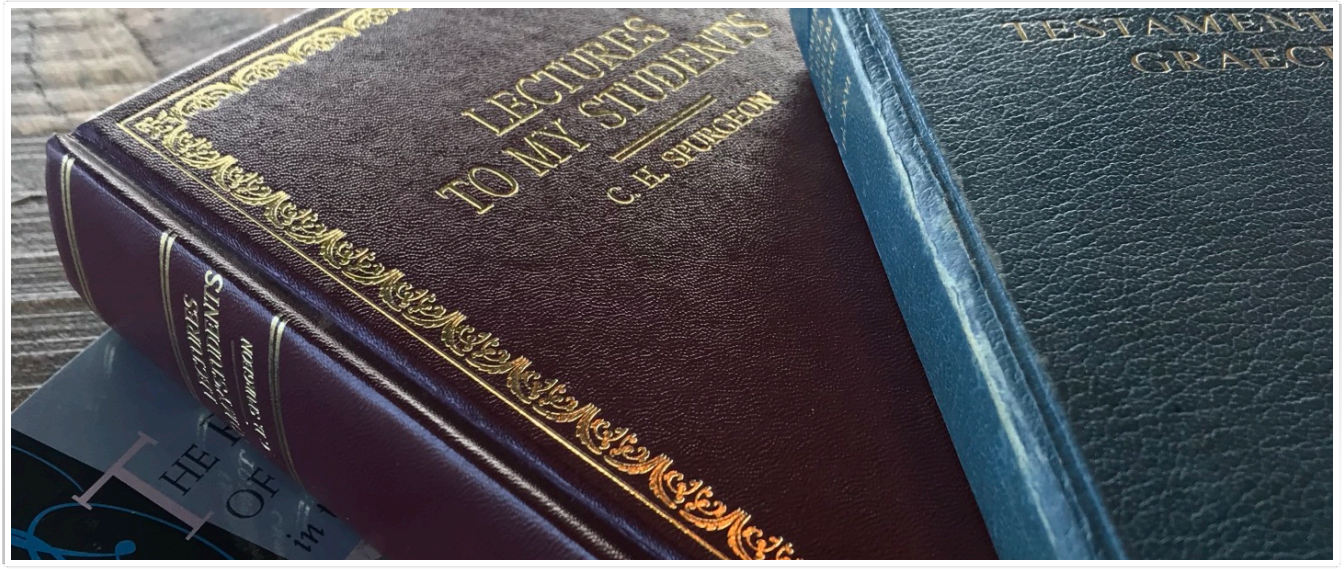

The Disaster Of Theology Divorced from Spirituality

Timothy Berg

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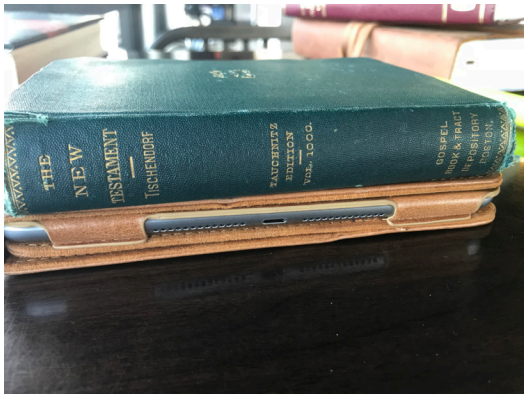
Sunday, August 12, 2018

I've been told, over and over again, "you dig too deep - you should just seek to love Jesus." Someone reads my blog, or some lengthy comment I've written on a FB post, and they tell me I dig too deep, and that is dangerous. I've had good friends "unfriend" me, and state that as the reason. Then, sometimes almost in the same breath, sometimes by the same people, I hear, "Well, you're wrong, because you just don't take the Bible and Bible study as seriously as we do." I'm told that I shouldn't give so much space to intellectual pursuits by some. But almost everyone from my past Fundamentalist life who has ever come to visit Bridgeway Church where I worship has commented that my charismatic worship, with hands raised in the air is "emotionalism," and intellectually empty. Anyone who studies exegesis, or theology, or biblical studies, or any similar discipline is likely to be warned eventually of the danger of their studies becoming "too academic," or "too heady, without heart." In the proposed division between mind and heart, I somehow end up being accused by well meaning people of erring at the same time in both directions. I always knew it was possible to wreck a car in a ditch. But some think it possible to wreck the same car at the same time in two opposite ditches. Nonetheless, such warnings are usually well meant, and can contain an important element of worthy caution.

