

Feed My Sheep



A
PASSIONATE
PLEA
for
PREACHING

Eric J. Alexander

Joel R. Beeke

James Montgomery Boice

Sinclair B. Ferguson

Don Kistler

John MacArthur

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

John Piper

R. C. Sproul

R. C. Sproul Jr.

Derek W. H. Thomas

ENDORSEMENTS

“This is the most compelling plea to restore preaching to its time-honored status that I have ever read. This book deserves to be read and reread to light the fire of passion and conviction for all who would publicly proclaim, ‘Thus says the Lord.’”

—*Dr. Erwin Lutzer*

Pastor emeritus, Moody Church
Chicago

“This book combines the wisdom and experience of a number of the foremost preachers of the present day. If it is received as it ought to be, we may yet see a mighty change for good in the current spiritual scene. I hope it will be widely read.”

—*Iain Murray*

Cofounder, Banner of Truth Trust
Edinburgh, Scotland

“*Feed My Sheep* is not only a passionate plea for preaching, but also a thorough review of what constitutes good preaching. Every minister of God’s Word will profit from prayerfully reading this book.”

—*Dr. Jerry Bridges*

author of *The Pursuit of Holiness*

“Here some of this generation’s most skilled shepherds provide passionate explanations of the priority and power of preaching God’s Word so that it is a feast for Christ’s sheep.”

—*Dr. Bryan Chapell*

President emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary
St. Louis

“There are a lot of books on preaching today, but not many good ones—this one is good. The subjects covered (and the accents of the authors as well) commend this volume to the minister and seminary student—and, indeed, to the church member who wants to learn what a real preaching ministry looks like, and who wants that for his church and from his pastor. It is spiritually challenging and topically pertinent.”

—*Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III*

Chancellor, Reformed Theological Seminary

“There has never been a greater need for good preaching, and this book will help. In it some of the best preachers I know share their passion for preaching biblical, practical, expositional sermons that inform the mind and touch the heart. *Feed My Sheep* will be a tremendous help to anyone learning to preach and will provide real refreshment for anyone in the gospel ministry.”

—*Dr. Philip Graham Ryken*

President, Wheaton College

Wheaton, Ill.

“When I was in seminary, my homiletics professor encouraged us to set a lifetime goal of reading at least one book each year on preaching. If you can read only one book this year on preaching, make it *Feed My Sheep*. Students and experienced preachers alike can find both timely and timeless teaching here. *Feed My Sheep* is simply one of the best books on preaching to come along in years.”

—*Dr. Don Whitney*

Professor of biblical spirituality,

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Louisville, Ky.

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Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching

© 2008 by Ligonier Ministries

Previously published (2002) by Soli Deo Gloria Publications.

Published by Reformation Trust Publishing

a division of Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org ReformationTrust.com

Printed in Ann Arbor, Michigan

Cushing-Malloy, Inc.

0001120

Second edition, first paperback printing

ISBN 978-1-64289-317-5 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-56769-107-8 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-56769-236-5 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-56769-459-8 (Kindle)

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Cover design: Dual Identity

Cover illustration: Michael Halbert

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Feed my sheep : a passionate plea for preaching / R. Albert Mohler ... [et al.] ; foreword by J. Ligon Duncan III ; Don Kistler, general editor. -- [2nd ed.].

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-56769-107-8

1. Preaching. I. Mohler, R. Albert, 1959- II. Kistler, Don.

BV4211.3.F44 2008

251--dc22

2008027918

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FOREWORD

J. Ligon Duncan III

The appearance of yet another book on preaching perhaps calls for some explanation. If the names on the title page are not sufficient in themselves to answer any query as to “why,” I suggest the following: preaching in the contemporary English-speaking world—and even in the evangelical and Reformed community—has not been impervious to the negative forces brought to bear on proclamation as a method of evangelism and discipleship. A video-drowned and educationally-challenged culture, and a church bent on accommodating herself to the dominant communication theories of the day, challenge the minister committed to the “foolishness of preaching.” He faces significant pressure to truncate and thin out his message, to entertain, to explore alternative media, and even to abandon historic modes of proclamation altogether. Such a milieu is discouraging in the extreme for the preacher (young or old, novice or master) who simply wants to be faithful. In this setting, every encouragement is useful. Indeed, it helps to beat this old drum and remind men that they are not crazy for wanting to remain faithful, to say to them, “Stay at the wheel; hold fast; keep on; don’t give up; you’re not alone.” For this reason alone, this book may prove to be a real comfort and inducement to servants of the Word.

