

Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

Experiential Benefits Gleaned from Thomas Boston's *Human Nature In Its Fourfold State*

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Considerations

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Introduction

Reformed Experiential Preaching was a common method of preaching among the Puritans as well as later Reformed preachers beyond the Puritan era. The target of the experiential sermon is the entire life of the hearer. Rather than focusing simply on doctrinal ideas that are to be known in the mind, experiential preaching aims to forge those doctrinal ideas into the heart and life of the believer. This style of preaching corrects the error that Charles Bridges described of laying too little stress upon “that life and power, that vital, experimental, and practical influence, which forms the character, and regulates the conduct of an established Christian.”¹

The term *experiential* has, throughout history, also been referred to as *experimental*, which finds its roots in the Latin *experimentum*, meaning trial. Experiential preaching ought to cause one’s hearers to examine their souls, as if on trial, to discern whether or not they bear the marks of authentic Christianity. Christianity is an all-of-life faith that it is to be lived, experienced, felt, and enjoyed by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Charles Spurgeon said, “Brother, if the truth be in you it will flow out of your entire being as the perfume streams from the every bough of the sandalwood tree; it will drive you onward as the trade wind speeds the ships, filling all their sails; it will consume your whole nature with its energy as the forest fire burns up all the trees of the wood.”²

My aim is to consider the experiential benefits of Thomas Boston’s classic work *Human Nature In Its Fourfold State*. **I will demonstrate that this work is both a prime example of reformed experiential writing, as well as a powerful resource for the experiential preacher.** After a general survey of the text as a whole, I will examine the book’s benefits through five particular aspects of experiential preaching. First, experiential preaching is Biblical and Christ

¹ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry: With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 259.

² Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 236.

Centered. Second, experiential preaching is discriminatory. Third, experiential preaching is targeted at the heart. Fourth, experiential preaching is applicatory. Fifth, experiential preaches with its listeners for a faithful response.

General Overview of the Book

Human Nature In Its Fourfold State examines the four states of human existence. First, the state of innocence describes man as God made him. Second, the state of nature describes fallen man as he has unmade himself. Third, the state of grace, as Christ has created the new man. Finally, the eternal state, as man will be in glory. In this section I will provide a brief overview of all four of these states and thereby introduce the reader to the contents and general flow of the book.

The State of Innocence describes Adam's condition as he was made by God, before sin's entrance into his heart. Adam had an original righteousness. "There was no corruption in his will, no inclination to evil... The will of man then was naturally inclined to God and goodness, though mutable."³ This original righteousness was natural to man, and not some artificial layer added by God's supernatural intervention as is classically held by Roman Catholic theology. Adam truly was righteous in mind and heart, not having the "least inclination to sin."⁴ Yet, in that state, Adam was also mutable. "God set it [Adam's will] towards good only, yet he did not so fix and confirm its inclinations, that it could not alter."⁵ Not only was this a holy state of existence, but it was a happy state of existence. "O how did light shine in his holy conversation, to the glory of the Creator!"⁶ God, in his infinite grace, entered into a covenant with Adam in the garden commissioning him as his "deputy governor in the lower world."⁷ He was to exercise dominion

³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 41.

⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 44.

⁵ Boston, *Human Nature*, 44.

⁶ Boston, *Human Nature*, 46.

⁷ Boston, *Human Nature*, 49

over all the other creatures, including the woman made as a companion for him, while maintaining subjection to God's ultimate authority. His was a life of tranquility, of delight, or immortality, and of sheer pleasure as he was to live his days in the garden of Eden, "the most pleasant spot of that pleasant place, a garden planted by God Himself, to be the mansion-house of this His favorite."⁸

The State of Nature describes man's condition after sin's entrance but before regeneration by Christ. It describes the corrupt nature of man in his natural state after Adam's fall. Sin has disordered and corrupted the entirety of man. "The soul, which was made upright in all its faculties, is now wholly disordered."⁹ In this state, men are hostile enemies of God, who can do no good or pleasing thing to God. Even mankind's seemingly good deeds are paved with false motivations because the "frame of the thoughts of the heart... is evil."¹⁰ In this state we are by nature "children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). In a rather systematic approach, Boston outlines six separate aspects of our nature that are wholly corrupted: our understanding, our will, our affections, our conscience, our memory, and our body. He summarizes this thorough investigation into the condition of our nature by saying, "As in a dunghill every part contributes to the corruption of the whole, so the natural man, while in this state, grow still worse and worse... every faculty of the soul serves to corrupt another more and more."¹¹ Boston then describes both the utter misery of man in this state as well as the absolute inability for man to rescue himself from this state. He concludes by pleading with the reader, "O be convinced of

⁸ Boston, *Human Nature*, 51.