A Warning

One such caution was, less personally, directed at me recently that comes from Kelly Kapic, who writes,



"J. I. Packer has warned us, "If our theology does not quicken the conscience and soften the heart, it actually hardens both; if it does not encourage the commitment of faith, it reinforces the detachment of unbelief; if it fails to promote humility, it inevitably feeds pride." Marks of a corrupt theology include fits of anger, jealousy, division and strife (Gal. 5:19-21), where understanding has become an idol rather than an avenue to the living God. Genuine theology cultivates a spirituality of grace, humility, truth, gentleness, unity, peace, patience and love of God (Gal. 5: 22-26). To separate theology and spirituality is to misunderstand, and even damage, both."

There is both a painfully real and present danger in the warning of Kapic, and a profoundly impossible scenario. Quoting Packer, Kapic warns that when theology is separated from spirituality, damage is done. Rather than the fruits of the Spirit, theology divorced from spiritually manifests the works of the flesh. We each harbor within ourselves the ability to immerse ourselves in the most sublime disciplines, and the deepest of theological discussions, and the most powerful of spiritual texts, and yet somehow emerge untouched by any encounter with the Divine. I am not immune. I too can spend hours digging into the text of a NT letter, with a Greek text open and stacks of commentaries beside me, and somehow, amazingly, come away having not encountered Jesus. This danger is real. It is present. It is common. Gordon Fee, who is technically writing of exegesis rather than theology, yet still helpfully notes,

> A great danger lurks here, you understand, especially for those who have been called of God to serve the church in pastoral and teaching roles. The danger is to become a professional (in the pejorative sense of that word): to analyze texts and to talk *about* God, but slowly to let the fire of passion *for* God run low, so that one does not spend much time talking *with* God. I fear for students the day when exegesis becomes easy; or when exegesis is what one does primarily for the sake of others. Because all too often such exegesis is no longer accompanied with a burning heart, so that one no longer lets the texts speak to them. If the biblical text does not grip or possess one's own soul, it will likely do very little for those who hear.
> (Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text.)

Craig Keener likewise warns us;

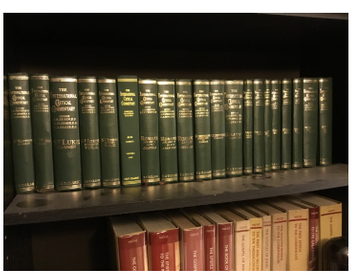
> "Throughout Scripture we read about people hearing from God, prophesying, and experiencing miracles. Though we may not all experience all these activities of the Spirit daily, biblical patterns lead us to expect that the God who empowered these activities throughout Scripture is the God who still empowers them. Many traditional approaches fail to do justice to Scripture's own witness—for example, they read Scripture as if it were merely designed to satisfy our historical interest about past salvation history (the approach of some conservative interpreters) or past ideas (the approach of some liberal ones), or just teaches us doctrine about God without inviting a relationship with him, or exemplifies moral virtues without attesting the Spirit's power to implement them."
> (Keener, Craig S.. Spirit Hermeneutics (p. 5). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.)

Fee further elucidates;

> These two (exegetical method and spirituality) are seen as constantly at war with one another, with the result that piety in the church is—for good reason—highly suspicious of the scholar or the seminary-trained pastor, who seems forever to be telling people that the text does not mean what it seems plainly to say. The result is a reaction to good method as such, since such a way of looking at the text seems to run at cross-purposes with a more devotional reading of the Bible, where "the Word for the day" is received by one's direct encounter with the text in a more free-floating, associative way of reading texts. The bottom line is that such people take their own brand of "common sense" approach to the Bible: read it in a straightforward manner and apply it as you can; and "spiritualize" (sometimes = allegorize) the rest.
>
> Came along the exegete and said "no" to such piety. Taking Scripture away from the believing community, the exegete made it an object of historical investigation. Armed with the so-called historical-critical method, he thus engaged in an exercise in history, pure and simple, an exercise that appeared all too often to begin from a stance of doubt—indeed, sometimes of historical skepticism with an anti-supernatural bias. Using professional jargon about form, redaction, and rhetorical criticism, the exegete, full of arrogance and assuming a stance of mastery over the text, often seemed to turn the text on its head so that it no longer spoke to the believing community as the powerful word of the living God.
>
> The natural result of this bifurcation between church and academy has been suspicion on both sides, and much too often poor exegesis on the one side and almost no Spirituality on the other.
> (Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text (p. 8).)

