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A Russian “Christians Only” Movement

Thomas H. Olbricht

Foreword by Allan J. McNicol

Anyone appraising the religious scene in Eastern Europe will appreciate that Orthodoxy and Catholicism are not without rivals. In fact, many other religious and ideological movements flourish throughout the area. In Christendom, at least since John Hus (ca. 1373-1415), reform movements have appeared in various quarters. Presently there is a small but determined effort among members of the Stone-Campbell tradition to establish New Testament Christianity in this vast area.

Stories about such movements fascinate and inform. In this essay, Tom Olbricht tells the story of developments of a restoration movement in Russia. This movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries established connections with some in the Stone-Campbell tradition despite differences to our plea. The story of this movement reminds us that many in Europe remain open to biblical faith.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century a movement began, at first among Russian nobility in St. Petersburg, to focus on simple, early Christianity. Although government officials in collaboration with the Russian Orthodox hierarchy imposed intermittent sanctions on the blossoming movement it entered upon a golden age from 1918 to 1928. At its peak these churches claimed over 300,000 adherents. After the revolution of 1917 the Bolsheviks launched their attacks against the Orthodox Church and permitted other religious groups to flourish. As Stalin became more powerful in 1928 he initiated

ing of Radstock. Among others he met Dostoevsky who liked Pashkov, but was not influenced by him.

Radstock gave special emphasis to a love for Christ and the Scriptures. He focused upon salvation and personal holiness, one faith, and the church. He baptized those he influenced, but did not assign baptism special priority. He stressed an allegiance to the Bible only and advocated that one be just a Christian. Opposition to the awakening soon arose. Russian Orthodox officials and others labeled it a blasphemous sect. Tolstoy, who himself advocated a purified Christianity, criticized its adherents. Radstock left St. Petersburg for Moscow but was forced to return to England in 1876.

Vasili A. Pashkov (1831-1902)

Pashkov, the first Russian leader of the evangelical awakening came from a wealthy family. He owned lands, factories and mines in Moscow, Nizhegorod, and Orenburg. His wife's sisters, also of considerable means, supported his efforts. He was past forty when converted, but he soon became passionately evangelistic and dedicated to organizational detail. He held open meetings at his palace, the results of which were published in the newspapers, in order to attract new members. He also preached among the commoners in courtyards, factories, and workshops. He and his adherents recognized the merit of addressing needs of various sorts as a means of attracting dedicated adherents. He opened a public cafeteria in a poorer section of St. Petersburg and offered meals for reasonable prices. He provided free eating-houses for workers and tea-houses for laborers who came into the city from the farms in the winter. When the farm laborers returned home in the spring he pressed upon them an abundance of printed materials to distribute. He founded a religious paper, *The Russian Worker* in 1875 under the editorship of M. G. Peiker. In 1876 he founded a Society for the Encouragement of

Spiritual-Moral Reading, which distributed tracts and books throughout Russia at low costs.

In the first two years the Pashkovites encountered little opposition because Pashkov sympathizers were in positions of power including A. P. Bobrihski who was Minister of Education, and A. E. Timashey, Minister of National Affairs. But in 1878 the Russian government prohibited the Pashkov evangelicals from meeting and admonished them to return to the Russian Orthodox Church. The Pashkovites, however, managed to continue various activities throughout Russia, and Pashkov himself traveled to different regions visiting with and giving assistance to Baptists, Molokans, Mennonite Brethren and Stundists. In 1884 Pashkov arranged for a meeting in St. Petersburg of leaders from all these groups providing lavish accommodations and meals. Government officials were aware of the gatherings and soon dispersed those who attended and arrested several of the delegates. In May of 1884 the Society for the Encouragement of Spiritual-Moral Reading was closed down. Pashkov and his associate Count Korff were told either to desist from distributing literature or face exile. Because of Pashkov's refusal to discontinue from distributing Bibles he was exiled and moved to Paris. He also lived some of his remaining years in London, Basel, and Rome. He continued to support the preaching of the evangelicals in various countries.

