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The Posture of Preaching

CONTRIBUTORS:

Roger Duke is Assistant Professor of Religion and Communication at the Baptist College of Health Sciences in Memphis, TN.

Dr Tom J. Nettles is Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.

Dr Phil Newton is Pastor of South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis, TN.

Jeff Robinson is director of news and information at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a graduate of the Master of Divinity program.

Cover Photo by Tim Brister at Grace Life Church of the Shoals in Muscle Shoals, AL.

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Editor: Thomas K. Ascol

Associate Editor: Tom J. Nettles

Design Editor: Kenneth A. Puls

Contributing Editors: Bill Ascol, Timothy George, Fred Malone, Joe Nesom, Phil Newton, Roger Nicole, Don Whitney, Hal Wynn

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Heels Together, Shoulders Back, Chin Down

Tom Nettles

This issue of the *Founders Journal* deals with the issue of “Posture in Preaching.” By posture we are referring to the overall approach one makes to the task. With what mental attitude does a preacher of the gospel approach the specific time of proclamation? He should ask himself, “What kind of language will be most effective in making my appeal and most appropriate to unfold the burden of the text? How can I mold the message of this text, not distorting it, with a view to bringing the hearers to decide in its favor? To what frame do I coax my mind for this time of self-abandonment to the glory of God?”

Roger Duke has presented an engaging and helpful rhetorical analysis of a potent evangelistic sermon by Spurgeon. This attempt is certainly not anomalous, for Spurgeon was quite conversant with the discipline of rhetoric and viewed it positively. He recommended the study of rhetoric to his ministerial students and commended the proper use of it as a means of increasing one’s usefulness. He shows how Spurgeon’s careful use of sacred rhetoric did not hide the text or make his presentation seemed contrived, but served to open the text in its intense passion for the truth and for the souls of his hearers. Roger’s analysis helps give us an awareness of useful rhetorical devices.

Phil Newton reinforces this idea in his investigation of how doctrine must fire appropriate application. He shows how the Bible gives warrant for a variety of ways in which effective application can be made in order to drive the hearer to see the seriousness of the Bible’s demands on his life. He gives us insight from several master craftsmen of the art of truth-application and includes examples from his own preaching.

My article is a simple attempt to sensitize all of us who preach the gospel to the importance of the mental attitude and spiritual perceptions we have as we approach the pulpit. How should our minds be fitted for this oppressive opportunity to bring eternity into intersection with time? In what manner should we consider those precious minutes? With what spiritual attitude should we approach the stance we take as heralds of the message of God to saints and sinners? How can we minimize the intrusion of those selfish trivialities that so feverishly hover around the edges of our minds pressing to be released into the center of this divine/human encounter?

Jeff Robinson has written a personal interaction as well as a succinct review of the recent Mullins Lectures on Preaching at Southern Seminary. Those lectures, by Ray Ortlund, Jr., mesh with a most pleasing symmetry with the subject of this issue of the journal.

As always we pray that your time reading it will be well spent. ☺

“Compel Them to Come In”¹

Posture and Persuasion in the Preaching of Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Roger D. Duke

Gleanings from Classical Rhetoric

Aristotle states that, “[R]hetoric ... does not belong to a single defined genus of [any one] subject [I]t is ... clear ... that its function is not to persuade, but to see the available means of persuasion in each case.”² For him, rhetoric was just like the other arts—even medicine. He goes on to explain: It is not the “function of medicine to create health but to promote this as much as possible; for it is nevertheless possible to treat well those who cannot recover health.”³ So then, rhetoric is to the orator similarly what medicine is to the physician. It is only a tool; a tool to be used as a means to an end. And that end—the movement or persuasion of the hearers.

But it seems in contemporary times that the artistry and practice of rhetoric as a discipline, or at least its *perception*, has fallen on hard times. With even a cursory “ear” to current events of the evening news or an “eye” to the print media, it is possible to hear and see the “rhetoric of the Democrats,” or the “rhetoric of the Republicans,” or the “rhetoric of Hitler,” or “the Communist’s rhetoric.” Rhetoric is used and defined today in pejorative and negative terms almost exclusively. Rhetoric truly is a misunderstood discipline!

Even in religious contexts a disparaging attitude toward rhetoric abounds. Michael Beaty in his recent “Hester Lectures” to the International Association of Baptist Colleges and Universities states:

[I]n those heady West Point days of weekday drills and Saturday morning dress parades, of flower children and peace marches, of Southern pride and shame, of the soaring *biblical rhetoric* of Martin Luther King, Jr., and of the strident *states’ rights rhetoric* and self-proclaimed *Christian rhetoric* of Carl McIntyre and George Wallace, I became aware for the first time of some intellectually discomfiting tensions (emphasis added)...⁴

To be completely fair to Beaty, the persuasive tactics of the era of the 1960s were indeed motivated by vitriol. In his address, he contrasts his days at West Point with those of his experiences after transferring to Ouachita Baptist Univer-

sity. There were, at that time, many negative cultural factors involving issues such as war, race, religion and generational divides. So any persuasive devices employed by antagonists on the opposite side of lightning-rod issues were bound to be interpreted as “rhetoric.” Sometimes they were even perceived as propaganda. Because of these negative uses, rhetoric has indeed received some “bad press” and an unnecessarily negative connotation. In some circles, those who choose to employ rhetoric are even considered sinister. Rhetoric in itself is neither good nor evil. Its usage determines its morality. All of us use rhetoric whether we know it or not. We are all rhetoricians—trained or not. After all; “Life is Rhetoric!”⁵

In his recently released work, *Doctrine that Dances*, Robert Smith lauds Aristotle’s categories of rhetoric.⁶ He brings back some religious respectability, credibility and usability to rhetoric. Smith’s categories of rhetoric are stated as *proofs*:

The first mode of proof is *ethos*. That is the integrity, credibility, or character of the preacher. . . . [E]*thos* is the perceived character of a good man speaking well. . . . The second mode of proof is *pathos*. This is the emotive and passionate sector of the preacher. . . . The third mode of proof is *logos*. This is the gathering of content and material for the sermon.⁷

Here Smith does a great service to all preachers who want to perfect the artistry of the sermon. He brings “rhetoric right into the church house” anew. Smith employs rhetoric because he understands that it can be used as homiletical theory and praxis for sermonic improvement. If used to define and refine preaching, rhetoric could be very much akin to “finding the pearl of great price” for those who desire to be pulpit craftsmen. Smith stands in a long line of pulpiteres who preserve the “rhetorical tradition” and its use in preaching. These, of course, include Augustine of Hippo and the Southern Baptist Convention’s own John Albert Broadus.⁸

Spurgeon’s use of rhetoric in his sermon “Compel Them to Come In!” is easily demonstrated.

Posture in Spurgeon’s Address

Rhetoric is a many-splendored thing.⁹ It is not confined simply to those definitions and constructs rehearsed above. One who uses rhetoric endeavors to find the means to persuade each audience in each particular case. One way Spurgeon employs his oratorical abilities is with his use of posture. Posture can be defined as an “*attitude* [or] a frame of mind,” or an “*arrangement of parts*: the way that components of an object or situation are arranged in relation to one another.”¹⁰ He divides the text of his address into two distinct divisions. He declares: “First, I must *find you out*; secondly, I will go to work to *compel you to come in*.”¹¹

Spurgeon begins “to find them out” by making a survey of his audience. He does this in a metaphorical as well as actual manner. He considers the audience

in attendance and also imagines beyond them as they become representative of all whom he “would compel to come in.” There is a certain measure of double entendre that can be missed with only a cursory reading of the sermon. He instructs his hearers to read and consider the immediately preceding aspects of Luke 14:23. There, he calls their attention to four images. These images from the biblical text become his component parts, or posture if you will, for the first half of the address. These are: the *poor*, the *maimed*, the *halt* and the *blind*.

The Poor

The evangelist starts with those who are “poor in circumstance.” Then he sets about to describe these from the text of Scripture. He calls all who are “vagrants,” “highwaymen” and “all ... [who] have no resting-place for their heads.” Even those “who are lying under the hedges for rest” he exhorts to come in. None shall be excluded, he declares: “Unto you is the word of salvation sent.”¹²

Our preacher then engineers a decisive contrast. He develops the idea of the “poor” very similarly as does our Lord when he spoke about the “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). Here he moves from the “physically poor” to those who are “spiritually poor.” He proceeds to describe them as those who have “no faith ... no virtue ... no good work ... no grace and what is poverty worse still ... no hope.”¹³ Spurgeon assumes the place of the Master himself in such a magnanimous manner and tone. He beckons to them:

Ah my master has sent *you* a gracious invitation. Come and welcome to the marriage feast of his love. “Whosoever will, let him come and take of the waters of life freely” (Revelation 22:17).

