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DO THE
RIGHT
THING





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Tom Nettles

Introduction

Do the Right Thing

How can a minister of the gospel feel encouraged that he has done something right—that at some point in his ministry the blessing of God thrives. We know Scripture declared that if one desires the office of bishop, he desires a good thing (1 Timothy 3:1). Stories of unresponsive or even hostile churches and communities, oppressed pastoral families and ministries shortened by depression, dereliction of duty or moral failure can put a deep shadow on the goodness of the ministry.

The word stands nevertheless. Among other applications of the idea of desiring a good thing, two are quite transparent. One, a person that goes into Christian ministry should desire it. He should do so because something about it has engaged his affections. He sees its outcome as having eternal value; he sees the preparation for its execution a pleasant expenditure of time; he sees its content as a never-ending challenge. Though not a path to worldly power, the gospel minister has concluded, along with Moses, that even “the reproach of Christ” far outweighs all the “treasures of Egypt” (Hebrews 11:26).

If unworthy motives drive unworthy and uncalled persons to desire the office of bishop and pose as instructors of God’s people, we must see with even greater power that the biblical reasons for desiring the office are yet untarnished. They transcend all the motives of those who “have their reward” in the niche-popularity engendered by idiosyncratic doctrine, promises of prosperity and mesmerizing authoritarianism.

Two, the text shows us that the office is a “good” work, a noble and beautiful investment of life in an intrinsically worthy labor. This means that it is morally upright and pleasing to the eye of the sanctified soul. Its central duties focus on those things that constitute absolute inherent goodness. It is a virtuous and beautiful occupation. Its most compelling task is the disclosure to man of the holy beauty and goodness of God. In his great hymn, “O What Matchless Condescension,” William Gadsby reminds us:

In His greatest work, redemption,
See His glory in a blaze;
Nor can angels ever mention
Aught that more of God displays;
Grace and justice
Here unite to endless days.

Justice, holiness, righteousness and commensurate vengeance interplay in mysterious and transporting symmetry with mercy, grace, lovingkindness and commensurate, yet utterly free, forgiveness in the message the bishop proclaims. This message produces in man a desire for that true goodness to press him into conformity with the “good and acceptable and perfect—the will of God” (Romans 12:2).

Let’s extend the idea of goodness to one more observation that pertains almost exclusively to its impact on the gospel proclaimer. One of the gracious benefits of the goodness of this work comes in the captivating delight, the elevation of spirit, that on occasions comes in the delivery of gospel truth with the intensity and earnestness that it deserves. Sometimes a minister involved in this good work will be, like John in the Apocalypse, called up. In his elevation of spirit he will behold the one who sits on the throne with the scroll in His hand; he will feel the purity of worship given by the angels and elders that surround the throne; he will taste the glory of the exalted Lamb that was slain whose worthy death brings forth an unending chorus of hallelujahs. The human spirit coiled in mortal unglorified flesh can bear but little of such an elevation of perception, but when it comes one wonders how any mortal could treasure anything beyond the glory encased in gospel truth. The distress of many a dark day in ministry succumbs quickly to the sense of holy beauty and condescending love that surround the senses in such a moment of proclamation. No other work on earth has such a potential for goodness as this.

The very worthiness of the work, however, involves the possibility of the keenest disappointment and the most troublesome conflicts. The alignment of our experience with Scripture gives existential verification to the perplexity of Paul's lamentations: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ... What then has become of the blessing you felt? ... I am again in the anguish of childbirth. ... I am perplexed about you" (Galatians 3:1; 4:15, 19, 20). "I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. ... I am afraid that ... your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ... I am not the least inferior to these super apostles. ... If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ... I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you" "I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish. ... I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced" (2 Corinthians 11:1, 3, 5, 30; 12:11, 20, 21). When eternity is at stake, and the glory of God will be displayed either in wrath or in "joy inexpressible full of glory," emotions may be pressed to the lowest depths or the most ecstatic heights. Desire for success can be intense and the perception of failure can be debilitating.

Scripture however, gives simple, clear, and straightforward instructions for a God-honoring ministry. God has not made the stewardship complicated, dependent upon magnetic powers of personality or unique methods of attracting crowds. We can know that we serve God faithfully as stewards of His truth, performing the call in the way He has commanded. Though our spirits are refreshed when real human beings who are the sheep of God find spiritual pleasure from our ministry, we need no independent confirmation from human centers of power, but find satisfaction before the court of heaven when we act with transparency and consistency toward the revealed mysteries of the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:1-4). Finally, our approval as well as our authority is from above not from the courts of human opinion.

Among the clear instructions we have in which we should seek pleasure before the Lord are these. We are responsible to deal faithfully with the biblical integration of Law and Gospel (1 Timothy 1:3-11). Those who do not give themselves to this will make shipwreck concerning the faith (1 Timothy 1:19, 20). We must pray regularly and fittingly for all levels of society and especially for those of the household of faith. We saturate our prayers for the success of the gospel as it is preached with a view to the salvation of those who hear (1 Timothy 2:1-7). When we select others to gospel ministry we must examine ourselves in accordance with the standards set forth and also make sure we do not introduce into this calling those whose lives and aptitudes are at odds with the biblical requirements (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

These requirements include a high view of the place of the church in God's eternal scheme as the "pillar and buttress of truth" as revealed particularly in the person and work of Christ (1 Timothy 3:14–16). In light of this stewardship of truth, the minister must see to it that he corrects and excludes doctrinal error and that he maintains close attention to the promulgation of correct doctrine. Additionally, the qualifications for ministry require he not stagger in his cultivation of holiness (1 Timothy 4). A particular thing that must be done in pursuit of both of these functions is to give attention to the public reading of Scripture and, on that basis, give both exhortation and doctrinal instruction (1 Timothy 4:13). He does not need to come up with new ideas but to give himself to these things as he was commissioned to do at his being set aside for ministry (1 Timothy 4:15, 16).

Other exhortations flow in contextual relationships throughout Paul's pastoral instructions. They give specific things to do by which a minister may know that he is following his call faithfully. On issues of revelatory truth the minister should "teach and urge these things" while avoiding any other teaching (1 Timothy 6:2, 3). The deposit of truth (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14) must be guarded as a sacred trust. It constitutes the material through which God implants the knowledge that alters mind, conscience, and affections to engage sinners in His redemptive purpose. Never minimize the necessity, and thus importance, of setting it clearly before those who have come to hear. Never use cunning or tampering with God's word merely to evoke a response or even avoid offense. The Spirit of God alone has the power of transformation and He uses only the truth He has revealed to do it (2 Corinthians 4:2).

