
KATEKŌMEN

*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without
wavering. — Hebrews 10:4*

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ON THEOLOGICAL WRITING

By Ryan M. McGraw

When I was in college, I earned a degree in history. One of the first classes that I was required to take as a history major was a course in historical writing. In this course, the professor chose a topic for the students to write about so that they might practice and exemplify what they were learning. The point was to learn how to write an “academic” paper, through the use of primary sources, with support from secondary sources, and by becoming accustomed to the process of formatting footnotes. In addition to these useful skills, however, I was taught that I must abandon all personal commitment to my subject, and that I must *especially* avoid all passionate involvement in my subject. A writer must either state his or her personal biases as quickly as possible in order to get them out of the way, or, better yet, he or she must suppress them altogether. To model these principles, one professor in the history department chose the history of Vietnam as the topic for his course. He chose this topic specifically *because* he had no personal interest in it. In a way, this method trains the student to divide his humanity by seeking to sever the student’s heart and emotions from his or her intellectual labors.

Theological seminaries, journals, and certain types of theological books have largely accepted the academic model as a normative model for theological writing. However, in light of the nature and purpose of theology as it is revealed in Scripture, is this model valid? By theological writing, I intend writing that in some form seeks to communicate the theology of the Bible. In the material that follows, I will scrutinize the academic model in

light of the purpose of theological writing, look at the biblical authors themselves as a model for theological writing, answer some questions, and finally set forth some practical guidelines that are virtually excluded by an “academic” model for theological writing. It is my contention that the Lord would be better honored, and the Church would be better served, if all theological writing were shaped by the teaching and model of Scripture rather than of the “academy.”

QUESTIONING THE ACADEMIC MODEL

Historian James McPherson has indicated that in historical writing, scholars have found themselves flustered over their inability to reach a popular audience:

Professionals hold themselves to rigorous standards of scholarship and write learned articles and books that are read mainly by other professionals or are assigned to students by fellow academics. ‘Amateurs’ write articles and books that reach a larger audience but do not always adhere to the technical standards of professional scholarship. Despite such raising of eyebrows and looking down noses at such ‘popular’ history, professionals periodically wring their hands at their own failure to reach an audience of educated laypeople who hunger for history and need to know it if they are to be informed citizens.¹

McPherson attempted to synthesize the academic model for *scholarship* with a *style* that could be read by a wider audience. The result was a book on the American Civil War that remained on the New York Times bestseller list for some time. However, reflecting on one response to his “success,” McPherson wrote:

A colleague at a California university recently remarked to me that I would be forced to choose between becoming a ‘popular historian’ or a ‘historian’s historian.’ He strongly hinted that I was in mortal danger of becoming the former. Why couldn’t I be both? I responded. Surely it is possible to say something of value to fellow

¹ James McPherson, *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 221.

professionals while at the same time engaging a wider audience. My colleague only smiled at my sad naiveté. Maybe that is what's the matter with history.²

This tension between writing to meet academic standards and writing to reach “the people” is equally pronounced with respect to theological writing. Most theological journals, for instance, are unread by many ministers of the gospel, let alone by Church members. This results from a separate class of professional theologians, distinct from the ministry of the Church, and often detached from the needs of the Church. One primary reason for this divide is that at some point along the way, we have lost sight of the purpose of theology as it has been revealed in Scripture. Perhaps the reason why readers prefer McPherson’s model of writing to the standard academic model is that the Triune God did not create human beings to function as soulless intellectual machines, but as reasonable creatures made in the image of God. How much more should those who expound the theology of the Bible address human beings in mind and heart, body and soul, thought and deed?

The purpose of theological writing must largely be identical with the purpose of theology. Objectively, true theology is a revelation from the Triune God that has been committed to writing in Holy Scripture. The purpose of true theology is to produce true theologians. Subjectively considered, a true theologian is one who is undergoing an entire renovation of the human personality through a living and vital communion with the Triune God.³ For this reason, the purpose of and tone of theological writing must largely coincide with the purpose and tone of biblical preaching: “Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus”

² Ibid., 253.