The subjects covered (and the accents of the authors) commend this volume to the minister and seminary student—and, indeed, to the church member who wants to learn what a real preaching ministry looks like, and who wants that for his church and from his pastor.

R. Albert Mohler Jr. dares to implore the overstretched, multi-tasking modern technician and spiritual therapist called a “pastor” to prioritize his ministry in such a way that the preaching of the Word becomes so central that everything else must fall into place behind it. Surely that is a timely exhortation, and a welcome, balancing

emphasis to the siren calls of various lesser duties and congregational expectations.

James Boice helps buttress the preacher's resolve to stick with the "foolishness of preaching" in an age in which biblical authority is at a discount and congregations want their ears tickled instead of their hearts and minds challenged and instructed.

Derek Thomas's piece on expository preaching is a gem, one of the best short treatments of this issue you'll ever read. He bravely tips over some contemporary sacred cows and manages to advocate ably for the plan of consecutive, expositional preaching (that is, preaching verse by verse through books of the Bible)—surely a necessary emphasis in our time.

Joel R. Beeke makes a strong case for the classical Reformed view of ministerial piety and experiential preaching (a view which, it must be said, is out of step with many of the currents of present-day Reformed thought). A prayerful reading of this chapter may awaken us to the older, wiser counsel of our forefathers and bring a helpful corrective to the anti-experiential tendencies of our theological environment.

R. C. Sproul, in his usual engaging style, urges preachers to know the truth and teach it. He explores the possibilities of and problems in doing that, all the while drawing on the counsel of Martin Luther regarding the task of teaching the Word.

R. C. Sproul Jr. urges us to aim to preach the Word, and thus to preach to both the minds and hearts of our hearers. He also argues that while our preaching aspires to bring changed hearts and changed lives (under God's sovereignty, as His appointed means of grace), these are the fruits of changed minds. This nexus between our thinking and our living, also championed by the great Princeton theologians of the nineteenth century, is why the minister of the Word preaches to the mind and conscience of the hearer, and never bypasses the mind by a direct emotional appeal. Emotional experiences may be the product of truth worked deep into the soul, but the life emanates from the heart (which includes the mind and will in Bible thought), so that our thinking and desiring must be tapped if our living is ever to be right.

Sinclair Ferguson helpfully addresses the task of preaching to the heart. Reformed preachers aren't known for this in our day, but this was a hallmark of the older Reformed tradition, and Sinclair is himself a master of it. Lest one acciden-

tally get the impression that this book's cry for substance in preaching is a call for arid conveyance of information, this chapter will put you right. (Of course, there are many calls for heart preaching throughout this book.)

Don Kistler urges men to preach with authority, citing examples of biblical preachers who did so, the greatest of whom was our Lord. This, too, is an important counterbalance to the chatty, self-effacing, tentative, informal, dialogical banter that sometimes passes for preaching today.

Eric Alexander, one of the archetypal Reformed preachers of our time, provides us with a Pauline perspective on evangelistic preaching (for those who still harbor suspicions that Reformed evangelistic preaching is an oxymoron!).

John Piper's timely treatment of preaching to those who are in the seminary of suffering (and that's all of us!) is simply brilliant. In his characteristic, God-exalting, grace-conveying manner, Piper deals with a subject of vital importance to the gospel ministry. There are broken hearts under our noses every time we preach, and that means we need a biblical grid for speaking to them. Piper gives this to us, while also helping us to respond appropriately to our own suffering

John MacArthur concludes the book by pointing us away from the messenger to the message preached, surely an important word of spiritual counsel in our success-focused and personality-centered culture. We are not the reason the gospel works; the gospel is the reason the gospel works.

This is a good book to read on preaching; it is spiritually challenging and topically pertinent. We find here an assemblage of veritable titans of robust evangelicalism, all of whom share in common a firm commitment to and ability for expository preaching (that is, the faithful explanation and application of the Bible in which the text of Scripture supplies the matter of the preacher's exhortations rather than the preacher using the text as an occasion for his own expostulations, however helpful those may be). The authors' topics are timely, their counsel is wise, and they will richly and quickly reward the teachable reader.