⁹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 61.

¹⁰ Boston, *Human Nature*, 61.

¹¹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 131.

your absolute need of Christ... believe your utter inability to recover yourself, that so you may be humbled...”¹²

The State of Grace describes man’s condition after being born again. In this state, man is truly a new creation, born of the Spirit, yet not fully perfected. “Though every part of the man is renewed, there is no part of him perfectly renewed.”¹³ Just as under the State of Nature, six aspects of our being were corrupted, so in our State of Grace, all six aspects are renewed and enlightened. “In a word, the whole man is for God, in soul and body, which by this blessed change are made His.”¹⁴ The impact of this regeneration on a man’s soul is overwhelming impacting every area of his life, from the company he keeps to the performance of his duties. “It does not only make good men and good women, but makes good subjects, good husbands, good wives, children, servants, and, in a word, good relatives in the church, commonwealth, and family.”¹⁵ True to his Reformed heritage, Boston plainly states that we are entirely passive in our regeneration. “God leaves some in their depraved state; others he brings into a state of grace, or regeneracy. If you be thus honoured, no thanks to you...”¹⁶ In this state we experience a true union with Christ and are blessed with the grace of sanctification whereby we mortify the deeds of the body and grow in our likeness of Christ.

Lastly, Boston describes the Eternal State in which the wicked are punished eternally for their rebellion against God, and believers are secured eternally in Heaven. He begins this section by writing at length of the fleeting nature of life and the certainty of the future death that all humanity faces. “Man’s life in this world, according to the Scripture account of it, is but a few

¹² Boston, *Human Nature*, 199.

¹³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 209.

¹⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 222.

¹⁵ Boston, *Human Nature*, 223.

¹⁶ Boston, *Human Nature*, 227.

degrees removed from death.”¹⁷ He describes the vanity of life with great emotional vigor, likened unto the author of Ecclesiastes. “When you are lying on a deathbed, all your friends and relations cannot rescue you; all your substance cannot ransom you, nor procure you a reprieve for one day; nay, not for one hour. Yea, the more you possess of this world’s goods, your sorrow at death is likely to be the greater.” Referring to unregenerate souls whose greatest delights were here in this life Boston writes, “How sorrowful must their departure be, when they have nothing in view so good as that which they leave behind them!”¹⁸ Hell is a place of eternal suffering, away from Christ’s presence, and away from any sense of hope or reprieve from torment, amidst the company of the demons. “What horrible anguish will seize the damned, finding themselves in the lab of fire with the devil who deceived them; drawn thither with the silken cords of temptation by these wicked spirits; and bound with them in everlasting chains under darkness!”¹⁹ The saints on the other hand are destined for an eternal state of glory where they will inherit incorruptible bodies suitable for an incorruptible heaven. “Death can do them no harm.”²⁰ They therefore have no fear in death, but eagerly anticipate the life that awaits. “But, at the resurrection, they leave all the seeds of corruption behind them in the grave; and rise incorruptible, incapable of the least indisposition, sickness, or sore, and much more, of dying.”²¹ We will see his throne, and be granted “glorious bodies; not only beautiful, comely, and well-proportioned, but full of splendour and brightness.”²² This is the glorious hope and certain future of all who genuinely receive Christ as Lord and Savior.

Experiential Preaching is Biblical & Christ Centered

¹⁷ Boston, *Human Nature*, 326.

¹⁸ Boston, *Human Nature*, 344.

¹⁹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 494.

²⁰ Boston, *Human Nature*, 355.

²¹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 387.

²² Boston, *Human Nature*, 388.

In the previous section I have provided a general survey of Boston's work. I now turn and consider the first of four aspects of experiential benefit. First, experiential preaching is to be word based and Christ centered. As Spurgeon once said, "The true value of a sermon must lie, not in its fashion and manner, but in the truth which it contains."²³ Particularly, Reformed Experiential Preaching is to teach through a historically Reformed hermeneutic. Let us first consider the Reformed nature of this work, and then examine how Boston builds and supports his argumentation at nearly every turn, with a Christocentric force.