³ See my article entitled, “John Owen on the Study of Theology,” submitted for publication.

(Col. 1:28). The purpose of academic writing or scholarship is often largely based upon the drive to contribute something new to a topic of discussion. At the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, a scholar was recognized in terms of his mastery of the primary sources as well as the *historical* literature. At the present day, a scholar is most often known by his knowledge of secondary sources and the most up to date *contemporary* research.⁴ The methods of modern education tend to produce students who, like the Athenians, “spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21).⁵

The idea of the “objective researcher,” which is the historical heart and center of the contemporary model of academic writing, is quickly passing by the wayside. This ideal is being replaced by the notion of an entirely subjective writer, who has no truth to discover and no truth to tell. This philosophical shift in modern culture at times provokes an opposite extreme with respect to research and writing. However, we should recognize that though we have shifted to a “postmodern” culture, this radical break with the past is not a neat and tidy one that adheres consistently to its own maxims. People *simultaneously* deny the possibility of objective truth and meaning in language, while upholding the idea that man shall eventually achieve anything and everything by way of science, medicine, and meticulous research. This means that the Church must respond with even greater alacrity

⁴ Gerald Heistand, “Ecclesial Theology and Academic Theology: Why We Need More of the Former,” in *Reformation 21*, August 2009, 3.

⁵ While not denying progress in our understanding of theology, the comments of William Plumer are worth noting: “Beware of ‘new truths’ in theology. That which is absolutely new in theology, is absolutely worthless. If you think you have made some discovery in divinity, say little about it for a season. You yourself may soon perceive that it is not worthy of further attention. If not, write it down, and lay it aside for six or twelve months, and read it again. You will probably reject it yourself. If it still seems true and important, modestly and clearly state it to some able and judicious divines. They may soon convince you that it is some old heresy, or that it is of no great value. If so, give it up; at least spend no more thought upon it.” William S. Plumer, *Hints and Helps in Pastoral Theology* (orig. pub., New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1874, reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2002), 119.

to the call to return to a model of theological writing and preaching that is based solely upon the Scriptures. Most of us have been taught that we must write *without* any personal interest or involvement. Currently we are being told that writing is nothing *other* than the personal interest or involvement of the author. We must turn to Scripture to teach us how to present the objective truths of theology through and to the subjective responses of both writer and reader. That is to say, the Scriptures not only teach true theology, but Scripture teaches us how to teach true theology.

None of this should suggest that we cannot benefit from theological literature that has been written based upon an academic model. A good minister in particular often gathers his materials as rough ore that he then hammers to shape into something useful for the Church. Most of a minister's commentaries, for instance, shall not *directly* help him prepare his sermons. He must take the raw material found in the commentaries and reshape it until it becomes something useful to feed hungry souls. However, as a principle, it is highly questionable whether "academicians" are a proper *audience* for theological writing. Theological writing ought to excel academic writing for painstaking and careful scholarship, yet theological writing must aim solely at promoting the cause of Christ in this world. If we write, let us write to that our readers may know the love of Christ that passes knowledge (Eph. 3:19). Let us write so that through Christ, men and women come to the Father, by one Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Let us aim our writing at pastors and Church members, as well as towards bringing the unbelieving to a true knowledge of Christ. Is anything less worthy to be called theological writing?

AN APOSTOLIC MODEL FOR THEOLOGICAL WRITING

The best place to turn for a model of theological writing is to the ultimate source of true theology, namely, the Scriptures themselves. In particular, the epistles of Paul serve as

an excellent model for theological writing. On their very surface, Paul's epistles are filled with doxologies (Rom. 11:36; Eph. 1:3; etc.), benedictions (1 Cor. 16:23; 2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 6:18; etc.), indicative statements of truth (throughout), probing questions (Rom. 10:14-17; 2 Cor. 11:7, 11, 22-23, 12:17-18; Gal. 3:1-5; etc.), direct exhortations (Phil. 4:1-9; 1 Thess. 5:14-27; etc.), passionate pleas (2 Cor. 5:29-6:1; etc.), compassion (1 Tim. 5:23; etc.), sorrow (2 Cor. 2; etc.), joy (Phil. 4:10; etc.), and direct commands to respond to the truth (1 Tim. 6:11-14; etc.).