Come, I must lay hold upon you, though you be defiled with foulest filth, and though you have nought but rags upon your back, though your righteousness has become as filthy clouts, yet must I lay hold upon you, and invite you first, and even compel you to come in.¹⁴

As the text of his sermon is read (or heard), Spurgeon’s incredibly compelling passion should be received with the hearing ear even by the most hardened unbeliever. God has sent this preacher on an errand, and he must use all possible means to dislodge the hearers from their life’s circumstance and bring them to safety.

The Maimed

Spurgeon builds upon his prior idea of those who are “poor in spirit” by seeing those who are “maimed.” He states emphatically that this category of folk believe “they could work out their own salvation without God’s help.” They believe ever so strongly they could; “perform good works,” “attend to ceremonies” and “get to heaven” on their own merits. The picture he paints is so very poignant. Spurgeon

refers to the “Law” as a “sword.” It has cut off the hands of the person to whom it is applied and leaves him or her without any ability at all. The person is left completely maimed spiritually.¹⁵

These are left without any moral power to perform the good that they might want to do. And the evil that they did not wish was the thing they found themselves doing (Romans 7). Spurgeon paints a picture that becomes progressively worse as he develops it. Not only is the person void of hands to “perform good deeds,” but they felt “yet ... [they] could walk [their] way there along the road by faith.” But this too is not possible, for the unbeliever is maimed in the feet as well as the hands. The “sword of the Law” has severed their hands, arms, and feet leaving the person in absolute destitution where they felt “utterly undone, powerless in every respect to do anything that [could] be pleasing to God. In fact you are crying out—

Oh, could I but believe,
Then all would easy be,
I would, but cannot, Lord relieve,
My help must come from thee.”¹⁶

The Halt

Here, Spurgeon turns somewhat away from the Lord’s use of the literal and adjectival understandings of the *halt*. The folk of the day would have understood the term’s meaning to be one who was unable to walk. Spurgeon again employs a certain measure of double entendre. He shifts from a descriptor of one with a physical ailment to a descriptor of one who is spiritually unable to decide a personal moral or ethical dilemma. He calls to mind the notable passage about Elijah on Mount Carmel: “How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD *be* God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). Space does not permit a discussion of his other biblical examples of “mental halting.” Spurgeon discovers many hearers in their personal “valley of decision” (Joel 3:14). For him, being disabled of mind is much worse than being disabled of body. A physical ailment can possibly be overcome temporally and eternally. But, the “halting” state-of-mind can lead the person to an everlasting condition from which they cannot recover. It is this latter category to whom Spurgeon appeals.

The Blind

For the fourth time Spurgeon calls forth a literal-ness from our Lord’s parable. He adapts it for his sermon’s single purpose: “To Compel Them to Come In!” But never did he contravene the Lord’s intent. The fact of the matter is, he reinforces it in a way that only Spurgeon could. He used the “blind” of the parable to designate the lack of “spiritual sight” of his hearers. He declares:

[Y]es, you that cannot see yourselves, that think yourselves good when you are full of evil, that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter, darkness for light and light for darkness; to you am I sent. You blind souls that cannot see your lost estate, that do not believe that sin is so exceedingly sinful as it is, and who will not be persuaded to think that God is a just and righteous God—to you I am sent.¹⁷

Spurgeon turns at this juncture to his second division of the sermon: “I will go to work to *compel you to come in.*”

Tone and Pathos in Spurgeon’s Address

Tone is “a literary technique, that is a part of the composition [or address], that encompasses the attitudes toward the subject and toward the audience implied in a literary work. Tone may be formal, informal, intimate, solemn, somber playful, serious, ironic, condescending, or many other possible attitudes.”¹⁸ Karen Bernardo states that: “Tone is a difficult literary concept to describe, but not at all difficult to recognize. It refers to the attitude with which the writer [or speaker] approaches his work.”¹⁹ A literary understanding of tone can be coupled with Aristotle’s understanding of *pathos* to examine this second division of the address, then an extremely clear picture emerges of “Compel Them to Come In!” Pathos is “The persuasive appeal ... to an audience’s sense of identity, their self-interest, their emotions.”²⁰ In the second half of the sermon Spurgeon utilizes six *pathos* dynamics in his appeal. He trusts these will move his hearers to leave their present unregenerate condition and “flee the wrath to come!” He “*accosts*” them, “*commands*” them, “*exhorts*” them, “*entreats*” them, “*threatens*” them, “*weeps*” over them and finally “*throw[s]* [them] into ... [the] Master’s hands.”²¹

He *accosts* them!

The pastor-teacher takes his Lord’s command literally to go out and bring in the lost. The very idea of one *accosting* a person is rather contrary to other biblical invitations. In fact he employs a Scripture that should not in any way be seen as an “in your face” encounter: “Come now and let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). He masterfully sets up another contrast with this somewhat docile invitation. He paints for his hearer’s consideration three gross and hideous pictures of Christ’s suffering: sweating drops of blood in Gethsemane, suffering tied to a pillar, and hanging upon the cross. Spurgeon pointedly, and what seems literally, steps in front of the persons in “the highway of life.” He stands between them rhetorically to sway them out of the way in which they trod. He pleads earnestly repeating Christ’s own words: “It is finished!” (John 19:30). He then recounts Paul’s word to the Philippian jailor, “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31).

He commands them!

At this point Spurgeon asks a rather sobering question! “Do you still refuse?” He answers his own rhetorical question so his hearers would not misunderstand his concern for their imminent and ultimate dangers. “Then I must change my tone for a minute,” he declares. He moves to a much more strident position than before. This time he becomes extremely intense: “Sinner, in God’s name I command you to repent and believe!” He defends his means as Christ’s preacher. Spurgeon wants them to know that he pleads for them in Christ’s place. He shows his “credentials,” his “sincere [personal] affection,” his “commission to preach ... [Christ’s] gospel” and his office of “ambassador.” The command: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature!” was Spurgeon’s *modus operandi*. Credentials, *modus operandi*, and the command all moved him to “annex ... this solemn sanction” of commanding them to “repent and believe!”²²

He exhorts them!

Spurgeon declares, “Then again will I change my note,” signifying a change of tone. He maintains his extremely high level of passion. He breaks into an extended exhortation in order to garner some level of sympathetic hearing. Spurgeon uses personal testimony here in order to persuade. He relates to them what he knows intimately of Christ and how he was moved to come. In the testimonial he reiterates:

He [Christ] came to me times without number, morning by morning, and night by night, he checked me in my conscience and spoke to me by his Spirit, and when at last, the thunders of the law prevailed in my conscience, I thought that Christ was cruel and unkind. O I can never forgive myself that I should have thought so ill of him. But what a loving reception did I have when I went to him.²³

He continues in graphic detail to describe how he thought the Savior would be a God of anger rather than the God of love and compassion who did receive him. Instead of having “his eyes of lightning-flashes of wrath upon me,” he rather greeted him with a Savior’s eyes full of loving tears. He begs his hearers: “I exhort you, then, to look to Jesus and be [en]lightened. Sinner, you will never regret,—I will be bondsman for my Master that you will never regret it,—you will have no sigh to go back to your condemnation.”²⁴

He entreats them!

In his spirit, Spurgeon appears to be at his wit’s end. What to do next? But he is nowhere through with his appeal to those who are lost and outside of Christ. He next makes an appeal—an appeal to their own personal interests. He knows well

that a plea to the pride of vanity can work when many other emotive approaches might fail. This he does with a series of rhetorical questions he believes will cause personal introspection: Would it not be better to be reconciled to the God of heaven rather than to be his enemy? What are you gaining by opposing God? Are you happy to be His enemy? Is your self-righteous work a place where you can rest? Will your conscience speak not ill to you? Are you still cold and indifferent [after all my pleading]? He cries out lovingly: “I am resolved My brother I ENTREAT you, I entreat you stop and consider.”²⁵ His passionate desire can be seen as he motions for them to come:

[I]f you be not saved, ye shall be without excuse. Ye, from the grey-headed down to the tender age of childhood, if ye this day lay not hold of Christ, your blood shall be on your own head Come, I am not to be put off by your rebuffs: if my exhortation fails, I must come to something else.²⁶

He *threatens* them!

Finally in his exhausting entreaty he describes, as only Spurgeon can, what it means to die without Christ. He imagines “death beds . . . thorny.” He “picture[s] [him]self standing at your bedside and hearing your cries . . . knowing you are dying without hope.” He sees himself “standing by your coffin . . . and looking into your clay-cold face.” Finally, he likens their rejection of Christ as “see[ing] you act the suicide this morning.”²⁷ Could Spurgeon be more poignant and compelling than this? It is paramount for them to understand. Rejecting Christ is, in effect, taking their own lives!

He *weeps* for them and *throws* them upon the Savior!