One can easily see the danger that can take place here on either side. But there is another sense in which this scenario is, in fact, not possible. There is a sense in which one cannot encounter and study and formulate biblical theology, or engage in careful exegesis, and walk away having not engaged in a spiritually transforming encounter. This is what Fee has traced out so helpfully, in his chapter which I read at least twice a year to remind myself of the importance of biblical, exegetical, and theological study always consummating in spiritual transformation and doxology. Few writings have ever so impacted my life as has his little chapter here. I well recall coming across it years ago, while in Grad School at a Fundamentalists institution. I shared it with my roommate, who shared it with our mutual teacher. It became required reading in the class. To my knowledge, it still is. I would urge every single student who pursues academic religious studies to read it, and heed its cautions. And really, anyone who studies the Bible closely in any setting would benefit from it. It is available as a free PDF here, and in slightly distinct forms in his books, "To What End Exegesis?" and "Listening To The Spirit In The Text" (the form I quote from here).

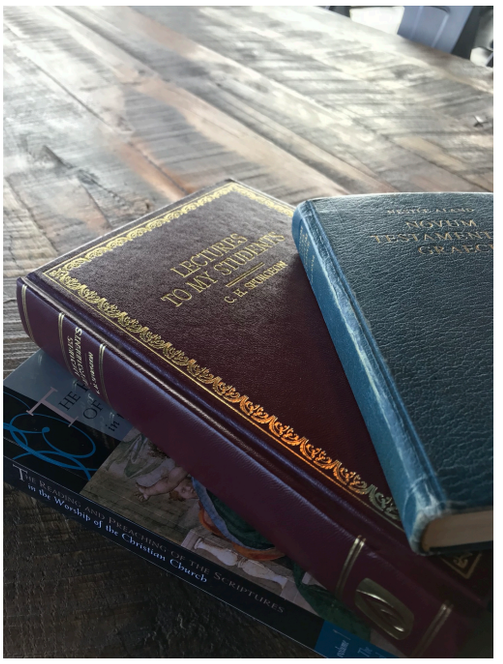
The Impossibility Of Divorce



What Fee points out, using Philippians as a lens, is that the authors of the NT are intentionally writing patently *theological* and undeniably *spiritual* texts. They simply do not intend only to convey information *about* God - they are intently concerned in every case to facilitate an encounter *with* God. An academic approach may come to the text only concerned to trace its historical meaning, or to use it as one more peg in the formation of a systematic theology. But such an approach is in fact to fail to fully complete the exegetical task itself. To fail to encounter the divine through the biblical text is to in fact fail to have truly heard what the biblical writers were saying. It is not only to fail spiritually - it is to fail as an *exegete*. Fee explains;

> But having made that point, let me carry it a step further, which will also lead us to our final point: the intersection of exegesis and spirituality in the task of exegesis itself. Rather than seeing exegesis and spirituality as opposed to one another, or as one preceding or following or having precedence over the other, I propose, (1) that faithful biblical exegesis belongs within the framework of the believing community, with those who follow—whether exactly so or not, but intentionally so—in the train of the original believing communities for whom and to whom these documents were written; and, (2) that such exegesis must always take into account the Spiritual purposes for which the biblical documents were written, as Spirituality has been defined in the preceding section of this paper [meaning, pertaining to the Holy Spirit].
> (Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text)

He goes on to explain,



> The ultimate task, and now I repeat myself, is the Spiritual one, to hear the text in such a way that it leads the reader/hearer into the worship of God and into conformity to God and his ways. My present point is that this task is not to be separated from the historical one, or added onto it at the end. Rather, determining the Spiritual intent of the text, as we have previously defined Spirituality, belongs legitimately—indeed, necessarily—to the historical task itself.
> (Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text)