On a style of life that plunges one to ruin and destruction the man of God must "flee these things" (1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22) and set righteousness, faith, love and peace as his dominant themes for living. Orthodoxy and uncompromised teaching therefore necessarily include patience and gentleness in instruction and a willingness to suffer from those who oppose revealed truth (2 Timothy 2:24–26; 3:10–13) without allowing the resultant pressures to smother the transcendent wonder of the saving and sanctifying power of Scripture: the sacred writings (2 Timothy 3:14–17). If we apologize for preaching revealed truth we leave the impression that it does not really matter if one consents to believe it. This increases the gripping power of the devil's snare in their minds.

In light of how clearly Paul as well as the other writers of the New Testament expressed their confidence in the eternal benefits of revealed truth for a redeemed life, a few easily remembered imperatives may serve as light in times of darkness. "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David as preached in my gospel." "Preach the Word." "Teach what accords with sound doctrine." "Show yourself in all respects to be

a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity and sound speech.” “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.” “I want you to insist on these things so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.” When one may find difficulty in discerning whether anything is going right in ministry, he can look at the simplicity of these commands, do them, and know that he is doing the right thing.

This edition of the *Founders Journal* contains testimonies of seasoned pastors about “*One thing I did Right in Ministry.*” In the stranglehold of discouragements and sometimes wrinkle-browed opposition, a stabilizing focus often is needed. Having invested in the practice of biblical ideas that rises above the ambiguities of day-by-day interactions and distracting demands can give health to one’s soul. It also can give a spiritual satisfaction that one’s sheep are receiving sustaining nourishment. Based upon the authority of biblical admonitions we can shove aside the fluff of ephemeral distraction and cultivate that which we know to be right, good and filled with holy power.

Tom Ascol recommends discreet and targeted distribution of literature as having great potential for education and edification of the people of God. He did this in two churches and observed a significant increase in spiritual maturity of those who took seriously the blessing of wisdom from approved saints of the past.

Jeff Johnson writes about the spiritual grace of patience while engaging God-ordained means of church ministry. He shows that the minister of the gospel must not panic and employ worldly gimmicks in building a church, but must wait on the Lord and His promise that, by His truth and Spirit, Christ will build the church for which He has died.

Phil Newton and Kurt Smith write about the blessing to one’s personal growth and to the lives of the congregation resulting from expositional preaching. They looked to the mandate “Preach the Word ... in season, out of season” and simple obedience to it. It would be hard to do wrong and highly consistent with doing right if one sets before his congregation week after week a cogent and earnestly engaging exposition of revealed truth. We are reminded of the blessings of that kind of ministry.

Jeff Robinson built on the biblical principle of “teaching others also” in developing an intern program. Doing ministry under the encouraging guidance of a sheep-loving, biblically sound pastor multiplies the experience of the days spent in such a context and helps sound convictions about pastoral ministry mature rapidly.

Tom Hicks writes about the central message of expositional preaching: the Person and work of the incarnate Son of God Jesus Christ. Advice for life from historical narratives and objectives to pursue for success in business and relationships sometimes pass in today's evangelical culture, for Bible-centered preaching. If however the message of Christ is not central, if we miss the themes of “the grace that was to be yours” through the “sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” (1 Peter 1:10–11), we have missed the point. All of these “right things” in ministry can be intensified in the soul of the minister when he personally finds a guide to remind him of each of these graces.

Tony Rose writes about finding a personal guide to challenge, instruct, and feed one's own soul. For him Samuel Rutherford has been of great benefit—Christ-centered exposition, patience in seeing the hand of God, humbly receiving guidance from another, reading a soul-enriching book— all these come when one finds a long-gone, ever-faithful, fire-tested, Spirit-changed, Bible loving guide to help think through both theology and life. One of those that match that description is Charles Spurgeon. Our “*One Thing I did Right*” then is capped with a couple of sections from his advice to his own ministerial students in the Pastors' College, “The Minister's Fainting Fits.” Spurgeon, all too familiar with the malady about which he seeks to give advice, worked on the assumption that “Fits of depression come over the most of us.” He wanted to examine “why the heralds of the daybreak find themselves at times in tenfold night.”¹ We pray that these short words of advice will encourage your soul and give you some very practical advice about equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

NOTES:

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “The Minister's Fainting Fits” in *Lectures to My Students*. Four volumes in one (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990) 1:167. This specific volume was originally published in London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1881. The parts included here are on pages 174–75 and 178–79.

What Is One Thing You Did Right in Ministry?

I Started a Book Table—Tom Ascol

One of the first things that I did when I became pastor of the church I now serve was to start a book table where good books at discounted prices were made available to our congregation. Through experience in the previous church I served I had learned that those who read, lead. Even with limited opportunity to distribute good books (I was the Assistant Pastor) it became evident that a book thoughtfully recommended could be instrumental in the spiritual development of Christians.

Within a few weeks of preaching my first sermon in my present church I purchased a handful of small books and started recommending them to our membership. Among that first batch was *Words to Winners of Souls* by Horatius Bonar and David M'Intyre's *The Hidden Life of Prayer*. My goal was to start small and devotional—to provide books whose content was obviously relevant and easily digestible. I had benefitted so much from good books that I wanted to share the blessing with others.

A man in the church who understood the value of good books helped underwrite the cost of the next set and within a matter of months we had a table full of good titles for sale as a fixture in our foyer. Within a year or two, the “Book Table” became a line item in our budget and the church adopted a policy that if anyone who wanted one of the books but could not afford to pay, he or she could have it in exchange for a promise to read it.

I often recommend books both publicly and in private conversations. When someone takes my recommendation I try to follow up in a few weeks to ask what they think of the book, what they are learning or if the book has raised any questions for them. That has led to some very fruitful conversations and opportunities for ministry.

Fruitful does not always mean easy however. On occasion I have had members and prospective members get upset by a book. Once a deacon stormed into my study on a Sunday morning and threw on my desk a book I had encouraged him to read the week before. He declared loudly enough for several other people to hear, “If that book is true,

then I am not a Christian!” What to me evoked such a response? Walt Chantry’s *Today’s Gospel, Authentic or Synthetic*. That deacon and I had many hard conversations after that. We discussed the nature of saving faith, true repentance and the new birth, among other things. That book helped establish a biblical framework for such talks.

Trusting God Even When Life Hurts by Jerry Bridges is the most popular book that has ever graced the shelves of our book room (the table became too small). Over the years we have distributed multiple thousands of copies of that book. Many people had become familiar with it from our church shortly before a major hurricane tore across southern Florida in 1992, leaving dozens of damaged church buildings and parsonages in its wake. Because it was fresh on the minds of so many, our people purchased copies for every pastor and church that we learned had been affected. We also gave money and additional books to help several pastors start rebuilding their personal libraries.

A culture of appreciation of good books took root in the church over those first few years and has continued to the present. With a little encouragement, members began buying books for family and friends, often including an appropriate title with a birthday or Christmas gift. Over the years it has become second-nature for many of our members to use books in evangelistic and discipleship relationships. I frequently lead small groups of members in reading through a carefully selected book. People who are not accustomed to reading or to reading theologically oriented books can be encouraged to make the attempt when they know that others will be conversation partners along the way.

