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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



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HEARING THE WORD: ROBERT HALL'S
REFLECTIONS ON HOW BEST TO PROFIT
SPIRITUALLY FROM PREACHING

Michael A.G. Haykin

No one has ever been a great preacher or a greatly used preacher without living for preaching.

—IAIN H. MURRAY

Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of God on earth.

—JOHN WESLEY

All hope in the ministry lies in the Spirit of God operating on the spirits of men.

—CHARLES H. SPURGEON

No one can be a great preacher without great feeling.

—JAMES W. ALEXANDER

In a century renowned for outstanding preachers, there is no doubt that the Calvinistic Baptist Robert Hall, Jr. (1764-1831), deserves to be remembered as one of the great preachers of the nineteenth century.¹ The son of Robert Hall, Sr. (1728-91), the pastor of the Baptist cause in Arnesby, Leicestershire, the younger Hall had been a precocious child: learning how to speak and read by means of the inscriptions carved on gravestones in a cemetery, devouring the works of Jonathan Edwards on *The Religious Affections and Freedom of the Will* before the age of nine, and composing essays on various religious topics before he was ten. From 1778 to 1781 Hall studied under Caleb Evans (1737-91) at the Bristol Baptist Academy. After graduating from the Academy, Hall went to King's College, Aberdeen, where he obtained his M.A. in 1785. Hall subsequently returned to Bristol as assistant pastor to Evans in Broadmead Church and tutor in classics at the Academy, where he began to acquire a reputation as a stunning preacher.

In July 1791, Hall was called to the Baptist church in Cambridge, where he served until 1806. His ministry in this university center was far-reaching in its influence. Fifty to sixty students regularly came to hear Hall preach, and the congregation grew to the point in 1798 that the meetinghouse had to be enlarged to accommodate another two hundred people.² During the last two years of his ministry

at Cambridge, however, Hall experienced two extensive nervous breakdowns, brought on by overwork, crippling pain that had dogged him since he was a young child, and the melancholy induced by the drabness of the fenland scenery around Cambridge.³ His physician recommended to Hall that a complete restoration could come about only if he resigned his Cambridge pastorate, took up smoking, and got married. Hall followed his doctor's advice to the letter and a complete recovery was effected!

Upon Hall's recovery to health in 1807, he accepted the pastoral charge of Harvey Lane Baptist Church in Leicester, where William Carey (1761-1834) had once pastored. Once again, there was Hall's "great preaching, crowded and overflowing congregations, a meeting-house that had to be enlarged more than once to save people being turned away disappointed, and a membership that was more than trebled during his time."⁴ Hall's final pastorate was in the church in which he had begun his pastoral ministry, Broadmead Church, Bristol. Dogged by ill-health for most of his life, he died in Bristol in 1831, his final days wracked with great physical suffering.

Hall's close friend and biographer, Olinthus Gregory (1774-1841), has recorded for us the striking effect of Hall's preaching, which, he emphasized, was repeatedly seen when Hall preached. Gregory noted that Hall usually

began with hesitation, and often in a very low and feeble tone, coughing frequently, as though he were oppressed by asthmatic obstructions. As he proceeded, his manner became easy, graceful, and at length highly impassioned. . . . The further he advanced, the more spontaneous, natural, and free from labour seemed the progression of thought. . . . From the commencement of his discourse an almost breathless silence prevailed, deeply impressive and solemnizing from its singular intensiveness. Not a sound was heard but

that of the preacher's voice. . . . As he advanced and increased in animation, five or six auditors would be seen to rise and lean forward over the front of their pews, still keeping their eyes upon him. Some new or striking sentiment or expression would in a few minutes, cause others to rise in like manner: shortly afterwards still more, and so on, until, long before the close of the sermon, it often happened that a considerable portion of the congregation was seen standing. . . .⁵

Harvey Lane Baptist Church, Hall's third pastorate, was in the Northamptonshire Association, which had been founded in 1764. Associations of churches in geographical proximity had been a regular feature of Calvinistic Baptist life since the denomination's seventeenth-century beginnings. By the last half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century these associations were holding annual meetings at which representatives of the churches in these associations, usually the pastors and elders, met for a couple of days. These annual meetings were marked by rich times of corporate prayer, solid fellowship, and occasions for the public preaching of the Scriptures. Each of the churches in the association was supposed to send a letter to the annual meeting informing their sister congregations of their state, newsworthy items and prayer concerns. And at some point in the two-day meeting one of the pastors drew up a letter to all of the churches in the association on behalf of the association itself. It would be ratified, printed after the annual meeting, and sent out as a circular letter. At the annual meeting of the Northamptonshire Association in 1813 Robert Hall agreed to write the following year's circular letter for the Association on the subject of "Hearing the Word."

