

PULPIT AFLAME

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ESSAYS IN HONOR OF STEVEN J. LAWSON

edited by Joel R. Beeke and Dustin W. Bengé



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Pulpit Aflame

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Foreword

Ian Hamilton

From my earliest days as a young Christian in Glasgow, I have been vastly privileged to be exposed to preaching that instructed me, stirred me, humbled me, challenged me, and sometimes plunged me into the depths, but then lifted me up to the heights. I have sometimes marveled at the different personalities, temperaments, gifts, and backgrounds that marked those men whose preaching ministries God used to shape my life and ministry. There was nothing formulaic or monochrome about them. Each one of the men (and I have five particular men in mind) modeled Phillips Brooks's dictum that preaching is truth through personality. But while these men were so different in regard to their personalities, there were common features in their preaching that marked them out as men set apart by God to preach His Word.

First, before they were anything else, these preachers were men of God. What first deeply impressed me about these men was not their preaching, but their manifest godliness. Their preaching was simply an extension of who and what they were. There was a seamlessness between what these men were outside the pulpit and what they were in the pulpit. There was no artificiality, no "pulpit voice," no acting a part. In classical Greek society, the *hypokrites* was a play actor, someone who acted a part by wearing a mask. There was nothing these five men more excoriated than spiritual pretense. Their weak humanity shone through their preaching, and they allowed it to do so. You can be sure that where there is not heart holiness in the preacher, his words will sound hollow and lifeless, no matter how gilded with eloquence and orthodox theology.

Second, they were men committed to the systematic expository preaching of God's Word. Foundational to this commitment was the unshakable conviction that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that

the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Not *some* Scripture, not *most* Scripture, but *all* Scripture is necessary to complete or make perfect the man of God. Only as God’s people are exposed to the length and breadth, height and depth of God’s saving revelation will they truly grow up into Christ.

It is sadly true, however, that some men committed to the systematic, expository preaching of God’s Word miss the wood for the trees. They are so intent on verse-by-verse exposition that they fail to grasp and pass on to others the big picture embedded in every paragraph of Scripture. That big picture is the grace and glory of God in Christ—promised, come, crucified, risen, ascended, reigning, and returning (this is what Martyn Lloyd-Jones epitomized in his verse-by-verse biblical expositions). This is why biblical and systematic theology are the necessary handmaidens of truly biblical, systematic, expository preaching.

Third, they were men committed to expository preaching that addressed both the minds and hearts of their hearers. Preaching seeks to address whole men and women in the totality of their humanity. Biblical preaching will necessarily seek to inform the mind and capture it with the compelling truth of God’s Word. But no less will it seek to address and engage the affections of men and women. The religion of the Bible is deeply and ineradicably affectional. Jonathan Edwards was only too right when he said that “true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.” God is never content with orthodox confessions of faith. He seeks the love of our hearts and joyful delight suffusing our obedience.

Fourth, they were men who preached God’s Word with a palpable zeal for God’s glory. The first great concern of any preacher worthy of the name is a desire for God to be glorified in his ministerial labors. What gives preaching a luster that compels the attention of believers and unbelievers alike is the preacher’s complete disinterest in commending himself.

Self-promotion is one of the sins that so scars modern evangelical Christianity. Celebrity preachers peddle the latest gimmick in developing self-worth, making man and not God in Christ the focus of their “preaching.” The faithful, God-honoring preacher will be kept from such perversions because as he preaches the whole counsel of God, he comes to understand that even the salvation and sanctification of sinners is the proximate, not the ultimate, aim of a God-honoring preacher. The preacher’s ultimate aim is the glory of the triune God: “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Fifth, they were men who preached God's Word understanding that the Lord Jesus Christ is both the epicenter and omega point of God's saving revelation. As I sat under the varied ministries of these five men, I began to understand that no matter where you were in the Bible, Jesus Christ was in the foreground and actually never in the background. These biblical expositors relentlessly impressed on me that the whole Bible was an exposition of the first gospel promise (Gen. 3:15). It is therefore vastly significant that the risen Lord rebuked the two disciples on the road to Emmaus for being foolish and "slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken." He then, "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets...expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:25-27).

