



Writing
Tim J. R. Trumper
www.fromhisfullness.com

WRITING

In an age of the glorification of the busy, Charles Haddon Spurgeon's advice about reading has much to commend it: "Read much, not many"! The same may be said of writing—especially in light of the seismic development of the publishing arm of the Christian church.

REMEMBERING THE LORD

I think of Jesus, the Savior and Lord whom we follow. His thoughts have filled minds, survived history, and traveled to the uttermost parts of the earth. Yet he never wrote a book by his own hand. This does not mean to say that he opposed writing for, evidently, he was an authority on the Hebrew Scriptures (Luke 2:41–52). His Spirit breathed out the best book of all—a book which is about him (John 5:39). Yet, he epitomized the truth that whereas people have souls, books do not. In the process, he laid waste to the idea that greatness must entail an impressive list of high-profile articles or bestsellers. If Jesus spent any time writing in private the truths he later discussed and preached, he certainly did not publish them. He may have written much, but clearly he did not write many. Published writing, it is clear, was not his calling. Greatness, he said, is found in serving (Matthew 20:28; Mark 9:35). Writing is certainly a service, but it is by no means clear that Jesus puts the weight on that the Christian community does today.

REMEMBERING THE DANGERS

The advent of mass publishing has been a great boon for the ministry of the church and the spread of the gospel, but it is not without its dangers.

Homiletical dangers.

The drive to publish can threaten in a pastor's ministry the primacy of preaching. Whereas once his mornings were taken up researching sermons, now they are occupied with writing chapters. The Lord's Day comes, and into the pulpit he walks with the draft manuscript. Unspotted by many, however, are the subtle changes this multi-tasking introduces: the exposition is shorn of its dominant thrust and becomes a running commentary; the delivery minimizes space for the Holy Spirit to direct in the moment, and becomes an exercise in reading; and the congregation present in worship to hear a word from God for them becomes a select group of samplers of the forthcoming book.

Spiritual dangers.

The gravitational pull toward becoming known is real. Making a killing on royalties is very much the exception, but the dream is for free. The hankering for affirmation from one's peers is more realistic but is no less of an impediment to spiritual growth if we cease to find our identity and satisfaction in Christ. It is by drinking of him we are refreshed and grow (John 7:37). Accordingly, our plan to publish must factor in Christ's expectation that we will. Premature publication sows, then, the seed of self-contradiction in later years. This might not matter to us, but it may to those whose thinking we shape. There are few like John Calvin who write as they read and read as they write and do so without later reversing their opinions.

Given these considerations, it is important to weigh the opportunity to write in light of the glory of God, the promotion of the kingdom, and one's own sense of calling. "Publish or perish" may be the mantra of academia, but it's not a motto for pastors or theologians. Our commitment to God's truth, the unity of his household, and the primary responsibilities of our specific ministry callings will sometimes mean foregoing opportunities to publish. Reformed theologian John Murray (1898–1975) epitomized this more cautious approach. It mattered to him what he taught Christ's church, and therefore he labored away in the privacy of his study seeking precision in his understanding of Holy Scripture before going public. Doubtless, temperament and giftedness came into play in this approach, yet there is something to be said for resisting the unspoken pressure to publish, simply because getting into print is deemed essential to greatness (a.k.a., celebrity status).

REMEMBERING THE CRITERIA

These convictions are not new. In airing them, I seek not to bind the consciences of others but to work out the criteria which justifies the time

taken to pen some thoughts amid the cares of a flock. These criteria are not imposed on me from without—either by a wife starved of company, or by an Elder Board seeking to micro-manage! Rather, they arise from the priorities of pastoral ministry: preaching (and prayer) and pastoral care.



1. Publishing should not take precedence over preaching.

Adhering to the primacy of preaching means resisting the usurpation of the primacy of publication. If God leads in the direction of writing that is one thing, but to turn down with regularity preaching opportunities in order to write, or to gear the preaching to the writing as if the preaching of the Word plays second fiddle to the writing is something else. Jesus, it is important to remember, came to preach (Mark 1:38), so did Paul (1 Corinthians 1:17-18), and so must all those called to preach.

2. Publishing should not take precedence over pastoralia.

Published writings can serve the church very well, but God who sees our sitting down and our rising up knows which pieces have been produced at the expense of the people in our immediate care: family, friends, and church families. How sad to hear of those renowned for their publishing leaving behind them wayward and embittered children.

REMEMBERING THE CHOICES

In light of the conviction of the priority of preaching and pastoral care, and given the constraints of time in life, there seems little point in publishing merely for the sake of it (Ecclesiastes 12:12). So, I drew up a few criteria to help in the making of some choices about writing, so that the good (the published Word) does not become an enemy of the best (the preached Word). After all, not every sermon warrants publication, or every thought an airing.

I tell myself, then, to write:

1. When it is possible to write: The possibility speaks of the illumination of the Spirit and the time available to transfer his insights into the Word to writing.

2. When it is appropriate to write: The appropriateness refers to the sincere desire to see God glorified, the fame of Christ furthered, the church matured, and the lost reached. Writing is, according to our calling, an aspect of ministry which requires a close spiritual walk with the Lord. Yes, writing and publishing can go ahead with a heart far from the Lord, but how much better does it go with the Spirit operating through a mind focused on God's gloried and a heart cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

3. When it makes sense to write: Theology is important but publishing what is said well elsewhere is not necessarily a good use of time, unless the previously published work is scarce or out of print, warrants by the centrality of its theme being said over and over again, or unless the Lord has given a fresh angle on a particular matter or a specific application that is the need of the hour. In other words, it makes sense to write to spread the gospel, to fill a biblical or theological lacuna, to offer a fresh interpretation, or to make a fresh application to your time and place.

The Spirit will remain sovereign in how he leads in the ministry of writing. As such these personal ideas are not unbreakable laws but general guidelines. Nevertheless, they are, to me at least, a useful note to self in weighing the priorities of God's calling in the area of writing and publishing.

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