Evangelical Groups in Russia

By far the most Russians were Russian Orthodox ever since Christianity came in A.D. 988. A few splits had occurred, the most significant ones being the Old Believers (1667), and two factions from them, the Dukhobors and the Molokans early in the Nineteenth century. The word Molokan in Russian may be translated milk and these dissenters were so labeled because they drank milk during Lent. Immigrants from Western Europe also added to the complexion. Peter the Great attempted to make Russia into a secular state

and invited various people from the West to settle in the country. Especially Germanic peoples were encouraged to migrate to Russia by Catherine the Great late in the eighteenth century. These groups included Lutherans, Mennonites, and Mennonite Brethren. Revival of interest in the Bible occurred throughout Russia after the freeing of the serfs in 1861. One such interest developed among the pietistic Lutherans who commenced studying the Bible at stated hours, hence they were designated Stundists, derived from the German word for hour. Several of the Stundists later merged with the Baptists. The first Baptist congregation was founded in the Caucasus at Tiflis in 1867. A Baptist Union was formed in the Ukraine in 1884. An awakening also occurred among the Mennonites who were officially recognized in 1863. These various evangelical groups comprised the constituencies that Pashkov tried to bring together, but with little success in 1884. Pashkov, however, was a dedicated believer given to big dreams for the uniting of evangelicals in Russia and focusing upon the New Testament.

Ivan Stephanovitch Prokhanov (1869-1935)

The next highly effective leader of these evangelicals was I. S. Prokhanov. Prokhanov was born to Molokan parents in Tiflis in the Caucasus. He was baptized in 1886 at age seventeen. He soon began to preach and gave serious attention to how he would spend his life. He was unusually focused upon his goals and decided to take up engineering. When he took qualifying exams he ranked among the top five of those admitted at the Imperial Institute of Technology in St. Petersburg. Because of his religious commitment he soon made his way to a group of Pashkovites who met at the mansion of Princess Lieven. There he met J. B. Karge and William Feltner, leaders of the Russian Baptists. He was especially influenced by the views of Vladimir Solov'ev who stressed the unity of all believers and who by most religionists in Russia was considered a heretic. Even before he received his diploma in

1893 Prokhanov started a religious publication which he titled *Beseda*. He wrote in it under the pseudonym of Zacchaeus. He likely selected this name to emphasize the intensity of his Christian commitment, for he was a large man as compared with Zacchaeus.

After completing his engineering education Prokhanov returned to the region of his birth. On the way he visited with Leo Tolstoy who in later life embraced a life of servanthood to his workers and the cultivation of a simple gospel and pacifism, focusing on the moral teachings of Jesus. Tolstoy, however, was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church because of his views on the nature of Christ and ministry. Prokhanov was deeply impressed by Tolstoy. After returning home, he heard his father was arrested for political activities. When he went to assist him he feared for his own imprisonment so he fled Russia through Finland. For the next several months he pursued theological studies in England, Berlin and Paris.

In 1898 Prokhanov heard of 1,150 Dukhobars being retained in Cyprus. He went to their assistance and worked with them as they made arrangements to move to Canada. Upon hearing that his father might be in Armenia he went there to find him. At the turn of the century he settled in Riga, Latvia, as an assistant railway manager. He was then approached about teaching at the Polytechnical Institute there. In 1901 he married Anne Kazakova and took a position with Westinghouse in St. Petersburg. Westinghouse was especially involved in manufacturing brakes for Russian trains. In order acquire further skills he was sent by the company to America in 1902 for study.

As his career developed Prokhanov continued his efforts among the Christian groups in St. Petersburg. Envisioning the need for a common hymnal he published 20,000 copies of a collection which he titled *Gusli*. In 1905 as the result of changes in the Russian government a toleration statute was

enacted. Prokhanov and others registered their congregation in St. Petersburg in 1908. Prokhanov encouraged those in his circles to work with the other non-Orthodox groups including Baptists and Mennonites. In 1910 he began publishing a religious newspaper, *The Morning Star*. Prokhanov was even more committed to linking together the dissident church groups than was Pashkov. He was also a highly motivated organizer and arranged for conferences in which union was proposed. He promoted a union of his Evangelicals groups with the Baptists in 1908. In 1909 he was instrumental in the forming of the All-Russia Union of Evangelical Christians. Several conferences of the Union were held until being banned by the Communists in 1928. That year the various Evangelical groups employed 500 missionaries for church plantings outside of Russia mostly in China and India.