One feature of Paul's writing that should not be overlooked is his underlying Trinitarianism.⁶ How often does Paul praise all three Persons of the Godhead in his letters? How often does he begin with thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Is not his primary aim always to bring his readers to a deeper fellowship with the Father through the Son? Does he not root his all of his ethical teaching in union with the Lord Jesus Christ and dependence upon the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit? Is not all communion with God through the instrumentality of the Spirit? In all of these instructions, however, Paul placed a premium upon the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He purposed in his heart to make nothing known to the Churches other than Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1-5) and it was Christ himself who was speaking through Paul's ministry (2 Cor. 13:3). As Calvin wrote, "his whole doctrine was summed up in a simple acquaintance with Christ alone, as in reality the whole gospel is included in it."⁷ If more of us took Paul as our model for preaching and writing, perhaps we would see the Lord Jesus Christ set forth from our pulpits and from the press with greater force and power. We would also see our ministers,

⁶ Robert Letham provides an excellent example of this in relation to the book of Ephesians. See Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 73-85.

⁷ John Calvin, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 136.

and consequently our Churches, think and act as self-conscious Trinitarians who are actively dependent upon all three Persons in the Godhead.

However, this does not mean that you must write *exactly* like Paul. There is diversity even among the inspired authors of Holy Scripture, yet all of the biblical authors hold in common the general characteristics of Paul's writing. In Particular, the driving aim of the biblical authors is to urge their readers to call upon God as Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit, so that their readers, with themselves, may worship and serve the Triune God throughout eternity. As with a preacher, a writer shall always express himself according to his own personality. This is a part of his genuineness or earnestness.⁸ Paul is not Peter and Peter is not John and none of them are Jude or Matthew. Yet they all wrote as men who were instructed by the Holy Spirit for the personal holiness of both themselves and those who heard them. In short, Paul's exhortation that Timothy should aim to promote his own salvation as well as that of those who heard him should apply to every aspect of Christian ministry, including theological writing (1 Tim. 4:16). Men such as John Owen and Wilhelms a Brakel provide historical examples of how to write theology in a manner that honors Scripture. Both men (especially Owen) address the heart and the mind at the same time throughout their writings, while demonstrating great learning and scholarship.

The manner of theological writing should ultimately be contemplated in light of the Reformed doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. The fact that the Scriptures are *sufficient* for all matters concerning faith and practice has always been designed to give Scripture *exclusive rights* in matters of faith and practice. That the Scriptures are sufficient to teach us

⁸ See John Angel James, *An Earnest Ministry: The Want of our Times*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993. The material in this book is largely unique among pastoral theologies. I cannot recommend it too highly.

how to worship God implies that we may not add to or take away from the elements and forms of worship prescribed in the Scriptures (see Deut. 12:29-32, etc.). The consciences of believers are thus free from the doctrines and commandments of men in matters of faith and worship (WCF 20.2). The Scriptures are sufficient for salvation in Christ, for Church government, for biblical interpretation, for counseling, and for determining the content and the form of preaching.⁹ How can Scripture, which exhaustively supplies the content of theology, fail to serve as a model for communicating theology in writing? What better model is there? Where is the so-called “academic” model in Holy Scripture? What right does the academy have to *exclude* the apostles and prophets as models for theological writing, when their writings form the basis of our theology? Is the mode of communicating the truth incidental to the truth itself? Do not our methods of communication inevitably shape our message? Much attention has been given to this question with regard to preaching, but very little has been directed to theological writing?¹⁰ Is it any surprise that our preaching has suffered so greatly when the literature that preachers are reading is not in itself conducive to the preaching of the Word of God?

SOME QUESTIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS

It is necessary to respond to some potential questions at this stage:

⁹ See William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture* (orig. pub: London, 1588, reprint, Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 2005), 496-704, as an excellent representative of the historic Protestant position on the sufficiency of Scripture. For the apostles as a sufficient model for preaching, see John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002.

