

The Supremacy of God in Preaching. By John Piper. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House,

1990. 119 pp. \$6.95 Paper. Reviewed by T. Scott Christmas.

John Piper, Senior Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, and author of several important works, writes a heart-stirring work to remind preachers that people are starving for the greatness of God (p. 9). In The Supremacy of God in Preaching, Piper repeatedly reminds his readers that “the unknown cure” for people’s troubled lives is the majesty of God. Piper asserts that every other popular prescription will prove its remedy to be shallow and brief. People are starving for God, and only a constant supply of His greatness will satisfy their spiritual hunger.

The book is divided into two parts. The material for Part 1 was first delivered as the Harold John Ockenga Lectures on Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in February 1988. Part 2 was first given as the Billy Graham Center Lectures on Preaching at Wheaton College in October 1984.

In Part 1, Piper spends four chapters presenting his case as to why God should be supreme in preaching. In Chapter 1, he describes the goal of preaching to be the glory of God. The author reminds the reader, “God will hide from you much of the fruit he causes in your ministry. You’ll see enough to be assured of his blessing, but not so much as to think you could live without it. For God aims to exalt himself, not the preacher” (p. 19).

The first chapter is filled with quotes from those who kept God's glory as their supreme goal when preaching. Such theocentric thought is conveyed by the Scottish preacher James Stewart who said "the aims of all genuine preaching are to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God" (p. 19). To foster this type of outlook, Piper argues that preachers must be theologians. As their knowledge of the greatness of God grows, the better equipped they become to communicate the greatness of God to His people. He concludes the chapter by noting that the goal of preaching is the glory of God reflected in the glad submission of the human heart (p. 26).

In Chapter 2, Piper defends the ground of preaching as the cross of Christ. He notes, "The most fundamental problem of preaching is how a preacher can proclaim hope to sinners in view of God's unimpeachable righteousness" (p. 30). However, that problem is resolved at the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ is the place of objective substitution. It is the cross which covers man's sin and holds down his pride. God achieved the ground of preaching in the cross of Christ. Preaching would not be valid without the cross (p. 32).

In Chapter 3, the author explains that the gift of preaching comes through the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only did the Holy Spirit inspire the Scriptures, or oracles of God, but He also extends His power to the preacher through His anointing. Piper exhorts his readers to rely on the gift given by the Spirit—the Bible. Spurgeon is quoted as referring to the exemplary preacher John Bunyan, "Prick him anywhere; and you'll find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full

of the Word of God” (p. 43). Further, Piper emphasizes the necessity of relying on the gift of the Spirit’s power by giving a five-step acronym to assist the reader in preaching in the strength that God supplies (pp. 44-46).

The fourth chapter explains the gravity and gladness of preaching. Piper spends much personal time studying the life of Jonathan Edwards. It is Edwards’ general tenor of life and ministry that shaped Piper’s pastoral approach. Piper explains his thesis by writing, “Gladness and gravity should be woven together in the life and preaching of a pastor in such a way as to sober the careless soul and sweeten the burdens of the saints” (p. 52). Without gladness, legalism is the result. Without gravity, the sinner loses sight of the serious nature of conversion. Unfortunately, gravity seems absent from many ministries. “Laughter seems to have replaced repentance as the goal of many preachers. Laughter means people feel good. It means they like you. It means you have moved them” (pp. 55-56). The author continues to address the inappropriateness of humor in the pulpit by stating, “I’ve been literally amazed at conferences where preachers mention the need for revival and then proceed to cultivate an atmosphere in which it could never come” (p. 56). This very practical chapter closes with the author giving seven suggestions for cultivating gravity and gladness in one’s preaching (pp. 60-63).

In Part 2 of the book, the author pens three chapters that show how to make God supreme in preaching. The heart of this portion of the book comes from guidance gleaned from the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. While in seminary, Piper received counsel from a professor which directed him to choose one great theologian and to commit himself throughout life to understanding and mastering that theologian’s thought. Piper chose Edwards. Chapter 5 records

how Edwards kept God at the center of his life. Obviously, there was great reward as Piper recognizes Edwards as the primary human spark plug for the divine voltage that caused the Great Awakening in New England (p. 71).

In Chapter 6, Piper explains the theology of Edwards as “submission to sweet sovereignty.” Edwards saw the goal of all that God does as upholding and displaying His glory. He also saw the duty and privilege of man as delighting in God’s glory.

In Chapter 7, the author explains the type of preaching which results from Edwards’ view of God: a preaching which makes God supreme! Piper defines the essence of Edwards’ preaching by ten characteristics: (1) stirring up holy affections, (2) enlightening the mind, (3) saturating with Scripture, (4) employing analogies and images, (5) using threat and warning, (6) pleading for a response, (7) probing the workings of the heart, (8) yielding to the Holy Spirit in prayer, (9) being broken and tenderhearted, and (10) being intense.

Probably the most encouraging aspect of this work is its theocentric nature. Seldom does one read of a heart that is consumed with the glory of the sovereign God. The passion of Piper’s heart for his sovereign Redeemer bleeds onto the pages of his text. And although the book is firmly rooted in theology, it’s message is not stale and lifeless, but fresh and vibrant! The author reveals the source of his joyous proclamation when he writes, “God has opened his Word to me and given me a heart to savor it and send it forth week after week. I have never ceased to love preaching” (p. 13). Oh, that God would grip the heart of all His messengers the way He has this one!

If there are any possible weakness about this work, it would be that it contradicts many current philosophies of preaching. While more and more preachers are moving toward entertainment, storytelling and meeting felt needs, this work calls pastors to return to the fundamentals. However, this is not a weakness, but a strength! Critical self-examination may be the first step needed in returning a pulpit ministry to its rightful purpose of promoting a high view of a sovereign God.

One's view of this book will probably be determined by one's general approach to preaching. If the reader is diligent to be faithful in his exposition of God's infallible Word, then this book will be a great encouragement. However, if the reader tends to settle for something other than the God of the Bible and His inspired Word as his primary source for preaching, he will find this book to be quite challenging.

This excellent work holds forth the tremendous need to preach the greatness of God. People are starving for God's greatness and the vast majorities do not know it. Regardless of the discomfort experienced by the hearer or the rejection experienced by the preacher, God's Word must be faithfully proclaimed. Edwards closes this work by comparing the preacher's challenging work to the necessary responsibility of a surgeon:

To blame the minister for declaring the truth to those who were under awakenings, and not immediately administering comfort to them, is like blaming a surgeon because when he has begun to thrust in his lance, whereby he has already put his patient to great pain... he won't stay his hand, but goes on to thrust it in further, till he comes to the core of the wound. Such a compassionate physician, who as soon as his patient began to flinch, should withdraw his hand . . . would be one that would heal the hurt slightly, crying "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (pp. 97-98).

Piper remarks, “We don’t want to lie naked on the table, and we don’t want to be cut, but oh, the joy of having the cancer out” (pp. 98)! This relatively “unknown cure” for people’s troubled lives is the majesty of God. This book is warmly recommended as a much-needed summons for God’s servants to keep Him supreme in the preaching of His Word!