

Nine Spiritual Disciplines from Charles Octavius Boothe (1845)

January 26, 2018

by David Schrock

As we finish up a month-long study on the personal and public spiritual disciplines, and this Sunday we turn to consider the subject of racial reconciliation, I want to share a book I've recently read: *Plain Theology for Plain People* by Charles Octavius Boothe (1845–1924), edited by Walter Strickland. In what follows I will introduce the man and his work, as well as the nine spiritual disciplines that should mark every believers' life.

I encourage you, if you are looking for a short, readable book on doctrine that is heavy on Scripture and clear on doctrine, take up and read Boothe's *Plain Theology for Plain People*.

Charles Octavius Boothe (1845–1924)

Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church is an historic church in Montgomery, Alabama. As the name reflects today, it is the church that called the twenty-six year old Martin Luther King, Jr. to be its pastor in 1954. And as the sign (above) reminds us, it is the church that organized the Montgomery bus boycott. But long before its critical role in the Civil Rights Movement, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church had a long history of gospel-faithfulness under pastors like Charles Octavius Boothe.

Boothe was born into slavery in 1845. As Walter Strickland reminds us, "he was the legal property of Nathaniel Hawthorne" (*Plain Theology for Plain People*, vii). In 1863, he along with four million slaves were liberated by the Emancipation Proclamation; in 1865 he became a Christian; and in 1866 he received baptism.

From this starting point, Boothe took seriously the call to follow Christ, and very soon he "worked to improve the spiritual, social, and intellectual well-being of blacks in a society that denied their humanity before God and in its Constitution" (viii). In his efforts, he planted two churches---the First Colored Baptist Church in Meridian, Mississippi and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama (ix). Later Boothe would join in the Great Migration and move to Detroit, Michigan, where he would die in 1924.

Little is known about his time in Detroit, but even more---and this is unfortunate---what is known about Boothe's life and ministry is not known in the evangelical world today. This is why Walter Strickland reintroduced Boothe's work of theology last year, and why biblically-minded believers of all ethnicities would do well to learn from him. As Strickland observes, there are at least three reasons for reading *Plain Theology for Plain People*.

[1] *Plain Theology for Plain People* destroys reductionist stereotypes of black faith. . . . Black Christianity is largely an oral tradition, and its written resources have been obscured by racial bias. Today, as in Boothe's time, many tend to caricature black Christian faith as merely "religious feeling and fervor." [Boothe's book brings needed correction to that caricature.]

[2] *Plain Theology for Plain People* shows black evangelicals that they belong in the broad evangelical tradition. . . . Boothe offers a window into an unexplored vista of theological expression. Black evangelicals have equal claim to the evangelical tradition---even though evangelicals have historically muted their voices.

[3] *Plain Theology for Plain People* requires evangelicals to engage non-white theological voices. Because evangelical biblical and theological studies have excluded the voices of racial minorities, evangelical theology is shaped by the concerns of the dominant culture. Unfortunately, white evangelicals only hear minority evangelicals' theology if it echoes white evangelical voices. (xi)

For these reasons and more, we (especially white) Christians need to take up the works of men like Charles Octavius Boothe. In reading his book over the last month my soul has been edified, my eyes have been opened, and my heart has been convicted to read more broadly from minority expressions of faith. Why? Because as Strickland observes there are blindspots that majority culture fail to see. But when we proactively listen to gospel-loving, Bible-believing people from diverse cultures, it helps the whole body of Christ grow.

To that end, I share Boothe's instructions for living a faithful life as a disciple of Christ. Consider how evangelistic his instructions are and how his call to love required radical faith and spiritual power. While love is hard for any people in any age, how much more difficult is it for those experiencing (racial) hatred at every turn. Yet, this is what the word of God requires. And therefore, as the church experiences the loss of cultural acceptance in America today, we need to turn to men like Charles Octavius Boothe and the faith of the black church in order to continue to walk in love. There is a treasure of resources in the black church tradition to strengthen faith, hope, and love. Therefore, we need to take up and read.

Plain Theology for Plain People

Boothe's volume on theology is a concise work outlining the major doctrines of theology---God, man, salvation, etc.. It is filled with Scripture passages written out in full, and well-arranged to help the growing disciple know what the Christian should believe and how she should live.

In chapter 6, Boothe lists nine ways Christians should live and labor (pp. 75--96). I list his nine gospel-centered points, adding a title in bold to each, and close with his final exhortation to love so that the message of Christ might extend to the end of the earth. (The verses listed here are all written out in the text of Boothe's chapter.)

1. **Baptism.** It is the will of the their Lord that, without any unnecessary delay, they shall be baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is not left to their choice whether they shall be baptized or not. How was it with those that were led to Christ by preaching of the Apostles? They were baptized at once. (Acts 2:41-42; 8:12, 36-40; 16:14-15, 29-34)
2. **Gathering.** They are to unite themselves in church fellowship with such other believers as teach and observe all the commandments and ordinances of the gospel. (Acts 2:41-42; John 17:20-21; 2 Corinthians 8:5; 1 Corinthians 14:12)
3. **The Lord's Supper.** The churches composed of believers who have been baptized in obedience to the Lord's command and after his example are to observe the Lord's Supper, the ordinance he instituted to commemorate his death. (Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 1 Corinthians 10:16)

4. **Service.** They are to strive to edify one another, and thus build up and strengthen the church. (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 4:7–12; 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17)
5. **Evangelism.** They are to do all that lies in their power to teach, or make disciples of, all nations according to the Lord's Great Commission. (Matthew 28:19–20; Proverbs 11:30; 15:23; 25:11)
6. **Good works.** They are to do good by a pure and spotless Christian life. (The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5--7)
7. **Prayer.** They are to pray that laborers may be sent into the harvest field, and that the blessing of God may rest abundantly on their labors. (Matthew 9:36–38; John 4:35–36; Acts 1:4, 8, 12–14; 2:1–12)
8. **Giving.** They are to give of their means as God has prospered them, for the support of those that go out to the nations to carry to them the news of salvation in Christ. (Matthew 9:35; Mark 16:15–20; Romans 8:9; Malachi 3:6–12; Proverbs 3:9–10; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; Deuteronomy 16:16–17)
9. **Love.** They are to cherish in their hearts, and to manifest in their love, fervent love to God and one another. (1 Corinthians 12:31; 13:1–3; Mark 12:28–34; John 13:34–35; John 14:15, 21–24; John 15:9–19; Romans 12:9–10; 13:8–10; 1 Peter 1:22–23; 4:8; 2 Peter 1:5–11; 1 John 2:3–11; 3:10–19; 4:7–12; 5:13)

Under this final heading, Boothe concludes,

What a power the believers in Christ will be in this world, where such multitudes are hateful and hating one another, when they all come to abound in deep, pure, fervent love to God and to their neighbors! How they will be stimulated to labor and give and pray for the gathering of every creature in the world into the fold of Christ, when they love God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, "with all their heart, and soul, and might, and mind, and strength," and really and truly love their neighbor as themselves! An increase of such love will be accompanied by a vast increase of missionary zeal and enterprise; and not long would it be before there will be, "Great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). (96)

This is a great list of spiritual disciplines and one that does more than make the faith a privatized religion. When put into practice, these nine "disciplines" provide direction and growth for any born again believer. Even more, the culminating call to love is a perfect capstone that explains why these practices matter, and when we remember the historical context of this book (written in 1890 in Montgomery, Alabama), we see why we need to learn from men like him.

May the Lord extend the work of Charles Octavius Boothe and others like him. May we learn from their faithfulness, so that the multi-ethnic church of Jesus Christ might be unified and built up in faith, love, and hope.