The hearer [reader] understands Spurgeon’s anguish and passion of soul by exposure to this sermon. As he closes, he turns to his final two ploys. He weeps for them and finally, he turns them over to the Lord Christ and His Holy Spirit. He weeps for them to remember. He weeps for them to recollect. “Mothers wrestle for you,” and “father’s anxiety is exercised for you.”²⁸ They are breaking the heart of all Christians who love their souls. Even though, “you . . . have no thought for *yourselves*, no regard to eternal things.” He alone is the only one who “*weeps*” over them, and finally “*throw[s]* [them] into . . . [the] Master’s hands.”²⁹ They will not weep for themselves. So, Spurgeon must ultimately release them to the Christ.

In this final and unexpected dual change of focus; Spurgeon turns his strong concerns away from the sinner to the Savior. He indeed has done all that can possibly be done by mortal preacher. He cries out with what seems to be a breaking-heart of prayer: “We can now appeal to the Spirit I cannot compel you, but thou O Spirit of God who hast the key of the heart, thou canst compel.”³⁰ In this his final appeal, he delivers them over to the Savior and the Spirit as he rehearses a familiar passage from John’s Revelation. He uses beautifully descriptive language

as he focuses on John's description of the Savior standing at the heart's door and knocking (Revelation 3:20). He then refers his hearers to the immediately preceding context of Revelation. In his closing Spurgeon tells them what they doubtlessly have known from so many other previous sermons. The one who stands at the door and knocks also is "he who hath the key of David." If Christ cannot persuade them by "heart-knocking" He can certainly persuade them by "heart-unlocking." Spurgeon's closing paragraph is so very moving and it captures the whole:

I thought it my duty to labour with you as though I must do it; now I throw it into my Master's hands. It cannot be his will that we should travail in birth, and yet not bring forth spiritual children. It is with him; he is master of the heart, and the day shall declare it, that some of you constrained by sovereign grace have become the willing captives of the all-conquering Jesus, and have bowed your hearts to him through the sermon this morning.³¹

A Gospel-Impassioned Rhetorician

Spurgeon is much the rhetorician. He uses every means within his arsenal of oratory to bring men and women, boys and girls to the Savior. But more importantly than being a rhetor—he is an evangelist. "Take the Gospel to sinners. Carry it to their door. Put it in their way. Do not allow them to escape..."³² was his evangelistic mantra. He pours out his very soul as preacher-teacher-evangelist of the Gospel "To Compel Them to Come In!"³³ 🍀

Notes:

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Compel Them to Come In," *A Treasury of Spurgeon on the Life and Work of Our Lord*, Vol. 3, *The Parables of Our Lord*, (n.p.); (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 285–292. The reader is strongly encouraged to obtain a copy of this address and read the sermon for himself. This address possesses such excellent qualities of ethos, pathos, and logos that one rhetorical reading will in no way exhaust or do service to what Spurgeon has accomplished.

² Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford Press, 1991), 35.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Beaty, "In Praise of Baptist Colleges," *The Baptist Educator* LXXII (Third Quarter 2008, No.4): 5.

⁵ It has been the author's privilege to teach Speech Fundamentals (Public Address at some institutions) for eleven years on the college and university levels. I have a saying that is always employed in my classes. "Life is rhetoric!" I go on to explain that we are nearly always, in most circumstances, trying to persuade others to do something for us or move them on some level. And rhetoric is not

just spoken, but it is “the use of the available means of persuasion” as defined by Aristotle in the above discussion. For a fuller idea of the principles of Aristotelian Rhetoric see Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

⁶ For a discussion of Robert Smith’s understanding of how Rhetoric can be used for Homiletics see the author’s book review at <http://sharperiron.org/index.php?s=doctrine+that+dances>.

⁷ Robert Smith, *Doctrine that Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2008), 113–114.

⁸ For a fuller discussion of John A. Broadus’ use of Classical Rhetoric in his *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* see: David S. Dockery and Roger D. Duke, eds, *John A. Broadus: A Living Legacy* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2008).

⁹ It should be considered that *Rhetoric* is the Art or Artistry of Persuasion as described in the citations above. This particular article is a *Rhetorical Reading* or *Rhetorical Criticism*. A rhetorical criticism of a written text, oratorical address, or sermon consists in determining *What?* the speaker has accomplished. Probably more importantly—is the *How?* the speaker has done what was done.

¹⁰ Encarta® World English Dictionary [North American Edition] © & (P) 2007 Microsoft Corporation. Internet source: http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_1861737696/posture.html, retrieved 28 August 2008. *Arrangement* is also known as one of the “Canons of Rhetoric.” For a fuller discussion of this aspect of Classical Rhetoric see: Robert Smith, *Doctrine that Dances*, 113–117; or also Aristotle, *Rhetoric*.

¹¹ Spurgeon, 286.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Spurgeon, 286–287.

¹⁸ Internet, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tone_\(literary\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tone_(literary)), retrieved 28 August 2008.

¹⁹ Karen Bernardo, “Tone in Literary Fiction,” Internet, <http://www.storybites.com/tonel2.htm>, retrieved 28 August 2008.

²⁰ “Definition of Pathos,” Internet, <http://courses.durhamtech.edu/perkins/aris.html>, retrieved 3 September 2008. For a complete discussion of Aristotle’s definition of *pathos* see: Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford Press, 1991).

²¹ Spurgeon, 287–292.

²² Spurgeon, 288.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Spurgeon, 288–289.

²⁶ Ibid, 289.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Spurgeon, 292.

²⁹ Spurgeon, 287-292.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Spurgeon, 292.

³² Linda D. Carson, ed. *C. H. Spurgeon: Morning by Morning, Meditations for Daily Living* (Springdale, PA.: Whitaker House, 1984), 266.

³³ It must be considered that Spurgeon comes against the “hyper-Calvinists” as he makes his appeal. He notes that “I must stand before my Judge at last.” The poignancy of the entire sermon could be understood by this motivation of the great 19th-century pastor-teacher-evangelist. See Spurgeon, 289-290.

News

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wwwFOUNDERSconference.org/past_conferences.html

Upcoming Regional Founders Conference

The Deep South Founders Conference will be held January 15–17, 2009 at RTS and Grace Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. The theme will be “The Sovereignty of God.” Jeff Noblit from Grace Life Church of Muscle Shoals, Alabama will be the keynote speaker. For more information, see online:

<http://deepsouthfounders.wordpress.com/>

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Decisive Preaching

Phil A. Newton

Though I do not remember the speech, I do remember the assignment. “Give a persuasive speech to your class.” I was tasked with building an argument that called for action and change on the part of the hearers. I had to convince my classmates that they needed what I offered.

While writing this article during the height of the 2008 presidential campaign, I have heard plenty of persuasive speeches. Most stump speeches fit this category. Putting on my political hat, I look for content in the speech that would lead me to a point of agreement and action with the speakers. At times, the call to action lacks substance, which reduces the speaker to that of a manipulator and the hearers to pawns moved by the power of words.

The Christian pulpit is a different story. Though dealing in the realm of words and a concern for persuasiveness, the preacher faces several challenges. First, he will give an account for what he preaches, how he handles the biblical text, and how he shepherds the flock of God (2 Timothy 4:1–2; 2:14–15; 1 Peter 5:1–4). That is enough to get any preacher’s attention! Second, he will seek to persuade his hearers to action but not on the basis of “superiority of speech or of wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:1). In other words, he cannot stoop to clever techniques or manipulation if he would remain faithful to his task. Third, he is not stumping for votes or introducing a new product or calling for social change; he is heralding the Word of God so that his hearers might know and enjoy the living God (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The substance of his message must come from the inerrant Word that “is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Fourth, his call to action must be consistent with the revelation of Holy Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:6–13). Otherwise, he is no different than a crass politician that will say anything to get a vote.

Does this cause the preacher to shrink from his task? Perhaps the trepidation of standing week after week before a congregation to open the Word of God, expound it, and call for specific action daunts the preacher. And well it should! Be daunted—but do not shrink back from the high calling of preaching the Word.

Preaching Demands a Verdict

“Preaching demands a verdict,” I often heard the late Stephen Olford say. This view of preaching calls for the hearers’ response to God’s Word. Unfortunately, many substitute deep, lasting response with a quick movement to the front of the

church at the end of the sermon. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was right in pointing out that such practice puts too much pressure directly on the will while by-passing engaging the mind with doctrine. “The will should always be approached primarily through the mind, the intellect, and then through the affections.”¹ Did Lloyd-Jones, then, go soft when applying the sermon? Anyone that has listened to his preaching (or read his sermons) knows otherwise! “The preaching of the Word and the call for decision should not be separated in our thinking,” he wrote.² Biblical preaching demands a verdict by the hearers. They must do something with the truth that has been passionately set before them. The preacher’s charge is to help hearers understand the text’s meaning and how they are to live in light of it. A message from God’s Word may call for repentance or new levels of discipline or confession of sin or mortifying sin or worshiping with new intensity or speaking the gospel to someone or restoring a broken relationship or changing church attendance habits or establishing new levels of accountability or developing a biblical worldview or believing on the Lord Jesus Christ or any number of specific responses related to the particular text expounded.