By 1910 there were 10,000 Evangelical Christians and 11,000 Baptists in Russia. The Evangelicals did not possess either credal or covenantal documents, but professed to be guided by the New Testament alone. These peoples gave considerable attention to hymn singing unaccompanied as was characteristic of Russian Orthodoxy. In 1912 the Evangelicals approved plans to establish a Bible College. By now they knew of the Stone-Campbell Churches in America and perceived them to hold similar views of early Christianity and the need to be guided by the scriptures alone.

That year the Russian leaders Alexander Persianov and Martin Schmidt visited America and made contact with the Christian Churches of the American restoration movement. They attended the Louisville, Kentucky meetings of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1912, after which Z. T. Sweeney and Louis R. Patmont visited the Russian churches. They found 900 believers in St. Petersburg and 700 in Moscow. They reported more than a hundred thousand members throughout Russia. Sweeney set a goal \$50,000 for the new Russian Bible School, but was unable to raise that

much and eventually the mission society sent \$5000. The school was launched February 27, 1912 with 19 students. It was closed during World War I in 1914.

The Evangelicals came under attack in 1912 through the influence of Rasputin upon Tsar Nicholas II. Prokhanov's journal, *The Christian and Morning Star* was prohibited in 1914. Prokhanov stayed in St. Petersburg during the war. Religious persons especially those of Russian Orthodoxy suffered recriminations from the Bolsheviks, but the Bolsheviks were less interested in the Evangelical groups after 1918. Prokhanov's journal was revived and by 1927, 15,000 copies of each issue were published. The Russian Orthodox Church was disestablished in 1922 and that same year Prokhanov was invited to preach in an Orthodox cathedral in Moscow. With this new freedom Prokhanov again instituted the annual conferences. In 1923 there were 303 delegates. In 1926 the delegates numbered 503. That year the Union of Russian churches joined the World Baptist Union and Prokhanov obtained Baptist ordination in Prague.

In 1925 and 1926 Prokhanov spent considerable time in America raising money for 60,000 hymnals and other materials. He was successful in collecting \$100,000. He approached both Disciples and Baptist churches. Prokhanov assessed his status and considered himself neither Baptist nor Disciple, but an evangelical within the Russian Union. Unlike the Disciples he did not consider that baptism was for the remission of sins, nor did he promote weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. The Prokhanov churches like many Baptists each had a single elder. Prokhanov had ties with emigrant Russian churches in America but in these years they withdrew from affiliation with the Disciples. He spent 1927 back in Russia visiting the evangelical churches that by now claimed over 300,000 members.

In 1928, under the emerging power of Joseph Stalin, all the churches faced downsizing. Stalin forced the closing of schools and publications and in 1929 closed down the union of the Baptists and the Evangelicals. Prokhanov attended the gathering of the World Alliance of Baptists at Toronto in 1928. He was not permitted to return to Russia. He spent his remaining years in North America and Europe and died in Berlin in 1935 at age 65. Thus brought to a close a concentrated effort to live according to the dictates of the New Testament in Russia.

Prokhanov issued a call for restorationism when he wrote in 1928:

It is firmly held by all believers in Christ, apart from any distinction of name or creed, that the church of the first century, the church of Christ and the Apostles, as it is revealed to us in the Acts and in the letters of the Apostles, is in its ideal aspect the model for the Church through all the future centuries and will ever remain so ...

Only the restoration of a Church which had its origin in the spirit of primitive Christianity, with its all-embracing and creative religious power, will be able to overcome the spirit of unbelief as manifested in atheism, materialism, and free-thinking, and to prevent the further growth among the people of the world ...