¹⁰ See Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001; Arturo Azurdia, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry*, Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1998; and David Hall, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2009 as representative treatments of this question. Reynolds provides the most penetrating analysis of the manner in which media both reflects and shapes our message that I have seen to date.

1. *Does a biblical model for theological writing preclude academic rigor of study?*

Moving away from an academic model for theological writing does not mean moving away from rigorous study and painstaking scholarship. The fact that the Word of the Triune God is the object of your writing must *increase* the intensity of your labors. Moreover, you must take refuge in fervent prayer in all of your endeavors. Rejecting academic forms for theological writing does not lessen the academic laboriousness of theological study. The primary difference lies in the fact that the purpose and form of our writing must be shaped by the pattern of Scripture and the needs of the Church, rather than by the demands of the academic world. Our model ought to be the Puritan pastor-scholar. Not every man in the ministry has the same level of gifting, yet there should not be such a large discrepancy between the average pastor and the professor of theology. Instead of having learned “professional” theologians and mediocre ministers, the Church needs ministers who are good pastors because they are good theologians, and good theologians because they are good pastors. Should we not choose men from the ranks of our ministers to serve in our Seminaries to train future ministers, rather than send our future ministers to be trained under a model that they will have largely to unlearn in order to be useful to the Church? Perhaps the reason why the Church’s ministers are not more diligent in their studies is because they have been trained to believe that a high level of theological study should be left to the “professionals.”

2. *Does this mean that all theological literature should have the characteristics of sermons?*

The assertions above do not mean that all theological writing should be of the same character. Printed sermons have a different quality than works on Systematic Theology. Commentaries on books of Scripture are not written with the same emphases as books on

Pastoral Theology. However, the primary characteristic that all theological writing should have in common is that the writer must always seek what is good for himself and for those who hear/read him (1 Thess. 5:15). More particularly, those who write theology must pursue personal communion with God for themselves and for those who read their works in all that they write. If they do not do so then, according to the demands of Scripture, their writing is not worthy of the name theology. As John Owen wrote, “Evangelical theology has been instituted by God in order that sinners may once again enjoy communion with God himself, the All-Holy One.”¹¹ Later he added, “To know *him* that is true – that is *theology*; and, if it is not, then I here declare my total ignorance of what is!”¹²

Sometimes short summaries of theology are of great value as well. These could not be written within manageable parameters without curtailing direct application to the reader. Such books will not have the same devotional quality as larger works of theology, but they must always seek to make the knowledge of God personal to readers. Three good examples of this kind of abbreviated writing are Archibald Alexander’s *Brief Compendium of Bible Truth*, William S. Plumer’s *Theology for the People*, and especially *The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington*.¹³ You must also seek to observe the rules of proper

¹¹ John Owen, *Biblical Theology: The History of Theology from Adam to Christ*; trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 618.

¹² *Ibid.*, 637.

¹³ Archibald Alexander, *A Brief Compendium of Bible Truth*, orig. pub., n.d., reprint, Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005; William S. Plumer, *Theology for the People*, orig. pub., New York: American Tract Society, 1875, reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2005; John Brown of Haddington, *The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington*, orig. pub., n.d., reprint, Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2002.

English grammar. Even if your readers and hearers do not know how to use grammar properly, this adds precision and clarity to speech and to writing.¹⁴

Lastly, writing in a manner that both reflects and propagates communion with the Triune God is not equivalent to writing in the first person. “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 4:5). This does not mean that the first person should be excluded from theological writing (and preaching), but that it should be used sparingly. However, our writing should be rooted in Scriptural indicatives, which are always coupled with biblical imperatives. These imperatives are driven home best by writing in the *second* person. Our sermons and our writing must be compatible, but this does not mean that all theological writing must consist of sermons. Again, you need look no further than the New Testament authors to observe this.

