



Ordained Servant

Faithful Preaching

April 2018

Ordained Servant Online

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### **CURRENT ISSUE: FAITHFUL PREACHING**

**April 2018**

### *From the Editor*

Preaching is at the center of the life and worship of our churches. This is the theme of this month's issue. All but one review and the poem are about preaching.

My Servant Thoughts this month, "The Voice of the Good Shepherd: A Sermon on Romans 10:14–21," is based on the sermon that I preach at the end of my media ecology conferences, "Christian Living in the Electronic Age." I first preached this sermon in 2003 at the RPCNA church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and last delivered it on February 25, 2018, at the Granite Seminar sponsored by the Granite State School of Theology and Missions at Amoskeag Presbyterian Church. I have modified the sermon in some ways to suit the audience of *Ordained Servant*.

Alan Strange answers the critical question, "What Is Faithful Preaching?" This is an article that should be helpful to sessions and congregations in search of a pastor. Strange also reviews a recent book on preaching by one of our ministers, Eric Brian Watkins: *The Drama of Preaching*. Stephen Tracey reviews Christopher J. H. Wright's *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth*.

Finally, John Muether reviews a book on an important figure in American Presbyterian history: Jeffrey S. McDonald's *John Gerstner and the Renewal of Presbyterian and Reformed Evangelicalism in Modern America*.

Our poem this month is by Ann Bradstreet (1612–72), "By Night when Others Soundly Slept." She was the first and the most prominent colonial American writer to be published.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# Servant Thoughts

## The Voice of the Good Shepherd: A Sermon on Romans 10:14–21

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

There are so many different kinds of sermons and preachers, and those preachers have such a variety of training, backgrounds, and ecclesiastical traditions and settings.<sup>1</sup> How can God, the Good Shepherd, speak through such a variety of imperfect men and their messages? It is clearly a supernatural work that requires the presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ, the Good Shepherd of his sheep.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:12–16)

There once was a fiddler named John Skinner. He wanted to upstage a famous preacher. So he placed a ladder outside of the church next to an open window near the pulpit. He was quiet as the text was announced. He began to tune his violin during the Scripture reading, hoping to annoy the preacher. But the power of the preached Word so affected him that he never began to play. The gospel pierced his heart with an irresistible power. He listened to the entire sermon and became a new man. The preacher was George Whitefield.

Today preaching has reached its lowest point since the Reformation, at least in much of the Western world. Electronic media are competing for the attention of God’s people, and seducing many into thinking that preaching is an inferior form of communication. The entire Bible makes it plain that this is not true. Preaching is the main means that God has chosen to convert and edify his people. We are not here to blow our own horns. We are called to sound the trumpet of the Lord with confidence in the face of much that seeks to distract us, distort our preaching, and discourage us.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a sermon that I preach at the end of my media ecology conferences, “Christian Living in the Electronic Age,” last delivered on February 25, 2018 at the Granite Seminar sponsored by the Granite State School of Theology and Missions at Amoskeag Presbyterian Church.

## **Romans 10:14-21**

14 ¶ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?”

17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

18 ¶ But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.”

19 ¶ But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, “I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.”

20 ¶ Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.”

21 ¶ But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

### **I. THE GOOD SHEPHERD SENDS HIS PREACHER**

#### **Preachers Must Be Called and Sent by the Good Shepherd**

Look at the Pauline sequence in verses 14 and 15: to call upon the Lord one must believe; to believe one must hear the voice of Jesus, the one he is called to believe; to hear this voice there must be a preacher preaching Jesus the Christ; and for there to be a preacher one must be called and sent by Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to preach.

This call is often misunderstood in American evangelicalism today. Many appoint themselves preachers of the Word of God. Presbyterian and Reformed churches practice the more biblical idea of calling by distinguishing between the internal and external call. As Paul tells Timothy, “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1). But this inner aspiration is necessary but not sufficient to constitute a call to office. The character and gifts of ministry must be recognized by the church, especially its officers. Hence the portrait Paul paints of what an overseer ought to look like in the next six verses in 1 Timothy 3:2–6. The Good Shepherd is the divine sender.

#### **Preachers Must Preach: The Priority of Preacher and Church**

WSC 89 “How is the Word made effectual to salvation? A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

Preaching is central throughout Scripture, but comes into its own in the New Testament. We see Moses the preacher, then the Prophets, who look forward to the New Covenant era in which John the Baptist announces the final preacher, a greater prophet

than Moses, Jesus the Christ. The prophetic ministry of the Son worked proleptically in the Old Covenant era:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. (1 Pet. 1:10–11)

The preaching ministry of the Apostles is a continuation of the Son's prophetic ministry as Luke informs us in Acts 1:1 "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). The Book of Acts is chock full of preaching. It ends with Paul teaching from prison, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31).

Based on the completed apostolic foundation, faithful preaching of the Word became the first mark of the true church. "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:1–2).

Notice the public and churchly nature of this task. It stands contrary to the individualistic tendency in our culture that believes that personal Bible reading is a sufficient motivation and guide to the Christian life. "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13).

### **Preachers Must Be Respected & Supported by the Elders and the People**

Paul quotes Isaiah's description of the gospel preacher: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns' " (Isa. 52:7). What is it about the messenger's feet that makes them beautiful? In and of themselves feet are usually not beautiful. In the ancient Middle East sandaled feet were often filthy. The beauty of the preacher's feet is in the swift-footedness of the messenger coming to captive Israel with good news of the coming liberation of God's people. The character of the message, not the anatomy of the messenger, is what is beautiful.

This made the feet of the apostles beautiful: "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). The beautiful message of amnesty from the bondage of sin and death.

While the modern church is tempted to fashion its ministers after secular models, such as the CEO, celebrity, or psychologist, faithful churches and their leaders must free their pastors to focus on preaching, so that every other aspect of the pastors' work flows from it. The apostles protected this central task: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. . . . we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2, 4).

This is a supernatural calling. Ministers are first of all accountable to the Good Shepherd of the sheep. This does not mean he is above criticism. The faithful preacher must always humbly seek to grow in his ministry. Constructive criticism will help him in

this development. He must have the prayerful support of elders and people in order to prosper in this great work (Eph. 6:18–20).