By encouraging members to read good books I inadvertently helped develop a support system for my own “continued education program.” Readers love to discuss what they are reading and they are always looking for recommendations of what to read next. In the early years here I was usually on the recommending end of such conversations. As reading became more customary among our members and with the increased access to books in not only print but also digital and audio formats, it was not long before I found myself regularly receiving recommendations as well as making them.

Through the years I have seen good books supplement the ongoing preaching and teaching ministry of the church, encourage personal and spiritual growth, help with counseling, equip for ministry and help people develop a growing love for truth. As such, good books can be like personal assistants to a busy pastor. With apologies to a Puritan author whose name I have forgotten, a book can speak when a pastor cannot, should not, will not and is not.

So I would encourage every pastor to start a book table if one doesn't already exist in the church he is serving. That is one thing that, by God's grace, I did right early in my ministry.

I Waited on God—Jeff Johnson

I peered out the door once more to look at an empty parking lot. This time however, it was past time for the worship service to start. "Maybe people are running late," I thought to myself. But as I continued to wait and wait, with my sermon notes in hand, I came to the disappointing conclusion that nobody was going to come. After taking a few moments to pray, I cleaned the coffee pot, turned off the lights, and locked the door behind me.

This was almost fifteen years ago, at the very beginning of Grace Bible Church of Conway, Arkansas. It has taken a lot of time to get from there to where we are now, but I am thankful that I have waited—I am thankful that I waited, not for the crowds to come, but that *I have waited on God!*

The verse that encouraged me to wait on God was Psalm 127:1: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Though I was young and full of ambition, according to this verse, I had two options: I could spend a lot of time and energy in my attempt to grow a ministry in the power of the flesh, or I could wait on God to build the house. Though I knew it would be hard, I sought to follow George Muller's well-known exhortation: "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supplies."

Of course, waiting on God is hard—even harder than blazing ahead. I, as do many, like to see results quickly. There is pressure from all directions to be successful—and success is so often judged by how fast one can grow a church. This may be one of the reasons churches are eager to consult marketing firms, buy into the newest church-growth technique, and spend so much energy and time convincing the saints to buy into the latest 'vision.' But rather than pushing ahead of God and begging man to get on board, one of the best things I did was seek to be faithful to pray and continue to wait on God to build the house.

My waiting started while in Bible college. I felt called to preach and had an insatiable desire to learn the Bible. I could not wait to start pastoring and share with others all the things I have learned. Though young, I had friends even younger who were already pastoring. Why not me, I thought. But, looking back now, I am glad that I waited. I was not ready for such a weighty responsibility. Preaching is one thing, pastoring takes a little more humility,

experience and wisdom. It seemed like forever then, but now I look back and see how fast things transpired. It was not long before I was thrust into the ministry. Without seeking it, a door was opened to start a church with a few precious families in the city that I was happy to call home. Rather than moving off and likely jumping from church to church, waiting on God has proven to be the best thing for me! Now after pastoring the same church for sixteen years, *I am thankful that I waited on God!*

As a pastor of a small church plant, I couldn't wait for us to have our own meeting place. In those early days, we were meeting in the living room of my little apartment. My pulpit was a flimsy music stand that would slowly compress down under the weight of my Bible. "Oh, if we only had an official meeting place, something outside of a living room, then people would take us more seriously" I thought. But, we had no money, and real estate in Conway was expensive.

And to make things worse, during this time another church was being planted in Conway—it turned out to be one of the fastest growing churches in America! Unlike us, they began with a few deep-pocketed investors and a marketing strategy to reach every single person in the Conway metro area with their message of starting a church. Rather than starting small with a few families like us, for six months they blitzed the community with advertising before opening their doors. And, when their doors did finally open on their first Sunday, they had a clown, a fog machine and 500 in attendance. From 500 to 1,000, from 1,000 to 5,000, the church continued to grow. Not only did they have their own place to meet, they quickly opened up satellite campuses across the state. By comparison, here we were, almost totally unknown and with no budget to spend on billboards or other such branding. But rather than getting impatient and rushing ahead, we continued to preach the Word and *wait on God*.

Within a year office space became available at the right price. Not before and not after, but the exact time we needed it, God sent a large sum of money to us and we were able to purchase all the needed church furniture. Moreover, my grandfather donated and delivered a custom built, Spurgeon quality pulpit to our new location. Things came together supernaturally and so quickly that all our little group could do was give God the glory. In this, *I am thankful that we waited on God!*

While in this office space, God brought us more members and it was not long before we needed a little more room. So we looked to God and waited some more. And as God promised, those who wait upon the Lord shall not be disappointed (Psalm 25:3, Romans

10:11). Right when we needed it, God provided us a mobile home almost free of charge. We were so thankful—it was everything we needed. *I am thankful that we waited on God!*

While meeting in the mobile home, we continued to grow. And there came a point that we felt cramped. Though we needed a larger place, we still did not have sufficient funds to secure a facility that would accommodate us. As we continued to minister and trust the Lord, the dean at the local Baptist college visited one particular Sunday morning. He recommended that we try to rent the chapel at Central Baptist College (CBC) where he worked. I remember responding by saying something of the nature: “That would be awesome, but there is no way they would they agree to allow a non-BMA church to meet on the campus of the BMA Baptist college and even if they did, then there is no way we could afford it.”

But I had forgotten that it was God who had always taken care of us and who had promised to continue to supply our needs. While not thinking much more about the advice of the visitor, the next morning he called me with the news: the keys to the beautiful chapel with its \$80,000 grand piano and stained glass windows would be waiting for us. I couldn't believe it. When I called the president of the college to confirm and learn what they would charge for rent, I was even more surprised when he said: “fifty dollars a month.” We could only say “Thank you God!” “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6). With this too, *I am thankful that we waited on God!*

It has been over four years since we moved into the CBC chapel and what a blessing it has been. We doubled in size the first year and doubled again the next year. God has not only brought growth, He has entrusted us with many young men who desire to dedicate their lives to the ministry. I would have never imagined that our church would also be starting a seminary with the opportunity to train the next generation of ministers, send out missionaries and possibly plant new churches. But here we are in the process of doing just that. If I would have put all my energy into trying to make something this big happen, I know I would have wasted my time. Therefore, *I am thankful that I waited on God!*

Well, having no contract with CBC, we knew it was just a matter of time before we would need a building of our own. CBC has been more than gracious and we have stayed twice as long as we anticipated. The Sunday I broke the news to the congregation that we had been given six months to find a new place, I reminded these saints about God's past faithfulness and His ongoing promise to provide. I explained that we were neither going to hammer them each week to give to the building fund nor were we going to start fundraising. It was evident that we needed to trust and *wait on God.*