Craig Keener likewise notes that, "All Christians should read Scripture as people who are living in the biblical experience—not in terms of ancient culture, but as people living by the same Spirit who guided God's people in Scripture," and explains that, "This means that we are interested in biblical texts not simply for what they teach us about ancient history or ideas (intriguing as that is to me), but because we expect to share the kind of spiritual experience and relationship with God that we discover in Scripture" (Keener, Craig S.. Spirit Hermeneutics (p. 5). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.). Thus, while the damage done to the heart in spirituality, and the mind in theology, by a division of the two is in one sense a real, present, and pressing danger, it is in another sense entirely impossible - for in so dividing theology and spirituality what one ends up doing cannot properly be categorized as either. If you study the text for a purely academic end and never encounter the God who spoke it into being, you have been less than a theologian, and less than an exegete. And if you seek and find quasi-spiritual "encounter" with the divine in a way not shaped by his own revelation of himself in the text, you have sought something less than biblical Spirituality. You have not divided the two to accomplish one over the other - rather, by the very divorce you have nullified your ability to accomplish either. As Jesus said in the context of marriage and divorce, "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

Fee goes on to suggest that it is essential when we come to the biblical text as exegetes (or, we might add, as theologians), that we of necessity become the subject, and the text becomes the object. But he points out that this begins a "circle" that must come fully round. And if we remain as the subject, standing over the text, we short circuit the intended process. We have failed to hear what Paul was saying in any of his letters if we can remain in control over the text, untouched by its influence in our lives. Rather, only when we once again reverse roles - when we, after our exegesis is done, and the theological lines traced, stand back once again *under* the text, prepared to let it, and the God who spoke it, act upon us, have we truly "completed the circle" of the task we have set out upon. If we end anywhere other than doxology, then what we have done cannot properly be called exegesis, or theology, or spirituality. What we have done is not only something less - it is something else altogether. And so Fee encourages us;

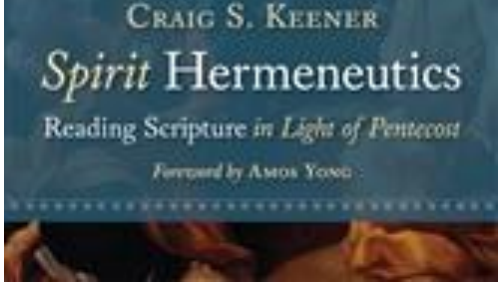
> Our final stance toward the text must be that with which we began; but it now must be informed by an exegesis that has completed the circle. And such completion takes place truly only when we rise up and follow, when we who would be "spiritual" recognize that true spirituality is not simply inward devotion but worship that evidences itself in obedience and the same kind of God-likeness we have seen in Christ himself.
>
> This, then, is what I think exegesis and spirituality are all about: not separate, or separated, disciplines, but one discipline that requires us simultaneously to be good historians—that is, good students of the Word—and good pray-ers.
> (Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text.)

So how can this danger of dry academia be avoided? Only by coming always to our studies, theological and exegetical, with the right purpose, and the right convictions. We must come not only as experts, or even as students. We must come first and foremost as seeking believers. We must come hungry to hear from, and encounter, and enjoy, God himself. As Fee notes,

> The key is to be found in one's overall stance toward Scripture, from beginning to end. This includes several things, but at least it means to come to the text with an absolute conviction that it is God's word; that here God speaks and we listen. Thus our concern in coming to the text is to hear from God. No other stance is exegetically in keeping with the text itself.
> Such a stance also includes a conviction that the text has been inspired by the Holy Spirit; for only with such a conviction will one expect the same Holy Spirit to help us in the twofold task of being good historians and good listeners.
> (Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text.)

"[We must] come to the text with an absolute conviction that it is God's word;
that here God speaks and we listen.
Thus our concern in coming to the text is to hear from God.
No other stance is exegetically in keeping with the text itself."
- Gordon Fee
(Tweet This)

It is encounter with God that remains essential, in all of our study. Craig Keener explains, "While careful study of Scripture helps counter the unbridled subjectivism of popular charismatic excesses, study that does not lead to living out biblical experience in the era of the Spirit misses the point of the biblical texts. All Christian experience in this era must be properly "Pentecostal"—that is, shaped by the experience of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit on the church" (Keener, Craig S.. Spirit Hermeneutics (pp. 5-6). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.) Fee goes on to explain;



Indeed, I don't much care what you call it—this touch of God on your life—but have it. Because without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, all else is mere exercise—mere beating the air. To be a good exegete, and consequently a good theologian, one must know the fullness of the Spirit; and that includes a life of prayer ("praying in the Spirit," Paul calls it) and obedience.

(Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text)

And, Fee notes, this encounter must facilitate worship;

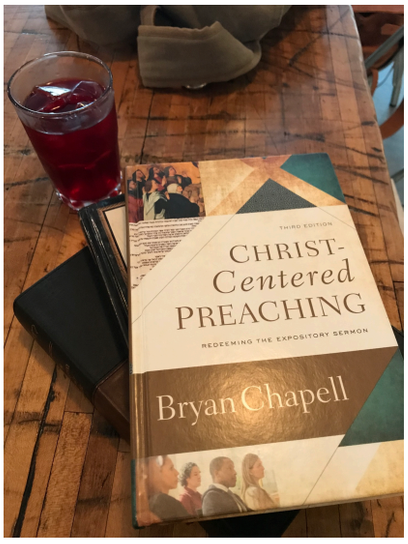
> I begin with a singular and passionate conviction: that the proper aim of all true theology is doxology. Theology that does not begin and end in worship is not biblical at all, but is rather the product of western philosophy. In the same way, I want to insist that the ultimate aim of all true exegesis is spirituality, in some form or another. And I insist on this because of my conviction that only when exegesis is so understood has the exegetical task been done in a way that is faithful to the intent of the text itself.
> (Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text (p. 5))

"Theology that does not begin and end in worship is not biblical at all, but is rather the product of western philosophy."
- Gordon Fee

J.B. Lightfoot, the great British scholar of a prior age, made this same point in his recently discovered commentary on Acts. He noted;

> "Last of all, these remarks would be most defective, if I failed to remind you, as I need to be reminded myself, that above all things prayer is necessary for the right understanding of the Holy Scripture. As speaking to Christians, I might appeal at once to the authority of Scripture itself, an authority which you all recognize. But if it can be said that as a matter of argument, I am arguing in a circle, because the recognition of the duty of prayer presupposes a belief in the truth of Holy Scripture, I could put the matter in this light. If you are studying an ancient writer, a historian for instance such as Thucydides or Tacitus, you would not expect to understand him unless you endeavored to transport yourself into the time at which he wrote, to think and feel with him, and to realize all the circumstances which influenced the life and actions of men of that day. Otherwise, your study would be barren of any results. So it is with the study of Holy Scripture. These documents come before you as spiritual writings, and to appreciate them you must put yourself in communication with the Spirit. Prayer is the medium of communication. And therefore it is necessary for the right understanding of the Bible."
> (J.B. Lightfoot, as quoted in Keener, Craig S.. Spirit Hermeneutics (p. 14). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.)

But how can the opposite danger, of spiritual encounter sought without the bounds of revelation, be avoided? Fee suggest;



The second key lies with our concern to do good exegesis, to hear the text first on *its* own terms, not *our own*. This, of course, stands over against a popular notion of Spirituality, which believes that learning gets in the way of hearing the text in a spiritual way. But such an approach to the text misunderstands the biblical meaning of Spirituality. And very often such an approach to the text gives one warm feelings about the biblical text and about God, but it does not always lead to obedience or to being encountered by God's own purposes in giving us the text in the first place.

In contrast to such a view, I urge that true Spirituality demands that we do our exegesis as carefully as our skills and opportunities make it possible. Since everyone who reads the text also interprets as one reads, the question is not whether one will do exegesis or not—everyone will and does—but whether one will do *good* exegesis or not.

The reason we must learn to do good exegesis is precisely because we are passionate to hear and obey. This means that we must also be passionate to get it right regarding the meaning of the text—not that God is waiting for our exegesis before he can speak to the church, but because if the text is going to lead us to genuinely biblical Spirituality, we must have the text right so as to have our Spirituality conform to the intent of the text.
(Fee, G. D. (2000). Listening to the Spirit in the Text (pp. 14–15).)