Sixth, they were men who preached God's Word passionately. I need to explain what I mean. I do not mean they preached loudly (though on occasion they did) or used particularly emotive language. I do mean that they preached out of the overflow of their hearts. There was an unmistakable and even compelling passion that pulsed through their preaching. I believe that each of these men exhibited in their lives the substance of John Calvin's motto: "Cor meum tibi offero Domine, prompte et sincere" (My heart I give to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely). It is out of such heart devotion that God-honoring preaching flows.

I often found it remarkable that these men were so different in their personalities and temperaments. One was at heart shy. Another was outgoing. A third was deeply idiosyncratic. The fourth was elegant in style, with the most mellifluous voice. The fifth was deeply read and richly theological. But one thing united these five different men: they preached out of lives that loved Jesus Christ with adoring humility. When I think of systematic, expository preaching, I think of these men.

Seventh, they were men who preached God's Word *coram Deo* (before God's face). No man can begin to preach the gospel of God's grace in Christ who is more concerned not to offend men than to please and honor God. The divine calling to "preach the word in good times and in bad times" (2 Tim. 4:2, my translation) requires a boldness that is not of man. Faithful, God-sent, and not merely church-ordained men discover that the God who sent them gives them a boldness in preaching that is not merely a personality trait. The Lord Jesus Christ was "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29), and yet when He confronted hypocrisy and worse in God's church, He preached with devastating and penetrating power (read Matthew 23). You might be thinking, "But no mere preacher begins to approximate the Lord Jesus Christ." Indeed,

and yet the Lord's humanity was a true humanity. He was upheld throughout His life and ministry by the Holy Spirit as the better-than-Adam Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1). By His ministry of replication, what the Holy Spirit first forged in the sinless life of Jesus He comes to reproduce in the lives of all believers, and not least in the lives of God's preaching servants.

It is not coincidental, at least to me, that these seven marks of God-honoring preaching indelibly mark the preaching ministry of Steven J. Lawson. Dr. Lawson has a passion for preaching that is infectiously engaging. He not only commends expository preaching but he also models it in his sermons, which are full of exegetical thoroughness, expositional clarity, applicatory incisiveness, and a passionate zeal for God's glory. The essays in this *Festschrift* are a testimonial to Steve's heart desire for God-glorifying and Christ-centered preaching. But, more importantly, they are a testimonial to the God of grace, who gives the church, in His love and mercy, men who will faithfully proclaim His saving grace in Christ, men who fear God and not man, men who preach out of the overflow of lives captive to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Steven J. Lawson: Knowing the Man and His Message

Dustin W. Bengé

On June 29, 2014, Steven J. Lawson stood in the pulpit of Christ Fellowship Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, for the final time. The atmosphere within these white walls and stained glass windows was heavy with heartfelt sadness. Many sitting in the congregation had heard Lawson preach every Lord's Day for almost twenty years.

Christ Fellowship is a church that had been birthed thirteen years earlier from the ashes of theological division and the spark of the bold proclamation of the truth. The men and women of this beloved church family had sat attentively Sunday after Sunday as Lawson had explained God's Word verse by verse, phrase by phrase, word by word. Under his expository ministry, many had come to know Christ and been baptized, while others had first become acquainted with the doctrines of grace. There were no adequate words of appreciation that anyone could muster on this "farewell Sunday."

Dressed in his signature crisp white shirt and narrow red and navy striped tie, Lawson, walking to the wooden pulpit, culminated his pastoral ministry, which had spanned several states over the past thirty years. With tear-filled eyes and a trembling voice, turning the pages in his Bible, Lawson said, "For one last time, I ask you to take God's Word and turn with me to the book of Philippians, chapter 4." He continued, "For those of you visiting today, I don't normally act this way. This is my last Sunday to be the pastor of this wonderful flock of people. You have become very dear to me, and I want to express to you my deep love and affection as we have spent significant time together. The title of my message is 'A Fitting Farewell.'"

Lawson then read the words of the apostle: "Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved" (Phil 4:1 NASB). This short verse encapsulated Paul's affection

for the church at Philippi, and it also epitomized Lawson's heart at the close of one ministry chapter and the opening of another.

Early Years

Steven James Lawson was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on April 13, 1951. His father, J. W. (James Wilkes) Lawson, worked for the government in medicine and pharmaceutical testing and research. Later, he became professor of pharmacology and vice chairman of the Department of Medical Chemistry at the University of Tennessee. Lawson's mother, Betty, was an accomplished artist and honor student throughout her years in school. After Steven was born, Betty stayed at home to raise him and his two younger siblings, Shelley and Mark.