—*J. Ligon Duncan III*

Chancellor

Reformed Theological Seminary

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the late 1990s, Don Kistler assembled an outstanding team of contributors to pour out their hearts on a crucial issue—preaching. The result was *Feed My Sheep*, one of the outstanding lay-level introductions to true evangelical preaching to be found today.

The book became one of the top sellers for Dr. Kistler’s Soli Deo Gloria Publications, which was a tribute both to the men who graciously wrote chapters for the book and to Don’s foresight in bringing the issue to the attention of Reformed believers.

When Soli Deo Gloria became part of Ligonier Ministries in 2004, demand for *Feed My Sheep* continued to be strong. Clearly interest in the subject matter remained high. Thus, when supplies of the paperback edition began to run low, it was an easy decision to reissue the book anew in a well-deserved hardback format.

Most of the authors of the various chapters in *Feed My Sheep* are pastors, and they often speak directly to their fellow ministers. This conversation is far from “shop talk,” however. Every concerned layman can benefit from listening in as these gifted men discuss this vital topic.

It is our dual hope that this new edition of *Feed My Sheep* will help enflame a new generation of preachers to preach the Word and will educate a new generation of believers in the pew to understand what they ought to expect from the pulpit each Lord’s Day.

—*The Publishers*
Reformation Trust

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr. is the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He holds an MDiv and a PhD from Southern Seminary. He is known for his insights into contemporary issues, which he discusses on his podcast, *The Briefing*. He has appeared on such national television programs as *Larry King Live*, the *Today* show, and *Dateline NBC*. The *Chicago Tribune* has called him “an articulate voice for conservative Christianity at large.” He is the author of several books, including *Culture Shift: Engaging Current Issues with Timeless Truth*; *Desire and Deceit: The Real Cost of the New Sexual Tolerance*; and *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists*, and has contributed to numerous other publications. Dr. Mohler is an ordained Southern Baptist minister and a member of the council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.

Dr. James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000) was pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for more than thirty-two years. He was a member of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and an editor for *Christianity Today*. Dr. Boice founded the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology and had an extensive radio ministry through his *Bible Study Hour* program. His many books include commentaries on such biblical books as Genesis, Daniel, the Minor Prophets, John, Romans, Ephesians, and Philippians, as well as *Foundations of the Christian Faith* and *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World*.

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Dr. R. C. Sproul is the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries and chancellor of Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla. He also serves as copastor at Saint Andrew's Chapel, a Reformed congregation in Sanford, Fla. His teaching is heard on the daily radio program *Renewing Your Mind*. He has taught at several seminaries around the United States. Dr. Sproul has written more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, *Abortion: A Rational Look at an Emotional Issue*, *A Taste of Heaven: Worship in the Light of Eternity*, and *The Truth of the Cross*. He also served as general editor of the *Reformation Study Bible*.

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Dr. Don Kistler is a Bible teacher, author, and editor. He founded Soli Deo Gloria Publications, which published hundreds of classic Puritan titles, and now heads the Northampton Press. Dr. Kistler holds an MDiv from Luther Rice Seminary and a DMin from Whitefield Theological Seminary and is an ordained minister. Prior to entering the gospel ministry, Dr. Kistler coached high school and college football for more than fifteen years. He is the author of the books *A Spectacle Unto God: The Life and Death of Christopher Love* and *Why Read the Puritans Today?* and has contributed to numerous other books.

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Chapter 1



THE PRIMACY OF PREACHING

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Evangelical pastors commonly state that biblical preaching is the hallmark of their calling. Nevertheless, a careful observer might come to a very different conclusion. The priority of preaching is simply not evident in far too many churches.