PREACHING—"AN ORDINANCE OF GOD"

Hall began the circular letter by observing that preaching is "an ordinance of God." What he meant by this

phrase is explained later in the letter, when Hall stated that preaching has been especially appointed by God to bring spiritual blessings to God's people.⁶ The Baptist author could also describe preaching as a "means of grace," that is, a "consecrated channel" in which God's spiritual mercies flow. In other words, preaching is one of the means by which the Holy Spirit extends the kingdom of God. Thus, "where the gospel is not preached," the effects of the Spirit's work are "rarely to be discerned." This was not only a theological conviction held by Hall, but also one that he believed could be readily discerned from a perusal of the history of religion: "In all ages, it appears that the Spirit is accustomed to follow in the footsteps of his revealed Word."⁷ Christian spirituality and biblical spiritual experience are thus vitally dependent on the preaching of the Word. Where the latter is absent, the former is unlikely to be found. In making this point, Hall is revealing his indebtedness to a long line of Reformed forebears stretching back to the sixteenth-century Reformers, for whom the unbreakable union of the Word and the Spirit was a foundational truth.

The importance of preaching for the life of the church was apparent to Hall from the fact that when the first Christian churches were formed, "an order of men was appointed in each society for the express purpose of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments." The appointment of this "order of men" was necessary, Hall averred, because most Christians have little spare time for the detailed study of and reflection upon God's Word that is necessary for providing others with an "extensive acquaintance with divine truth." While it is a privilege of "inestimable value" to have the Scriptures translated into one's mother tongue and to be able to read them, Hall was convinced that this was not enough for a believer's spiritual growth. First, there are "difficulties in the Bible which

require to be elucidated" by someone who has the time to ferret out the meaning of these difficult passages. Moreover, Hall was convinced that the "living voice of a preacher" can produce a deeper and "more lasting impression" than can be gained from reading alone. In Hall's words: "the combined effect of countenance, gesture, and voice, accompanying a powerful appeal to the understanding and heart, on subjects of everlasting moment, can scarcely fail of being great."⁸

HEARING THE WORD OF GOD WITH SPIRITUAL PROFIT

After these prefatory remarks regarding the importance of the preaching of the Scriptures, Hall gave a series of eight directions to his readers, most of whom were "lay" people, on how to hear the Word of God properly. First, believers should come with "a prepared heart," that is, one that has been prepared by "secret prayer" to listen to the preached Word with serious attention and devotion to God. Hall emphasized this time of prayer should also include a definite request for the one who is to preach that he might be given "light, love, and liberty" in order that the "mystery of the gospel" might be proclaimed as it ought to be.⁹ Then, one must come with a "reverence and esteem of the glorious gospel," which Hall explained in terms of the pre-eminent place that the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Calvinistic Baptist community afforded to preaching. The believer must be conscious that the preaching of the gospel is "the chief, though not the only, means of possessing . . . its advantages."¹⁰

Third, as one listens to the sermon, it should be with attention and with a determination not to give place to wandering thoughts. Here Hall also devoted a paragraph to criticize those who regularly fell asleep during the sermon, a practice that he believed was "not prevalent in any other

place of public resort." Do not such people, Hall said, imitating the apostle Paul's style in 1 Corinthians 11:22, have "beds to sleep in, that they convert the house of God into a dormitory"?¹¹ The fact that the average length of the sermon among eighteenth-century Dissenters was an hour or so—with some as long as two hours—may well have contributed to this problem,¹² although this problem is certainly not unique to Hall's day.

Then, Hall maintained, there should be a willingness to listen to preaching on each and every section of the Word of God. Hall knew of some that were "in raptures while the preacher is insisting on the doctrines of grace" but had no time for sermons on the nature of a holy life and the ethical responsibilities of the believer. Others were all for so-called "practical preaching," yet had "no relish for that truth which can alone sanctify the heart." In Hall's mind both attitudes were wrong, for love for the Word of God and its proclamation entails a love for "every part of it, in its due proportion, and its proper place."¹³

Fifth, along with attentive listening there must be a willingness to apply what is heard. Hall likened the person who hears the Word preached and refuses to apply it to his or her life to an individual who goes to a feast, spends his or her time reflecting on how the food has been prepared and how it is ideally suited for the other guests, but tastes not a morsel. It is not fortuitous that Hall should choose such an illustration. It well reveals the very high regard in which preaching was held by him and his fellow Baptists. The opportunity to hear the Word preached was nothing less than a feast that God provided for the soul. As Hall went on to say, "the Word of God is the food of souls," giving them "strength and refreshment."¹⁴

Then, the believer must be careful not to come to hear the Word of God in a critical frame of mind, where every fault and imperfection of the preacher is magnified out of

proportion, and the good and weighty things that he says are obscured by such judgments. "Hear the Word of God less in the spirit of judges than of those who shall be judged by it," Hall admonished his readers. Seventh, those who listen to sermons must be more than mere sermon-tasters; they have to be imbued with a spirit of obedience and be doers of the Word.¹⁵ This directive to apply what is heard during the sermon seems to be materially identical to the fifth directive described above.