## II. THE GOOD SHEPHERD SPEAKS THROUGH HIS PREACHER

### Christ Speaks in the Ordinary Preaching of His Word

Preaching is not the same as a lecture and it certainly is not the preacher’s opinions on Bible. So then what is preaching? Two basic words are used by Paul to describe preaching. *Kerux* is the noun form of the verb (*kērussontos* κηρύσσοντος) used in Romans 10:14 to describe this activity, “someone preaching,” and in Romans 10:15 “to preach” (*kēruxōsin* κηρύξωσιν). This is an authoritative public proclamation by a spokesman or herald for a king like Caesar. The second word Paul uses is *Evangel*, the root for our English word evangelism. It is the noun form of the verb (*euangelizomenōn* εὐαγγελιζομένων) translated by the phrase “preach the good news” in verse 15. The noun “gospel” (*euangeliō* εὐαγγελίῳ) occurs in verse 16. It is a public announcement of military victory, also the work of a herald.

So we may define biblical preaching as an authoritative proclamation of the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death, or as Puritan Thomas Hooker described preaching: “open publication of heavenly mysteries.” In Romans 10:17 “the word of Christ” reminds us of the nature of a herald, in contrast to the persuader desired by some in the Corinthian church.<sup>2</sup> A herald was a public proclaimer of the message of another with authority over the message and messenger. The preacher, then, comes with the message given by God in his Word; he “brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation” (Isa. 52:7).

Preaching is the voice of the Good Shepherd. Charismatics are not the only ones to claim that God speaks today. The difference, of course, is that the Reformed have always believed that God speaks through the reading and preaching of Scripture, not through special new extra-biblical revelations. The *Second Helvetic Confession* puts it this way: “preaching of the word of God IS the word of God” (emphasis added).

In most translations Romans 10:14 puts an unnecessary distance between Christ and the hearers of the gospel. Instead of “of whom” it should be “whom.” The New American Standard Version of 1995 gets it right: “How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard?” Commentators John Calvin, John Murray, and William Hendricksen agree, “Christ speaks in the Gospel proclamation.”<sup>3</sup> The speaking Son is to be listened to: “a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen One; Listen to him!’” (Luke 9:35). He told the preaching apostles: “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me” (Luke 10:16). Christ is immediately present as the true speaker in the preaching moment. Preaching is not speaking about Christ, but Christ speaking to his people.

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<sup>2</sup> See Gregory E. Reynolds, “A Medium for the Message: The Form of the Message Is Foolish, Too,” in *Confident of Better Things: Essays Commemorating Seventy-Five Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, John Muether, ed., (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2011), 311–34.

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 58.

Preaching conceived of in this way exalts the Lord not the preacher. In as much as he preaches scripturally it is the voice of Jesus. He is not six feet above criticism. But beware of the opposite egalitarian spirit which resists authority in every form. Christ addresses his people thru the official means of gospel proclamation. This was Paul's confidence as a preacher: "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13).

### **Preachers Must Be Confident in God and His Word**

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

Preachers, you must trust the Spirit of Christ in the preaching moment: praying at all times in the Spirit, . . . making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." (Eph. 6:18–20)

Preachers, you must believe that you are proclaiming God's Word as Paul did in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:13). The "boldness" Paul asks for Ephesus is not brash or pulpit pounding; in the New Testament bold preaching is preaching with confidence in the message and the God who gave it.

Preachers, you must not give in to discouragement. There are many sources of ministerial discouragement: the moral and spiritual decay in our culture; the lack of concern for ultimate and spiritual realities, even in the church; the electronic distraction that steals attention with its many voices drowning out the preacher's words; and the pervasive belief that preaching is an inferior form of communication. But I am here to tell you that there is nothing more important than what you do even if to only five or ten people. Eternal destinies depend upon it. We have our marching orders: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2).

### **Preaching Must Be Heard and Heeded**

WLC Q. 160. What is required of those that hear the Word preached?

A. It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God;

meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

People of God: we are told in this passage, Romans 10:14–21, that Israel heard but did not heed Christ’s Word. Israel refused the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ, even though it has been preached to them. As we see in Romans 10:16 the problem is Israel’s unbelief, “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’” (Isa. 6:8). Romans 10:21 sums up the problem of unbelief: “But of Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people’” (quoting Isa. 65:2). There is no salvation without preaching, but hearing must be mixed with faith. Both the message and the medium of proclamation are foolish according to Paul, thus the gift of faith is required. “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21, my translation). Again, both message and the act of preaching are folly to the unbeliever. But, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32). There have been plenty of messengers sent to Israel, so there is no excuse. Just as the creation leaves everyone without excuse, “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world” (v.18, quoting Ps. 19:4, cf. Rom. 1:20). The gospel is being preached throughout the creation, as Paul says of the apostolic preaching, “the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister” (Col. 1:23).

In Romans 10:19–20 Paul tells us that ironically, the nations, once condemned by general revelation, now respond to the gospel, while Israel, who knew God’s plan for the nations, rejects the gospel in favor of idols. Moses warned of this, as seen in the context of Paul’s quotation of Deuteronomy 32:21 in Romans 10:19: “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded” (Deut. 32:17). Because Israel turned from the Lord and worshiped the “no gods” of the nations, so the Lord turns to those who are “not a nation” with the gospel to make Israel jealous. He is saving those who neither sought nor asked to be saved (v.20, quoting Isa. 65:1). This is exactly the picture Paul gives of the Thessalonian reception of the gospel: “you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).

So, people of God, heed the message from the messenger. True hearing is obedient hearing, hearing that changes the inner life. Don’t let personal or doctrinal differences with the preacher prevent obedient hearing. Come prepared to receive the Word, as well-rested and prayerful Bible readers, expecting to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.

True hearing requires a messenger gifted and called by the head of the church. This in turn requires the visible church and its public worship. Be whole heartedly committed to the visible body of Christ and its mission. From the church the Lord sends out messengers to all nations. And don’t accept substitutes for preaching: TV, MP3, Internet—or even fellowship or private devotions. For only through the public reading and preaching of Scripture will you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.

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# Servant Word

## What Is Faithful Preaching?

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by Alan D. Strange

What is faithful preaching? Faithful preaching is an exposition of God's Word, opened up in all its gospel glory, drawing us into the drama of redemption in which all of God's people meaningfully participate. To be faithful in this task means that we evangelize and disciple as our Lord commanded us to do in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20). In faithful preaching, we explain and apply God's Word so that we have, and grow in, a true knowledge of God and of ourselves. We do this as we attend to the message, method, and manner of faithful preaching.