Too often, preaching is disjointed. A text is read, a few stories are told, and then hearers are asked to do something: believe on Christ, walk to the front of the church, turn over a new leaf in their lives, etc. However, that style of preaching lacks the *reason* for responding: careful opening of the biblical text through exposition. As the doctrines in the given text become clear, there is the natural call for response. Consider how Jesus Christ used this approach in the sermons of Mark’s Gospel.

How Jesus Applied Doctrine

Christ’s earliest sermon declared the advent of the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” How are men to respond in light of the immanence of God’s rule? Jesus applied the doctrine: “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). He furthered this message of the kingdom in the parabolic teaching of Mark 4. Each parable contains pictorial descriptions of some aspect of kingdom life and the inherent call to decisiveness in light of the kingdom of God. This is especially noted by Christ’s repetition, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (4:9, 23). Later, when preaching to a crowd after an encounter with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus used parabolic language that called for personal evaluation and action (7:14–16). Afterward, the disciples seemed to squander the opportunity of rightly hearing and applying Christ’s message; so He rebuked them, asking, “Are you so lacking in understanding also?” (7:18). The quintessential call to action is found in Jesus’ explanation of what it means to be a true disciple. The application followed the explanation of the doctrine of His impending passion (8:31). “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (8:34–38). He offered no middle ground, no place for compromise if one would call himself a follower of Jesus Christ.

A number of years ago, a lady visited our church for several Sundays. I discovered that she attended a cult church that denied the doctrine of the Trinity, among other things. Yet she attended and heard the gospel preached. As she came out the door following an exposition from John's Gospel, she took my hand and said, "Now I understand." "What do you mean?" I asked. "I understand your preaching. You don't give any options," she replied. Though to my knowledge, she never turned to Christ, at least she understood the call for solitary following of Jesus Christ if one would be a Christian. Accustomed to hearing that many ways to God existed, the doctrine and application in the sermon showed otherwise. The doctrine gave vent to the application.

In the extended sermon known as the "Little Apocalypse" in Mark 13, Jesus sprinkles the message with calls to action. "See that no one misleads you" (13:5); "But be on your guard" (13:9); "When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour" (13:11); "You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved" (13:13); "But take heed; behold I have told you everything in advance" (13:23); "Take heed, keep on the alert" (13:33); "Therefore, be on the alert... What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert'" (13:35, 37). Rather than posting a series of applications at the end of the sermon, our Lord called for decisive action—a verdict—throughout the entire message. While each point of doctrine remained fresh on the mind, Jesus declared, in essence, "Act on this! Here's what you must do!"

Do your sermons resemble this approach by our Lord? Certainly, the end of the sermon appropriately calls for action, perhaps a list of responsive points, but Jesus shows the preacher that he need not wait to the end of the sermon before applying it. While the mind focuses upon a particular doctrinal truth, seize the moment, and call for action. This can be effectively recapped at the end of the sermon where the appeal is drawn to a sharp edge. Having already applied the message numerous times, the closing appeal reiterates the need for decisive action.

Multiple Applications in Doctrinal Preaching

One of the most powerful sermons ever preached is the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer himself calls it "this brief word of exhortation" (Hebrews 13:22). A number of scholars, consequently, believe that Hebrews is an extended exposition on the supremacy of Christ—as the doctrine—and the call for perseverance—as the primary application.³ It contains repeated calls for decisive action based on doctrinal exposition. For instance, Hebrews 2:1, 3 demands that in light of Christ as God's final revelation of Himself, the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of the divine nature, the upholder of all things, Ruler at the Father's right hand who is supreme over the angelic host (1:1–14), "*For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it*" (italics mine). Then he asks, "How will we escape if we neglect so

great a salvation?” The doctrine of the person and work of Christ—the “reason” he refers to—though theologically rich and intellectually satisfying, calls for more than just soaking up good truths. It calls for paying attention to the gospel so that we do not drift from it.

Hebrews 3 does the same. The ancient preacher calls us to “consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession,” then proceeds to show how Christ was counted worthier than Moses as a faithful Son over God’s household. Then he inserts, “whose house we are, *if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end*” (3:6, italics added). His conditional clause raised an important question that called for a heart-searching response. Consequently, in light of Israel’s failure to heed the voice of God speaking in the wilderness, Christians have much greater reason to heed the voice of God’s Son through the gospel! The preacher applies the doctrine in 3:7–11 by declaring, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (3:12–13). His application is both internal and external. Inwardly, the hearers must check out their own hearts to make sure they are not slipping from the perseverance called for in the gospel. Outwardly, they are to encourage others in the body to keep pressing on in faithfulness. He continues his sermon by setting forth the doctrine, often illustrating it from Old Testament stories, and then forcefully applying it by calling for active perseverance (see 4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1, 11–12, noting the doctrinal portions followed by the call for decisive action in light of the doctrine).

The most intense doctrinal argument comes in chapters 7–10:18, as the preacher exults in the High Priesthood of Christ, the superiority of His priestly ministry to the Aaronic priesthood, the promise of the New Covenant and its superiority through Christ’s solitary sacrifice at the cross. After repeating the promises of the New Covenant, he follows with one of the most memorable calls for action (10:19–25). To make sure that there is no question of the basis for his call to action, he reiterates the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as “a great priest over the house of God,” and then drills his hearers: “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith... Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering... Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” Draw near, hold fast, stimulate, do not forsake, and encourage comprise specific calls for action on the part of the church. The balance of the ancient sermon continues to sound the call for action in light of specific doctrine (cf. 11:35; 12:1–3, 8, 12–15, 25, 28; and most of chapter 13, which ends with a flurry of applications).

Decisive action is the inevitable “therefore” that follows on the heels of doctrinal exposition. A call for response or action without doctrine is manipulation that can lead to legalism and false assurance. Doctrine, when properly understood, demands response. In this sense, we might call doctrine *teaching with a catch*. It is

not simply improving knowledge, as wonderful as knowledge is; but it is knowledge that leads to changing or improving one's relationship with God and the church or changing one's relationship with the world. A text rightly expounded always deals with the doctrines in the text; hence, expository preaching is doctrinal exposition. Doctrine calls for decisiveness. For this reason, Lloyd-Jones rightly called preaching, "theology on fire," adding, "And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire."⁴

I certainly do not think that preachers have to dream up applications! Each doctrinal emphasis carries multiple points of application. The preacher must know his congregation, understanding their spiritual needs, and then aim the applications that flow naturally from the doctrinal exposition. Let me explain in a more personal way.

A Personal Example

Presently, I am preaching through Romans in our morning worship service. In an exposition on Romans 4:1–3, I considered the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Paul had declared and illustrated imputation by recounting a statement from Genesis 15:6, which he translated as, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." After explaining what it meant for Abraham to believe God, I focused on the word "credited" which means to impute or to put on one's account. I showed how imputation is used negatively: Adam's sin was imputed to his posterity; then positively: Christ's righteousness was imputed to us and our sin was imputed to Christ so that He might bear God's judgment against us and fully atone for our sin. After setting forth the doctrine I wanted to apply it to the various needs that I recognized in my own congregation that day. My concern was not only to make an evangelistic application but to also help believers to know the depth of peace and satisfaction in depending on Christ's righteousness alone. Here is how I applied the doctrine:

Imputation of Christ's righteousness means that every moment of the day, God accepts you as He does His Son. Think of that, especially when you feel the weight of your weakness and sinfulness: your acceptance by God is not based on your righteousness but on that of God's Son. "But, you don't know how much I struggle. You don't know how much I falter and fail. You don't know how weak my faith is." No, and I don't have to know that; I know enough of my own struggles and failures to understand that I have nothing to offer God but the rags of my unrighteousness. But my claim before God's throne is not what I've done but the perfect righteousness of the Son. For every condemnation, return to this doctrine of imputation; in every trial and temptation, think upon the righteousness of Christ for you; in every situation of doubt and distress,

remember that your standing with God is not grounded in what you've done but in what Christ has done on your behalf.⁵

I had in mind some Christians who struggle over their past sins. I thought of those who happen to be mentally and emotionally wired in such a way that they tend toward over-introspection rather than the upward look of reliance on Christ. I considered those who vacillate with legalism instead of confidence in Christ's righteousness. I thought of those who struggle to cast themselves upon Christ for salvation because they cannot understand how they could ever become righteous enough to stand before God. It was imperative that the doctrine of imputation was first explained in detail and then just as imperative that it was applied. Otherwise, my sermon would have been an appropriate theological lecture for students and not a sermon for struggling sinners.