Finally, Hall instructed the members of the churches to which this circular letter was being sent to take time after they have heard the preaching of the Word to meditate on what was spoken and to "spare no pains to fasten it upon [their] hearts." Satan, he told them, always seeks opportunity to rob men and women of the Word of God. To support this declaration Hall turned to the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. There Christ states that some of those who hear the Word have it stolen out of their hearts by Satan before it can bear fruit (Matthew 13:19). In the context of this parable it is clear that such individuals cannot be regarded as believers. Hall, however, appears to see in this aspect of the parable of the sower a general statement about Satan's policy regarding the Word of God. As such he can admonish *believers* to be careful not to engage in frivolous conversation or thoughts when they go home from worship lest Satan wrest from their hearts the treasure that has been placed there through the hearing of God's Word. Hall concluded the circular letter with a brief explanation of why Satan was gripped by such animosity toward the Scriptures. The evil one is "conscious that the Word of God is capable of elevating us to that pinnacle of happiness whence he fell."¹⁶

CONCLUSION

This remark, coming as it does in the closing sentences

of this tract, is well positioned to impress upon the reader a leading conviction of the British Calvinistic Baptist community to which Hall belonged: central to their spirituality and to their worship were the Scriptures. This devotion to God's Word lies at the heart of their tradition. To use a description coined by Alister McGrath, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Calvinistic Baptists, of whom Hall is an excellent example in this regard, are clearly "Word-centred evangelicals."¹⁷ A marvelous expression of this predilection and devotion to God's Word, and a fitting conclusion to this article, comes in a sermon that was preached in 1791 by John Sutcliff (1752-1815), one of Hall's good friends. Sutcliff has been describing the various qualities that are characteristic of one who is zealous for God's honor and glory. Among them, he says, is an unshakable commitment to the Bible

as the *sacred Chest*, containing the Oracles of God, attending to which you may separate truth from error and so receive the former, as the most salutary food, but reject the latter, as the most deadly poison; as the *Measuring-Reed* by which every thing in the house and worship of God is to be exactly adjusted, that so Zion's fair building may rise according to the pattern seen in the mount [see Exodus 25:40], while all the goings out and comings in of her highly favoured inhabitants are divinely approved; as the *Test* by which every part of your experience is to be examined, that so the pure gold and the worthless dross may be distinguished; and as the *unerring Rule* by which your conduct as it respects God, your neighbour, and yourselves, in things civil or sacred may be regulated, that so a conscience void of offence towards God and man may be in some happy degree enjoyed.¹⁸

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Notes

1. For an account of Hall's life, see Olinthus Gregory, "A Brief Memoir of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M." in his and Joseph Belcher, eds., *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publ., 1854), 3:3-75.
2. L. E. Addicott, "Introduction" to *Church Book: St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge 1720-1832* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1991), xxi.
3. *St. Andrew's Street*, xxii.
4. *St. Andrew's Street*, xxii.
5. Gregory, "Brief Memoir," 36-37, *passim*.
6. *On Hearing the Word* (*The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.*, eds. Olinthus Gregory and Joseph Belcher [New York: Harper & Brothers, Publ., 1852], 1:249-50).
7. *Works*, 1:250-51.
8. *Works*, 1:249-50.
9. *Works*, 1:252. In making this point about praying for the preacher, Hall clearly has in mind such New Testament passages as Ephesians 6:19 and Colossians 4:3.
10. *Works*, 1:253.
11. *Works*, 1:253-54.
12. Edmund Calamy (1671-1732), the historian of eighteenth-century Dissent, stated in 1727 that the average Dissenting minister of his day preached "two distinct Discourses on the Lord's Day, the one in the Forenoon, the other in the Afternoon," and that "each Sermon is about an hour's length" (cited Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* [Westminster: Dacre Press, 1946], 193). See also Duncan Coomer, *English Dissent under the Early Hanoverians* (London: The Epworth Press, 1946), 35. For references to two-hour sermons, see Olin C. Robison, "The Particular Baptists in England 1760-1820" (Unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Regent's Park College, Oxford University, 1963), 233.
13. *Works*, 1:254-55.
14. *Works* 1:255-56.
15. *Works*, 1:256-58.

16. *Works*, I:258-59.
17. *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 66.
18. *Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts Illustrated* (London: W. Button, 1791), 5, italics in the original. For further details on Sutcliff, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, His Friends and His Times* (Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994).