### **The Message of Faithful Preaching**

The message communicated in faithful preaching is the saving work of God in Jesus Christ in and by the power of the Holy Spirit (all of grace), the necessity of which is seen in the law that we cannot fulfill after Adam's (and our) fall into sin. Accompanying this good news of the saving work of God in Christ, and in some ways preceding it, is the bad news that the law brings: we are sinners in Adam and by our own desires, and, as such, are under the wrath and curse of God and are headed for hell. The good news of the gospel is that God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son on a divine rescue mission in which Christ both fulfills the whole law for us (in his active obedience) and pays for our lawlessness (in his passive obedience, finding its focus at the cross).

The message then is that God has sent Jesus to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. Salvation lies not in anything that we are or have or do, because we are totally depraved, due to the Fall. Salvation lies rather in resting upon and receiving what Christ has done for us. The righteousness that God requires for us to receive his approval and blessing, to be accepted into his presence, is something that we can no longer produce (after the Fall). Jesus, instead, has won such for us by his perfect obedience so that the righteousness that God requires he freely gives by imputation to us, received by faith alone.

The message of the gospel then centers on the salvation that is ours in Christ and how we should then live, not so as to win the favor of God, but because we have the favor of God in Christ. Salvation is truly a free gift that we spend our lives as Christians responding to in grateful obedience. While it is not warranted to separate this message from the call to believe and repent—this preaching of the person and work of Christ is the object of our faith and the reason for our repentance—it is appropriate to distinguish the good news of who Christ is and what he's done for us from our response to it, as Paul does, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4. The gospel, above all, is simply the old story of Jesus and his love, of God doing for us in Christ everything necessary, from first to last, for our everlasting salvation. That “salvation is of the Lord” is something that Jonah discovered in the belly of the fish, and this truth is central in all our gospel proclamation, in all our preaching of the Word of God.

## The Method of Faithful Preaching

There are a number of methods that have been employed throughout the history of the church in preaching the Word. Even as there are various types of biblical texts (historical narrative, didactic, paranetic, poetic, prophetic, etc.), such genres influencing our approach to them, there are also several ways in which one might approach the preaching task.<sup>1</sup> Sermon types are often categorized along the lines of homily, topical, analytical, synthetic, narrative, reconstructive, etc. In the ancient church, preachers like John Chrysostom used what came to be called the “homily” method, a verse-by-verse exposition, which packed significant rhetorical skill and oratorical power.<sup>2</sup>

Other methods developed over time: topical (e.g., one preaches on “marriage” and finds suitable biblical material for this topic); analytical (akin to the homily, but usually a short text, minutely considered, with much other Scripture brought in; Spurgeon is a prime exemplar of this approach); synthetic (similar to topical but does more justice to the unique message of the text); narrative (often inductive, following the story-line of the text); and textual reconstructive. This last sermon type aims self-consciously to combine the strengths of the analytical (expository of the text, like a commentary) and synthetic (drawing a single theme from a text). I think that the textual reconstructive method is a most appropriate one, especially useful for congregants to understand the theme of the passage and to remember it and the points developed in support of it.

Each of the approaches have their merits as well as their drawbacks. The most important thing is that one’s preaching be properly redemptive-historical (Christ-centered), expositing the drama of redemption in its original horizon and applying it in that of its auditors. Even as it is important to recognize Christ as present in some sense in all biblical texts, whatever their types, it is also important to preach Christ always, whatever sermon type one employs.<sup>3</sup> In any case, it is the Word preached that the Lord is pleased to use especially to convert sinners and grow saints (WLC 155). The message of salvation in Christ alone must come through in every sermon, whatever method is employed to convey that.

## The Manner of Faithful Preaching

The manner, the lengthiest of our considerations, means how the preacher does it, especially as seen in WLC 159, which asks, “How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?” The answer:

They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom,

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) deals deftly with how modern expositors might best treat different text types. These particular text and sermon types herein cited derive from an unpublished syllabus of P. Y. DeJong, used in the course “Sermon Types,” and additional syllabus materials and notes by Cornelis P. Venema and Alan D. Strange (at Mid-America Reformed Seminary).

<sup>2</sup> See, Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, vol. 2: The Patristic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 171–74, for an introduction to Chrysostom. This entire seven volume set (completed in 2010) is incomparable and to be consulted for the history of preaching from biblical times down to our own.

<sup>3</sup> Many books well-argue the imperative to preach Christ. I will cite three that I find especially helpful: Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon, 2 ed.* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); and Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Necessity of Sound Doctrine**

Those who are called to preach (WLC 158), or, as WLC 159 has it, “labor in the ministry of the Word,” are to preach “sound doctrine.” We live in days when many in the pews demand comfort and encouragement from the pulpit. Indeed, the preacher ought to provide in his exposition of the Word comfort and encouragement. Preachers, however, are to preach God’s message, not merely what man might wish to hear. And in a confessional church—like the Reformed and Presbyterian churches—we do not have to guess what sound doctrine is. Sound doctrine is defined in the first place by that large body of doctrine which the church agrees upon and is embodied in its confessions and catechisms.

## **Adverbs of Preaching: Diligently**

The minister of the Word, WLC 159 further tells us, is to preach sound doctrine “diligently.” To be diligent in the preaching of the Word over the course of many years is no mean task and requires the constant assistance of the Holy Spirit. Preachers must be diligent in their preparation, starting with their own hearts: the preacher is to be prepared in his heart, coming before God’s Word in profound humility, and to be prepared by God’s gifting of him, naturally and spiritually. The preacher should think through his text quite carefully, working in the Hebrew or Greek, checking the commentaries—both ancient and modern—and making sure that his interpretation is in line with the confessions and with Reformed commentators. This does not mean that the preacher may not in his exposition or application of a text depart from the main body of commentators (assuming that he does not teach unsound doctrine, that is, anything contrary to the confessions). He ought, therefore, to know the history of the interpretation of his text and depart only because he is convinced that faithfulness demands it, never for the sake of novelty or to be thought clever. The preacher is to be faithful to the text that he is preaching and diligent in preaching that text, understanding that each particular text is in the Bible for a reason.