"The reason we must learn to do good exegesis is precisely because we are passionate to hear and obey. This means that we must also be passionate to get it right regarding the meaning of the text..."
- Gordon Fee
(Tweet This)

And here Fee gives words to my own burden for and love of Scripture (more accurately, his words have from early on shaped such love). This is always what has driven me to be so careful with the text. To be passionate that we read it carefully; to point out grossly errant mishandling of the text; to call friends to engage the text in historically accurate ways. I never have sought to study it as a purely academic book. I fell in love with the Bible as a teenager not out of academic and disinterested curiosity, but because I encountered God in its pages. I never engaged in biblical studies out of a desire only to be a historian of an ancient text. Rather, what drove me, and continues to drive me to study these ancient texts well is precisely the conviction deep in my soul that here, God himself in the person of the Risen Christ can be encountered. The proper pursuit of the text or the theology within it is, rightly stated, the pursuit of encounter with Christ himself. We come as *worshippers* to the text. We seek the Spirit in the text. If we fail to do so, we have not just been bad theologians or less informed spiritualists - we have, by divorcing the two, become something else altogether. As Fee says, these are not separate, or separated, disciplines.

The division of theology and spirituality is not, after all, like the divorce of a marriage that ends with an equal settlement between two parties - it is rather like the splitting of an atom, that ends only in the destruction not only of both parties, but of all that surrounds and is touched by them.

May God spare us this catastrophe.

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For those who are interested in more - The chapter by Fee is availible as a Free PDF at the link above. A Lecture by him on the same topic is availble for a few dollars here; https://www.regentaudio.com/.../exegesis-spirituality... And Fee and Eugene Peterson Lecture together on the topic here; https://www.regentaudio.com/.../walking-by-the-bible...

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Spurgeon sounded a similar warning long ago;

Preservation	Resurrection	Textus Receptus
Reformation	Luther	Neo-Fundamentalism
New Testament	Tongues	Apologetics
Church History	Eschatology	Kingdom
Tr Only	Tyndale	Apostolic Fathers
Commentaries	Easter	Gospels
Jesus	Luke	Sex
The Shire	Theology	Tr
Anabaptist	English Bible	Holy Week
Inaugurated Eschatology	King James Bible	King James Only
Lord Of The Rings	Luke-Acts	Missions
Objections To Christianity	Preaching	Protestant
Single	Singleness	Slander
Slavery	Song Of Songs	Technical Commentaries
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Bible Study	Biblical Commentaries	Burgon
Ccm	Charismatic	Charity
Christmas	Christology	Chronology Of The Life Of Christ
Church History \	Contemporary Issues	Cross
Cursing	D. A. Carson	Demonization
Die Hard	Doctrine Of Preservation	End Times
Exegesos	Exegsis	Faith
Fathers	Fundamentaism	Gordon Fee
Gospel Contradictions	Greek	Hands
Historical Jesus	Historical Theology	History
Homosexuality	Journal Of Travels	Kingdom Chronicles
Kingdom Of God	Kjvonly	Lewis
Liturgy	Marriage	Matthew
Mattthew	Minimal Facts	Music
Nt	Oh My God	Omg
Paraphrase	Pastor	Paul
Philosophy	Polycarp	Praying
Psalms	Radicals	Reformers
Satire	Sermon Notes	Sex Drive
Sexuality	Single Life	Singles
Spiritual Gifts	Spirituality	Strongs
Synoptic Problem	Taking The Lords Name In Vain	Tattoo
Text	The Doctrine Of Preservation	The Power Of The Tongue
The Singer	Translation Methods	Tro
Webster's	William Tyndale	Word Studies
Words	Worship	

"Abhor, dear brethren, the thought of being clockwork ministers who are not alive by abiding grace within, but are wound up by temporary influences; men who are only ministers for the time being, under the stress of the hour of ministering, but cease to be ministers when they descend the pulpit stairs. True ministers are always ministers. Too many preachers are like those sand-toys we buy for our children; you turn the box upside down, and the little acrobat revolves and revolves till the sand is all run down, and then he hangs motionless; so there are some who persevere in the ministrations of truth as long as there is an official necessity for their work, but after that, no pay, no paternoster; no salary, no sermon"

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B.B. Warfield urged his students;

"A minister must be learned, on pain of being utterly incompetent for his work. But before and above being learned, a minister must be godly.

Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these things over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg: soldiers should have both legs. Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. 'What!' is the appropriate response, 'than te… See more

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Warfield again;

"Whatever you may have done in the past, for the future make all your theological studies 'religious exercises'. This is the great rule for a rich and wholesome religious life in a theological student. Put your heart into your studies: do not merely occupy your mind with them, but put your heart into them. They bring you daily and hourly into the very presence of God; his ways, his dealing with men, the infinite majesty of his Being form their very subject-matter. Put the shoes from off your feet in this holy presence!"

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