Learning that it could take close to a million dollars to purchase a property that could accommodate our growing needs, with the clock ticking and the pressure mounting, we received the amazing news that a 7,000 square foot building in the middle of town could be ours free of charge if we wanted it. And what could we have said but “We will take it, and *to God alone be the glory!*” The building is in a great location, is large enough for growth and we had sufficient funds to remodel without going into debt. Perhaps we could have moved ahead faster in our own efforts, but *I am thankful that we waited on God!*

After all these years God has been faithful. We have no right to take any credit, but all the glory and praise belongs to Him who richly provides us all things. Though we have labored hard, it truly has been God who has built the house. It was discouraging that lonely Sunday when I was the only one to show up for church those many years ago, but with all the discouragements and growing pains, *I am thankful that I waited on God!*

I Did Expository Preaching—Phil A. Newton

I grew up under very poorly done topical preaching. When I came to faith in Christ as a teenager and subsequently sensed God’s call to ministry, I had few models of solid biblical preaching. I too, followed in stride by preaching some pathetic topical sermons. Grippled by inerrancy, I kept gravitating back to the need to “preach the Word.” As a college junior, I attended a pastors’ conference in Birmingham, Alabama that solidified my view of preaching. I listened to the late Stephen Olford, former pastor of churches in London and New York City, preach expositionally. I literally could not get up from the pew after the first sermon! The power of opening a biblical text and letting the text speak staggered me. Before the week ended, I committed to the Lord that whenever He found pleasure in me preaching that I would do my best to preach expositionally.

The journey from that 1975 conference to the present day, serving on a couple of church staffs and pastoring four churches, preaching in other churches and in international settings has given me the opportunity to continue to learn to preach expository sermons. While a number of seminaries in the seventies neglected teaching exposition, I was fortunate to have one professor who emphasized it (unfortunately, another did not). I even took a class in expository preaching, something that seemed an oddity in 1977. But taking a class on expositional preaching *doth not the expositor make!* That’s why I call it a journey over the past forty-one years since making a commitment to preach expositionally. I’ve faltered many times, no doubt, to let the text speak. Yet the Lord, along with four congregations, has been patient with me in learning how to work through a

biblical text and expound it so that its doctrines and applications are set forth to the benefit of the hearers. Along the way, I've seen a number of positive outcomes with expository preaching.

1. ***Biblical exposition feeds my own soul devotionally.*** One must not approach a text for preaching as though it is yet another academic exercise in ministerial profession. It's not just our Sunday duty. Instead, the Word is life, food, and drink that nourish the soul. Many weeks, while feeling the struggles of discipline and Christian walk, digging into the Word in preparation to preach has reenergized me spiritually.
2. ***Biblical exposition has challenged and transformed me theologically.*** I've found over the years that the best way for me to be reoriented theologically is to work through doctrine in the biblical text. My journey in the doctrines of grace came twenty-six years ago as I attempted to preach expositionally through Ephesians. Week-by-week, neglected and hazy theological ideas came into focus. It is no exaggeration to say that exposition has rocked me theologically. For that, I'm profoundly grateful to the Lord.
3. ***Biblical exposition forces me to deal with subjects and themes outside my comfort zone.*** Face it, some issues we would rather dodge than stand before the congregation and open them knowing that we'll likely offend or be misunderstood or open a taboo subject. We might even get fired! But preaching through books of the Bible will not allow us to hide from texts—nor should we. We need those texts and subjects; so do our congregations. Give the people the Word.
4. ***Biblical exposition brings reformation to the church.*** The most natural way for a church to experience biblical reformation is through biblical exposition. In that way, the pastor has no need to pick the theological and ecclesiological topics that he wants to incorporate where they've been previously neglected by other pastors. If he is patient and persistent, the pastor will address basically *everything* as he works through books of the Bible. With that approach, a congregation sensitive to God's Word realizes that the pastor is not trying to lead them down some sinister path of change. He's just opening the Word and letting the Word by the Spirit do the work in the church.
5. ***Biblical exposition exposes me to a wider range of competent scholars, expositors and theologians.*** I've often wondered about non-expositional sermon preparation. The preacher spends his time studying a topic, hunting for

illustrations and stories and finding suitable applications. He doesn't do much wrestling with biblical texts, so he doesn't need to dig into Calvin, Luther, Lloyd-Jones, Carson, Stott, Broadus and others. But in expository preaching, the preparation time means digging into the text, considering the original languages, interacting with commentaries, feeding the soul from fellow expositors and supplementing with theologians who address the themes of the text. My reading expanded when I got serious about exposition. Otherwise, I would not be ready for Sundays. A range of old and contemporary *friends*, sit on my bookshelves along the four walls of my study. They join me each week in preparing to expound the Word to my congregation. I'm thankful to have these friends as dear colleagues in expositional ministry. They have taught me and stood by me for four decades of ministry.

- 6 ***Biblical exposition feeds my congregation a more balanced diet of God's Word than other approaches in preaching.*** While my first audience in preaching must be the Lord (2 Timothy 4:1), the aim must be to make sure that His people regularly receive the Word. We live in an era when far too many people who regularly attend worship in evangelical congregations, know very little about the truths of Holy Scripture. Some of them may be capable of using an evangelistic outline that they learned in a class but are unskilled in discipling a new believer in biblical doctrine, woeful in explaining some of the great themes of God's Word or unable to trace the story line of Scripture. While these believers can certainly study the Word on their own, much of the fault for their paucity of understanding lies in the pulpit where pastors have neglected biblical exposition in favor of an easier, more entertaining approach to preaching. Knowing that I must give an account before the Lord for how I shepherded the flock entrusted to me, that daunting fear looms larger if I'm failing to recount to the church the massive truths of who the Lord is, what He has done redemptively and how He will be glorified among the nations. Paul told the Ephesian elders that he "did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable" (Acts 20:20). Will that be said of me when I finish my course as pastor?

I'm always learning as a biblical expositor. With every text and every sermon, I'm reminded of the depth and riches of what God has given to us in His Word. Consequently, preaching never gets boring; the preparation never becomes blasé. With every sermon and the labor that goes into preparing it, I'm enriched before I stand in the pulpit. I pray that my congregation will be too. While I've made many mistakes in ministry, the best thing that I've done is to remain committed by the grace of God to biblical exposition.

I Started a Pastoral Internship—Jeff Robinson

As I reflect back on a particularly difficult stretch of ministry in the local church, there is one thing I led our elder board to adopt that continues to bear fruit today and for which I am deeply grateful—we invested in several younger men called to Gospel ministry.

Motivated by Paul’s admonition to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, we sought to “entrust these things to faithful men,” by developing an internship for men who exhibited clear gifts and call to ministry. Over two years time, four young men participated, all of whom remain involved in local church ministry in some form or fashion today.

While I did not possess an abundance of ministry experience in my first pastorate, I was privileged to serve alongside two other elders with more than 70 years of combined experience in pastoral ministry. Things in that ministry were rocky from the beginning and after one year, I began to realize my stay might be short. With this in mind, I wanted to capitalize on whatever time the Lord gave me there and felt the best way to do it was to use the strengths we had and see if God might raise up other men for ministry.