Human Nature is clearly a robust work of Reformed theology. This is demonstrated perhaps most simply by examining Boston's teaching on the doctrine of original sin and his teaching on the doctrine of justification. By way of providing a Reformed standard to compare Boston's work against, we may consider the Westminster Larger Catechism. Question twenty-five of that historic document asks "Wherein consisteth the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?" The answer provided is,

*"The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called Original Sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions."*²⁴

Boston provides an in-depth treatment on the doctrine of original sin in consideration of the state of nature. Here, Boston exposes the total depravity and complete corruption of the natural human state. "Man in his natural state is altogether corrupt: both soul and body are polluted, as the apostle proves at large (Rom 3:10-18)."²⁵ In dealing with the soul, he

²³ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 73.

²⁴ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 180–181.

²⁵ Boston, *Human Nature*, 79.

demonstrates from Scripture how every aspect of the soul has been corrupted, not one aspect left untouched by the corrupting influence of sin. Our understanding, for example, is “naturally overwhelmed with gross darkness in spiritual things.”²⁶ We are both incapable of knowing God and incapable of desiring his paths. Another aspect, our wills, are prone to every kind of evil. “He not only cannot come to Christ, but he will not come... He is a captive, a prisoner, and a slave, but he loves his conqueror, his jailor and master.”²⁷ Likewise, our affections are wholly disordered from their original design. We hate what God loves and love what God hates. “The natural man’s affections are wretchedly misplaced; he is a spiritual monster.”²⁸ Boston continues in this way by sketching the full corruption of our conscience, our memory, and our body. This section culminates with a plea to the listener to consider the totality of original sin, “O that you would at length be serious about the state of your soul!... Will you lie down and sleep another night at ease in this case?”²⁹

A second doctrine of equal import in Reformed theology is the doctrine of justification. Again, by way of comparison we can consider question seventy of the Westminster Larger Catechism which asks, “What is justification?” The answer,

*“Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.”*³⁰

In complete alignment with the Westminster standard, Boston demonstrates in his section on The State of Grace how a person is transformed from sinner to saint. “Man is, in respect of his

²⁶ Boston, *Human Nature*, 81.

²⁷ Boston, *Human Nature*, 99.

²⁸ Boston, *Human Nature*, 127.

²⁹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 148.

³⁰ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession*, 213–214.

spiritual state, altogether disjointed by the fall; every faculty of the soul is, as it were, dislocated: in regeneration, the Lord loosens every joint, and sets it right again.”³¹ This work of regeneration is entirely a work of Christ acting upon the soul. The soul that has been regenerated has contributed nothing more to their own new birth than a newborn child does in its own birth. “As the child is passive in generation, so is the child of God in regeneration.”³² The overwhelming and consistent teaching of Boston throughout this book is God’s ultimate grace towards his elect. Man brings nothing to his own salvation. Even faith, is a gift bestowed upon man by God.

Reformed Theology is a complete system, in the sense that each doctrine is carefully defined and woven into other vital doctrines in such a way that to remove the stitching of one is to weaken the others. It is therefore no surprise that as Boston agrees with the reformed tradition on two major doctrines of original sin and justification, that other major doctrines would find alignment as well. This is indeed the case, as we discover Boston at times takes up topics like: God’s sovereignty, election, adoption, and union with Christ. On each of these he is consistently in line with the historic reformed standards. On the whole, Boston is a wonderful example of reformed theology applied.

Lastly, *Human Nature In Its Fourfold State* is not only Biblical, but from start to finish it is highly Christocentric. Nearly every page points the reader to Christ in some way. Perhaps his work on the Eternal State affords us the greatest grasp of this particular aspect of his writing. After describing the necessity of death and the certainty of the judgment to come, Boston depicts the believer’s heavenly reward. He exhorts the believer to “prefer Christ’s cross before the world’s crown, and wants in the way of duty, before ease and wealth in the way of sin.”³³ He

³¹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 207.

³² Boston, *Human Nature*, 227.