The preacher is to preach “in season and out of season” (WLC 159). The import of this dictum of Paul to Timothy (in 2 Tim. 4:2) bears upon both the preacher and the auditor, I believe. The preacher is to preach whether he feels like it or not, and the preacher is to preach whether the congregation feels like hearing him or not. How many parishioners have gone to church not desirous of then hearing a sermon but have gone away blessed by the preaching of the Word and glad that they had come? Ministers, too, do not always feel like preaching. Perhaps they are not prepared in heart to preach or have not adequately prepared their exposition and application. Nonetheless, when it is time to preach, preachers must do so in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit.

The exhortation to be ready to stand (the meaning of “be instant” KJV) makes it clear that when a man is called to preach, he is to continue to preach in all the seasons of his life and in

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<sup>4</sup> The rest of this article derives from and is summary of pp. 212–25 of Alan D. Strange, “Comments on the Centrality of Preaching in the Westminster Standards,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 185–238, which also may be accessed here: <http://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files/pdf/journal/10-strange.pdf>.

all the seasons of the lives of the congregations which he serves. This does not mean that the preacher never needs a vacation, but it does mean that God by his Spirit so equips his preachers that, as they have recourse to him who is the fountain of life, they need not fear “burnout.” It is only as the preacher uses all the means of grace himself and grows in intimacy and communion with his God that he can ever hope to serve in season and out of season.

### **Adverbs of Preaching: Plainly**

WLC 159 also says that the preacher is to preach “plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power.” To speak plainly is often exceedingly difficult. The preacher, especially in preaching year in and year out to the same people, is often sorely tempted to be clever, brilliant, artful so as to hold the interest of the people and often, frankly, from a desire to be seen as a profound preacher. The simple truth is, though, that the profoundest preachers are the plainest. Preachers need not fear boring their people because it is the Spirit who makes effectual the Word, and he is pleased to do it not through the artistry of the preacher but through the plainness of his exposition. Paul contrasted his preaching to that of the “disputer of this age” who speaks merely according to the “wisdom of this world.” Speaking, in Paul’s day, was a much-celebrated art, and few things were desired more than the rhetorical skill of a Cicero and the oratorical skill of a Demosthenes. But the task of the preacher is not to impress his hearer but to edify his hearer. This requires humility because able, learned men in the ministry often have the skill to dazzle the crowd with their speaking abilities, demonstrating the breadth and depth of their learning.

Clear, direct preaching is necessary lest anyone mistake that eternal matters are at issue. I would argue that the preacher has best done his job, not when hearers are amazed with the cleverness of someone who could get what the preacher got from the text, but when folk have the sense that they too, given sufficient time and gifts, could have come up with the same truths from the text. The best preacher gives valuable insight into the text, to be sure, but not “insight” that the auditor after having heard it has to struggle to see in the text. The best preacher is the preacher who imparts the maximum amount of understanding as to the text under consideration.

The original Directory for Worship (1645) says that “the doctrine is to be expressed in plain terms” and that the preacher is to avoid “obscure terms of art” so that the “meanest may understand.”<sup>5</sup> The Standards, in other words, are concerned that the preacher preach as clearly as he can so that as many within the congregation as can will understand him. This does not mean that the preacher may not use theological terms like “justification” or “propitiation”—though he must clearly explain them when he does use them—but that he should make clear the doctrines under consideration and not obfuscate them through the use of technical terminology.

### **Adverbs of Preaching: Faithfully**

The preacher, according to WLC 159, is also to preach “faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God.” There is here, I think, an integral connection between faithful preaching and the whole counsel of God. Paul, in his farewell address to the presbytery in Ephesus, boldly claims, “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” The faithful preacher then is one who takes pain to teach the whole of what the Bible teaches and

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<sup>5</sup> The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, (Inverness, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), 379–81.

not merely his pet doctrines. Faithful preaching entails a systematic development of God's Word and not the preacher riding his favorite hobby horse, even if that hobby horse happens to be doctrines particularly dear to the Reformed. However he does it, the true biblical preacher is bound to preach the whole counsel of God.

### **Adverbs of Preaching: Wisely**

Continuing with the fourth of the six adverbs of WLC 159 (“diligently, plainly, faithfully, wisely, zealously, sincerely”), preachers are to preach “wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers.” How does a preacher apply himself to the necessities of his hearers? A preacher applies himself to the necessities of his hearers by an insightful and accurate understanding of the lives that his people lead. No preacher knows his people perfectly. The most sensitive and genuinely intuitive preacher knows something of what his people are really like but he does not know their hearts. Nevertheless, that the preacher does not know the hearts of his hearers as only the Lord does, does not relieve him of the responsibility of knowing the real needs of his hearers as accurately as possible.

Unbelievers live their whole lives, of course, in self-deceit, pursuing idols that will never satisfy their needy hearts, longing for what only God himself can fill within them. Believers, too, though, are perpetually plagued with heart idols that they must see, recognize, and be instructed to mortify. Often believers do not clearly see their heart idols (because they are self-deceived) and may resist when such idols are pointed out to them. For the preacher to do his job in a heart-searching manner, he must delineate sin in its various guises to his hearers so that the Spirit may make application. This honesty about one's true needs must begin with the preacher, though, if it is to bear conviction in the hearts of his auditors. A preacher must know the depths of his own depravity and be well-acquainted with his characteristic flesh and the sin that clings so closely. This brings us back to the point that humility is a *sine qua non* for the would-be effectual preacher. True self-awareness and continual repentance for one's characteristic flesh are constitutive of biblical humility.

It is common, especially for a young preacher in getting to know his flock, to see their shortcomings and to put more on them than they are able to bear, particularly at any one time. This is why great pastoral wisdom is needed not only in truly understanding the necessities of one's hearers but also the capacities of one's hearers, as WLC 159 reminds us. We are preachers not of a legalistic works-righteousness but of God's grace, which grace should suffuse all that we preach, even our very calls to duty. Obedience, preachers of grace must always remember, flows from our continual renewal in the redeeming love of God. It takes ministerial wisdom to recognize the real needs of the various members of the flock and then to minister to them the grace of God so that the flock does not despair in the face of demonstrated shortcomings but continues to draw near to Christ. The preacher must rebuke and reprove as needed, but even then he must take care not to break the bruised reed or to quench the smoking flax.