As it turns out, He did.

One of the young men had completed a seminary degree and three others were seminary or Bible College students. We sought to give them practical, hands-on experience to supplement the excellent subjects they were studying from Greek and Hebrew, church history, apologetics and systematic theology.

I was privileged to gain two degrees in the things of God—a master of divinity in biblical and theological studies and a doctor of philosophy in historical theology—yet, I felt ill prepared to lead and feed a local church. I designed our internship program for these men to remedy shortcomings in my own experience. We assigned them texts and mentored them in sermon preparation and allowed each young man to preach in a church service. We took them on hospital visits, shut-in visits and allowed them to sit in on acute counseling sessions. What seminary education was teaching them in theory, we hoped to enable them to practice in reality. We sought to give them experience in many of the things Puritan Richard Baxter wrote about in his *Reformed Pastor and Christian Directory*.

While I made myriad mistakes during those early years as a pastor (and still make mistakes as a pastor), I am thankful that the Lord allowed me to invest in some small way in the lives and ministries of these four men and pray that they will continue to impact God’s kingdom for His glory for many years to come.

I Was Committed to Expository Preaching—Kurt Smith

I must begin by making a personal confession that when asked to consider writing on this topic, I initially found it difficult. When assessing my own personal ministry, I have multiple regrets over bad decisions, indiscretions, misjudgments and wasted opportunities which could have been avoided had I only followed the wisdom of God's Word with greater consistency. Adding to struggles with remaining sin, by and large, I have faced a ministry to people whose rebellion against the truth turned into a campaign against the messenger of truth, sowing discord, fabrication and public slander thereby seeking to discredit me. Coming away from this kind of trial with the request to write one thing I did *right* in the ministry was a little daunting to say the least.

So, what is something I did right in ministry? The one thing I have done right, to which I can, with clear conscience testify, *is that I have consistently been faithful to the expository preaching of God's Word*. Whether "in season [or] out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2), by God's grace and mercy, I gave myself in full obedience to His command to always "preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2). And, for the most part, in my experience the preaching of God's Word has been "out of season". In other words, where the Lord has typically sent me has been among people to whom the exposition of His Word has been unwelcome.

Yet, it has been in these turbulent circumstances where the Lord has taught me what He impressed so strongly on His prophet Ezekiel: "...be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house" (Ezekiel 2:6b-7, ESV). What I have learned and continue to glean from this is that in preaching God's Word, I am never to regard the conduct of those who hear it. I am proclaiming the Word of God because *He has commanded it to be proclaimed* period. If therefore, it has pleased God to place me in the midst of "briers, thorns [and] scorpions" (Ezekiel 2:6) as my ministerial station, I will nevertheless utter His Word because this is His calling and imperative. Thankfully, I can say with integrity, this one thing I have done by God's empowering strength.

But I must stress that not all to whom I have expounded God's Word fit in the category of the "rebellious house". While I have witnessed God's Word expose the darkness of men's hearts through the medium of preaching, I have also seen the body of Christ greatly edified. One of the families who came to the last church where I was pastor, remarked that they came only because they knew the Word of God was faithfully preached there. The husband bore witness how his life personally, his marriage, and the raising of his children

is no longer in a fog, but fixed clearly on the Scriptures alone. I think of a young man I met recently who testified that when he heard me preach on John 3 and the new birth seven years ago, God gave him the assurance of salvation. Another man expressed his gratitude for coming to a greater understanding of the place and purpose of elders in the church through a series of messages I expounded from the Pastoral Epistles. He observed how the biblical qualifications of the elder were set forth with greater clarity than what he had understood before, thus he now knows what to look for in a potential elder. And three months ago, a man who had listened to a sermon I preached from Matthew 5:21–27 entitled, “Are you a Murderer?” wrote the following:

I discovered Pastor Smith today since Chris and I upload all the sermons for www.wilderness.com and I was listening while delivering the mail. The powerful oratory of this sermon caught my attention immediately, and then the substance. By the end of the sermon I had to get Chris on the phone and thank him for adding Pastor Smith’s sermons to our lineup. Then I got home and had to share this with the wife as I always do when a sermon really arrests me. Now I want to hear the next few sermons as well. I am a debtor to any pastor whose sermons unzip my heart, arrest my conscience, and drive me to the blood of Christ for fresh mercy.

These testimonies are certainly not meant to “toot my horn” but to simply give examples of how the Lord has edified His people through this one thing I have done right in ministry by preaching His Word.

Reflecting, therefore, on the one thing I did right in ministry, I am grateful it was faithfully preaching God’s holy Word. Personally, if I couldn’t affirm this above all, then I am not fit to be a pastor as God has called men to serve in this sacred office. John Owen (1616–1683) crystallized this fact best when he wrote: “The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word...This feeding is of the essence of the office of a pastor, as unto the exercise of it; so that he who does not, or cannot, or will not feed the flock is no pastor, whatever outward call or work he may have in the church.”¹

I Preached Christ—Tom Hicks

When first convinced I was called to pastoral ministry, I remember feeling overwhelmed with the responsibility of it all. I thought that being a good pastor meant being a good administrator, an excellent student, a sound theologian, good with people, a gripping public speaker, a strong leader, a humble servant and so on. And certainly a pastor needs

to have elements of all those things, but it seemed to me that a good pastor needed to be good at almost everything. Soon, the Lord graciously sent influences into my life to teach me that pastoral ministry isn't ultimately about me. My pastoral mentor, Fred Malone, taught me that the greatest hindrance to pastoral ministry is the pastor himself and that faithful pastors preach and minister Jesus Christ. A pastor's highest responsibility is to commend Jesus. I also remember attending a National Founders Conference where I met Geoff Thomas, a pastor whom I highly respect. At one point in our conversation, he said, "At my age, I have nothing left to prove, only to speak warmly of the Savior, but that's the hardest thing to do, isn't it?" That resonated deeply with me, and "speaking warmly of the Savior" has remained the greatest desire of my ministry.

- (1) ***Christ-Centered Preaching Leads Christians to Worship.*** Preachers must work to explain the text in such a way as to form distinct doctrinal ideas in the minds of their hearers. But the preacher is also to turn the sermon to Jesus Christ, showing how Christ Himself is on display in the Scriptures. The Bible teaches us to preach Christ-centered sermons (Acts 8:12; 8:27; 17:3; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Colossians 1:28) manifesting His love, grace, truth, and justice through whatever particular text is being preached. In my experience as a preacher, at the point in the sermon when I make the connection to Christ, people's faces light up with joy and gratitude or reverence and awe, depending on the text. I'm convinced that the end of preaching is not simply teaching people to understand or believe sound doctrine. Nor is it simply getting people to do what the Bible says. The end of preaching is worship, and a sermon can only lead people to worship if Jesus Christ is preached because Jesus is the fullest revelation of God to men (John 1:18; Colossians 2:1, 9).