Intensity in Preaching

Doctrinal exposition intensifies and emboldens the preacher in his applications. That is quite natural since doctrine qualifies the particular truths of Scripture. The preacher is not expressing his views but expounding God's truths in particular. He has something of vital importance to apply to his hearers. Charles Haddon Spurgeon taught his students that "the gospel consists in something definite which is to be believed by men," and consequently, "it becomes us to be decided as to what we teach, and to teach it in a decided manner."⁶ By a "decided manner," he meant that the preacher is thoroughly convinced of what he preaches and demonstrates it by the clarity and vigor with which he approaches his task. He went on to identify "fixed principles" or doctrines that are unquestioned and must be preached with certainty. These include the doctrines of God, the Bible, the Trinity, Christ's atonement, the work of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of the new birth, the evil of sin, salvation as all of grace, and justification by faith.⁷ He did not minimize other doctrines but specifies these as non-negotiable and thus, of utmost importance in ongoing pulpit ministry.

Spurgeon heightens this emphasis by reminding his students that "we dare not stir beyond the record. What we have been taught of God we teach." Then he warns, "If we do not do this, we are not fit for our position."⁸ But how are we to do this kind of preaching? We are not giving a lecture but proclaiming life-giving truth. Spurgeon explains that having been "taught of God we teach," so the truths expounded have already been internalized—at least to some degree. The reality that one has been "taught of God" intensifies his desire to not only explain truth but to see it applied. Dispassionate, indecisive preaching betrays the truth that the preacher really expounds the Word of God. He must be convinced of what he preaches or he will fail to convince anyone else that the truth is worth applying to one's life. If he has felt the power of that truth in his own life it will be evidenced in the decisive tone of his proclamation. He will preach so that others might live in

the same experience of God's truth. His applications, consequently, are not merely a list of appropriate responses but instead convey a sense of vital life—necessities if one would follow faithfully after Christ.

Intensity increases when we are conscious that our preaching affects hearers now and in eternity. If we have a clearer sense of standing before God, our expositions and applications will be clearer, too. Spurgeon told of an American preacher, who as he lay dying, turned to a friend and said, "I have taken a look into eternity. Oh, if I could come back and preach again, how differently I would preach from what I have done before."⁹ In a 1792 sermon in Rutland, Vermont, Lemuel Harris underscored that same consciousness of judgment and the world to come as changing both the preacher and the hearers.

The subject affords direction on how ministers should preach and how a people ought to hear—namely, with death and judgment in view. It is this that makes preaching and hearing a serious matter and renders the house of God so very solemn. We must soon meet before the bar of Christ, perhaps before the next Sabbath, to have our sermons and our hearing examined by Him who is infinite in knowledge and is present in every congregation. Did we always consider these things, it would tend to abolish that coldness, drowsiness, and indifference that too often attend the ministers of the gospel and that formal spirit that is too apparent among hearers. How that would check the levity of mind and disorderly behavior that presumptuous creatures often indulge in the house of God! "How dreadful is this place!" is a reflection suitable on all occasions, and especially when we meet for public devotion.¹⁰

Stuart Olyott captures this intense spirit of seriousness in a sermon on Matthew 11:20–30, as Christ denounced the cities that did not repent in spite of the many miracles they witnessed by His power. His application at the point of expounding the reality of judgment against Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum gripped me as I read the sermon. Notice how he relies on the doctrinal context to set up the application of judgment against those with much light who refuse to respond to the gospel.

As the inhabitants of Capernaum watch the proceedings, they see the men of Sodom come in. As they expect, the Sodomites receive a punishment that is unspeakably terrible. After all, homosexuality is not like other sins; it is a sin against nature. What could be worse than repeated, unrestrained, aggressive, violent sodomy? How piercing, then, are the shrieks of the people of Capernaum when they learn that their punishment is to be even greater! *The guilt of unenlightened sodomites is not nearly, nearly as great as that of the spiritually privileged who do nothing with the light they have received* [italics added to underscore application].¹¹

No one would think for a moment that Jesus Christ dispassionately and indecisively spoke to these communities that had rejected His gospel! Nor would any think that such searing explanation of impending judgment lacked current application. Olyott demonstrates this with a single sentence that causes hearers to search their own hearts in light of the severity of Christ's judgment.

Making Application

Since we are considering the necessity of strong, passionate application in the course of an expository sermon, then it is fitting that we close with some recommendations on how to go about it. Fortunately, applications are not monolithic, either in terms of how they are made and what they seek to accomplish. To apply the Scripture appropriately in a given congregation, the preacher must hold closely to the biblical text, observe closely the spiritual needs of his congregation, and follow closely the promptings of the Holy Spirit as he prepares and preaches. Applications are no time to climb onto his homiletic hobby-horse or hammer away at recalcitrant church members. It is time to let the text of Scripture speak and apply the message only as consistent with the text.

Preachers that maintain a regular expositional ministry need not worry that their congregations are missing needed applications. Working through books of the Bible uncovers ample and timely applications for their congregations. The Sovereign Lord who directs preachers as they plan and prepare their preaching brings about amazingly effective applications. I have lost count on the number of times that a particular need has arisen in the congregation, and in the course of my regular expositional ministry, without resorting to picking a *special* text, the sermon's applications would be precisely what individuals or the whole congregation needed at just the right time. Remember that the word we preach is "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12).

As a rule, every sermon should contain explanation, illustration and application. That pattern will serve well both preacher and congregation. In making application throughout the sermon, the preacher should utilize numerous approaches. Stuart Olyott identifies five of these in the preaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount.¹² First, offer clear *statements* that by their language call attention to application. For instance, the Beatitudes are simply statements—but what statements! "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Immediately, the hearer begins to ask himself, "Am I poor in spirit?" "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." "Do I mourn over my sin?" "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." "Do I really hunger and thirst for righteousness or is my desire centered on selfish pursuits?" Forceful, powerful, concise, and penetrating statements make the necessary point (Matthew 5:3–12).

Second, make use of *imperatives*. The simple command calls for action based on the doctrine taught and illustrated. For instance, Jesus explains, "You are the

light of the world.” He illustrates, “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.” Then He applies with an imperative: “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14–16).

Third, utilize *questions* to stir appropriate inspection and action in response to the doctrine. Jesus taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” His application came in the form of four questions that probe the heart and motivate to action. “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matthew 5:43–47)

Fourth, give the congregation specific *scenarios*. Paint scenes for them so that in viewing the verbal snapshot they see specific actions they must take. A good example is the scenario of one dropping off his offering at the altar. “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,” grips our attention. We can see ourselves casually presenting our gift and thinking well of ourselves for doing so, when suddenly we hear the words of Christ, “and there remember that your brother has something against you.” He then instructs as a follow up to the scenario: “leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matthew 5:23–24).

When preaching on forgiveness, I have told the story that I experienced in my first pastorate. With only forty people in the church, one would think that there would be no problem knowing details of everyone in attendance! However, I had pastored that church for a year when I found out that two ladies in the church were sisters. Here’s the story: they were sisters that had not spoken to each other in many years. Though they passed by one another each Sunday—both faithfully attended—they would not speak. It all arose over a silly incident in which one sister offended the other. The one offended refused to forgive even though the other had apologized. It was not until she faced death that she finally reconciled with her sister. I still remember preaching on forgiveness from Matthew 18:21–35 prior to the sisters’ reconciliation. As the offended sister walked out the door, she shook my hand and commented, “I enjoyed that, preacher.” I can tell that story and then make a simple statement of application: don’t wait until you are on your deathbed to try to reconcile with those whom you have not forgiven.

Finally, application can be made through *picture language*. Think of how Jesus made application concerning His warning against judging others. “Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold the log is in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:1–5). Can you hear that pictorial language and not pause to consider how you have offended your brother by judging him?

Both of the major presidential candidates in the 2008 election have said of the other candidate, “He just doesn’t get it.” The jab refers to disconnect on the part of the rival. Perhaps we can rephrase this just a bit and ask ourselves the question concerning our preaching and the congregation’s response. “Does the congregation get it?” You have preached a particular text by explaining, illustrating and applying it. But has the sermon fallen on deaf ears? Did they get it? Did the application hit the intended mark? Or maybe the church asks the question of the preacher as they struggle with their spiritual needs, wondering if God’s Word that he preaches has anything to say to them. “Does he get it?”

I leave you with that question because that is precisely what each of us must wrestle with when we step from the pulpit after expounding God’s Word. Only the Holy Spirit can drive the preached Word home to the heart as needed. Yet that is never a theological excuse for poorly applying the text. We are to be diligent in studying the text and “accurately handling the word of truth” because it is “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 Timothy 2:15; 3:16–17).☺

Notes:

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 271–272.

² *Ibid.*, 273.

³ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 35. As an example to this theme, see my sermons on the Epistle to the Hebrews at <http://www.southwoodsbc.org/resources/sermons/hebrewsindex.html>.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, 97.

⁵ Read the entire sermon at http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/romans_04.01-03.html.

⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990, reprint of 1881), vol. 2, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰ Thabit M. Anyabwile, *The Faithful Preacher: Recapturing the Vision of Three Pioneering African-American Pastors* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 44.

¹¹ Stuart Olyott, *Ministering Like the Master: Three Messages for Today’s Preachers* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 46.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21–23. Though a small book, I found Pastor Olyott’s insights worth their weight in gold.

The Posture of Preaching

Tom J. Nettles

By “posture” I do not refer to the alignment of one’s body when standing. Good posture, of course, is advisable, for one breathes better, projects his voice better and shows respect for the uprightness and symmetry with which God created His image-bearers. No better instruction on this feature of pulpit address can be found than that offered by Spurgeon in his *Lectures to my Students*. In his brief apology for this two lecture series, Spurgeon summarized the intent by assuming that “No minister would willingly cultivate a habit which would blunt his arrows, or drift them aside from the mark; and, therefore, since these minor matters of movement, posture, and gesture may have that effect, you will give them your immediate attention.”¹ But I refer to one’s mental and spiritual posture. In what position does a person place his mind and heart as he approaches the time of pulpit proclamation? Within what framework does the preacher of the gospel align his thoughts as he prepares to stand before the people of God to deliver the message of God from the book of God?

My experience in considering this issue does not come from a long history of week by week preparation to give soul care to one group of people over several years of pastoral labor. My preaching has been occasional in churches where I served as an assistant to the pastor, in conferences, a few interims, or one Sunday at a time in different churches. I have heard many sermons, however, as a church member and as a regular attendee at chapel through eight years of seminary life as a student and thirty-three years as a professor. And, as is true in virtually every Christian’s relationships, many friends who attend church talk about sermons and preachers and the impact that certain styles of pulpit address have on them.

Content trumps everything. The *reconciling work* of Christ must be central to the message and omnipresent in the sermon portfolio of every pastor. By reconciling work I mean the incarnation of the Son of God, His life of tested and perfected righteousness, His substitutionary death submitting to a wrath not His due but ours, His resurrection by the glory of the Father, His appearances and post-resurrection commissions and instructions, His ascension, His sending of the Spirit, His present work of intercession and the hope of His coming again. By *omnipresent* I mean that each and every sermon must make some conscious and conscientious connection to the Messiah-driven nature of divine revelation. A sermon is not a Christian sermon unless it leads us to Christ; a text is not a biblical text unless it is seen in its connection to Christ. None of the promises are ours apart from Christ but “as many as may be the promises of God, in Him [Christ] they are yes” and only in Him do we find the assured and final affirma-

tion that we may indeed live to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 1:20). Every law was given by Him to drive us to Him, every deliverer of Israel pictures what only Christ does. Every Psalm gives praise to the King of kings, every proverb shows us that wisdom is bound up in the cross of Christ, every prophet lets us know that in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son. Christ Himself taught us this when He called two disciples “foolish men and slow of heart” because they failed to “believe in all that the prophets have spoken.” Had they perceived correctly the prophetic message, they would have known that it was “necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory” (Luke 24:25, 26). He instructed them, therefore, “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets” and “explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (27) Without Christ in His suffering and glory all sermon content is trivial humanism.

Next to content, however, no listener can ignore the impression made by delivery. Delivery is affected, moreover, not only by the disciplined use of body and vocal inflection, but by the state of mind a preacher has prior to his taking his assigned place of instruction and admonition before the people of God. So infused are matter and manner that one’s posture of presentation may allow the content to glow with magnetic fervor or bleach it into pale, insipid, even obnoxious hues by its impact on the existential credibility of the messenger. A serious message on the cross may wither from the flippant humor and ill-placed jocularity of the messenger. A message about the humiliation of Christ and the consequent necessity of humility on the part of his followers may crumble under the weight of the cavalier and detached carriage of the messenger. A message on the love of God may sag into mere amusement by the amateurish histrionics of the messenger. In short the most glorious and compelling message possible may lose credibility by any number of ways in which a lack of earnestness becomes prominent.

Jonathan Edwards, in his *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, observed, “I think an exceeding affectionate way of preaching about the great things of religion, has in itself no tendency to beget false apprehensions of them; but on the contrary a much greater tendency to beget true apprehensions of them, than a moderate, dull, indifferent way of speaking of ‘em.” He argued that great earnestness did as much to settle the judgment in favor of truth as great learning and concluded, “Our people don’t so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched.” We, however, need a heavy portion of both. The truths of divine revelation, flowing like hot lava from heart and lips burning with intense passion for God and souls, makes truth not only heard but felt. Spurgeon added, “One of the excuses most soporific to the conscience of an ungodly generation is that of half-heartedness in the preacher. If the sinner finds the preacher nodding while he talks of judgment to come, he concludes that the judgment is a thing which the preacher is dreaming about, and he resolves to regard it all as mere fiction.”²

While Edwards specifically wrote to defend the exuberance of preachers in the first Great Awakening and to deflect the severe criticism they received in an attempt to discredit the revival, his argument that manner, the emotional and

spiritual overtones, of delivery colors the content is widely applicable. Given our great tendency to sin and self-centeredness, certain particular steps should be taken consciously to give the best opportunity for an earnest manner commensurate with the glory of the message.

First, we should consider who we are—sinners prone to have our tongues corrupt the whole course of nature and defile our entire body because it is set on fire by hell. We preachers will be judged harshly for the wrong use of our tongues. On this we should meditate at several points during the week; we should recall those times that words spoken too quickly or with too little thought have hurt relationships and dishonored God. How much more will a word unfitly spoken, even the right word unfitly spoken, be a dishonor to God if we stand as His messenger and fail to mortify the flesh in our style of delivery. The immediate suggestions to the mind of light anecdotes or *ex tempore* comments about oneself or the congregation hardly ever advance the cause of the gospel in a message and usually lighten the mood so that seriousness due the proclamation can not be regained.

Second we should consider who the people are—the sheep of God who need a shepherd that is not a mere hireling. The shepherd may protect the sheep by steering them clear of pitfalls, brambles and sheep-eating carnivores. Calls to repentance, therefore, based on biblical admonition, mandate and law should run liberally through the messages that we preach if we earnestly care for the souls of those that hear. Aside remarks, however, that draw more attention to the feelings of the speaker than the glory of the message hardly ever edify or endear one to the call of Christ. Self-conscious efforts to evoke a periodic “Amen” from the congregation may interrupt meaningful reflection on the part of the more serious listeners and could indicate that the minister is more interested in an immediate affirmation of a series of one-liners than a prolonged engagement with a biblical argument. Worse than that is the attempt to insult the congregation into response by clever, or not so clever, manipulations to shame: “Are you people awake yet?” “Are you thinking about beating the Methodists to the cafeteria?” or “Hello?!” after a failed attempt to create a chuckle.

When they hear our voice, will they indeed hear the voice of the Shepherd that gave His life for them. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “You are our letter, written in our hearts known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.” This periodic consideration of who the people are, how Christ has died for them, how the Spirit has called us to them and hopefully written them on our hearts as persons to be cared for will make our public messages to them filled with transparency, earnestness, godliness and joy with the intent of edifying them by setting Christ before them. Instead of evoking a laugh from them, the point of our message should bring weeping from us and them for the reality of the eternity that looms before us mortals, the eternity in which we face the flaming eyes of the righteous judge whose vision will burn away every refuge except the cover of Christ’s obedience.

Third, meditate seriously and purposefully on the glory of Christ. The apostle Peter indicates that this action occupied the prophets prior to Christ's coming. They "inquired carefully" as to what type of person or time might be required to fulfill the Spirit's predictions concerning "the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories" (1 Peter 1:10, 11 ESV). They labored over the revelation that they had with such intense interest that the Spirit made a separate revelation to them that the answers would not come in their lifetime. These vital and compelling aspects of divine intervention were reserved for a subsequent age and could only be understood in light of the appearance of the person Himself. Only through Christ is the veil taken away, and, then, only "when one turns to the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:14–16). Their turning to the Lord, moreover, was the result of hearing the "word of Christ" preached (Romans 10:17). After Christ's ascension, the revelation was made in its fullness to the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:5) even as they preached "the good news... by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven" (1 Peter 1:12). The good news consisted of issues of redemptive truth that even the angels did not fully grasp and which they evidently learned through the preaching of the apostolic generation. As a result of the impact of this preaching, in which the sufferings of Christ and His subsequent glory were highlighted, Peter could admonish the churches to "set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13). Every admonition, every word of encouragement, every bit of instruction that Peter wrote relates immediately to the sufferings and glory of Christ. Their ground of acceptance is in His sufferings and their hope for the future is in His glorification (1:2; 2:24; 3:18; 4:1, 2; 5:1, 10). Their reason for patience in all their trials is the suffering and glory of Christ (1:3–9; 3:14–18; 4:12–14). Their impetus for holiness is in the sufferings and glory of Christ (1:13–21; 2:18–23; 4:3–6). The energy and example for loving the brethren comes from the gospel of Christ's suffering and glory preached to them (1:22–25; 3:8, 9; 4:7–11). If a preacher would understand a text and be inspired to preach all that it contains, he must spend time during the week reflecting on the glory of Christ in His cross, His resurrection, His intercession and His coming.

