

Writing as Teaching

Florida College Lectures (2/6/18)

I. Introduction

- A. My relationship with writing is like giving birth, it happens only after much painful, screaming labor. But, through the process I have found the joy of writing, and I hope I can share it with you today.
- B. Before we talk about the glories of writing we need to ask, “Is writing still an effective form of teaching?” The last I heard, a thing was not real nor important unless it is on YouTube. In our visual, sound-bite culture, can writing make a difference? Or, has writing gone the way of Egyptian Hieroglyphics—an interesting form of archaic communication?
1. To some degree I would say, “Yes.” I realize, in some ways, more people than ever are writing. Through technology we pound out a mountain of words every day. Of course, half of those are emojis, abbreviations and acronyms. That’s not the kind of writing I’m talking about today.
 2. Today we are talking about a writing with the purpose of communicating Biblical truths. This lecture is under the heading of “The Preacher Workshop.” As preachers we have opportunities to write bulletin articles, blog posts, tracts and books. Today we will think about how we can do that effectively.
 3. Please note that the nature of this topic is largely observational and experiential. Therefore, this lecture my views and values, and you are free to disagree if you want to be wrong.
 4. *Here is my goal:* To give us tools to be good and godly writers.
- C. As we proceed I feel the need to highlight the rewards of writing. Asking people to write is a little like asking people to run a marathon—everyone wants to say they did it, but we don’t want to go through the work of doing it. But, we will be more likely to write if we remember the benefits.

II. The Benefits of Writing

- A. **Clarity of Thought.** For example, writing creates clarity of thought. Many times, I thought I knew something, until I tried to write on it. Our brains have trouble seeing the holes in our reasoning, but the written word exposes the gaps.
1. Frances Bacon wrote, “*Reading makes a full man; conference a ready man; and writing and exact man.*” Write, if for no other reason, to know what you believe. Renown historian, David McCullough said, “*Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That’s why it’s so hard.*”¹
 2. The best way to understand a Biblical text is to write about it. No one else may read it, but it will help you learn it. Writing creates clarity. Oration alone can obscure the message with the personality and looks of the speaker, but the written word can lay bare the bones of the thought.

¹ (Interview with NEH chairman Bruce Cole, Humanities, July/Aug. 2002, Vol. 23/No. 4)

3. A couple of years ago I was particularly troubled by the nature of the world. So, I decided to write about it. I intended to write a fiery piece, railing against society. Then, I visited the Biblical record and saw how the early church faced the social injustices of their day. My tone began to change. My fears began to subside. The decision to *write* brought clarity. I wrote an article entitled, “What Can You Do About This Mess?”
4. When it comes to Biblical teaching God’s people need more clarity. That clarity most often comes from the Word, through a word, that is written.

B. ***Changes Your Life.*** This clarity of thought then begins to change who you are.

1. Israel’s kings were to write for themselves a copy of the Law (Deut. 17:18-20).
“¹⁸“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, ²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.”
(Deut. 17:18-20)

The process of writing accomplished three things. It created respect for God, obedience to His word, and humility toward people. Reverence, obedience, humility forged into the heart at the end of a pen.

2. Writing creates an opportunity for self-examination. When it is done well, our inner motives are laid bare, and the truths of God’s word are imprinted more deeply in our hearts.

C. ***Changes Your World.*** Once writing does its work in us, perhaps it can help others. Spoken words are quickly forgotten or modified in the hearer’s mind, but written words can have longevity. They can be read and re-read for understanding.

1. If our goal is to impact others with the gospel, the written word is one of the most effective, long-lasting ways to do that. How often do you read a commentary or an article from someone long-since dead?
2. Yet, we must not put too much stock in the immortality of our words! Each generation thinks they found the medium that will preserve their brilliance for the ages, yet time has a way of reducing our work to ash. Every article or book we write is an increasingly smaller needle in a haystack of data can be wiped out with one pull of a plug.
3. Yet, God in His providence can choose to use the written word far beyond the time and space it was written. So, write.
4. [Through writing I had studies with a Pentecostal preacher and her husband in New Jersey, an agnostic in Atlanta going through a divorce, a Pastor in Arizona about baptism.]