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus opened the Scriptures and began to teach His disciples. "And beginning with all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). The disciples responded to Christ's own Christ-centered teaching with heartfelt worship. "They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?'" (Luke 24:32). When I preach, people don't usually thank me for deep insights, for providing detailed analysis or historical background, though I hope they sometimes benefit from those things. But people do tell me that the sight of Christ has helped them to persevere as Christians. They tell me that they love seeing Christ in all the Scriptures. Believers say along with those who came to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:21).

- (2) *Christ-Centered Counseling Encourages Godly Change.* Often when people come for counseling, they simply want relief of some kind. This is sometimes true even of Christians who come for counseling. People who are depressed just want the depression to stop. Those who are struggling in their marriages are willing to do whatever it takes to have a happier marriage. And very subtly, people can be motivated to make changes in their lives simply to get relief from pain. Spouses are willing to make changes to find rest from the constant conflict that is taking place in their marriage. And it would be very easy for a pastoral counselor simply to tell people, “If you believe and do what the Bible says, then the problems you’re experiencing in your life will get better.” The fact is, if people believe and do what the Bible says, they may get some relief from their pain.

But the pastoral counselor’s job is to lead people to worship and grow in Christ. That means pointing people to Jesus, and exhorting them to change because they believe Him and love Him. Often in marriage counseling, both the husband and the wife say that the problem is with the other person. The other person won’t change. They blame one another. And each of them is waiting on the other to make the first move. And if one of them does change, that one gets discouraged because the other isn’t changing too. The only way through this is to preach Christ to both spouses. They both need a great vision of the beauty, goodness, love, and grace of Jesus Christ. And they both need to humble themselves before Christ, trust Him and obey Him, no matter what the other person does. The goal of counseling isn’t to give people a better life in this world. It’s to lead people to know Christ more deeply, to suffer with Him if necessary, and to obey Him faithfully for His glory. This is the only way I’ve seen any real progress in counseling. And it has been one of my greatest joys in pastoral ministry to watch people renew their love for Christ and be willing to submit to Him, no matter what else changes.

- (3) *Christ-Centered Ministry is Good for the Minister.* Striving to be centered on Christ in my heart, home and ministry has helped to check the proud and sinful tendencies in my own heart. Christ reminds me that I can’t save anyone, but that He alone is the Savior. I don’t have to get my way among the other elders because the church belongs to Christ, not to me. I’m to speak the truth in love and love my brother pastors. I don’t have to convince the congregation of sound doctrine because Christ alone rules their minds and hearts. My job is faithfully to declare what I have received and leave the results to Jesus. I don’t have to make people obey Christ because Christ alone is powerful to work holiness

in the hearts of His people. In discipline situations, I have sometimes been tempted to become angry and frustrated when people are destroying their lives and the lives of others. But I'm reminded that I too have broken God's law and deserve hell, just like those under discipline and that my only hope is redemption in Christ. The kindness of God leads us to repentance. And so my job is to minister Christ, to stay on Christ, never tiring of holding out the same message of hope and life in Him.

The more focused I am on Jesus, the less likely I am to think that ministry is about me or that my efforts can accomplish the work that Jesus alone can accomplish. When my thinking is centered on Jesus, I find that He is the most powerful motive to diligence and hard work in the ministry. My work is not in vain. The outcome is in His hands, not mine. When my eyes are fixed upon Jesus, I work, not to change people, not to build my own kingdom, not to be a good pastor, but to love Christ and glorify Him.

I Found a Personal Guide in Samuel Rutherford—Tony Rose

It feels a bit odd writing about what I did right in ministry. However, I can say with confidence that one thing I did right in ministry was finding Samuel Rutherford as a personal and pastoral guide.

Like waking in the morning and waiting for your vision to clear it took a few years of ministry for my eyes to adjust and see the “exposing” nature of pastoral work. Serving a local church and the weekly study of Scripture were performing a work on my own self without my awareness. Working hard to respond to the relentless demands of the church body began a painful dismantling of a soul insufficiently structured to bear up under the weight of real pastoral work. The continual work of studying Scripture to tell others what God was saying to them cast an ever growing light onto my insufficiencies. The realities of ministry exposed the reality of me. The pastorate will do this to every man God calls.

It was 1991. I was married, the father of three daughters and a few years into my second pastorate. The self-exposure had reached critical mass and I found myself in desperate need. I felt the weight of Hebrews 4:13, “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” I began a determined search for someone who could speak a language clear enough, sophisticated enough and expansive enough to heal my anguished soul. I was tired of trying to look like a man of God. I needed someone who could teach me the difference between having the

appearance of godliness and having the power of godliness. My soul needed more than a preacher or a theologian. I needed a soul-physician. Was there anyone who had been where I was and had come out well on the other side?

My search was turning up very little help among contemporary writers. Through a series of events I “stumbled” onto the English Puritans and in particular the Scottish divine, Samuel Rutherford. He was the man who had the vocabulary and skill to speak words that healed. Though he came from across the centuries and across the ocean Rutherford became and still is my pastor, my dear friend, and my guide. Let me offer a few reasons for having a mentor like Rutherford:

1. Much of Rutherford’s writing is personal correspondence. A letter offers riches that other forms of writing cannot provide. Letters are addressed to specific persons, at specific times and surrounded by specific circumstances. Rutherford’s personal correspondence provided a clear demonstration of applying the gospel to daily life.
2. Samuel Rutherford endured suffering and persecution. Suffering and persecution are harsh and yet extremely effective teachers of the real gospel of our suffering Savior. According to 2 Corinthians 1, sufferings are the school through which we learn the comfort of God. Without suffering we cannot know the comforting grace of God and are left incapable of offering effective gospel comfort to believers in their sufferings.
3. Learning from one who lived in a different century has several advantages. First, if his writings survived it usually means that he was addressing issues of the ages not merely issues of the day. Secondly, he is not clogged up with the prejudices of our day and will see things differently than we do. Thirdly, he is dead and can no longer mess up!

The core of what Rutherford did and still does is sharpening my understanding of Christ and of myself. Failures in ministry, small and large, can be traced to a faulty conception of self or of Christ and His gospel. A clear-eyed awareness of the deceptive nature of our own hearts and the redemptive power of God’s grace in Christ are foundational to keeping a man faithful in ministry. The best way to explain Rutherford is to let him speak for himself.