We must affirm with Martin Luther that the preaching of the Word is the first essential mark of the church. Luther believed so strongly in the centrality of preaching that he stated, “Now, wherever you hear or see this Word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica* [Christian, holy people] must be there. . . . And even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God’s Word cannot be without God’s people and, conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s Word.”¹

A Servant of the Word

The preacher is called to be a servant of the Word. That statement is an expression of a very proud and glorious lineage in Christian history. But it was made particularly well-known among preachers in 1941, when H. H. Farmer delivered a series of addresses on preaching and then published them under the title *The Servant of the Word*.²

Farmer represented the neoorthodox recovery of preaching. After a period of

theological and homiletical sterility, figures such as Farmer in England, Karl Barth in Switzerland, and others in the English-speaking world and in greater Europe sought to reassert the case for preaching. In *The Servant of the Word*, Farmer had a great deal to say about preaching; he argued for the affirmation of the Christian message through the continuation of preaching in the church. But despite his book's title, Farmer actually had very little to say about the Word. As a result, this neoorthodox argument for preaching was a house built on theological sand—it did not last.

Such an argument for preaching was made necessary by the assertion, which was widespread at the time, that preaching was outmoded as a form of Christian communication. It was seen as something the church could do without. Farmer maintained, however, that the practice of preaching was indispensable to Christianity.

Farmer got a number of things right. First, he argued for the unique power and preeminence of preaching in Christianity. The history-of-religion approach was very influential at that time. This school of thought held that preaching was part of virtually every religious system in one way or another. Farmer maintained, however, that such a claim simply was not honest. Preaching has a priority among Christians that it does not have in other faith traditions, and this is because of the very nature of the gospel.

Second, Farmer argued that the unique authority of Christian preaching comes from the authority of revelation and, in particular, the Bible. Contrary to those who maintained that revelation was basically internal, emotional, and relational, Farmer argued that it was external, historical, and given. He stated:

For Christianity is a religion of revelation; its central message is a declaration, a proclamation that God has met the darkness of the human spirit with a great unveiling of succoring light and truth. The revelation moreover is historical, that is to say, it is given primarily through events which in the first place can only be reported and affirmed. As we have already said, no merely internal reflection can arrive at historical events. If a man is to be saved, he must be confronted again and again with the givenness of Christ.³

This is an interesting statement. In it, we discover an argument that Christian preaching is distinguished by virtue of its grounding in revelation. It is the preaching of a God-given Word, not a human message (2 Peter 1:16)

My concern, of course, is not with what *H. H. Farmer* thought about the preacher as the servant of the Word. I want an apostolic authority, one inspired by the Holy Spirit, namely, the apostle Paul. I am concerned to discover what the great apostle thought about preaching and how he understood *himself* to be the servant of the Word. To make this discovery, I want to examine a portion of Paul's letter to the Colossians:

Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the Word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but now has been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we might present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. (Col. 1:25–29)⁴

This is a majestic passage. Paul writes here of his understanding of the apostolic ministry, of his stewardship of the mysteries of God, and of his task of proclaiming the Word of God. He speaks of his calling, his message, and the purpose of his preaching. This is Paul's declaration of his ministry: he sees himself as a servant of the Word.

We must notice what goes before this passage: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (v. 24). Here Paul states that he not only endures suffering but, of all things, rejoices in it. Why? The passage that follows gives the explanation, and it is gloriously counterintuitive. He rejoices in his sufferings because they have earned him the opportunity to preach the gospel. Paul sees his purpose on earth as preaching this Word and proclaiming Jesus Christ.

This passage, then, does not represent superficial triumphalism, but genuine gospel triumph. It is a sober triumph, because Paul acknowledges the sufferings he is enduring, but he also understands the victory that is assured in Christ. It is not Paul's triumph. It is Christ in Paul, the hope of glory.

Hidden Results, Frequent Controversies

In contrast, we see the exhaustion of preaching that has taken place in so many pulpits in the contemporary church. Rarely do we hear these days that a church is distinguished primarily by its preaching. When we hear people speak about their own congregations or make comparative remarks about other congregations, generally they speak about something other than preaching. They might speak of a church's "ministry." They might speak of specialized programs for senior adults, children, or young people. They might speak of a church's music. Sometimes they might speak of things far more superficial. Or perhaps they speak of the church's Great Commission vigor and commitment—and for that we are certainly thankful. But rarely do you hear a church described, first and foremost, by the character, power, and content of its preaching. This is because few preachers today are true servants of the Word.

I acknowledge that pastors have a certain "product envy." We envy those who build houses or sell cars or build great corporations or assemble automobiles. Why? It is because they have something tangible to show for their labor at the end of the day. They may be assembling widgets. They may be putting things in boxes, sealing them up, and sending them out. They may be cutting the grass. But in each case, they can see the product of their hands. A carpenter or an artist or a building contractor has something to which he can point.