D. All these benefits make us excited about writing, but before we form the first word we need to stop and think about some of the problems of the written word!

III. The Problems of the Written Word

A. ***The Influence Problem.*** One of the benefits of the written word is influence, but that is also one of the problems. Who wouldn't want to shout the message of the gospel around the world? But, if that message spoiled with an ounce of selfish ambition, worldly wisdom, or doctrinal error, it can make a lot more people sick. The influence that comes with writing needs to be used with the utmost care!

1. A few years ago, Swell Hall was asked about his role in writing for Christianity Magazine. He said,

“I created some distrust of papers. ... During the divisions of the 50's and 60's the papers not only provided teaching, but they exercised an influence far beyond anything they included in their articles. One or two papers became the focal point of sectarian division.”²

- a. Writing can be used to create parties, to get a following, to amass a movement, and end up harming the people of God and obscuring the purpose of the gospel.
 - b. Writing has always had this power, but the capacity for communication has never been greater. Therefore, the danger of misusing this influence deserves persistent attention.
2. The way our culture communicates drastically changed in the last decade. We have access to more information, from more sources, more frequently.
- a. This creates an environment where change happens rapidly. Social and religious trends sweep across the country at the speed of light. You either fit it or be left out! Yet, wisdom is most often born through long hours of careful thought—reasoned not from circumstance, but from Scripture.
 - b. In less than one generation, the most influential voices in our lives come from far beyond our local communities.
 - c. We are “Living in the Shadow of Babel,” and I wrote about it recently. Babel, was also the age of communication. It did not result in utopia, but societal collapse and divine judgement. Like Babel we are tempted to find our security in numbers. We seek immortality by building our tower on the web.
 - d. But, may I remind us, God did not choose to work through the city and its crowd. God changed the world through one old nomad who lived in tents and followed His commands.
 - e. The influence of writing should not be used to erect monuments and amass crowds, but to call people to pick up their cross and sacrificially follow the carpenter from Nazareth.
3. The influence that comes with writing needs to be used with the utmost care!

B. ***The Narcissist Problem.*** The message of writing will be wrong, when our motive for writing is flawed. The essential question to ask before the first letter is written is, “Why?” *Why* do you want to write?

1. If your inner voice of integrity replies, “I want to write so people will know me; I will have job security; people will understand how talented I am.”

² (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbQKVgEMT3E>; at the 2:40 mark)

- a. Then it is time to turn off your computer, put down your pen, and get down on the ground and ask God to forgive your pride.
 - b. Then go out and serve God in obscurity for months, only for the good it does others and the glory it brings to God.
 - c. Then, only after your arrogant beast has received a mortal blow, do you get back up and write God's truth for God's purposes alone.
2. In our day of instant feedback writers become like junkies waiting for the next fix of approval. "How many times was my writing shared, viewed, liked or followed?" The statistics change every minute. Writers are trained to be like politicians who write for approval ratings.
 3. Years ago, I heard an older preacher talk about how writing can be used as a means of self-promotion.
 - a. He warned young men not to be determined to write publicly until they were 40 and wrestled their pride into submission. Of course, pride doesn't end when you are 40, but now I understand his point.
 - b. When you write to be known, you will either become the gun-slinger who makes your name by shooting down the enemy in the street, or you will become the politician who repeats the values of the day so they can hear the roars of the crowd.
 4. Our reason for writing must be better. We write because the message of the text is burning in our bones and we cannot restrain it. It is not until we are content to be the nameless prophet, that we are ready to put our name on the cover of a book or the end of an article.
- C. Once the foundation of the writer is solid, we can begin to think of how to erect the structure of the writing. So, let's consider some good habits for writing.
1. But please note these are habits, or disciplines. For most people, writing is not a magic gift that flows effortlessly from the mind like a gentle stream. Writing is a discipline exercised, a skill learned, and a laborious work.
 2. Many give up on writing because it is hard. It is. But you can learn to do it, and it will make you a better person and your world a better place.
 3. We will start with sentences and work our way upward.