³³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 468.

encourages the believer with these precious words, “Blessed be the day in which I was united to thee, whose chief care was to get Christ in us the hope of glory, and to make me a temple for His Holy Spirit.”³⁴ Always and everywhere Boston is pointing us towards the infinite worth and majesty of our Lord and Savior, pinning our greatest hope on that blessed future when we “shall have society with the Lord Himself in Heaven, glorious communion with God in Christ, which is the perfection of happiness.”³⁵ His depictions of heaven and the joy that will be the believers not only stir the heart of the reader, but saturate the reader in Christocentric hope. “There the saints shall eternally, without interruption, feast their eyes upon Him, and be ever viewing His glorious perfections.”³⁶ Upon reading Boston, one is truly left panting and thirsting for God, the living God.

Experiential Preaching is Discriminatory

Experiential preaching is discriminatory. Discriminatory preaching may be defined as preaching wherein the author separates his readers into various classes, discriminating between the distinct listeners, in order to pin the text to each person’s specific condition. William Perkins famously instructed preachers to consider seven unique categories of listeners when preaching: unbelievers who are ignorant and unteachable, those who are teachable but ignorant, those who have knowledge but have never been humbled, those who have been humbled but may still be yet unconverted, those who already believe, those who are backsliding, and a mixed congregation of believers and unbelievers.³⁷ Perkins’ seven categories are: unbelievers who are ignorant and unteachable, those who are teachable but ignorant, those who have knowledge but

³⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 383.

³⁵ Boston, *Human Nature*, 449.

³⁶ Boston, *Human Nature*, 455.

³⁷ William Perkins, *The Art of Propheying and the Calling of the Ministry*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 53.

have never been humbled, those who have been humbled but may still be yet unconverted, those who already believe, those who are backsliding, and a mixed congregation of believers and unbelievers. Charles Bridges likewise provided nine distinct categories of hearers to consider when preaching.³⁸ He instructed ministers, “It is important to ascertain the stage of the Christian life; the degree of strength or weakness, of faintness or overcoming in the spiritual conflict; of advancement or retrogression in evangelical holiness...”³⁹ While engaging with discriminatory preaching, the listener is invited to discern which category they belong to, and is provided with specific instruction to assist them in that particular condition.

Discriminatory preaching must therefore clearly distinguish between the believer and unbeliever. It particularly labors to leave no hypocrite comforted by false promises that are not theirs to hold. Rather, by providing tests of self-examination, discriminatory preaching stirs the listener to put themselves on trial, to determine the truth of their soul’s condition. As Boston writes, “The neglect of self-examination leaves most men under sad delusions as to their state, and deprives many saints of the comfortable sight of the grace of God in them.”⁴⁰ I will consider both Boston’s ability to separate his readers into classes, as well as his use of putting the soul on self-examination, as two separate functions of discriminatory preaching below.

Preaching Towards Separate Classes of Listeners

While *Human Nature* does not specify a preaching grid as neatly divided as William Perkins’ seven classification of listeners, it is clear that Boston did intentionally tailor sections of each chapter towards particular people, often stating these intentions directly. He very often will use a phrase like, “I shall now conclude, addressing myself in a few words, first, to saints, and next to

³⁸ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 361.

³⁹ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 279.

⁴⁰ Boston, *Human Nature*, 233.

sinner. To you that are saints, I say...”⁴¹ And then later, “And now, sinners, what shall I say to you?”⁴² Elsewhere on his discussion of the kingdom of heaven, Boston concludes with a similar separation, “I shall conclude my discourse on this subject with a word of application. 1. To all who claim a right to this kingdom. 2. To those who have indeed a right to it. 3. To those who have no right thereto.”⁴³

The most common place this discrimination occurs for Boston is when he transitions from doctrinal explanation to practical uses. While I will examine the role of application in Boston’s writing with greater depth in a later section, it is helpful here to consider how Boston discriminates very effectively when creating various applications. For example, when concluding his discussion on the doctrine of the state of innocence, he writes of three separate classes of nonbelievers to whom this particular doctrine provides a reproof, “1. To those who hate religion in the power of it... 2. It reproves those who put religion to shame, and those who are ashamed of religion... 3. It reproves the proud self-conceited professor.”⁴⁴ In this example, Boston’s exemplary discriminatory language leaves even the unbeliever challenged to discern what kind of unbeliever they are.