Rutherford had a spiritual, verbal and moral dexterity to speak the gospel into life’s most difficult moments. He could offer more comfort and deliver more confrontation in one sentence than most of us could in three paragraphs. I think this ability was hard won

by his own suffering for and submission to the Jesus he called Lord. His security in Christ enabled him to speak with a transparent honesty rarely found among us pastors. Rutherford expressed to a friend, "It hath pleased His holy Majesty to take me from the pulpit, and teach me many things in my exile and prison that were mysteries to me before. I see his bottomless and boundless love and kindness, and my jealousies and ravings, which, at my first entry into this furnace, were so foolish and bold as to say to Christ, who is Truth itself, in his face, 'Thou liest'. I had well nigh lost my grips; I wondered if it was Christ or not; for the mist and smoke of my perturbed heart made me mistake my Master, Jesus . . . Alas! I knew not well before what good skill my Intercessor and Advocate, Christ, hath in pleading, and in pardoning me such follies."² Later in the same letter he wrote, "I am now brought to some measure of submission, and I resolve to wait till I see what my Lord Jesus will do with me . . . I see Providence runneth not on broken wheels; but I, like a fool, carved a Providence for mine own ease, to die in my nest, and to sleep still, till my grey hairs, and to lie on the sunny side of the mountain, in my ministry at Anwoth (the town his church was in).³ Through his suffering and submission to the Lord Jesus he learned what every pastor must learn if contentment in ministry is to be attained. He expressed to a friend that he had learned "Anwoth is not heaven and preaching is not Christ."⁴

During Rutherford's imprisonment he received a multitude of requests for counsel and direction. One friend was suffering from relentless doubts concerning Christ and his salvation. Rutherford responded with wisdom, boldness, and comfort in keenly constructed words that only God could provide through a human instrument. Rutherford told his friend, "Your heart is not the compass Christ saileth by. He will give you leave to sing as you please, but he will not dance to your daft spring (tune) . . . Your thoughts are not parts of the new covenant; dreams change not Christ. Doubtings are your sins, but they are Christ's drugs and ingredients that the Physician maketh use of for the curing of your pride . . . since faith apprehendeth pardon, but never payeth a penny for it, no marvel that salvation doth not die and live, ebb or flow, with the working of faith. But, because it is for your Lord's honour to believe his mercy and his fidelity, it is infinite goodness in our Lord that misbelief giveth a dash to our Lord's glory, and not to our salvation."⁵ I recommend slow and repetitive reading of this counsel. It is concise. It is over-full of truths from God's gospel. Our contemporary minds are not usually fit to grasp such writing in one reading.

Samuel Rutherford may not be the man that speaks to your soul but you will need someone who can. I pray this small taste of Rutherford's pastoral art and skill will whet your appetite to find such a guide.

NOTES:

¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen: Volume 16* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1968), 74–75.

² Rutherford, Samuel, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA. 67

³ *Ibid*, 68

⁴ *Ibid*, 59

⁵ *Ibid*, 87



Charles Spurgeon

The Minister's Fainting Fits

In the midst of a long stretch of unbroken labour, the same affliction may be looked for. The bow cannot be always bent without fear of breaking. Repose is as needful to the mind as sleep to the body. Our Sabbaths are our days of toil, and if we do not rest upon some other day we shall break down. Even the earth must lie fallow and have her Sabbaths, and so must we. Hence the wisdom and compassion of our Lord, when he said to his disciples, "Let us go into the desert and rest awhile." What! when the people are fainting? When the multitudes are like sheep upon the mountains without a shepherd? Does Jesus talk of rest? When Scribes and Pharisees, like grievous wolves, are rending the flock, does he take his followers on an excursion into a quiet resting place? Does some red-hot zealot denounce such atrocious forgetfulness of present and pressing demands? Let him rave in his folly. The Master knows better than to exhaust his servants and quench the light of Israel. Rest time is not waste time. It is economy to gather fresh strength. Look at the mower in the summer a day, with so much to cut down ere the sun sets. He pauses in his labour, is he a sluggard? He looks for his stone, and begins to draw it up and down his scythe, with "rink-a-tink—rink-a-tink—rink-a-tink." Is that idle music? is he wasting precious moments? How much he might have mown while he has been ringing out those notes on his scythe! But he is sharpening his tool, and he will do far more when once again he gives his strength to those long sweeps which lay the grass prostrate in rows before him. ...

Even thus a little pause prepares the mind for greater service in the good cause. Fishermen must mend their nets, and we must every now and then repair our mental waste and set

our machinery in order for future service. To tug the oar from day to day, hike a galley-slave who knows no holidays, suits not mortal men. Mill-streams go on and on forever, but we must have our pauses and our intervals. Who can help being out of breath when the race is continued without intermission? Even beasts of burden must be turned out to grass occasionally; the very sea pauses at ebb and flood; earth keeps the Sabbath of the wintry months; and man, even when exalted to be God's ambassador, must rest or faint; must trim his lamp or let it burn low; must recruit his vigour or grow prematurely old. It is wisdom to take occasional furlough. In the long run, we shall do more by sometimes doing less. On, on, on forever, without recreation, may suit spirits emancipated from this "heavy clay," but while we are in this tabernacle, we must every now and then cry halt, and serve the Lord by holy inaction and consecrated leisure. Let no tender conscience doubt the lawfulness of going out of harness for awhile, but learn from the experience of others the necessity and duty of taking timely rest...

This evil will also come upon us, we know not why, and then it is all the more difficult to drive it away. Causeless depression is not to be reasoned with, nor can David's harp charm it away by sweet discourings. As well fight with the mist as with this shapeless, undefinable, yet all-beclouding hopelessness. One affords himself no pity when in this case, because it seems so unreasonable, and even sinful to be troubled without manifest cause; and yet troubled the man is, even in the very depths of his spirit. If those who laugh at such melancholy did but feel the grief of it for one hour, their laughter would be sobered into compassion. Resolution might, perhaps, shake it off, but where are we to find the resolution when the whole man is unstrung? The physician and the divine may unite their skill in such cases, and both find their hands full, and more than full. The iron bolt which so mysteriously fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits in gloomy prison, needs a heavenly hand to push it back; and when that hand is seen we cry with the apostle, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." 2 Corinthians 1: 3, 4. It is the God of all consolation who can—

"With sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse our poor bosoms of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart."

Simon sinks till Jesus takes him by the hand. The devil within rends and tears the poor child till time word of authority commands him to come out of him. When we are ridden

with horrible fears, and weighed down with an intolerable incubus, we need but the Sun of Righteousness to rise, and the evils generated of our darkness are driven away; but nothing short of this will chase away time nightmare of the soul. Timothy Rogers, the author of a treatise on Melancholy, and Simon Browne, the writer of some remarkably sweet hymns, proved in their own cases how unavailing is the help of man if the Lord withdraw the light from the soul.