The Lawson family attended church every Sunday and viewed the Lord's Day as the high point of the week. Essentially, Sunday morning began Saturday night. Lawson's father oversaw a Saturday evening ritual in which he instructed his son to lay out his suit coat, tie, freshly pressed shirt, and trousers for the next morning. He was to expertly polish his shoes. At an early age, Lawson received the message loud and clear that worshiping the Lord was the most important thing going on in the life of his family, and it required a certain level of seriousness and discipline.

The Lawsons openly discussed Christian topics and Scripture in their home, for spiritual matters were highly regarded and to be taken seriously. Both of Lawson's parents lived out the virtues of a godly life before their children and in their daily work. Lawson recalls that his father "was the most principled man I have ever known. His personal integrity and honesty were distinguishing marks of his life."

Lawson came to faith in Christ at an early age through the faithful witness of his parents. As a young boy, he listened each night as his father read Bible stories to him before bed. These stories began to plant seeds of gospel truth within his heart, which eventually brought conviction of sin and then later blossomed into salvation. In a recent interview, Lawson recalled, "When my father explained that Christ had suffered divine judgment upon the cross in the place of sinners like me, this was extraordinarily good news. By God's grace, I put my faith in Jesus Christ."

The Lawson family moved quite often due to J. W.'s position with the government, from New Jersey, where young Steven developed a love for Yankee baseball; to Fort Worth, Texas, where he became a diehard Dallas Cowboys fan; and then finally settling down in Memphis, Tennessee. Lawson entered

his teen years attending White Station High School, where he discovered his love of sports. Throughout his adolescence, he grew to be an excellent athlete, enjoying baseball, basketball, track, and football. To the chagrin of his family, who held success in academics as the pinnacle of human achievement, he gave priority to his sports activities.

Lawson remembers his years playing football and participating in “two-a-days,” a period of grueling preseason workouts in the blazing heat of summer. His high school team traveled south to Greenwood, Mississippi, for an entire week of two-a-days to prepare for a season they hoped would be victory filled. Lawson ate, breathed, and slept football during his high school days, which culminated in a football scholarship to Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, after his graduation in 1969.

Calling into Ministry

Entering college, Lawson remained faithful to Christ, attending church, reading the Scriptures, and growing in his faith. During his first three years of college, he began several youth ministries for high school students. These ministries grew and were unusually blessed by God. Under his teaching, he saw several young people brought to faith in Christ.

While a freshman in college, Lawson had the experience of proclaiming God’s Word for the first time. He was asked by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to give his testimony of personal faith in Christ in Fluvana, Texas. The pastor who introduced him, however, told the small congregation that Lawson was going to bring the morning sermon. Though he admits he was terrified of public speaking at only eighteen years old, he found this initial experience of standing before a congregation with an open Bible exhilarating. This time served as the foundation upon which he would later stand as he surrendered to God’s calling to preach. The drive and desire to stand and explain God’s Word grew stronger as the years passed.

As Lawson began to realize he couldn’t play football for the rest of his life, he grew increasingly miserable with his uncertain career path as God’s call upon his life became clearer. Striving to find peace, he worked in politics, banking, and other ventures for a short time, but nothing satisfied this growing, insatiable desire to preach God’s Word. He graduated from Texas Tech in 1973 with a bachelor of business administration degree and then entered the law school of Texas Tech, but never graduated. While studying law, Lawson began to realize the law he was learning often changed by the time exams were given, but God’s laws never change and are forever fixed in eternity.

Dropping out of law school, he moved back to his family home in Memphis, taking a job at the First Tennessee Bank.

Providentially, during this uncertain time of searching for satisfaction, he sat under the powerful biblical preaching of Dr. Adrian Rogers at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis. Sunday after Sunday, he heard this man of God stand to preach. Lawson recounts that he was “blown away” by what he heard. He remembers, “I had never heard anyone handle the Scripture as he did. He became a living incarnation before my eyes of what was in my heart that I wanted to do.” After much soul searching and agonizing prayer, he relinquished his life to preach the Word of God, to minister to His people, and to win the lost to Him.