Take the Old and yet eternally New Gospel as the foundation of your life, to rebuild it in accord with the teaching of Jesus Christ, and then the earth and the heaven will be new.³

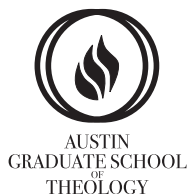
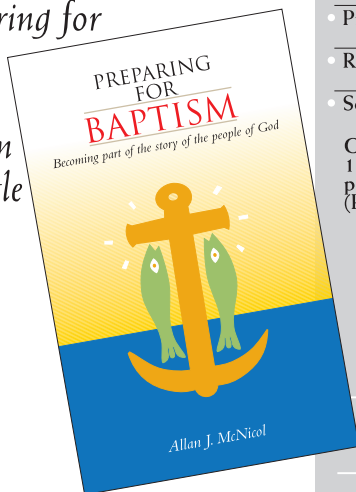
At various times and places in history movements have arisen to reestablish ancient moorings. Among these, Christian efforts to restore the first-century church have been the most prolific. Movements to this end have taken various forms and embraced differing sets of details, but they have all been premised upon the thesis that such a restoration must depend meticulously and solely upon the writings of the early Christians, that is, the New Testament.

³ Ellis and Jones, 177.

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Christian Community

By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions but the God of truth.

There is probably no Christian to whom God has not given the uplifting experience of genuine Christian community at least once in his life. But in this world such experiences can be no more than a gracious extra beyond the daily bread of Christian community life. We have no claim upon such experiences, and we do not live with other Christians for the sake of acquiring them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Doctrine and “Specific” Christianity

There is no Christianity “in general.” Faith in some experience devoid of theological or biblical content—no matter how powerful—is not New Testament Christianity. Those called to Christianity in general may believe nothing in particular. But faith resides in particulars.

Some churches seem to think that doctrine is a concern for those of a certain intellectual bent, but unnecessary for most Christians. Interest in doctrine amounts to something like an intellectual hobby. Others steer clear of doctrine for fear of argument or division in the church. Both factors indicate a lack of respect for the Christian believer and an abdication of the teaching function of the church.

Churches lacking an intentional and effective program of doctrinal instruction risk becoming the company of the confused. Charles Spurgeon told the painful story of the Irishman who attended a sectarian religious society meeting. Telling of the meeting, the man recounted: “Oh, it was lovely: none of us knew anything and we all taught each other.”

Albert Mohler, *Why Doctrine Matters*

It is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.

Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*

The Lord's Supper and "Communion"

Like Passover, the Lord's Supper is not simply a recollection of past events or a fitting memorial to a dead hero. For it also includes the element of the present, with its communion (lit., "union with"). Here we are met by the living Lord of mercy at his table, and we sit at the table with his multitude of disciples down through the centuries. At this table, Luke reminds us, Jesus is a servant, outpouring his life and blood in our behalf. "For who is greater," Jesus asks, "the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (22:27).

"I am among you," says Jesus, promising his continued presence at the table. But it is not simply that he is among us as we gather for Communion; our living Lord is among us as the One who serves.

Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God*

Management as Ministry, Minister as Manager

Certainly the church is called to be successful and effective, but it is called to be those things in relation to the mission given by God, not by our culture. . . . The church's capitulation to the authority of the Manager is tied to the centrality of that character in our culture. . . . Seeking to recover or to maintain our perceived place in the culture, we in the church turn to the manager for guidance. So today, some of the most powerful leaders of the church are those who know how to manage public opinion and the political process in order to achieve success. If we examine the ends of that management, however, we may well question whether its success is directed toward making disciples.

Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*

Ministry and Technique

Spiritual problems cannot be solved by *administrative techniques*. The problem is not how to fill buildings but how to inspire the hearts. And this a problem to which techniques of commercial psychology can hardly be applied. The problem is not one of *synagogue attendance* but one of *spiritual attendance*.

