

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Book Critique: Charles H. Spurgeon

Submitted to Dr. Ben Gutierrez, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

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Theology of Pastoral Ministry

by

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Bibliographical Entry

Spurgeon, Charles H. *Lectures To My Students*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub, 2010.

Summary

“Lectures to My Students” is Spurgeon’s instruction manual to pastors in training on how to be a pastor, what the ministry requires, and the sacred expectations that go along with such a high calling. And Spurgeon most definitely views the call to a ministry as a high calling requiring the utmost of respect and not entered into lightly.

The underlying themes throughout the chapters reviewed include the pastor’s critical need for full devotion to God, the seriousness of the calling to ministry, the weight of responsibility a pastor bears, the sacred calling to reach the lost and its high priority, as well as the critical need to disciple and lead believers deeper into faith.

From the opening of the book, Spurgeon makes it clear that the pastor has a critical responsibility to maintain these areas in his life, driving home the importance of being self aware and keeping all aspects of his life in order for the sake of the call (7). As a result, the minister becomes “an awful weapon in the hand of God” (8).

He goes on to deal with the topic of the call to ministry, emphasizing that this calling must be of God and the seriousness that such a calling communicates. He walks the reader through what that calling should look like, that it is unmistakable in its all encompassing pull toward the work of the Lord (26), or as he puts it, “an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst” for sharing the message (26). At the same time, he warns that it must be a thoughtful response to the call as well (26), that it continues, and is proven over time (27).

The seriousness of the calling and the weight of responsibility begin to come through dramatically in the chapters on private and public prayer. Over and over Spurgeon makes the point that a pastor's ability to serve and follow God rests on his prayer life and the respect he gives to prayer. He lectures against anything other than spontaneously constructed prayers, warning of the impersonal nature of written or repeated prayers.

Having laid the groundwork of a pastor's life in the early chapters, Spurgeon continues in later chapters/lectures to coach the reader through a pastor's various responsibilities. Choosing sermon topics, preparing them, interacting with scriptures. How to speak, how to preach, how to choose illustrations. He coaches through all aspects of a pastor's call to teach, reach the lost, and grow the body. And through it all continues the underlying themes calling the reader to take it seriously. To recognize the weight of responsibility, the sacred nature of the calling. If it is treated lightly, much hangs in the balance. For Charles Spurgeon, there is no higher calling, and if the pastoral candidate cannot see that or live up to it, than he has serious doubts about their calling.

Critique

For a book written in the 19th century, Spurgeon's work has held up remarkably well. Its strengths are in its systematic approach to building a pastor, from the foundation of the walk with God, calling, and prayer life, through to the practical exercises of ministry in preaching, teaching, leading and more. Due to the timeless nature of the scriptures, it should be no surprise that a well written, scripturally based book on ministry would be applicable long beyond what most expectations would be.

One of its greatest strengths is the high regard Spurgeon gives to ministry. One cannot read this work and then pursue a calling lightly. It forces the reader to think through all their assumptions and weigh out the validity of their calling.

Having said that, the work does have weaknesses. One of the underlying themes seems to be that of putting too much weight on the position of senior pastor. The success of the church rests on his shoulders, he must be properly trained so he can lead a church effectively, he must build the congregation, he cannot let others do the prayers or the teaching since he is the best at it, and so on (11). It creates an over dependence on one man when the New Testament church portrayed local churches as having a team of leadership upon whom the responsibility of guiding the congregation fell. In our modern context that may still result in one minister paid to do so full time, but he should still be part of a team of leadership seeking guidance from the Lord with the only real difference being his ability serve full time while the others volunteer part time.

A second criticism is that Spurgeon is overly opinionated. On the one hand it is incredibly helpful how he walks the reader through every aspect of ministry. On the other hand, it is a weakness that seems to present his way as the only way. For example, his harsh critiques on others' methods of prayer, blasting the words they chose or the manner in which they approach God, labeling their methods as sinful when they seem to be merely different than his style (57). He seems to regard his methods as the only correct way. There is a healthy level of being convinced in the rightness of one's' approach to ministry, as opposed to an unhealthy level of arrogance that claims it is the only way.

At the same time, maybe this perception is rooted in the passage of time that separates today's reader from Spurgeon's time. American culture changes dramatically in the space of a handful of years. To assume attitudes or arrogance based on his writings would be to assume

culture had not changed in the last century and a half. In some ways, the reader needs to put himself in the shoes of someone in the mid 19th century and ask how they would have read or understood the message of this work. The response would probably be significantly different than today's response.

Evaluation

“Lectures to My Students” is still a critical resource for the pastoral student. While the reader needs to evaluate what applies to today and what should stay in the 1800's, the undeniable reality remains that Spurgeon was and is a master communicator, powerfully using illustrations and passion drive home timeless lesson after lesson for the pastoral students and experienced pastor alike.

This book both gives an insightful look into church history and the development of Christian theology, as well as an eloquent and passionate defense and proclamation of the seriousness of God's calling to reach the lost and feed the body of believers. Spurgeon makes it clear in a way that many have been unable to duplicate the weight of following through on the call to ministry, while at the same time painting a picture of the joy and thrill it is to live out such a calling. The reader cannot help but examine his or her own life and see if they have approached service to God with their whole heart and life or not.

As such, “Lectures to My Students” continues to be a valuable resource for those training for ministry. Perhaps not for the casual believer, and even for the experienced believer a certain amount of care must be taken to recognize the limits of Spurgeon's work, even so, it continues to stand the test of time.