3. *Who should write theological literature?*

Ministers of the gospel should do *more* theological writing. Ministers should also do *most* theological writing. Occasionally I receive a book advertisement that highlights the fact that the book has been written by a “layman.” Presumably, this appeal recognizes that much theological literature is “out of touch” with the Church at large. We must not forget, however, that an ordained ministry designed to instruct the Church is not an invention of men seeking to exercise tyranny over other men, but it is a gift from the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the primary thrust of Ephesians 4:11ff. If a “layman” is gifted to edify the flock, should he not pursue a call to the eldership? The warrant that a pastor has to *write* for the benefit of the Church is rooted in his commission to *preach* for the benefit of the Church.

¹⁴ See William Strunk and E. B. White, *Elements of Style*, New York: Penguin Books, 2008, for a useful handbook for effective communication in writing.

Not all pastors shall write for the sake of publication, but all pastors should write. As we write, we shape the way we communicate in general. This is why older works on pastoral theology often urged ministers to pursue devotional writing. Samuel Miller exhorted, “He who wishes to discipline his own mind on any subject; to render his habits of thinking accurate and profound; to cure himself of habits of crude thought, and loose expression ought to make a point of subjecting every matter that he takes in hand to the process of writing; and he will then be more likely to obtain his object than by any other means in his power.”¹⁵ The more the pastor writes, the more clearly and deeply he is able to express the devotional language of his heart from the pulpit. Miller’s exhortation is all the more striking in light of his vehement opposition to forms of prayer and to read or memorized sermons. He concluded, “The true plan is to write often; to write much; to store the mind with ample furniture for the exercise; but to leave the impulses of the moment to a feeling, gushing heart.”¹⁶ The southern Presbyterian, William S. Plumer, included a similar exhortation to pastors.¹⁷ Writing can be the greatest help to a minister’s preaching, but writing can be a two-edged sword as well. If a student is in training for the ministry and he is required to write academic papers exclusively, it is very likely that he will find himself attempting to unlearn his communication skills when he is learning to preach. In such cases, I suspect that a minister’s style of preaching will become less cold and academic the farther removed he is from seminary.

¹⁵ Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer* (orig. pub., Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1849, reprint, Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1985), 291.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 300. For an outstanding defense and exposition of extemporaneous preaching, see Dr. John Carrick’s inaugural lecture as professor of homiletics at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. <http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=124092165410>

¹⁷ Plumer, *Hints and Helps*, 296-307.

There is a further implication in the role of pastors in theological writing. Christ gave pastors and teachers as gifts to his *Church* to prevent his flock from being “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). It is not a stretch to assert that the purpose for which Christ gives such gifts to men is in order to be used solely for the profit of *the Church*. Regarding spiritual gifts, Paul’s rule is: “Seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the Church” (1 Cor. 14:12). Would the biblical authors recognize an academic theology that is written primarily for other academics? Moreover, the purpose of such “theology” is often to *generate* debate and discord rather than to bring men to a unity of the faith, “unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). It seems simultaneously that our pastors are not scholarly enough, and that our scholars are not pastoral enough (if at all!). This is why men with pastoral experience who use their intellectual gifts for the sake of the Church should fill our seminaries. What does the seminary have to do with the academy? What does theological writing have to do with academic writing? How can such “theology” be legitimated on the basis of Scripture?

LESSONS THAT YOU WILL NEVER LEARN FROM AN ACADEMIC MODEL OF WRITING

In summary, theological writing should be shaped by Scripture rather than by the academy. Men should do theological writing for the Church and within the context of the Church. This includes writing that seeks to expand the borders of the Church by way of evangelism. Much more should be said about the nature of theological writing than can be said in one article. The following principles are recommended lessons that you shall not learn based upon an academic model for theological writing:

1. Study, develop, and preach your theology for about ten years before you begin publishing anything. This is not a magic number, but in general it seems to be a good rule.