There are some people who believe that the only to revitalize the synagogue is to minimize the importance of prayer and to convert the synagogue into a social center. ... A synagogue in which men no longer aspire to prayer is not a compromise but a defeat; a perversion, not a concession.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (1954)

Rethinking Baptism

In the New Testament, conversion involves five integrally related components or aspects, all of which took place at the same time, usually on the same day. These five components are repentance, faith, and confession by the individual, regeneration, or the giving of the Holy Spirit by God, and baptism by representatives of the Christian community.

The cardinal problem with most views on baptism today is that the five components integrally associated with conversion in the New Testament are now separated in time. ... [Roman Catholic theology] divorces baptism and regeneration from the human components of the conversion experience—repentance, faith, and confession. Thus it seriously deviates from the New Testament pattern.

Lutheran theology ... deviates from the New Testament understanding because it divorces repentance and confession from the other components of conversion.

Reformed theology deviates even more significantly from the New Testament pattern in that it separates baptism from all the other components of conversion.

Baptist theology also deviates from the New Testament pattern. Although repentance, faith, confession, and regeneration are associated with baptism, baptism is separated in time from these four components. Thus baptism is an act which witnesses to a prior experience of repentance, faith, confession,

and regeneration. As a result such passages as Romans 6:4, 1 Peter 3:21, Titus 3:5, John 3:3ff., and others, which associate baptism with the experience of conversion, are embarrassing to many Baptists and often receive a strained exegesis at their hands.

Robert H. Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 2, Spr 1998, 6-17.

Stein was Mildred Hogan Professor of New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. This article was first presented at a session on Baptism for the Baptist General Conference.

Baptism is not an offer made by man to God, but an offer made by Christ to man. It is grounded solely on the will of Jesus Christ, as expressed in his gracious call. Baptism is essentially passive—being baptized, suffering the call of Christ. In baptism man becomes Christ's own possession. When the name of Christ is spoken over the candidate, he becomes a partaker in this Name, and is baptized "into Jesus Christ. . . . From that moment he belongs to Jesus Christ. He is wrested from the dominion of the world, and passes into the ownership of Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*

Transformative Christianity

The ancient Christian fathers spoke of the Christ event as the "recapitulation" of the entire human drama. In this one life, all lives are summed up; in the eternal present of this one life, the past is encompassed, the future is anticipated and the life of Everyman and Everywoman is most truly lived. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," he said. Not a way among other ways, not a truth among other truths, not a life among other lives, but the way of all ways, the truth of all truths and the life of all lives. Recapitulation. It means, quite simply and solemnly, that this is your life, this is my life and we have not come to our senses until we sense ourselves in the life, and death, of Christ.

Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*

The Christian view of human nature is wise precisely because it is so very extreme; it sees humanity, at once, as an image of the divine, fashioned for infinite love and imperishable glory, and as an almost inexhaustible well-spring of vindictiveness, cupidity, and brutality. Christians, indeed, have a special obligation not to forget how great and how inextinguishable the hu-

man proclivity for violence is, or how many victims it has claimed, for they worship a God who does not merely take the part of these victims, but who was himself one of them, murdered by the combined authority and moral prudence of the political, religious, and legal powers of human society.

Which is, incidentally, the most subversive claim ever made in the history of the human race.

David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*

“The function of religion is not to make people feel good but to make them good.”

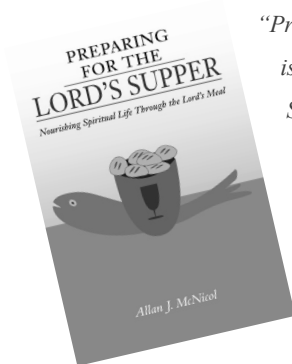
Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses*

Worship: Transcending “Relevance”

It is not an accident that when we think about making the church more relevant, we usually mean meaningful for one particular group. In North America, that usually means 20-somethings and young families. For one, 20-somethings are some of the hardest people to attract to church—we evangelicals love the challenge of reaching them. ... It's a perfect "target audience" for a new church to aim at. Unfortunately, churches that perceive themselves as relevant often by their nature limit a full-bodied expression of the church. ... [F]ew churches that consciously seek relevance want to clear the way to church for the poor, the homeless, welfare moms, drug-addicted men, or those tapped in nursing homes and convalescent hospitals. ... This is one reason I thank God for the liturgy. The liturgy does not target any age or cultural subgroup. It does not even target this century. ... Instead, the liturgy draws us into worship that transcends our time and place. ... [I]t has not been shaped to meet a particular group's needs. It seeks only to enable people—people in general—to see God.