### **Adverbs of Preaching: Zealously**

WLC 159 further instructs those who preach to do so “zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people.” Preachers who preach without zeal betray the very message that they preach. If the gospel message is good news, indeed, the best news that a poor sin-enslaved humanity could ever hope for—and it is—then the one who preaches it ought to be consumed with it and burning with an insatiable passion to deliver this message to needy, dying men. It is one of the telltale marks of the need for revival and reformation when the pulpit is held by men

who lack conviction and do not burn with the zeal of the Lord but languish with the lukewarm Laodicea. Sadly, much of what has passed for Reformed preaching has lacked zeal and has lulled whole congregations into dangerous somnolence. It is little wonder that a number of churchgoers these days lack zeal and commitment: they witness so little of it in the pulpits of our churches.

The very words of WLC 159 reveal the cause of our lack of zeal: simply put, we preachers lack—greatly lack—in love for God and his people. The preacher must spend time before God seeking that heart of love and then carrying out the duties of love if he is to be zealous in his preaching. The reason that we fail in love to God and to our people is because we fail to see how much God loves us. It is only when we preachers have frequent recourse to the fires of God’s love that our cold hearts are melted and made hearts that burn with a zeal to preach the Word of God above everything else in this world. We only love others as we ought when we love him as we ought—and we always fall far short of this in this life—and we love God as we ought only when we see that he first loved us. Preachers need then to see the love of God for them as a love that comes to them even in the face of their sin, because the diamond of God’s love never appears lovelier than when set against the dark, background of our sin.

### **Adverbs of Preaching: Sincerely**

We come finally to the last of the six adverbs in WLC 159 that describe how the Word of God is to be preached by those who are called thereunto: “sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.” That the Word is to be preached sincerely means with one’s heart, from one’s heart, not for fame, fortune, or the praise of people, but for the glory of God and the good of the hearers. We live in an era in which the media are filled with religious hucksters and charlatans. The sincerity of some well-known preachers is, at best, questionable. Preachers have in every age had among their numbers those who have fallen into gross sin and become public scandals. While we may seem to have more clerical immorality now than in times past, it may simply be that such ministerial sins as there are receive more widespread media coverage. The preacher who would be effective in the pulpit must be a man who lives what he preaches, albeit imperfectly, out of the pulpit. He must be a man known by those closest to him as a man of principle and courage. He must be the kind of man described in Psalm 1—not so much in his own judgment, but in the judgment of those who know him best and who themselves are competent to render such judgment.

In summary, then, faithful preaching entails the delivery of the message of the Bible, using a method that best sets Christ before the hearers, calling all to faith, repentance, and new obedience, with the preacher employing a manner most suited to win the hearers with the aim of securing their conversion, edification, and salvation. Faithful preaching is done in the power of the Holy Spirit, without which the preacher has no unction and the Word no power to persuade and change the hearer. May God grant to us a reformation in the preaching and the hearing of the Word of God for the gathering and perfecting of the saints and the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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# ServantReading

## The Drama of Preaching by *Eric B. Watkins*

### A Review Article

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by Alan D. Strange

*The Drama of Preaching: Participating with God in the History of Redemption*, by Eric Brian Watkins. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016, xviii + 255 pages, \$33.00, paper.

Eric Watkins, pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in St. Augustine, Florida, has written an eminently readable and useful book, *The Drama of Preaching: Participating with God in the History of Redemption*. It is a version of his doctoral dissertation from the Theological University in Kampen, The Netherlands; as such, it is well-researched and carefully reasoned. It does not have the drawback, however, of excessive academic and technical jargon that burdens so many theses. It is thus accessible to any thoughtful pastor or educated layman. We can be thankful that it is, because the subject matter and his treatment of it are of the greatest importance. If the faithful preaching of the Word of God is, as Reformed confessions teach, the Word of God to us here and now, a proper understanding of what it is and how it ought to be done is of great importance. Therefore, we are in the debt to Dr. Watkins for being such a sure guide in this most significant of enterprises.

Watkins introduces his work by simply declaring, “Preaching is dramatic” (xiii). My first thought was “it is if it’s any good,” not because the preacher makes it so by great oratorical skill, but simply because he expositions the greatest story ever told, the one that gives meaning to every other redemptive tale; and without which there is no meaning, purpose or love in the world; all is rather “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Since all things were created by speaking, God, in a sense, “preached the world into existence” (xiii). The Bible records this story from creation to consummation, and it is this dramatic tale, having Christ and the redemption that we have in him at its center, that furnishes the preacher with his subject matter.

Before further examining the drama of preaching, it might be helpful to note that we often speak in our Reformed and Presbyterian circles of preaching as being “redemptive-historical.” One of the central themes of the book is that the drama of preaching and its redemptive-historical character are not in tension with each other but complement each other. The pedigree of the notion that proper proclamation ought to be redemptive-historical, rightly understood, is as ancient as the recapitulation theory (ca. AD 140–160), of Irenaeus not to mention many biblical antecedents (notably, the New Testament use of the Old). The more recent roots, however, stem from the debates in the 1930s in the Dutch church leading in no small measure to the formation of a new denomination in the Netherlands in 1944, the “Liberated” church, particularly indebted to the leadership of Klaas Schilder (2–8).

Schilder and company particularly objected to preaching that employed “exemplaristic” application, “which reduced biblical characters to moral examples in abstraction from the person and work of Christ” (xiv). In contrast, the redemptive-historical preachers of the Liberated church “pushed back strongly, arguing that . . . the intention of the biblical text . . .

was to display the redemptive work of God in history” (xiv). However, many then and later perceived the redemptive-historical approach as overly objective in its reaction against other approaches as overly subjective, “perceived as flying high over the hearts and lives of God’s people without necessarily touching down upon the practical realities of daily life” (7). As Watkins notes, that was a charge levied not only at the time of World War II but more recently by critics like Henry Krabbendam and Terry Johnson (14).

While Watkins, and this reviewer, ardently support what the best of a redemptive-historical hermeneutical approach yields (full disclosure: I am deeply influenced by the biblical theology of Richard Gaffin and the preaching of Edmund P. Clowney), Watkins recognizes that the Dutch redemptive-historical homiletical approach (which is related to, but distinguished from, the biblical-theological hermeneutics of Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, et al.) sometimes suffered an unintended consequence: it yielded preaching that ossified the religious life of its auditors by failing properly to engage their hearts. Watkins wants to retain all the objectivity of setting forth Christ and his redemptive work, both prospectively in the Old Testament and retrospectively in the New Testament (certainly we want Christ central in our preaching). Yet, he also wants to discover a better way to connect with one’s auditors and to elicit their participation in the text (something that he thinks superior to the older “application of the text” model).