While some pastors do not write enough, others start writing too early. Think of the painful experience of A. W. Pink, who wrote his first book as a Dispensationalist! Pink repented of his work after a few years and desired that it should not be republished, but in some circles, it continues to be republished to this day, and the doctrines espoused in it continue to be attached to Pink's name. Dr. Morton Smith at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (who was a personal friend of John Murray) noted that Professor Murray usually waited about ten years before publishing his books and articles. At the end of his life, he reportedly forbade his friends to publish any of his work that he did not explicitly approve of, or had thoroughly edited it for publication. The academic model presses the opposite. If you desire a career in academia, you must publish as much and as early as possible. I know of one minister who was instructed to abandon his PhD studies because he was too old to become established as a teacher, yet he was in his forties! The academic model does not value time and wisdom, but rather output and contributions that further "scholarship."

You will always grow in your knowledge of God in this life and you will never reach the point where you have "arrived" theologically. Nevertheless, the more you have read and prayed through the great historic works of Reformed Theology, you will develop a certain stability with time. No matter how much progress you have made, you must always make it your greatest ambition in life to "know him" (Phil. 3:10), but you must do all that is possible, with Divine assistance, to prevent being tossed about by every wind of doctrine *before* printing your thoughts in a permanent and public form. John Owen warned that too many young seminary graduates think that they are true theologians after having read three or four major works on theology.¹⁸ It often takes time and depth of study and ministry in the Church before we begin to realize the depths of our ignorance and before we develop the

¹⁸ John Owen, *Biblical Theology*, 592.

caution necessary to publish our work. No hard fast rule or time limit can be prescribed in this matter, but the fact is that most of us are far too prone to think that we are exceptions to the rule, when in fact we are often the worst judges of our own gifts and maturity.

2. This leads to another vital element of theological writing: before publishing seek counsel from godly ministers and church members, “but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14). Church members and the average minister of a local congregation shall be your best readers, since these should be your primary audience. Even here we must exercise caution. At times our counselors may be in concert in giving us wrong advice.¹⁹ At other times, we have already decided what we are going to do before we ask for advice, and we are not easily diverted from our course in spite of the counsel of wise and godly men. Our ultimate rule must be Scripture, but God himself has prescribed godly counsel as a means to guide us.²⁰

3. Pray fervently over every book that you read, every thought that you have, and every word that you write. You must go beyond mere laborious study and writing, relegating prayer to a mere afterthought that the Lord would bless your labors. Pray often that you would use the books in your library well and with profit even before you read them. Remember that God is sovereign over your natural abilities as well as your spiritual gifts, and plead with him to provide you with what is necessary for the task at hand. Examine your motives continually in the context of prayer. Are you writing to make a name for yourself? Are your endeavors likely to benefit the Church, or is it for the sake of building

¹⁹ A striking example of this is illustrated in Tim Challies’ interview with Burk Parson, who was pressed to enter the entertainment industry rather than the gospel ministry.

²⁰ Carl Trueman has provided useful cautions against seeking “accountability” in academic circles, particularly in the context of PhD programs. Instead, he counsels young men to seek “accountability” by being intimately involved in serving a small Church where they can make a difference. See Carl Trueman, “A Question of Accountability,” in *Themelios*, 34.2 (2009): 158-161.

a resume? Have you begun well and written out of love to Christ? Even then, how often do our deceitful hearts drive us from our original purpose, even in a good work? Prayer is the only means by which we may write usefully. Without continual and fervent prayer, our pride will threaten to destroy us. Moreover, how often does the Lord remind us that he is sovereign even over our “natural” gifts? He can open our mouths and he can silence us. He can give wisdom and he can deprive us of wisdom. When a minister labors in fervent prayer for the sake of the Church, the Lord of the Church often blesses that minister’s gifts *beyond* his natural abilities in order to provide what is necessary for the Church.