If it be enquired why the Valley of the Shadow of Death must so often be traversed by the servants of King Jesus, the answer is not far to find. All this is promotive of the Lord's mode of working, which is summed up in these words—"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord." Instruments shall be used, but their intrinsic weakness shall be clearly manifested; there shall be no division of the glory, no diminishing the honour due to the Great Worker. The man shall be emptied of self, and then filled with the Holy Ghost. In his own apprehension he shall be like a sere leaf driven of the tempest, and then shall be strengthened into a brazen wall against the enemies of truth. To hide pride from the worker is the great difficulty. Uninterrupted success and unfading joy in it would be more than our weak heads could bear. Our wine must needs be mixed with water, lest it turn our brains. My witness is, that those who are honoured of their Lord in public, have usually to endure a secret chastening, or to carry a peculiar cross, lest by any means they exalt themselves, and fall into the snare of the devil. How constantly the Lord calls Ezekiel "Son of man"! Amid his soarings into the superlative splendours, just when with eye undimmed he is strengthened to gaze into the excellent glory, the word "Son of man" falls on his ears, sobering the heart which else might have been intoxicated with the honour conferred upon it. Such humbling but salutary messages our depressions whisper in our ears; they tell us in a manner not to be mistaken that we are but men, frail, feeble, apt to faint.

By all the castings down of his servants God is glorified, for they are led to magnify him when again he sets them on their feet, and even while prostrate in the dust their faith yields him praise. They speak all time more sweetly of his faithfulness, and are the more firmly established in his love. Such mature men as sonic elderly preachers are, could scarcely have been produced if they had not been emptied from vessel to vessel, and made to see their own emptiness and the vanity of all things round about them. Glory be to God for the furnace, the hammer, and the file. Heaven shall be all the fuller of bliss because we have been filled with anguish here below, and earth shall be better tilled because of our training in the school of adversity.

The lesson of wisdom is, *be not dismayed by soul-trouble*. Count it no strange thing, but a part of ordinary ministerial experience. Should the power of depression be more than

ordinary, think not that all is over with your usefulness. Cast not away your confidence, for it hath great recompense of reward. Even if the enemy's foot be on your neck, expect to rise amid overthrow him. Cast the burden of the present, along with the sin of the past and the fear of the future, upon the Lord, who forsaketh not his saints. Live by the day—ay, by the hour. Put no trust in frames and feelings. Care more for a grain of faith than a ton of excitement. Trust in God alone, and lean not on the reeds of human help. Be not surprised when friends fail you: it is a failing world. Never count upon immutability in man: inconstancy you may reckon upon without fear of disappointment. The disciples of Jesus forsook him; be not amazed if your adherents wander away to other teachers: as they were not your all when with you, all is not gone from you with their departure. Serve God with all your might while the candle is burning, and then when it goes out for a season, you will have the less to regret. Be content to be nothing, for that is what you are. When your own emptiness is painfully forced upon your consciousness, chide yourself that you ever dreamed of being full, except in the Lord. Set small store by present rewards; be grateful for earnestness by the way, but look for the recompensing joy hereafter. Continue, with double earnestness to serve your Lord when no visible result is before you. Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light: faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide. Between this and heaven there may be rougher weather yet, but it is all provided for by our covenant Head. In nothing let us be turned aside from the path which the divine call has urged us to pursue. Come fair or come foul, the pulpit is our watch-tower, and the ministry our warfare; be it ours, when we cannot see the face of our God, to trust under THE SHADOW OF HIS WINGS.



Tom Nettles

Book Review

“Free Grace” Theology: 5 Ways It Dimisses the Gospel

“Free Grace” Theology: 5 Ways it Diminishes the Gospel by Wayne Grudem.

Wheaton: Crossway, 2016.

Reviewed by Tom Nettles

Those who are familiar with Andrew Fuller’s tenacious engagement with Sandemanianism and the nineteenth-century Baptist resistance to the theology of Alexander Campbell will recognize what is at stake in this book by Wayne Grudem. On Sandemanianism, Fuller isolated Robert Sandeman’s definition of justifying faith as “the bare belief of the bare truth.” Grudem recognizes the similarity of the issues in remarks on page 34 in a footnote on Sandeman., and characterizes the view of faith in this movement as “merely believing that what the Bible says is factually and historically true” (18). Grudem points out, like Fuller on Sandemanianism, that “Some free grace advocates view faith as intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel,” and those who focus more on trust in the person of Christ still “underemphasize” that element of faith and overemphasize a mere belief in the fact that “I am a sinner and belief that Jesus has died to pay for my sins” (99). When Andrew Broaddus, along with many others, sought to bring Alexander Campbell back to the historical doctrinal position of Baptists, he identified the systemic, destructive weakness in Campbell’s views as radiating from his “undervaluing of the exercises of the heart, and attaching to external conduct or action the importance which really belongs to those

exercises.” So Grudem observes that the Free Grace movement focuses on the mind as the seat of faith while Grudem, though including the necessity of substantial cognition, makes saving trust, including both repentance and faith, a matter of the heart (45-76).

Grudem isolates five problems with the Free Grace movement and argues with the intent to demonstrate that “the entire Free Grace movement is based on a mistake, and it should be abandoned” (39). The five problematic areas include the following: their concept of “faith alone” is not the “faith alone” of the Reformation; the Free Grace movement has no call to repent of sins as inextricably tied to justifying faith; the movement gives assurance of salvation to unrepentant people and even to those who fall so far from professions of Christianity as to become “complete unbelievers;” this movement has an overemphasis on belief of facts and is weak on that aspect of faith that emphasizes “heartfelt trust in the person of Christ;” and, finally, the hermeneutic used to justify their biblical foundations manifest a “pattern of idiosyncratic, eccentric interpretations, as illustrated” in eleven passages chose for examination.

As is normal in virtually all his writings, Grudem employs a simple, clear and chastened style of writing both in syntax and vocabulary. He does not put the work out of the reach of any interested reader. Further, he loads his arguments with careful interpretation of Scripture. He does not ignore, but rather highlights the historical Protestant confessions on this issue, and still manages a sola scriptura plainness to the argument. Also, he highlights the really pertinent issues involved in this controversy so that the reader can see what is really, and how much, is at stake in drawing a truthful conclusion. Grudem does not insult, ridicule, caricature, or give unwarranted extrapolation in his discussion. He recognizes some differences in the way representatives of the Free Grace movement handle some issues so as not paint with too broad a brush. He does not call their presentation of the gospel a false gospel (74)but recognizes that what they set forth for mental assent contains an accurate presentation of the objective truths of Christ’s saving work. That component which, in a different context, Andrew Fuller argued made the gospel “worthy of all acceptance,” may come to the hearer of the Free Grace gospel in a different context and join heart repentance and trust to the objective truth. In the meantime, their presentation greatly weakens the overall intended impact of holy gospel truth.

Grudem realizes that an absolutist approach to such issues as “Lordship Salvation,” the connection of obedience with faith, the cordial state of repentance vis a vis the perfection of repentance presents material that is easily mis-managed. Sometimes poorly stated interactions with those issues have given arguments to those involved in the Free Grace movement. In light of this, they believe they are protecting the Protestant doctrine of

justification by faith. Grudem has shown, without trying to say everything that could be said, that their belief on this is wrong.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

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