Watkins believes that the more recent “drama of redemption” paradigm (as seen in Kevin Vanhoozer, Michael Horton, Dennis Johnson, et al.) may serve to advance the whole discussion and move us to a place in which the auditor in the pew can see “the Bible as a unified, redemptive drama in which God is not simply the author but the main actor.” At the same time, the auditor can see himself and his fellows as a participant in that drama (God has “granted the church a scripted role that she must learn faithfully to perform on the world stage”). Thus, the drama of redemptive history (to meld the phrases) is one that not only sets forth Christ’s work for us in history objectively but subjectively draws us in so that our story is woven into his (xvi). Bringing the two together brings the historical and the existential together, making sure that *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis* are properly integrated. This is the burden of the book, one that Watkins ably bears.

In chapter 1 Watkins sets forth the contours of the redemptive-historical preaching debates, treating first the debate in the Netherlands, particularly those surrounding the Liberated Church (1944), and then the debate outside the Netherlands, especially among the heirs of Vos. Before proceeding to acknowledge that the discussion continues (and can be seen in the approaches of contemporaries like Brian Chapell and Tim Keller), Watkins has sections discussing homiletics vis-à-vis other disciplines (exegetical theology, systematic theology, etc.; also the distinction between a redemptive-historical hermeneutic and homiletic) and one that deals with the contention that redemptive-historical preaching is rather new in the church (as compared, certainly, to other older methods).

Watkins explores and defines the drama of redemption paradigm further in chapter 2, noting the drama of Scripture itself (furnishing us with several examples of how Scripture can be viewed as acts, pages 4–7, with additional scenes, pages 31–34), including its striking imagery and typology. Watkins then explores the historical use of the drama metaphor, moving us from ancient times to contemporary ones, surveying a variety of partisans of such. Finally he seeks, while offering appropriate cautions (some push the drama of redemption metaphor too far; Watkins, anchored as he is by the Reformed confessions, never does), to “connect the dots between the [drama of redemption] paradigm presented thus far and [redemptive-historical preaching]” (55–63). Watkins makes connections not to be missed, that must be read and pondered, that this review cannot capture, with payoffs like this observation: “A sermon is much more than a creative display of God’s redemption as something merely to

be believed; it is also a summons to active participation in the drama of redemption by the life giving Spirit through the preaching of the Word” (58).

Closely connected with this is the postmodern appropriation of the metaphor and how a fitting use of it can be made in preaching to the postmodern, which Watkins treats in chapter 7. If modernity champions the propositional and postmodern the personal, then properly preaching the gospel suits both. Preaching the Word is by its very nature propositional, since the Word, and all exposition of it, is in the form of propositions; it is also personal, since the truth that we preach is a person (John 14:6). Only the Christian faith and its proper proclamation overcomes the false dichotomy of propositional v. personal (modernism v. postmodernism). Our times have not rendered preaching passé, as many have claimed in recent decades. Rather, preaching that understands the drama of redemptive history and seeks to bring the hearer, with his own narrative, and situate him in the grand meta-narrative seems quite appropriate for both the modernist (who lacks the personal) and the postmodernist (who lacks the truth, having only his own perspective).

Participation has been cited before as a necessary connection between objective redemptive history and the spiritual life of the congregant in the pew who hears the sermon. Watkins devotes an excellent chapter to that (chapter 5), entitled “Application or Imitation? Reconsidering the *Sine Qua Non* of Preaching” (114–34). All agree, or should, that preaching is more than exposition of the text employing a sound redemptive-historical hermeneutic (that by itself is a lecture); the distinctively homiletical move always involves some sort of application to the lives of the hearers. In other words, it is never enough to give a sound treatment to only the first horizon (a sound exegesis of the text in its context) but there must be a lively engagement of the second horizon (what does this mean to me as listener here and now?). So much application, however, appears contrived, an excuse for the preacher to say what he wants, whether riding a hobby horse or addressing current events. Watkins wants a more organic approach, one that lets the text and its context truly dictate the significance of this part of the Word of God for the hearers. His treatment of participation/application shows us a better way.

We have Watkins’s theses advisors to thank for the application of his work to even the postmodern context. This was their insistence and not his original intent. His original intent was to see how the two approaches (a drama of redemption one and a redemptive-historical one) might best work together, particularly in the service of sermonizing in a significant text like Hebrews 11. Chapter 3, 4, and 6 manifest Watkins’s interest in Hebrews 11, with chapter 3 setting the stage for the great “faith” chapter, chapter 4 dealing with the “theatre” of martyrs presented in the faith “hall of fame,” and chapter 6 (picking up from chapter 5 on imitation) dealing with application as imitation of the saints (which differs from mere exemplarism). Watkins’s treatment of Hebrews 11, apart from all his theoretical engagement of this subject, already discussed, makes this worth the price of the book.

Watkins covers a good deal in this work and these following observations are not so much a criticism of his omissions but that which comes from thinking within and beyond his work. It’s interesting that a number of sound Reformed men, like Horton and Watkins (not only those of other traditions), have come to stress the drama that Scripture contains: Reformed Christians, as much as any, have been historically opposed to drama and the theatre. This was marked among the Westminster Divines, who not only opposed performances of Shakespeare, but whose era gave us William Prynne and his inimitable *Histriomastix*, undoubtedly the most massive attack on the theatre ever penned. This is true in succeeding centuries: Charles Hodge, for instance, in his travels in Europe (1826–28) was proud that he never went to the theatre, though often invited, and as late as 1928 the Christian Reformed Church still dismissed the theatre and movies as “worldly amusements.”

It's only comparatively recently that Reformed and Presbyterian folk have embraced the dramatic arts. How we've arrived at a point of embracing drama and seeing Scripture as presenting a drama of redemption seems worth exploring, particularly in light of the fact that more conservative homileticians may remain wary of the drama metaphor, suspicious that it hides some lurking liberal agenda. More work needs to be done here in exploring the historic allergy of Reformed and Presbyterian believers to drama and the claim that redemption itself is the grandest drama of all.

Watkins also advocates imitation (especially in keeping with Hebrews 11) over the kind of strained moralistic application that many texts have suffered at the contrivance of preachers. One might think that Watkins would mention the Brethren of the Common Life and Gerard Groote (since Watkins otherwise mines well the Dutch context) as antecedents for such, since, at the heart of this *Devotio Moderna* was Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. Others before Watkins, in other words, have emphasized imitation and participation and it would be interesting to know how this all might play or fit into what Watkins here calls for.