Writing in a manner that honors the Lord does not mean that you will be a New York Times best selling author (nor do you need to be). We serve the Lord Christ and he shall prosper the work of our hands as he sees fit. The truth is that most readers remember little detail of what they have read or heard as the years pass by. If the focus of your writing is to convey knowledge of specialized research in your field of study, your labors may have *some* inherent value. However, should you not write in such a manner that aims to make a spiritual impression upon the souls of your readers? Aim to bring them into the presence of the Triune God! If this is your goal, and above all, the object of your fervent prayers, you shall lay up treasure where moth and rust cannot destroy and where thieves cannot break in and steal. Do not write theology for academia. Write theology for the redemption and glorification of human beings. Write in a manner that simultaneously honors the *content* of Scripture, the *form* of Scripture, the *purpose* of Scripture, and thus, the *Author* of Scripture. Is anything less worthy of the name “theology”?

WILLIAM S. PLUMER ON PASTORAL WRITING

By Ryan M. McGraw

Most ministers of the gospel do not do enough writing. The general assumption that most have is that ministers who write are in a higher caste, beyond the province of the common pastor. However, the southern Presbyterian theologian and pastor, William S. Plumer, set “doing good with the pen” within the scope of pastoral theology.¹ All ministers share the same set of gifts and qualifications for their office, yet not all ministers have the same degree of gifting within that office. Nevertheless, all ministers may extend their usefulness and do at least some good through the use of writing, and congregations should allow their pastors to do so as a part of their calling. Plumer sets forth five categories of pastoral writing, to which I shall add two more.

“EPISTOLARY WRITING”

“Letters are among the most powerful means of influencing mankind.”² “Under the guidance of inspiration, the apostles have set us an example of this kind of writing.”³ Plumer referred to John Newton as an excellent example of a man whose letters were not only useful to their original recipients, but to posterity. However, the most useful form of

¹ William S. Plumer, *Hints and Helps in Pastoral Theology* (orig. pub, New York: Harper and Brothers Publications, 1874, reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2003), 296-307.

² *Ibid.*, 296.

³ *Ibid.*, 297.

letter writing will of necessity be that which is highly tailored to the addressee, and that ministers directly to his or her peculiar need. "Letters have one advantage over all else we write. They are always read."⁴

"PERIODICAL PRESS"

This format is equivalent to periodical magazines and theological journals. This audience is broader than mere letters, but is still somewhat limited in scope. Through writing useful articles, the minister extends his ministry beyond his endeavors in the pulpit. Moreover, many articles will easily arise from the minister's studies for the pulpit. Plumer did not add much detail concerning this form of writing.

"TRACTS AND SMALL BOOKS"

"He who succeeds in writing one good tract has not lived in vain."⁵ "There are several living men whose thoughts are before the community in millions of pages, because they have written five, ten, or more good, popular tracts."⁶ An outstanding example of the usefulness of tracts and small books is illustrated in the republication of Archibald Alexander's tracts from the American Tract Society.⁷ Most of these tracts span between three and five paragraphs, yet they are some of the most profound and outstanding examples of devotional writing that I have ever seen. A contemporary example is John

⁴ Ibid., 301.

⁵ Ibid., 302.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ These tracts have been collected and printed in Archibald Alexander, *Practical Truths* (orig. pub, New York: The American Tract Society, n.d., reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1998).

Blanchard, who's *Ultimate Questions* and other tracts have sold several million copies world-wide.

BOOKS THAT SERVE ONE GENERATION ONLY

The question raised is whether or not ministers should publish sermons or material that “will not undergo a second edition.”⁸ “In reply, it may be said that there are two classes of authors. The first writes for generations to come. The other writes but for the present generation. The latter class is the larger. The former is the more distinguished. But it is not possible for any mortal to say which class confers the greater blessing upon mankind. Nor can it commonly be told to which class a given man belongs until his thoughts are published, and often not till one or two generations have passed away.”⁹ In most cases, modern theological writing secures for itself a short shelf-life. Specialized or academic writing that is predominantly concerned with contemporary theological trends shall always be “dated” quickly. Much of this kind of writing lacks a timeless quality. We must not despise writing that meets the needs of our time, but it is valuable to ask the question whether or not the bulk of contemporary theological research meets any need at all, or whether it has become research for the sake of research.