IV. Good Habits for the Written Word

- A. ***Be Concise.*** Good writing is concise. William Zinsser wrote, "Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon."³
1. In years past authors restrained the length of their articles to fit into "papers," bulletins or tracts, and each page cost money. But today, a blog post of 5,000 words cost the same as a post of 5 words. But that doesn't mean it is better. The wall of words we construct often obstruct the message. One of the most precious tools of a writer is the delete key. "Cut it till it bleeds." Remove the fat.

³ Zinsser, William. (1998). *On Writing Well*. New York: HarperCollins.

2. I listened to Paul Earnhart in an interview I mentioned earlier. Most of us know Brother Earnhart as one of the most skilled, meaty, substantive writers of our time. In the interview he gives us a peek into one thing made his writing so good—the 750-word limit of Christianity Magazine forced him to be concise.

He said, “There were times I was glad my article was too long, because it gave me a good excuse to rewrite the thing. [Brevity] made it better. Every adjective, I don’t care how beautiful; every phrase, I don’t care how wonderful; if it didn’t carry weight it had to go.”⁴

Clarity begins with brevity. Just think of how meaningful and powerful proverbs are—they are truths distilled down to their essence.

3. My own practice is to slice out the unnecessary words and phrases while I write, before I become enchanted by them.
 - a. Then, I make a copy of the article and go back through it with the expectation that 10% to 20% of this must go.
 - b. Then, I send it off to a group of examiners with the request, “What can I cut out?”
4. Good writing is the result of writing, re-writing, and re-writing again, until just the essentials remain.
5. Be concise. Try it, even if it is for a bulletin article only 5 people will read, or for a tract on one will ever pick up. Develop the skill of being concise and it will make you a better thinker and communicator.

B. **Be Clear.** Concise thoughts then need to be put into clear, logical progressions. Now, I realize that some writers prefer to record their stream of consciousness, but I find such streams are often too shallow to navigate and don’t go anywhere. Good writing is most often the result of a clear purpose accomplished by a careful plan.

1. *A Clear Purpose.* This begins with a clear understanding of your purpose: “What is God’s wisdom on this subject? What does His word say?” Can I describe the purpose of my writing simply and concisely, in five words or less? That is my purpose. Everything I write drives towards that goal.
2. *A Clear Outline.* But, I will only arrive at my destination if I first, map it out. This is accomplished by an outline. Divide up the writing into a logical progression of thoughts that persuasively arrive at your stated purpose.
 - a. For me, that outline takes the form a list of sentences; each one containing a single thought. Each sentence forms a point on the outline
 - b. I examine those sentences to eliminate any redundancies.
 - c. Then I order those sentences in a logical fashion
 - d. Then I am ready to flesh them out and write. Or as Brother Dee Bowman memorably said, “You write sentences upon which you hang paragraphs.”
 - e. Writing should not reenact the wilderness wanderings. It should chart the direct root from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land.
 - f. Our job is to take the reader on a guided tour of God’s wisdom until they arrive at the destination of truth—fully aware of how they got there. Yes,

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xpdXiqu3kA> (6:50 mark)

there are rare times when you write a piece that flows organically into a crystal-clear thought. But good writing most often begins with a clear purpose explained through a logical outline, based on careful, Biblical study.

3. *Read It Out Loud.* One tool that will help you detect the clarity of your material is to read it out loud. My office walls hear some of the most poorly constructed sentences, but I don't know it until I hear it.

C. ***Be Evaluated.*** Another thing that will improve our writing is to be evaluated by others. Evaluation is something that is missing today, to our disadvantage. Preachers used to send their article to a paper. It was examined by group of editors who often provided feedback. "This is too long. This is unclear. This is untrue. This is a grammatical train wreck." The writer was presented with an opportunity to grow.