Watkins does cite the dynamic of the Holy Spirit in preaching, but I think that more could be made of the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching, both liturgically and historically. One thinks, for instance, not only of the real presence of the Spirit in the sacraments but in preaching, as some have particularly noted. Additionally, when it comes to application, or imitation (to stick to his preferred term/approach), one might fear that Watkins remains, as is often charged by critics of a redemptive-historical homiletic, rather underdeveloped here. For instance, in discussing Genesis 22 (God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac) as part of Hebrews 11, Watkins tells us several things that the preacher should not do by way of application (138–40). He does this frequently in this chapter, in fact. I generally agree with him, but am often left wondering what he thinks correct application/imitation of the passage would be. Genesis 22 has some especially rich lessons (teased out by Edmund Clowney, for example), but these are not produced by Watkins. Perhaps the volume would be improved by two or three sample sermons on Hebrews 11 (in appendices) in which a rich application can be shown to cohere with a drama of redemption and redemptive-historical approach.

Finally, when it comes to application/imitation I think that the spirituality of the church, rightly understood, might help (and, rightly understood, it's closely tied to a proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit). That we must preach the ethical imperatives of Scriptures is patent. Paul's teaching, for instance, is fraught with such. But how one does it properly, even prophetically (in challenging wickedness in both the church and the wider society), without doing it politically, and I mean by this without doing it in a way that divides persons of the same confession, is a challenge. We must not preach a political or social message. This is not to say that preaching God's Word may never have political or social *implications*. It does mean, however, that we should be guided by a healthy spirituality of the church, one that understands the spiritual character and calling of the church as an institution. A proper spirituality of the church is one in which the church distinguishes itself from the world, while giving itself to the world, holding out our Lord Jesus Christ as the only hope of a needy and dying world.

These observations spring from Watkins's fecund theory of preaching. The book should be read by all who preach and who aspire to preach. It should also be read by well-informed laymen who wish to know more about the elements that comprise good preaching. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

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# ServantReading

## How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth *by Christopher J. H. Wright*

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by Stephen J. Tracey

*How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth*, by Christopher J. H. Wright. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016, 288 pages, \$18.99, paper.

The little phrase “for all its worth” in the title sets a high standard for this book. It draws one in, expecting to learn how to milk the Old Testament for all its worth in our preaching and teaching. And the book gets close—very close—to achieving this.

Christopher J. H. Wright has produced numerous helpful and insightful studies relating to the Old Testament. This book is packed with sound instruction and practical advice. The checklists are very useful.

The book is divided into two sections. Section one answers the question, “Why should we preach and teach from the Old Testament?” Wright gives three reasons: 1) It is God’s Word, 2) It sets out the foundations of our faith, and 3) It was the Bible of Jesus. He then gives three thoughtful chapters on understanding the flow of Scriptures and how to connect them with Christ.

Section two answers the question, “How can we preach and teach from the Old Testament?” with detailed discussion on preaching narrative, law, prophets, Psalms, and wisdom literature. These are all beefy chapters, full of details and well informed in the issues of hermeneutics, with good homiletic pointers. This book would be profitable to seminary students, and also as a refresher to preachers who know these things, but amidst the pressure of pastoral commitments sometimes take shortcuts through the hermeneutical work.

There are four areas where I think Wright doesn’t reach the expected standard of “for all its worth.” To be fair, the book was first published in 2015 in the UK under the title, *Sweeter than Honey: Preaching from the Old Testament*. It seems that the American publisher pushed the book into a “for all its worth” series format.

First, the book does not discuss the issue of divine and human meaning in Scripture. With so much of the book dealing with hermeneutics, this is a surprising omission. By concentrating on human authorial intent, he seems at times to weaken divine authorial intent. Wright does recognize that the Old Testament is authoritative and relevant. He says that “breathed-out by God . . . means that, although they [the Scriptures] were spoken and written by ordinary human beings like us, what was said and written down was as if it had come from the mouth of God” (19). More discussion of the relationship between divine and human meaning would have been helpful.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 241–79.

Second, and related to the first issue, is the question of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Wright devotes three chapters dealing explicitly with this subject: chapter 3, “Understanding Jesus Through the OT,” chapter 4, “Don’t Just Give Me Jesus,” and chapter 5, “Connecting with Christ.” His emphasis is that Christ is the destination of the Old Testament, that “the Old Testament is essential to understand the identity and mission of Jesus” (39). Consequently, he says the OT is not all about Christ, but it points to him. What he is against is “a simplistic method of interpretation in which every verse in the Old Testament somehow has to be ‘*about Jesus*’” (54, his italics).

His warnings in this section are to be heeded. However, since the death of Jesus was according to the “definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23), it is hard to escape the conclusion that every word God subsequently speaks in time is founded on and shaped by this decree. Perhaps more, every word God subsequently speaks is in the light of the Lord Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ was known in the mind of God before he created the world. Wright does not want to flatten the incarnation, but I wonder if he ends up flattening the eternal decree, or the eternal Sonship of Jesus. It is not as though Jesus had no ministry prior to the incarnation. Both John and Paul reveal that creation itself is through Christ, to Christ, and for Christ (John 1:2, Col. 1:15–20). Of course, we must not fall into a simplistic method of interpretation, but we must also not overlook the place of the Eternal Son in his eternal glory. In other words, it is too simplistic to see Jesus as merely the destination. He is more than the end. He is also the beginning. He is alpha and omega (Rev. 22:13). My real frustration here is that Wright does not consider Christ and the decree in the context of the metanarrative. His metanarrative is too small. The whole of Scripture must be read in the context of “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8 NKJV, KJV). I recognize that there are different translations of this verse, but even if the phrase “before the foundation of the world” applies to the writing in the Lamb’s book, it still implies the pre-time knowledge of the cross.

Third, Wright’s work on understanding and preaching from Old Testament law is very helpful, emphasizing that Old Testament law was given to people who had experienced grace. It would have been more helpful had he also outlined the way law comes to us as creatures. It is wonderfully true that we do not earn our salvation by law keeping. But there is an obligation to keep the law simply by virtue of our being humans made in the image of God.