Mark Galli, “A Deeper Relevance,” *Christianity Today*, May 2008

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BOOK SHELF

Gordon, T. David. *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009.

Reviewed by M. Todd Hall

Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World* portrays a populace subjugated not through force, but instead through sensuous, mindless pleasure and entertainment. Unlike Orwell's vision in *1984* of book-banning committees and the like, Huxley portrays a society overrun by trivial "information" which crowds out any would-be subversive material—including the humanities, and of course the Bible. Ultimately, unrest in the population is controlled through a highly structured delivery of entertainment and a drug called "*soma*," which creates a mood of complete indifference. Writing in 1985, Neil Postman quoted Robert MacNeil's observation that "Television is the *soma* of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*," to which Postman adds "Big brother turns out to be Howdy Doody."¹

Though not concerned with totalitarian rule, T. David Gordon's book *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* provides further evidence that Huxley's vision of the West's future is correct. The sheer weight of triviality in modern American discourse—from so-called news programs to the vapid yet ubiquitous "reality" shows—has crushed the ability to address the deeper, more important questions of life. Unlike other books which simply address the problem, Gordon offers constructive advice for ministers hoping to speak a word of hope in a culture of indifference.

¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 111. An excellent graphic representation comparing Orwell and Huxley is currently available at <http://www.recombinantrecords.net/2009/05/24/amusing-ourselves-to-death/>

Gordon wrote this book while undergoing treatment for stage III cancer, giving it a sense of urgency. He explains that, “Having been concerned about the state of preaching for three decades, I believed that it would be irresponsible to leave the world without expressing my thoughts about the matter, in the hope that better preaching might be the result” (9).

The book does not begin its work slowly. The first chapter of the book is titled “Johnny Can’t Preach,” and in it a preacher will find difficult but necessary words. “Preaching today is ordinarily poor,” Gordon explains.

... I have come to recognize that many, many individuals today have never been under a steady diet of competent preaching. As a consequence, they are satisfied with what they hear because they have nothing better with which to compare it. ... As starving children in Manila sift through the landfill for food, Christians in many churches today have never experienced genuinely soul-nourishing preaching, and so they just pick away at what is available to them, trying to find a morsel of spiritual sustenance or helpful counsel here or there (17).

The evidence provided for this poor preaching is largely anecdotal, but is not an uncommon assessment. Ultimately, Gordon provides a compelling case that rings true regarding the quality (or lack thereof) of preaching today. Once this is established, Gordon provides two factors for why “Johnny can’t preach”: Johnny can’t read (texts) and Johnny can’t write.

Gordon begins his discussion of Johnny’s inability to read by suggesting a “profound difference between reading information and reading texts” (43). Reading information—which is the universal practice of our “information society”—is content-driven, focusing on gleaning “information” from texts. Reading *texts*, however, is a slow and arduous process that requires great patience, focus, and attention to detail. It is the kind of reading required of poetry and narrative that takes the texts themselves seriously rather than simply sifting them for kernels of “useful information.” Gordon suggests that most ministers read modern novels and other books, “but as a group they are

no more interested in texts than is the culture of which they are a part. They read for information and amusement, but they do not read because they cherish the aesthetic pleasure taken in something that is well written” (46). This affects the way preachers read *every* aspect of the Bible, according to Gordon.

[Preachers] read the Bible the same way they read everything else: virtually speed-reading, scanning it for its most overt *content*. *What is this passage about?* they ask as they read, but they don't raise questions about how the passage is *constructed*. ... They read John 3:16 the same way they read Romans 5:8; each is “about” the love of God, but they don't notice much more than that, and their sermon on God's love from John 3:16 is probably not different from their sermon on God's love from Romans 5:8. ... All of their sermons are about Christian truth or theology in *general*, and the *particular* text they read ahead of time merely prompts their memory or calls their attention to one of Christianity's important realities ... Their reading does not stimulate them to rethink anything, and since the text doesn't stimulate them particularly ... their sermon is not particularly stimulating to their hearers (46-7).