Regarding works that serve a true need in the Church, Plumer added: “Every generation ought to produce a large body of publications for its own use. Let not men despise a good writer as ephemeral, if his work is but useful in its own day. Yet it is a mercy, a great favor, to be allowed to write even a small work for other ages and countries besides

⁸ Plumer, 302.

⁹ Ibid.

our own. Let us earnestly covet the best gifts.”¹⁰ A good example of this kind of writing is found in George Gillespie. Most of Gillespie’s works are polemical and difficult to read for those who were not embroiled in the debates of his day. Nevertheless, he did much good in protecting the cause of Reformed worship and Presbyterian Ecclesiology and, despite the form in which they were written, his works are still studied seriously at the present day.

Books (in general)

Plumer sets forth four categories of books. He illustrated these four in terms of four kinds of “shops.” The first is like a toy shop, in which everything is entertaining and of little value. Ministers should never write for the sake of mere literary recognition. “For a minister of Christ to earn, or to desire the reputation of a literary harlequin, is monstrous.”¹¹

The second type of book is like entering a “shop” where “remnants” are sold. Nothing is complete or developed, but these books present only loose or open-ended ideas. Ministers ought to avoid this kind of writing as well. The third are like shops “with vast quantities of rich goods in the piece. The wise man loves to deal here. He is sure to be suited. He always gets the worth of his money.”¹² Plumer likened this type of book to raw ore that a man finds and rejoices over, yet which he must mould and shape according to his purposes. Such works are often monumental and provide a wealth of information to develop and build

¹⁰ Ibid., 303.

¹¹ Ibid. In a preface to one of John Owen’s sermons, Daniel Burgess complained, “It is the complaint of many that our bookseller’s shops have become heaps of dry sand, in which many a rich stone is lost.” In *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), IX, 3.

¹² Ibid.

upon. Plumer pointed to Jonathan Edwards as an example of this kind of writer. "To produce a book of this description is hardly given to one man in each generation."¹³

The last illustration is a shop "where you find an excellent variety already prepared for use. . . . Books of this description are brought out in every century. They do great good. Were it possible to extinguish the light of one of them, it would be a public calamity."¹⁴ He cited Milton who wrote, "[he] who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye." To produce even one such book is a great honor. "A wise man will rather be the author of some of our best and brief religious books than to have written all the Greek and Roman classics."¹⁵ At this point, Plumer lamented the explosion of interest in and publication of novels in his day, as endangering people's abilities to devote themselves to serious study and attention.¹⁶

BOOK REVIEWS AND INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a sixth category of writing that Plumer did not address: namely, book reviews. Book reviews are a useful means to do much good and to prevent much evil. The merits of good books may be highlighted in order to promote wider circulation. On the other hand, there are some books that I would not have purchased if I had read a thoughtful review. Book reviews should be brief, yet searching. They should not simply rehearse the contents of a book, but they should evaluate them and point out why the book shall or shall

¹³ Ibid., 304.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 305.

¹⁶ Compare to R. L. Dabney's article, "On Dangerous Reading," in *Discussions* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980) vol. I, 158-169.

not be useful to readers, or what kind of audience will value the book. Remember that *book reviews* are not *book reports*.

Plumer *could not* address the seventh category of writing, which is posting resources on the internet. If writing itself holds potential for tremendous good or evil, the internet magnifies this potential intensely. The great caution that should attend writing online is that such writing can be published without seeking the approval of publishers, let alone of the Church. This is probably the *first* type of writing that most ministers engage in, yet it is the one form of writing that requires no accountability or review. The only question I ask is, “Why are men who would hesitate to publish their thoughts in a journal or book so ready to publish their thought to the world on the internet?” Use this resource well, but use it with appropriate caution.

Let us be diligent to use all of our time and labors for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! Our time is short and we must use every means at our disposal to do as much good as we can. We must be cautious in our writing and we must not publish hastily or without godly counsel and criticism. May the Lord grant that more ministers of the Word may take up and write so that men and women may come to Father, through the Son, by one Spirit. And may you encourage your pastors to do more good through the use of the pen. As Plumer concluded, “USE YOUR PEN ARIGHT.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Plumer, 307.