Seminary and Family

In the mid-1970s, after surrendering his life to gospel ministry, Lawson loaded everything into the backseat of a small Volkswagen Bug and drove to seminary with a mere one hundred dollars in his pocket. His first experience was at Southwestern Seminary. During these turbulent liberal years within the Southern Baptist Convention, Lawson was immediately told not to cause trouble; he was suspect since he was “from Adrian Rogers’s church.” Rogers had built his ministry upon the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. Lawson was quickly told that Southwestern did not hold to such doctrine. With strong conviction in his heart for the truth of God’s Word, he left Southwestern and transferred to Dallas Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1980 with his master of theology degree.

Lawson recognizes several professors at Dallas who invested in his life and made a large impact upon his preaching and future ministry. Haddon W. Robinson and Duane Litfin, who taught expository preaching, were responsible for key lessons he would never forget. Other professors at Dallas, men like Howard Hendricks, J. Dwight Pentecost, John Hannah, Stanley Toussaint, and Roy Zuck left their imprint upon Lawson during these years of theological training.

In the fall of 1979, during his last year at Dallas Seminary, Lawson meet Anne Crowell, who had recently moved to Dallas to be on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ at Southern Methodist University. The Sunday they met, Lawson had just finished teaching a class of two hundred singles in the basement of Highland Park Presbyterian Church. Anne’s former fiancé, who was traveling through town, invited Lawson to go to lunch with him, Anne, and Anne’s roommate, who was very taken with Lawson’s preaching. Even though

Lawson had never met any of them, he agreed to go. After their three-hour lunch, Anne and her roommate began to attend Lawson's weekly Bible study.

In January 1980, after turning in his ThM thesis, Lawson asked Anne if she would like to go with him to hear Adrian Rogers preach at a conference in Fort Worth. He has often recounted that if Anne had not liked Rogers, this would have been their only date. But her response was positive, and by May they were discussing marriage. Shortly after, Lawson asked Anne's father for her hand in marriage, to which he responded, "Son, you first need to get a job!"

Lawson accepted a position at the first church that contacted him, University Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where he became the collegiate pastor. Having fulfilled Anne's father's wishes, Lawson proposed to her by a small creek on the grounds of Highland Park Presbyterian Church.

He and Anne were married on April 18, 1981, in Asheville, North Carolina, near the Crowell summer home. In August 1981, Lawson was called to be the senior pastor of The Bible Church of Little Rock in Little Rock, Arkansas. During their fourteen years in Little Rock, he and Anne welcomed four children into their family. Their first two children, twins Andrew and James, were born on March 15, 1983; a daughter, Grace Anne, was delivered on April 20, 1987; and their youngest son, John, was born October 15, 1990.

Lawson's pastorate at The Bible Church of Little Rock established him as a strong expository preacher. Week after week, he practiced the skills of sermon preparation and delivery. During this time, he also decided to continue his education from a distance at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Jackson, Mississippi.

Lawson attended Reformed Seminary for the single purpose of being able to sit under the teaching of R. C. Sproul. He comments, "Dr. Sproul instructed me in the finer points of communication. Every one of his classes was filled with his passion to convey the truth of Scripture and still remains fresh and memorable in my mind." On May 18, 1990, he graduated from RTS with his doctorate in ministry degree.

Ministry in Alabama

In spring 1995, Lawson's family moved to Mobile, Alabama, where he had accepted the senior pastor position at Dauphin Way Baptist Church. Founded in 1904, Dauphin Way had become one of the largest churches on the Gulf Coast, with a prestigious list of previous pastors—kind of a "Who's Who" in the Southern Baptist Convention. Lawson accepted the call in the

great hope that he could continue what he had dedicated his life to—verse-by-verse exposition.

After only a few years, however, Lawson began to experience difficulty at Dauphin Way after several in leadership and in the congregation began to disagree with his preaching on the doctrines of grace. He sought much guidance from his mentor and friend John MacArthur, but the two of them saw no solution to the problems of Dauphin Way except resignation. After heart-wrenching agony and prayer, he resigned his pastorate in January 2003. Upon his resignation almost half the congregation, with great affection for God's Word and for Lawson's expository ministry, decided also to leave the church.