But what about the preacher? The preacher is denied that satisfaction. We are not given the sight to see what we would like to see. It seems as if we stand up and throw out words and wonder what becomes of them. What, after all, is our product? Words, words, and more words. We sometimes feel as if we are flattering ourselves that people even remember what it was we had to say. We are chastened from even asking our own church members and fellow believers to recall our text halfway through the next week. Why? Because we are afraid that we will get that shocked look of anticipated response when a person of good intentions simply

says: “That was a fine message. I don’t remember exactly what it was about, and I have a very vague recollection of something you may have said, but I want you to know it was powerful.”

Paul responds to this, at least in part, in verse 23, when he writes, “[All of this is true,] if indeed, you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.” Paul understood that it was possible to hear in vain, and he hoped that it was not true of the Colossian church, that their response to his preaching was not just a succession of nice accolades and respectful comments.

Wouldn’t we like to have an assembly line of maturing Christians going out the door of the church, wherein we could at least see something and note some progress? Perhaps we could even statistically mark what kind of impact one sermon had over against another. But we do not have that sight; the pulpit ministry is largely a hidden work in the human heart. Such a work will bear good fruit, but it will take time to show.

Since the Lord established His church, there have been preachers—lots of preachers. The church has heard good preachers and poor preachers, faithful preachers and faithless preachers, eloquent preachers and pulpit babblers, pulpit humorists and pulpit bawlers, expository preachers, narrative preachers, thematic preachers, evangelistic preachers, literary preachers, sawdust preachers, postmodern preachers, seeker-sensitive preachers, famous preachers, infamous preachers—lots and lots of preachers. Accumulated, their work amounts to many millions of hours of preaching.

This represents a massive investment of human time, energy, and attention in the task of preaching, as well as countless books, conferences, and controversies. So what? The preacher may sound like Luther on Sunday, but he feels like bathing in Ecclesiastes on Monday morning: “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.” Preaching can seem like striving after the wind. We feel like the preacher of Ecclesiastes, who laments in 1:15, “What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.” Vanity. Such is life for those who are called to preach: Hard work with (often) no tangible, positive result.

Furthermore, this line of work has a nasty way of getting you into trouble. It seems that the more faithful one is in preaching, the more trouble one encounters.

Why? You did not come up with the Word. This is not your opinion. It is not something you are saying in order to offend people. You are simply preaching it. After all, that is your assignment. So you preach the truth, and the next thing you know you are on the front page of the papers. You are the subject of gossip for the deacons and their wives; even the youth group is up in arms over what you said. Conflict and controversy are always hard, and they tend to be correlated to faithfulness in preaching. The harder you work at it, the greater the risk.

Sometimes it happens that preaching the Word is met with antipathy and resistance. Why? Because “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12a). And as the Lord spoke to His prophet Isaiah, “[My Word] will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire” (55:11b). Sometimes this means that God uses the Word to rebuke and correct His people. And it is the preacher who must speak that word and reap the response. Sometimes preachers are ejected and fired. That is simply one of the realities of pulpit ministry.

And it is not just conflict and controversy. Sometimes, preachers experience persecution or even martyrdom. The man who wrote the letter to the Colossians was himself to be a martyr for the faith. In giving his final instructions to Timothy, he speaks of being poured out as a libation. He is ready to be offered as an offering. The sufferings of which he speaks in Colossians 1:24 are going to be realized in a martyrdom that is yet before him. There have been martyrs throughout the history of the church, but the blood of those martyrs has been the seed of the church, nourishing its growth.

Do you not imagine that your preaching priorities would become clear under persecution? After all, if you are forced to meet with your congregation in a catacomb, and if you know that you might be arrested at any time, you are going to weigh every word. There is not going to be any time for pulpit frivolity. There is not going to be any time to promote the next youth program. You are going to be concerned with getting down to the reality of the eternal Word of God.

Indeed, I will go so far as to assert that if you are at peace with the world, you have abdicated your calling. You have become a court preacher to some earthly power, no matter how innocuous it may appear. To put it straight: you have been bought! If there is no controversy in your ministry, there is probably very little

content to your preaching. The content of the Word of God is not only alive and active, it is sharper than any two-edged sword, and that means it does some surgery. Cutting leads to bleeding, and by God's grace healing then comes, but there is *always* controversy.