By way of contrast, a close reading of texts is *required* to understand and appropriate *literature* (for instance, not a single line of a Shakespearean sonnet may be omitted without doing violence to the sonnet).

Equally as damaging to preaching today is the increasing inability to effectively communicate. Gordon begins by suggesting that technology—in this case, especially the telephone—has damaged interpersonal communication insofar as it has diminished our capacity for reading visual cues present within in-person communication. “[L]ack of visual response in conversation makes us literalists, whose capacity to see and interpret body language, gestures, and the language of the eyes atrophies because of comparatively infrequent use” (63). This has damaged preachers' ability to “read” their congregation during a sermon and adjust accordingly.

Technologies have also caused the atrophy of composition skills. Communication by letter requires thoughtful reflection, whereas (especially) telephone conversation may ebb and flow without any forethought whatsoever. The same can be said of emails, blogs, and other interactions of “Web 2.0.” The communication which often occurs on the Internet is shallow and “stream-of-consciousness.” It is not composed in as *deliberate* a process as a book, an article, or an essay, a process that is essential for a good sermon.

Following this chapter is a note on the content of the sermon. Here is where one might quibble with the book. Gordon calls for sermons to be *evangelical*, in the old sense of the word. Every sermon should bring its hearers into contact with the gospel. Gordon lists four common types of sermons which this evangelical focus confronts: Moralistic sermons, How-to sermons, “Introspection” sermons, and Social Gospel/So-Called Culture War sermons. “None of these false surrogates for real Christian proclamation nourishes the soul. They may inform or instruct about some aspects of religion, but they do not nourish *faith* . . .” (88-9).

Gordon is certainly right in responding to sermons which are devoid of Christian content—whether through legalism or pop-psychology or the “culture warrior” ethos—but there are questions which might be raised. For example, how does one preach Song of Solomon, or Ecclesiastes, or Proverbs *evangelically*, while taking the text itself seriously?² How is the Old Testament, when read and preached in this way, taken seriously in and of itself? Despite this quibble, Gordon’s call is vital for a church which is less relevant due to—ironically—its constant attempts to be “relevant” in modern society.

² This is ironic, given Gordon’s concerns in chapter two, explaining that Johnny can’t preach, partly because Johnny doesn’t know how to read texts for more than simply content. Reading Scripture canonically, and especially in light of the gospel is of course vital for the church. But some texts, especially wisdom literature, resist this, if they are to be taken seriously as texts themselves, with their own contexts and meanings.

Gordon's suggestions for teaching Johnny to preach are perhaps the most insightful thoughts of the book. The suggestion of an annual review for preachers, while perhaps initially disturbing to readers, would prove an excellent vehicle for improving preaching. It would remind both ministers and church leaders of the minister's primary calling—the proclamation of the word—and facilitate constructive communication regarding the preacher's work in the pulpit.

Gordon also suggests that preachers begin reading and writing. Preachers should read beyond the pop-literature and information on the hastily composed blogosphere. They should start interacting with the great literature of human history, of all sorts. In consuming elegant, well-composed literature, the preacher will begin to develop the skills necessary to craft elegant sermons which will truly impact the church. Likewise, the preacher should begin writing letters (and journal articles, etc!), in order to further develop his communication and composition skills.

Of all of the books to come through the library in the last year, I recommend this one for ministers. In an age when ministers are asked to fulfill many roles—program director, counselor, business manager, etc—Gordon reminds them of the most important role they have been given: *preacher*. In the course of doing so, Gordon provides a glimpse into the damage that the *soma* of our time is doing to the proclamation of the gospel. The book is a difficult word to hear, but ultimately, if given the chance, it will prove transformative for those called to *proclaim* things of ultimate importance in a culture obsessed with the trivial.

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