Fourth, be saturated with the sermon text and bear it consciously in mind throughout the sermon. In addition to thorough preparation in all the relevant helps available to him, meditation on the text should heighten its importance in the preacher's mind so that he grasps the potency of the eternal blessings of grace flowing from it and can think of nothing more worthy of his allotted time than the display of Christ through its truth. Be determined that those that hear this sermon will know this text and how its parts radiate from Christ and His sufficiency as Savior and Lord and bend back upon Him, reflecting His glory from a unique facet on the jewel of Scripture. Keep reminding the hearers that "Our text tells us so." We would never want to do away with the massive variety of helps available today to expedite exegesis and give critical clarity to the meaning of a text. But we must also recognize that Scripture is its own best interpreter. A personal knowledge of the text, its surrounding context, and an intimate acquaintance with the whole

Bible makes meditation on a particular text an edifying experience personally and lends power to one's preaching. A. T. Robertson had broad acquaintance with large numbers of preachers that in truth were men of one book. He observed:

This was literally true in some instances, for some of the early Baptist ministers were too poor to possess even a modest library. In some cases the old preacher would own Cruden's Concordance or Matthew Henry's Commentary. But the preacher who had only a copy of the English Bible often made such diligent use of it that he literally knew it. He could quote chapter and verse for his positions and expound Scripture by Scripture; a method not to be despised by the modern interpreter. Sermons out of the Concordance may be fearfully and wonderfully made, but sermons made out of the Bible which one has at his fingers' ends may be charged with power and can certainly claim the promise of God to bless his Word in a sense not true of some modern disquisitions and essays. If some of the interpretations were at times crude and lacking in historical perspective, they at least reflected the light of truth. They were loyal to Christ and preached the reality of sin, the need of a Saviour, and the power of Christ to save sinners the deepest dye. The pioneer preacher believed his gospel with all his heart and had no doubts about it, for he had put it to the test in too many instances. He was a man of power largely because he was mighty in the Scriptures and was full of faith in God.³

Fifth, be single minded in staying with the text and aware of the presence of Christ during the time of delivery. Many clever asides and easily-permitted digressions would remain in the realm of the unspoken where they should be joined by many others were the preacher to cultivate a deep-consciousness of Christ's presence with His people during the time of the ministry of the word. The clutter of superfluous comments could be swept away entirely if we kept in mind that the demands of the text should determine the contour and intent of every sentence. Such concentration on text and Christ would defy the insertion of jokes. Free-standing fabrications of incongruity or implied ridicule simply for the sake of a laugh will not contribute to but will interrupt both the cogency of thought and the pertinent pathos necessary for penetrating a heart with truth and love. Late night talk shows may thrive on this material, but Christian pulpits will wilt right along with the souls that are periodically injected with the virus of insincerity. Jokes have nothing to do with the biblical text and the attempt at teasing relevance out of them is so strained that the congregation usually sees through the charade, and gospel seriousness flies away to find refuge somewhere else. If you seek such jokes in the sermons of Calvin, Luther, Edwards, Whitefield, Wesley, Owen, Howe, Bunnyan, Gill, Andrew Fuller, Richard Fuller, Robert Hall, John A. Broadus, James P. Boyce or Charles Spurgeon you will come up empty. They give no advice about it nor example of it. I doubt if the consideration of such a communicative device ever occurred to them for their view of the task before them did not admit of it. Spur-

geon sometimes employed humor, but it was always in the flow of thought—an epigram, a pithy proverb, an arresting image, an astute observation about human nature in its relation to divine things, a statement of irony—that sealed, rather than concealed or nullified, the truth being discussed. Boyce’s sermons so overflow with earnest solicitude for the spiritual health of his hearers that one can almost feel the warmth generated by his devotional energy. Edwards’ intensity for the truth of his doctrine and the salvation of his hearer, concerns intertwined at every phase of his sermon, reverberate with palpable power even from the printed page. Richard Fuller’s saturation with the applicability of his doctrinal and textual theme left no space in his mental apparatus for a jocular spirit to shoulder its way into his thinking.

One should not infer from any of these suggestions that a minister of the gospel must be less, or more, than human. He should, however, recognize the sinful tendency that humans have to trivialize the sacred and mortify that urge. He should recognize the sinful tendency to use the tongue as an instrument of hell and fear the outcome. As one called to a transcendent task, he must not create a subterranean climate. As one given specific instructions about the chief function of his calling, he must avoid adding his own bright ideas about what would make it more compelling. “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. . . . But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:2, 5). Hold fast the faithful Word that by sound doctrine you can exhort and convince those that contradict it; and show yourself to be a model of good works. In your teaching show integrity, gravity, sincerity, sound speech that cannot be condemned (Titus 1:9; 2:7, 8 paraphrased). ☺

Notes:

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990 [four volumes in one]), 2:97.

² *Ibid.*, 147.

³ *The Christian Index*, 21 October, 1915, 9

Wanted: A Few Weak Men

Jeff Robinson

For many years the United States Army recruited soldiers by means of a now classic poster of Uncle Sam, his brows fully furrowed to highlight an austere countenance, his finger pointed directly at the face of potential enlistees. The whole picture sought to communicate gravely the slogan emblazoned across the poster beneath Sam's red, white and blue torso: "I want you." This was a major part of the army's overall campaign to recruit soldiers under the slogan, "Wanted: A few good men." When I was younger, I once heard a preacher say that God, like your local military recruiter, is looking for a few good men.

Without a doubt, the Christian minister's calling bears many similarities to the job description of the soldier: the faithful man of God is perennially engaged in battle against an enemy whose strategies are as unpredictable as they are lethal; God's man is to go about equipped in full battle array—the impenetrable armor of God, and he is equipped with the sword of the Spirit as his weapon. In summary, the faithful gospel minister is a man of war and Scripture is replete with warfare imagery. Thus, the gospel ministry is no place for those weak of heart.

But there is one significant difference between the calling of the earthly soldier and the warrior who marches under the banner of the King of Glory: For God's warrior, strength lies in weakness and ultimate victory on the battlefield will only come through full, immediate and wholesale surrender. And profound suffering, for God's herald, is the only boot camp that will fit him to survive the theatre of war.

These differences never rang with greater clarity to me than during Ray Ortlund Jr.'s recent visit to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Ortlund, a veteran minister who presently serves as pastor of Immanuel Church in Nashville, Tennessee, delivered the annual E.Y. Mullins Lectures at Southern and for three days, he gloriously articulated a God-exalting, pride-slaying vision of the Christian ministry. It was a much-needed antidote to the ethos of professionalism that dominates the landscape of evangelical ministry today.

During his first lecture, Ortlund unpacked 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 and powerfully reminded us that "a crucified Savior can be preached only in divine power" and Christ can be preached in divine power "only by crucified preachers."

This is the quality of weakness that must typify the soldier of Christ. In Paul's day, great rhetoricians were in demand in much the same way as are the televangelist superstars of our day. These speakers came with lofty words and high-minded ideas. They displayed an air of omni-competence and were not remiss to put their brilliance on display to dazzle their listeners.

Yet, the apostle Paul operated through another strategy, one that led him to admit to the Corinthians, “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom...” (1 Corinthians 2:3–4a). Why such an unexpected admission? As Ortlund reminded us, Paul operated this way because “God’s strategy for all of humanity is to destroy the wisdom of the wise” through “choosing the weak to shame the wise.” As John Piper so succinctly put it, brothers, we are not professionals. We are weak and clueless and foolish, yet chosen by God as instruments to herald His gospel. How humbling! Why does God work in this way? Verses 4–5 in 2 Corinthians 2 provide the answer: “... in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest on the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” God works this way so that the faith of sinners may rest upon the bedrock of divine grace and He works this way so that He gets all the glory. Preaching that stakes the claim of power for itself empties the cross of its effectual glory. Paul understood this well, as Ortlund further reminded us, “Paul was fully dependent upon the Holy Spirit’s power to prove the truthfulness of the cross... That is the wisdom and power of God. The changing of the human heart is a miracle and God does it through weak preachers.” For all who would presume to proclaim the oracles of God, let us not be intimidated by our weakness; instead, like Paul, let us boast in it so that God’s glory might be manifest.