Paul is emphatically aware of this dynamic. He understands the reality of preaching. He understands the frustration, and he sometimes articulates it in his own words. Just read his letters. It is not as if he avoided controversy. In 1 Corinthians 1:14, he lays it right before them, even to the point of saying, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius." That's a rather strong word of rebuke. But this text hits us where we need it, because Paul not only endures all of this, he seems to revel in it, to celebrate it. Paul seems to understand all of the frustrations, the conflict, the controversy, and the trouble of preaching, and yet he says, as it were: "Bring it on. This is what I was made for. This is what I was called to do. This is what I am here for. Let's get at it!"

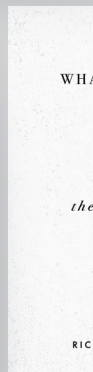
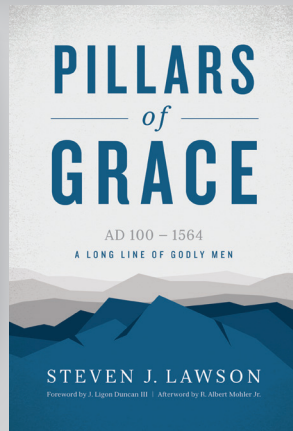
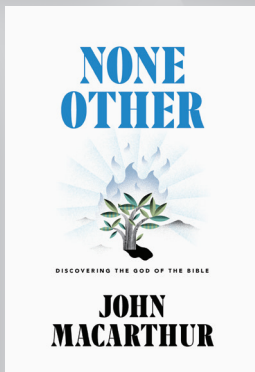
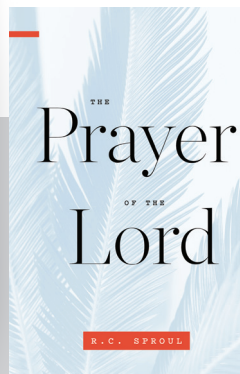
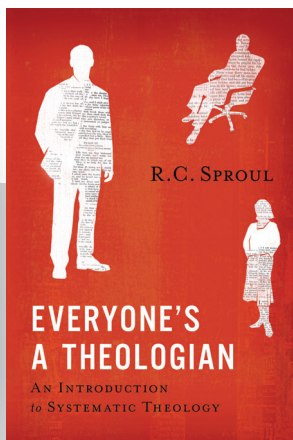
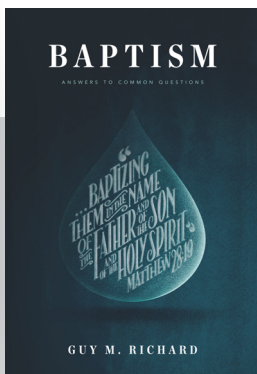
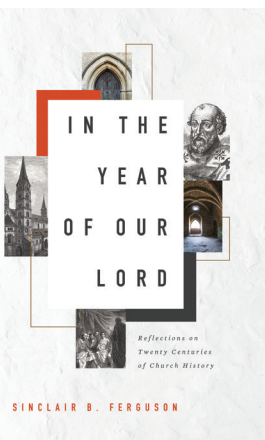
In Colossians 1:24, Paul even rejoices in his sufferings for the sake of the church, for the body of Christ and for His glory. "Of this church," Paul says, "I was made a minister. I was not made a minister of some hypothetical, non-problematic, non-controversial church. I was made a minister of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the body of Christ on earth, a chosen, purchased possession being sanctified even in the present, and struggling against the powers of sin and death and evil and darkness."

The Chief Priority of Ministry

Then Paul makes the point in verse 25 that the central purpose of ministry is the preaching of the Word. In the end, everything comes down to this. "Of this church, I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out *the preaching of the Word of God*" (emphasis added). The words "the preaching of" are not in the original language, but are inserted in some translations, and I believe that is a legitimate insertion. It is clear that what Paul means is that the ministry of the Word of God is achieved by the proclamation, the teaching, and the preaching of the Word of God.

Paul speaks in very strong language. He speaks of the fact that he was *made* a minister. He did not make himself a minister anymore than he saved himself

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