index volume will make this information even more conveniently and comprehensively accessible, enabling the reader to search for topics, verses, or words as they appear throughout the whole series without having to look them up in each individual volume.

**Devotional Reading.** The chapter divisions essentially correspond to the individual sermons from which the commentaries are derived. This enables the reader to proceed through a whole volume in manageable portions that generally represent one unit of thought in the flow of the biblical book. Outlines for the book being covered by single or multiple volumes connect the individual commentary chapters to the framework of progression and development of thought in the rest of the book under consideration.

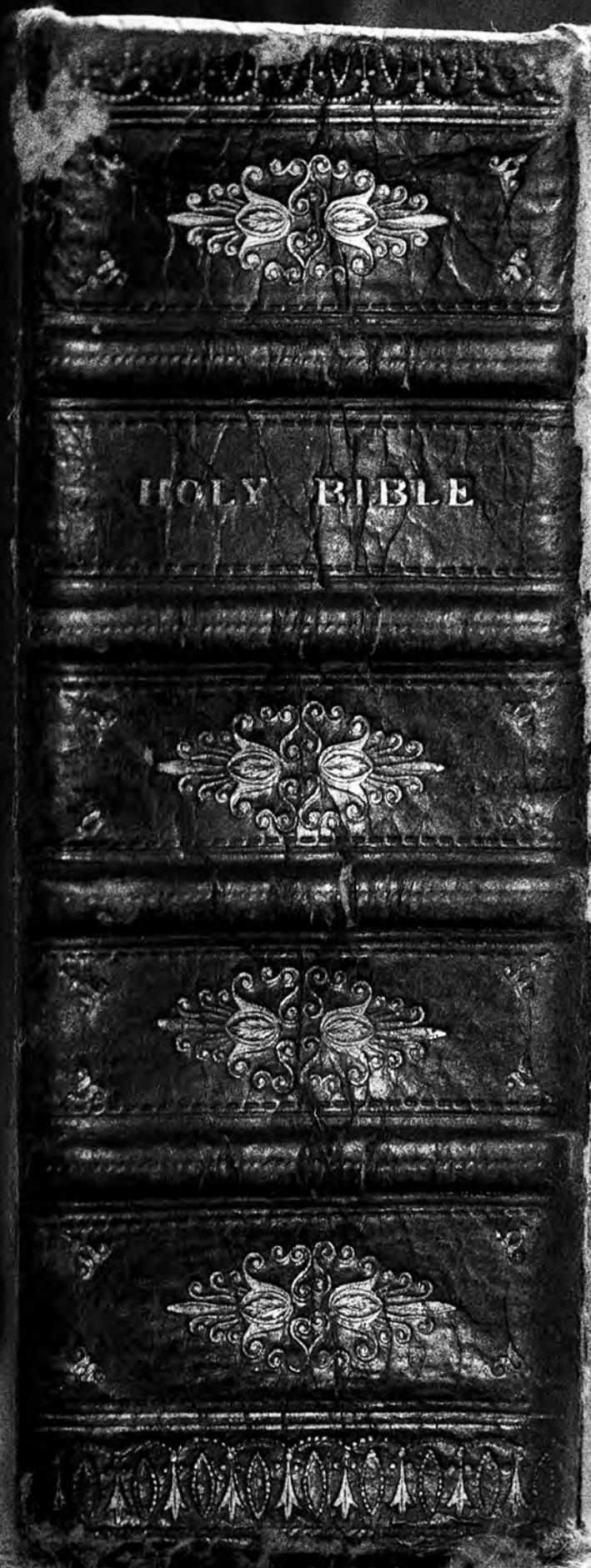
**In-depth Study.** The reader who desires a more in-depth study of the material is aided by extensive verse cross-references parenthetically embedded in the text. The phonetic English rendering is given for prominent Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic words to assist the reader who desires to pursue word studies in the original languages. Indexes of these words are also provided. Each treatment of a different Bible book is commenced with a thorough introduction, which includes detailed background on the author, his purpose for writing and his intended audience, the date of writing and details relevant to the historical context, insights into the book's themes and doctrinal emphases, and many other observations that enhance the reader's understanding and appreciation of the book's qualities and distinctive contributions to the breadth of divine revelation. A variety of relevant works are cited in the Bibliography for each commentary volume to aid in further study of additional resources.