The next Sunday found the Lawson family and hundreds of others without a place to worship. Lawson received a call to meet with the divided congregation and preach to them. He agreed, and out of these ashes of theological division emerged Christ Fellowship Baptist Church. Christ Fellowship was the pulpit that would see his greatest ministry, hear his most in-depth sermons, and become the crown of his pastoral ministry.

In the years that followed, Lawson took his passionate verse-by-verse expositional ministry to various conference venues and pulpits around the world. In October 2012, after consulting with many mentors and pastoral colleagues, he ventured out in faith to found OnePassion Ministries, an extension of his preaching ministry, to be based in Dallas.

OnePassion was founded to ignite a supreme passion for God and His glory in all people throughout the world. The intentional focus of OnePassion is to impart the knowledge of the truth by equipping pastors and church leaders, strengthening believers in all walks of life, and spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. Through OnePassion, Lawson is building a ministry platform to enflame hearts with an all-consuming desire for Jesus Christ and His gospel.

Worldwide Ministry

Prior to the launch of OnePassion, R. C. Sproul invited Lawson to become a teaching fellow at Ligonier Ministries in 2009. From his seminary days at Reformed Theological Seminary, he had always recognized Sproul as a mentor in theological training and preaching and was now happy to join him in ministry. Ligonier Ministries has provided Lawson with tremendous opportunities to write books, preach at conferences, and train men in preaching through the newly founded Institute for Expository Preaching.

In addition, in 2015, after Lawson had taught for several years at the Master's Seminary in Sun Valley, California, John MacArthur invited him to oversee the seminary's doctorate of ministry program in the area of expository preaching. Under Lawson's guidance, this program has transformed into one of the best places in the world for men to prepare for pulpit ministry.

Though Lawson is dedicated to instructing other preachers in biblical exposition, he is also committed to preaching to all segments of the international church. His bold preaching has taken him around the world, from Russia, Ukraine, Scotland, Wales, England, Ireland, and Germany to Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, Italy, and South Africa. In addition, his sermons are posted online and listened to in all fifty states and numerous countries. Many who have never seen him have heard his voice and learned from his faithful proclamation of God's Word.

Lawson's sermons and the overflow of his diligent study and biblical preaching have been preserved in writing as well. He has authored more than twenty books, including biblical commentaries, books on Christian living, and surveys of church history and historical theology. He is the series editor of the Long Line of Godly Men biographies, published by Reformation Trust, and the executive editor of *Expositor* magazine, which features timely articles from leading expositors written for the instruction and nurturing of the coming generation of biblical preachers.

Biblically Driven

From the early days of his ministry, Lawson has been wholly committed to the sufficiency of Scripture. This commitment has fueled and driven everything he has preached for the past thirty years. From his time at seminary during the turbulent liberal days of the Southern Baptist Convention, he has been devoted to proclaiming the truth of God's Word.

Lawson recognizes a departure from the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture in the twentieth-century church. This departure is nowhere more clearly seen than in the evangelical pulpit. As he notes, "The content of preaching is becoming increasingly man-centered and overrun with heavy doses of cultural wisdom, therapeutic advice, psycho-babble, secular pragmatism, and political agendas, all mixed together with a barrage of personal anecdotes."¹ This departure from a firm belief in the sufficiency of Scripture

1. Steven J. Lawson, "The Sufficiency of Scripture in Preaching," *Expositor* 1 (September/October, 2014): 8.

results in weakened preachers who have lost their confidence in the message they are called to proclaim. Inevitably, Lawson maintains, weak pulpits result in weak Christians.

Defining the sufficiency of Scripture, Lawson writes, “[By sufficiency,] we mean the ability of God’s Word to produce any and all spiritual results intended by God, when it is accompanied by the supreme power of the Holy Spirit.”² For Lawson, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture affirms that everything *necessary* for the spiritual well-being of individuals, in salvation and sanctification as well as direction for gospel ministry, is found in God’s Word.