1. Today, most of the things posted and emailed have passed before no other eyes, but our own.
2. I deeply appreciate my years working on Focus Magazine. Many of my fellow-editors helped me clarify my thinking, and clean up my writing. Being evaluated made me a better writer; a better person, and I still need it.
3. It is wise to develop a group of evaluators. Men and women who are skilled in own ways, who are not there to pat you on the back, but they have the courage and permission to question, correct, and cut.

D. ***Be Biblical.*** But, now to the main reason I was willing to talk on this subject. The world is full of men and women who skillfully write, and you can learn their techniques on the internet. We don't seek to just be good writers, but godly ones. This requires two things: 1) a godly character in the writer, and 2) Biblical content in the writing.

1. *Godly Writing Radiates from Godly Character.* Before we assume the influence of writing, we must carefully consider ourselves! *Good teaching radiates from godly character.* A good writer is made from the inside out. It begins with an inner commitment to truth and a compassion for people.
 - a. We often look for gimmicks, offers, and methods that will make our writing popular and our churches grow. But, God is looking for holiness among His servants. The greatest criticism Jesus had for the teachers of His day, was not so much in what they taught, but in who they were. The most important work a writer does is on himself/herself, before the word is written.
 - b. All the anger, divisiveness, pretense, and pride are to be wrestled into submission before the writer types the first word. All my articles end with the same tagline, "*Let all that you do be done in love*" (1 Cor. 16:14). It is there to remind myself that my love for God and others is the context in which this article must be written, and I pray will be read. So, pray, confess, repent and read 1 Corinthians 13 before you write. Being a *godly* writer is more important than being a *good* writer.
2. *Godly Writing Communicates Biblical Content.* Godly writing, then, communicates Biblical content. I realize there is room for all kinds of writing and there is joy in a diversity of styles. But to be a godly writer the source of your message needs to be God's word. It is the beginning point of our research; the major influence in our outline.

- a. None of us actually say, “I don’t want the Bible in my writing!” But, we can obscure the Biblical message by some poor habits.
 - b. *Growing Our Thought in the Wrong Pot.* In other words, our message arises out of our mind rather than God’s word. We came up with such a clever idea for an article, we don’t want the Bible to get in the way.
 - 1) So, the meat of the message comes from our wisdom, and we sprinkle on a few verses for flavor. This approach flatters ourselves and is often easier, than the understanding the wisdom of God and letting it outshine all else.
 - 2) In some circles readers have developed a thirst for story over Scripture, and writers are happy to serve the drinks. Biblical teaching fades into dark behind the spotlight shining on story. Ah, it is good writing, but is it godly writing.
 - c. *Write to Prove I’m Right.* This writing has the goal of validating our creed and putting down our enemies. Scriptures get twisted to condone the status quo.
 - d. *We Don’t Stop Talking Long Enough to Listen.* If you have young children at home, you know this. You have important things for them to hear. But, they often do not hear you because they have 45 questions of their own, and 95 things they want to say. Now, those questions are important, but their primary need is to listen! As writers we have questions we want to ask, things we want to say, but sometimes we need to just stop and listen to what God says, to His values, and write about that. “But, people are not interested in that!” Maybe, but God is. Write about that.
3. I urge us to chart a different course where the wisdom and themes of Scripture captivate our minds and populate our writing. As a result, we can create a new appetite among readers who delight in the words of God, and live for the Word who became flesh.
 4. Our desire is, not just to be good writers, but to be godly ones.

V. Conclusion

- A. I know a man who was not a Christian, but he went with his wife to worship. At the building he picked up a couple of tracts about salvation and the nature of the church. At night, after his wife went to sleep, he put a small chair in his closet. He shut the door, turned on the light, and read those tracts and studied his Bible.
 1. One day at worship, his wife was stunned to see him respond to the gospel.
 2. I’m glad that man had those tracts and read his Bible, because his name was Curry Lynch, and he was my granddad. His life was changed by good and godly writing.
- B. I’m excited about the lives that can be eternally changed by ours! May God bless us in that task.