Beyond the abovementioned benefits and advantages, this reviewer was extremely impressed by the consistent quality of the commentaries, from the earliest installments through the latest edition. In every volume and every chapter, the message of the Word of God is presented with clarity and concision

that will readily appeal to the most serious Bible student, and yet the content is not overly technical so as to be too laborious for a layman.

Most importantly, the Bible is always handled in the reverential manner befitting divine revelation. These commentaries are educational and informative, but dispensing information is never the primary intent. MacArthur is keenly aware that mere "knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" (1 Cor 8:1), and "if you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:17). Therefore, the rich knowledge and detail presented about God and His truth is always accompanied by a convicting call to practical application in sincere obedience. In the same way, the faithful prophets and apostles issued both proclamation and exhortation, like Jeremiah saying, "Hear the word of the Lord" and "O generation, heed the word of the Lord" (Jer 2:4, 31), and Paul delivering rich doctrine that calls for a worshipful response: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor 7:1). This governing principle for the project is given by Dr. MacArthur in the series Preface (which appears at the outset of every volume): "My prayer is that each reader will fully understand what the Holy Spirit is saying through this part of His word, so that His revelation may lodge in the minds of believers and bring greater obedience and faithfulness—to the glory of our great God."

Charles Spurgeon said with full assurance, "The Lord will be with the truth," and so it is that God will undoubtedly continue to set His seal of approval upon the MacArthur New Testament Commentary series, graciously answering the author's prayer by lavishing abundant spiritual blessings upon all who study the volumes with sincerity, and multiplying the glory that redounds to His name whenever His truth is proclaimed faithfully. The Lord asks, "Do not My words do good to the one walking uprightly?" (Mic 2:7)—Absolutely, for He says, "I am watching over My word to perform it" (Jer 1:12), and, indeed, "the word of God . . . performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess 2:13), with the result that the saints are "filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:11). The Lord's people owe an immense debt of gratitude to John MacArthur, Moody Publishing, and everyone involved in the production of this dynamic and invaluable resource. ♦



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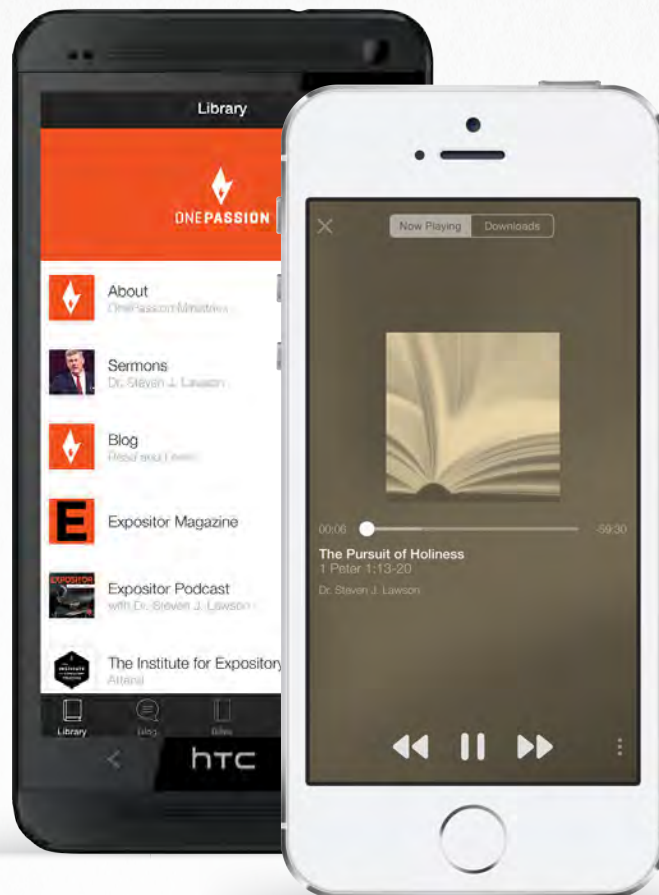


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