Lawson also maintains that Scripture itself affirms its own sufficiency. He points to Hebrews 4:12 as evidence: “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” The Bible claims to be “living,” meaning it is full of divine life, supernatural life, the life of God Himself. Lawson comments, “Every other book is a dead book, devoid of life. But not the Bible. It alone is alive, always relevant, never stagnant.”³ Lawson agrees with the German Reformer Martin Luther that “the Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me.”⁴

According to Hebrews 4:12, Scripture also affirms itself to be “active.” Interestingly, this is the same Greek word from which we derive the English word “energy.” Lawson observes, “This is to say, when Scripture is preached, it is always *energetic*, always *working*, always *executing* God’s sovereign purposes.”⁵ God affirmed through the prophet Isaiah,

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:11)

God has promised that when His Word is proclaimed, it will accomplish the eternal purpose for which it was intended by His own perfect will. In short, Scripture never fails to succeed in the work for which it is intended.

2. Lawson, “Sufficiency of Scripture,” 7.

3. Lawson, “Sufficiency of Scripture,” 8.

4. As quoted in *More Gathered Gold*, comp. John Blanchard (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), 26.

5. Lawson, “Sufficiency of Scripture,” 8.

Lawson firmly believes that the Bible is an infallible guide to those who follow it and that it addresses all the essential areas of life. He says, “The Scripture has all ability to lead our lives in the direction they should take. The Word is more than adequate to shine light into man’s chaos and confusion, replacing ignorance and lack of understanding with lucid direction, eternal perspective, and divine insight.”⁶ In the course of ministry, this firmly held doctrine and belief in the sufficiency of Scripture has enabled Lawson to stand behind the pulpit with firm confidence and conviction that what he is preaching is absolute truth and the word of God.

This belief has likewise given him the freedom to proclaim boldly all parts of Scripture. Lawson has never shied away from the misunderstood or controversial passages of Scripture. Even when he was told in one church not to preach certain texts in the book of Romans because of their controversial nature, he ardently refused, believing that it is God’s Word that transforms the heart rather than ingenuity of speech or eloquent words. Lawson stands in a long line of other preachers through the centuries who have refused to waver on the sufficiency, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture.

Theologically Passionate

Theological conviction is the blazing furnace behind Lawson’s passionate preaching. He not only stands in the pulpit firmly anchored in the truth of God’s Word but also upon the theological positions proclaimed by that Word. Lawson is passionate about the doctrine of God and everything that it includes.

Lawson’s system of theology begins with the glory of God. The unrivaled preeminence of God stands as the focal point of his theological universe. Scripture commands, according to Lawson, that God is to be the chief object of praise. In answering the question of what God’s glory is, he comments, “The Bible speaks of God’s glory in two primary ways. First, there is the *intrinsic* glory of God, which is the sum total of all His divine perfections and attributes.... Second, the Bible also speaks of the *ascribed* glory of God, or the glory that is given to Him.”⁷ He continues, “This, then, is the centerpiece of God’s saving purpose in the universe—the revelation and magnification

6. Lawson, “Sufficiency of Scripture,” 10.

7. Steven J. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2006), 31–32.

of His own glory.”⁸ This is to be the passionate heartbeat of all Christians, especially those who stand to preach: the promotion of the glory of God.

This intrinsic and resplendent glory is most magnificently displayed, as Lawson states, in the doctrines of grace. He writes, “Here, all three members of the Godhead—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—work together as *one* Savior, indivisibly united in rescuing radically corrupt sinners.”⁹ He continues:

Before time began, the Bible teaches, God the Father chose a people for Himself to be worshipers of His glory by becoming the objects of His grace. As an expression of His infinite love for His Son, the Father gave His elect to Christ as a love gift, a people who would praise Him forever and ever. The Father commissioned His Son to come into this world in order to redeem these chosen ones through His sacrificial death. The Father, along with the Son, also sent the Spirit into this world to apply the saving work of the Son to this same group of elect sinners. This vast number of redeemed saints—those *elected* by God, *purchased* by Christ, and *called* by the Spirit—will never fall from grace. They all shall be transported to heaven and glorified forever.¹⁰

In essence, these marvelous truths are grounded in five main headings that showcase the glory of God in man’s salvation. According to Lawson, each of these truths is deeply rooted and solidly grounded in the rich soil of God’s Word. He says, “When the Bible is rightly exegeted, carefully expounded, and properly explained, it clearly teaches these truths, which have been identified as total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.”¹¹ In short, these doctrinal convictions form the theological position of Calvinism, which, Lawson says, “is a God-centered, Christ-exalting way of viewing salvation.”¹² Calvinism identifies God as the only Savior and therefore the only object of rightful praise. He writes, “God alone supplies all that is necessary, both the grace *and* the faith.”¹³ Anything short of this robs God of glory, and we are

8. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace*, 32.

9. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace*, 32.

10. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace*, 33.

11. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace*, 33.

12. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace*, 33.

13. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace*, 33.

reminded, “I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another” (Isa. 42:8).

Lawson did not always hold to the doctrines of grace. But as he grew in his knowledge and study of God’s Word and came under the teaching, preaching, and guidance of men such as R. C. Sproul, James Montgomery Boice, and John MacArthur, he became convinced this was the clear teaching of Scripture. He writes, “The doctrines of grace are a cohesive system of theology in which the sovereignty of God is clearly displayed in the salvation of elect sinners.”¹⁴ This cohesive system has shaped and influenced every sermon Lawson has preached, and his pursuit of the glory of God has shaped every act of ministry he has performed. It is from these doctrines, handed down from Jesus, Paul, Augustine, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and many others, that Lawson derives the passion of his heart for the preaching of the Word of God—that sinners may be drawn to Him and that He may be glorified.

Expositionally Called

From the very beginning, when Lawson first began to sense the call of God upon his life to enter ministry, he was convinced that he was being called to be a preacher. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great expositor of Westminster Chapel in London, during a lecture series given on preaching at Westminster Theological Seminary, stated, “The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and most urgent need in the Church, it is the greatest need of the world also.”¹⁵ Lawson echoes the words of this English pulpiteer. He says, “A return to preaching—*true* preaching, *biblical* preaching, *expository* preaching—is the greatest need of this critical hour. If a reformation is to come to the church, it must be preceded by a reformation of the pulpit. As the pulpit goes, so goes the church.”¹⁶

What is expository preaching? Lawson’s definition is succinct and straightforward: “It is the man of God opening the Word of God and expounding its truths so that the voice of God may be heard, the glory of God seen, and the will of God obeyed.”¹⁷ More specifically, Lawson looks to

14. Lawson, *Foundations of Grace*, 30.

15. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 9.

16. Steven J. Lawson, *Famine in the Land: A Passionate Call for Expository Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 17.

17. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 18.

the Genevan Reformer John Calvin for a more detailed definition. Calvin stated that preaching involves the explication of Scripture, the unfolding of its natural and true meaning, while making application to the life and experience of the congregation.¹⁸ Calvin further stated, “Preaching is the public exposition of Scripture by the man sent from God, in which God Himself is present in judgment and in grace.”¹⁹ Lawson’s view is in accord with Calvin’s, which strikes at the heart of what expository preaching truly is.

Biblical preaching, according to Lawson, must come from the life of one who is fervent for the glory of God, zealous for the Word of God, and aflame for the souls of men, women, and youth. He points to the pattern that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy for him to follow in his own pulpit (1 Tim. 4:13). Timothy’s ministry was to consist of three parts—the public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching. Lawson affirms, “These three components are the strong and sturdy pillars on which all biblical preaching should rest.”²⁰

First, the preacher is to read the Word. This refers to the public reading of Scripture in the corporate gathering of the church’s worship, a practice dating back to the time of the prophet Ezra (Neh. 8:1–8). Lawson recognizes the centrality of Scripture reading in the worship of the early church. For instance, underscoring the central importance of the Scriptures in the life of the church, John Calvin noted that Paul “places reading before doctrine and exhortation; for, undoubtedly, the Scripture is the fountain of all wisdom, from which pastors must draw all that they place before their flock.”²¹ Lawson believes the preacher is to be the worship leader during the gathering of the church and that he should therefore follow Paul’s instruction to read the Scriptures publicly.

Second, Paul instructed Timothy to accompany reading with “exhortation.” Lawson points out that the word “exhortation” (*paraklesis*) means “to come alongside” with the purpose of helping someone who is weak or wayward.²² This refers to the element of preaching that applies the Word of God to the people’s lives. The preacher must not only read the Word of God

18. John H. Leigh, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research,” *Review and Expositor* 86 (1989): 32, 34.

19. As quoted in *Gathered Gold*, comp. John Blanchard (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955), 33.

20. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 112.

21. *Calvin’s Commentaries* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 11:115.

22. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 113.

to the people but must also exhort them to obey it. This is where the living element of the Word of God initiates life within the hearts of the hearers. This exhortation may take many forms—instruction, warning, rebuke, edification, counsel, comfort, but, according to John MacArthur, “always involves a binding of the conscience.”²³ Thus, Lawson believes that the ultimate goal of Bible exposition is changed lives. He says, “Preaching must do more than simply inform the mind; it must grip the heart and challenge the will. The entire person—mind, emotion, and will—must be impacted. Exposition is not merely for the transmitting of information; it is for the effecting of transformation.”²⁴ So not only is the preacher to publicly read the Scripture but he is also to properly apply its truths to listeners’ lives.

Third, preaching must include “teaching” or, more literally, “the teaching” (*didaskalia*), which refers to the explanation of the biblical text. This, according to Lawson, is the careful unfolding of the meaning of the passage. In short, the text must be explained. Drawing a distinction between “exhortation” and “teaching,” he says, “While ‘exhortation’ is more application-oriented, ‘teaching’ is more doctrine-oriented.”²⁵ To teach the Scriptures is to get to the heart of the passage and the veil, as it were, that hides the face of God. This properly captures what Martyn Lloyd-Jones believed being biblical meant: “My idea of being biblical is that you bring out the real message, the treasure of the Scriptures.”²⁶ This is why serious preparation is required, for the preacher integrates each biblical text into the larger system of theology and shows how each passage, each word, each phrase fits perfectly into the whole counsel of God. Lawson writes, “The expositor is to demonstrate how all biblical truth fits together.”²⁷ He believes this involves disciplined, rigorous study in God’s Word. He notes, “All this requires the pastor’s personal study in the original languages, historical background, authorial intent, cross-references, cultural background, geography, grammar, literary structure, and systematic theology.”²⁸ Such diligent study is entirely necessary if the true meaning of the biblical text is to be conveyed.

According to Lawson, these three elements—the reading, exhortation, and teaching—are essential for true biblical preaching. These three elements

23. John MacArthur Jr., *1 Timothy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995), 176.

24. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 114.

25. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 115.

26. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2013), 268.

27. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 115.

28. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 116.

are all present in Lawson's preaching, and his commitment to these principles has shaped his pulpit ministry to be one of strong, biblical exposition impacting countless lives with transforming truth.

Holding Forth the Torch of Truth

In every generation, God providentially gifts His church with men who are committed to His Word, passionate about His glory, and dedicated to His calling. One such man for our current generation is Steven J. Lawson. His life has been dedicated to biblical exposition and the proclamation of the truth. His desire is to train a new army of gospel heralds who will be unleashed upon a sin-soaked world. His heart is to call the modern evangelical church back to the biblical command to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2).

As Lawson has often stated, "Evangelical churches need to recapture the power of biblical preaching—preaching that is courageous, compelling, confrontative, and compassionate."²⁹ When Charles H. Spurgeon observed the decline of dynamic preaching in his own day, he pleaded for the Lord to raise up a new generation of biblical preachers.

We want again Luthers, Calvins, Bunyans, Whitefields, men fit to mark eras, whose names breathe terror in our foemen's ears. We have dire need of such. Whence will they come to us? They are the gifts of Jesus Christ to the Church, and will come in due time. He has power to give us back again a golden age of preachers, and when the good old truth is once more preached by men whose lips are touched as with a live coal from off the altar, this shall be the instrument in the hand of the Spirit for bringing about a great and thorough revival of religion in the land.

I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. The moment the Church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her. It has been through the ministry that the Lord has always been pleased to revive and bless His Churches.³⁰

Lawson comments, "May God raise up such proclaimers of His divine truth who will preach with growing confidence in the power of His Word to perform its sacred work. May Christ give to His church again an army of

29. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 75.

30. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Early Years* (London: Banner of Truth, 1962), 1:v.

biblical expositors who will proclaim the Scriptures boldly in the power of the Holy Spirit.”³¹

As Steven Lawson stood in the pulpit of Christ Fellowship Baptist Church for his final sermon in the summer of 2014, he preached the message he has been preaching for the past thirty years: “Stand firm in the Lord” (Phil. 4:1 NASB). This has been his call to three separate congregations and countless Christians who have heard him preach at conferences around the world. With bold passion, Lawson answers the call he extends to others, standing firm in the faith and holding forth the torch of truth.

31. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, 75–76.