Fourth, I was surprised to find that in the section on poetry Wright sticks to the old threefold division of parallelism. Fokkelman, reflecting other scholars, is scathing in his view of this threefold division: “Poems wilt when subjected to this sort of boorish and wooden treatment.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, I highly commend this book. As part of the discussion of preaching and teaching from the Old Testament, it is readable, thoughtful, and helpful; I am just not sure he milks it “for all its worth.”

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<sup>2</sup> J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2001), 27.

# ServantReading

## John Gerstner and the Renewal of Presbyterian and Reformed Evangelicalism in Modern America

by Jeffrey S. McDonald

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by John R. Muether

*John Gerstner and the Renewal of Presbyterian and Reformed Evangelicalism in Modern America*, by Jeffrey S. McDonald. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017, x + 263 pages, \$44.00, paper.

In this life of John Gerstner (1914–1996), Jeffrey McDonald, Pastor of Avery Presbyterian Church (EPC) in Bellevue, Nebraska, presents his case for seeing Gerstner as a key voice for “theological continuity” among conservative Reformed evangelicalism in the late twentieth century (18).

Converted improbably through a conversation with a professor while visiting the dispensational Philadelphia College of the Bible, Gerstner was mentored in the Reformed faith by John Orr (1893–1983) as an undergraduate at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. After studies at Westminster Seminary and Harvard Divinity School (PhD), he settled in the rich Presbyterian soil of Western Pennsylvania where he took on a brief pastorate before beginning a long and distinguished academic career, first at Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary (1950–1960) and then at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (1960–1980).

Gerstner championed the cause of Old Princeton Seminary, especially in the work of B. B. Warfield. Gerstner regarded the presuppositional approach of Westminster Seminary’s Cornelius Van Til, with whom Gerstner engaged as a colorful and respectful antagonist, as an abandonment of the classical approach of Warfield.

Idiosyncrasies abound in the character that McDonald portrays: he describes Gerstner as alternatively gregarious and brusque. He would often come across to strangers as strident and gruff, an impression partially owing to severe asthma. If his views came across to readers as wooden and narrow (143), he was demonstrating his persistent loyalty to the Reformed faith.

This put him in the thick of many of the major battles in American Presbyterianism, fighting on the losing side of all of them. These include the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) union with the PCUSA in 1956. That merger created the redundancy of two denominational seminaries in the same city, which led to the 1960 consolidation of Pitt-Xenia Seminary with Western Seminary to form Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This more liberal environment isolated Gerstner to the point where he became “pretty quiet at faculty meetings” (100).

Next he led the opposition to the church’s adoption of the Confession of 1967. However, last minute cosmetic changes to some of the language of C-67 persuaded him that it contained “some unmistakably alien, orthodox elements superimposed on its basic structure” (100). To the surprise of friends, he reported that “I seem to favor continuing with the church” (100).

The theological controversies involving Walter Kenyon (who could not get ordained in 1974, because he would not participate in the ordination of women) and Mansfield Kaseman (who was received as a minister in the denomination in 1980, even though he would not affirm the deity of Christ), pushed him to the point of declaring the mainline Presbyterian church “apostate.” But Gerstner was later encouraged when Kaseman embraced more Christologically orthodox language, enough to retract the charge of apostasy and to urge fellow conservatives to remain in the denomination.

Even while he was marginalized at Pittsburgh Seminary and the mainline church, Gerstner secured alternative platforms to gain an audience. He served a long tenure as a founding contributing editor for *Christianity Today* and in the 1970s as an adjunct professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Arguably, Gerstner’s highest visibility among Reformed evangelicals came through a former student who eschewed the academic life, to his teacher’s regret. In 1972 R. C. Sproul appointed him Professor at Large at Ligonier Valley Study Center in Pennsylvania (later Ligonier Ministries in Orlando). Ligonier’s use of innovative media greatly expanded Gerstner’s voice.

For these reasons McDonald claims that Gerstner belongs on a short list of the major shapers of the intellectual life of American evangelicalism. He laments—rightly it seems—that since his death Gerstner has been “astonishingly overlooked” (11), as he “barely appears in the secondary literature on the history of American evangelicalism” (14).

At the same time, McDonald is candid in his assessment of Gerstner’s scholarship. He published voluminously for many outlets, and several of his books met with favorable reviews and impressive sales. But it was a bitter disappointment when his twenty-four-year project of editing Jonathan Edwards’s sermons for Yale University Press ended with Yale terminating his appointment, the editors frustrated over his failure to deliver material that met their expectations. Much of his research would be published in his three-volume magnum opus, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, which McDonald acknowledges was at times incoherent and disorganized.

McDonald compares Gerstner to W. Stanford Reid, the Canadian church historian whom Gerstner met during his Westminster Seminary student days. But Gerstner’s career more closely resembles that of Richard Lovelace, retired professor of church history at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Both Gerstner and Lovelace were WTS graduates but not true Macheenites, as they set out to serve mainline instead of sideline Presbyterianism. Both loved Edwards, and each exercised significant influence on mainline evangelical students. Though Lovelace’s *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (1979) remains in print, he too is a largely forgotten figure. Perhaps the lesson here is that maintaining an evangelical voice in the mainline, as plausible as that may have been a half-century ago, appears in retrospect to have been a misguided strategy.

Only when he reached his seventies, “worn out from the ecclesiastical skirmishes he had waged” (174), did Gerstner conclude that the PCUSA was “not the true church,” prompting his transfer to the Presbyterian Church in America six years before his death. McDonald asserts (though does not explain) that Gerstner’s ecclesiology went through a “process of maturation” (198). But the life of John Gerstner might better suggest that he himself did not fully escape the “perils” of “evangelical accommodation” that he saw in others (108). His institutional loyalty did not always serve the cause of “theological continuity.”

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# ServantPoetry

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by Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672)

## By Night when Others Soundly Slept

1

By night when others soundly slept  
And hath at once both ease and Rest,  
My waking eyes were open kept  
And so to lie I found it best.

2

I sought him whom my Soul did Love,  
With tears I sought him earnestly.  
He bow'd his ear down from Above.  
In vain I did not seek or cry.

3

My hungry Soul he fill'd with Good;  
He in his Bottle put my tears,  
My smarting wounds washt in his blood,  
And banisht thence my Doubts and fears.

4

What to my Saviour shall I give  
Who freely hath done this for me?  
I'll serve him here whilst I shall live  
And Loue him to Eternity.