In his second message, Ortlund examined 1 Thessalonians 1:2–5 and asserted that humility must be the distinguishing mark of the faithful minister. “The divine power with which we preach to our people is inseparable from the kind of men we are with other people,” he said. In other words, in preaching to our congregations, we must adorn the gospel with the sweet savor of Christ, for therein lies the power of God. It was Paul’s deep and selfless love toward the people that embodied his ministry to the Thessalonians. Such love is paradigmatic for the type of affections that a faithful minister must display toward his people in order to see the gospel come “not only in word, but also in the power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Ortlund’s final message, from 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, demonstrated perhaps the single most countercultural aspect of the gospel ministry: A minister’s greatest spiritual breakthrough comes, not through power encounters with God, but through the most harrowing experiences of his life. Ortlund pointed out that Paul did not reach a spiritual pinnacle through being lifted up to the third heaven; rather, Paul’s intimacy with God increased exponentially as he suffered from a providentially placed thorn. The thorn had the net effect of keeping Paul humble and dramatically emphasized his weakness and dependence upon the might of the Lord. “Authentic Christianity does not produce a race of men who rise above need,” Ortlund said. “Paul is not threatened by his weakness because it is through it, through the thorn, that Christ’s power and presence rest on him.” So much modern-day preaching, particularly at the popular level, exudes precisely the opposite ethos. Indeed, much contemporary preaching merely employs cute apho-

risms that commandeer the Bible to promote a form of human wisdom, a form of “wisdom” that promises to meet ten thousand felt needs. These promises are empty, however, because they bypass the one thing needful to give them credence: the power of God. As Ortlund pointed out, the human heart never changes and human sinfulness continues to need the same remedy of divine grace. The contemporary church needs precisely the sort of minister of which Ortlund spoke: men who, conscious of the depth of their own weakness, operate under a battle plan of humility adorned by an unshakable confidence in the power of God and the Word of God.

The gospel ministry is a calling of deep paradox. God’s man must be strong in the Lord, but strong in the power of *His* might. The herald of Christ must hear and heed the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:13, “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong...” all the while operating out of the selflessness of verse 14, “Let all that you do be done in love.” For God’s man, the way up is down, the path to greatness is through full dependence upon sovereign grace. This stunning gospel paradox has outfitted some of the greatest preachers in history—Spurgeon, Bunyan, Luther, Calvin—all of whom suffered greatly, worked humbly and were used profoundly.

Ortlund’s clarion call to ministers and future ministers at the seminary recalls the words of A.W. Tozer, words that should be emblazoned on the hearts and minds of every man who is wrestling with the call to ministry: “Before God can use a man greatly, he must bruise him deeply.” This is the radical paradox that must typify the faithful herald of the gospel, a paradox which Piper summarizes in his customary pithy style: “We are fools for the sake of Christ. But professionals are wise. We are weak. But professionals are strong. Professionals are held in honor. We are in disrepute. We do not try to secure a professional lifestyle, but we are ready to hunger and thirst and be ill-clad and homeless.”¹

Brothers, God is looking for a few men whose strength lies in their weakness, whose heart beats with love for sinful men, who seek to walk the narrow road that leads to life along a path fraught with vicious enemies—some of whom are invisible, others of whom are camouflaged as friends—and deadly dangers, toils and snares too numerous to name. Are you ready to enlist? 🐣

Notes:

¹ John Piper, *Brothers, We are Not Professionals: A Plea for Radical Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 1.

Book Review

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4. Edited by John Bolt and translated from Dutch into English by John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 944 pp. \$49.95

Reviewed by Roger Nicole

This is an event, a momentous event in Reformed Theology, for it marks the completion of the publication in English of the massive four-volume *Systematic Theology* of Hermon Bavinck. The first Dutch edition was published between the years of 1895 and 1901 and consisted in four ordinary sized volumes of some 550 pages each. In 1902 Bavinck began to teach in the Free University of Amsterdam and produces a nearly doubled sized second edition between 1906 and 1911. A third edition in 1918 was identical with the second edition. A fourth edition published in 1928-30 made no change in the text but involves a different pagination. It is this second edition which is now integrally translated by William Hendriksen (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1951). Two portions of the present four volume edition had appeared under the title *In the Beginning* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) covering II 406-609 and *The Last Things*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996, covering IV, 589-730). The text of these two partial translations appears to me identical although retyped in the four volume presentation, which also includes the Greek and Hebrew texts as well as the transliteration of them.

Writing for Dutch readers Bavinck quoted not only in Hebrew and Greek but also in Latin, French, German, and English without translation. In this edition all such quotations are translated into English with the source indicated in English editions when available. The original Dutch second edition comprised some 2850 large pages in large type, and concluded with 52 pages for indices at the end of the fourth volume. In his translation the text of Bavinck occupies some 2300 pages with 100 dedicated to some 123 pages by the editor at the opening of each chapter as a summary of what that chapter contained and some 437 pages for bibliographic information and indices. The indices of the fourth have been extensively enlarged, that of Scripture from one page of two columns to 48 pages of four columns (amounting to more than 11,000 references). That of names from 11 pages of two columns to 70 pages of 3 columns; that of subject from 32 pages of 2 columns to 50 pages of 3 columns. This will greatly enhance the accessibility of the material.

Throughout the work of Bavinck gives evidence of an exceptionally thorough acquaintance with and acceptance of the Holy Scripture (referred on average about five times per page). To this must be added a formidable mastery of the history of Christian doctrine made evident through ample reference to primary sources as well as important monographs in five languages. (German, Latin, Dutch, French.

English), Bavinck has the ability to recognize a path of sound faith and good sense in the labyrinth of discordant claims and to do so with a poise and serenity that surely avoids the *rabies theological* that has so often characterized theological controversies. Like the pioneer in a deep woods he knows how to brush away side alleys which are dead ends and deviant ways that lead to swamps and to lead his followers calmly, firmly, and confidently in the path that the Scripture has provided for our faith.

His order follows a traditional course: starting with Prolegomena he devotes Vol. I to the solidity of Revelation and Scripture (Vol. 1), then follows the doctrine of God and Creation (Vol. 2), Vol. 3 is concerned with the impact of sin and the Person and Work of Christ the Redeemer and Vol. 4 details the work of the Holy Spirit in the individual, in the church and means of grace, and in the *eschaton*.

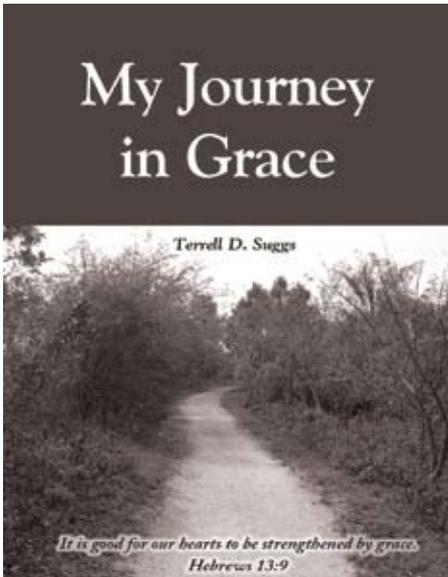
One may compare the task of the systematic theologian to that of a person who works out a picture puzzle. There is no question of modifying the pieces nor of forcing some of them into a place where they do not fit easily, but the aim is to rearrange them or to take them in such a way that together they do constitute a larger picture, more full and effective than any piece seen separately but manifestly in their unity and extensity what the painter had projected.

In 1941, when as a student I saw Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, on the shelves of the Andover-Harvard Library, I was so impressed by what I saw even without knowing Dutch, that I said: "I will have to know Dutch in order to have access to that work!" And so I did, and found great benefit in reading Bavinck, who, incidentally, is peculiarly clear and uncomplicated in his style. The ability to read Dutch has been very valuable for my fifty years of teaching theology. To read Bavinck was a sufficient incentive for learning another language. And now because of this English translation it will not be necessary. Bavinck is in a sense accessible to the hundreds of millions of people who can read English, instead of the 20 million who read Dutch. I have in my bedroom a large portrait of Herman Bavinck: he is for me every day an inspiration and a challenge.

C. Van Til said about Bavinck's dogmatics that it was "the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times." [C. Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, page 43 as quoted by Brian G. Mattson in "Van Til on Bavinck: An assessment." WTS 70/1 (Spring 2008), 127.] And J.I. Packer wrote, as reproduced on the jacket leaf of all four volumes of Reformed Dogmatics, "Solid but lucid, demanding but satisfying, broad and deep and sharp and stabilizing, Bavinck's magisterial Reformed Dogmatics remains after a century the supreme achievement of its kind."

What can I say beyond that? Only this. Thanks to John Vriend the translator, to John Bolt the editor, to Baker Books the publisher, and to the Dutch Reformed Translation Society the promoter. They are entitled to immense gratitude. 🐦

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Terrell D. Suggs has served as pastor of churches in Alabama, Mississippi and Oklahoma. He is currently Director of Missions of the Bryan Baptist Association in Bryan County, Oklahoma.

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