Later in his discourse on the mystical union between Christ and believers under the state of grace, Boston paints a vivid portrait of the heart and life of a hypocrite. He explains that hypocrites of Christianity can indeed appear to grow, but it is a false growth. “They grow like rickety children, who have a big head but a slender body; they get more knowledge into their heads, but not more holiness into their hearts and lives.”⁴⁵ This deformed growth is contrasted

⁴¹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 316.

⁴² Boston, *Human Nature*, 320.

⁴³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 465.

⁴⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 54.

⁴⁵ Boston, *Human Nature*, 301.

with the beautifully proportionate growth of the true believer. The listener is challenged to ask what sort of growth they have experienced, in order to discern if they are a hypocrite or a true believer.

Likewise, when discussing the state of nature, Boston moves to provided proper uses of the doctrine of the total corruption of the soul and body. In his second use he directs his fiery language towards the unbeliever, “Well may we lament your case, O natural man! For it is the saddest case one can be in out of hell... Your soul is a mass of darkness, rebellion, and vileness, before the Lord.”⁴⁶ Here, Boston has separated the unbeliever from the believer and spoke directly to their condition. He refused to hold back any punches. The unbeliever is left considering their state in all of its pollution. “Ah! What a miserable spectacle is he that can do nothing but sin! You are the man, whoever you are, that are yet in your natural state.”⁴⁷

Preaching Towards Self-Examination

Boston is excellent at drawing his readers towards deeper reflection upon the condition of their own soul. Over and over again the work of self-examination is celebrated. He will often employ phrase like, “Try yourselves by these.”⁴⁸ Or elsewhere, “By what is said, you may try whether you are in the state of grace or not.”⁴⁹ This is particularly powerfully employed after some of his more beautifully written sections such as when he writes on the eternal state. After painting a picture of the everlasting joys of heaven, Boston writes, “It is necessary that all of us impartially try and examine whether, according to the laws of the kingdom contained in the Holy Scriptures, we can verify and make good our claim to this kingdom.”⁵⁰ Boston continually completes his

⁴⁶ Boston, *Human Nature*, 136.

⁴⁷ Boston, *Human Nature*, 137.

⁴⁸ Boston, *Human Nature*, 229.

⁴⁹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 230

⁵⁰ Boston, *Human Nature*, 465.

discussion on particular doctrines with an appeal to self-reflection, “Now, if you would improve these things to the knowledge of your state, I would advise you... to set apart some time, when you are at home, for a review of your case, to try your state by what has been said.”⁵¹ The listener is invited to put their life on trial before the standard of God’s Word not just in the moment of the sermon, but at home as well.

In perhaps Boston’s most extended section on self-examination, he assists the reader to discern whether or not they have truly undergone regeneration. In rapid fire, he lists out dozens of insightful questions designed to cause the reader to pause and ask whether or not they truly have been born again? “Were your eyes ever turned inward to see yourself, the sinfulness of your depraved state... Were you ever led into a view of the exceeding sinfulness of sin? Have your eyes seen King Jesus in His beauty... What change is there on your will?... Are your desires going out after God? Has your conscience been enlightened? Is your memory sanctified?”⁵² The believer hears these questions and can discern at least a seedling of a positive response within their souls. The hypocrite however, is left gasping for air at the realization that the answer to the questions are negative.

Another method employed by Boston to put the soul on trial is his use of addressing various doubts that believers endure. Boston pastorally comforts struggling and doubting Christians by addressing their doubts directly according to the Word of God. In his discussion on the doctrine of Regeneration, Boston imagines the listener expressing four such doubts they might feel, “1. I doubt if I be regenerate, because I know not the precise time of my conversion. 2. If I were a new creature, sin could not prevail against me as it does. 3. I find the motions of sin in my heart more violent since the Lord began His work on my soul. 4. I find pulse of my

⁵¹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 232.

⁵² Boston, *Human Nature*, 230

affections beats stronger to the creature than to the Creator.”⁵³ With each of these, the reader is invited to dig deeper and ask serious questions of the soul, “Ask yourself, as in the sight of God, whether you would part with Christ for the creature, or part with the creature for Christ?”⁵⁴ This is not simple work, it is a probing work. It is the work of a soul determined to discover its true condition, determined to see if a seed of faith resides within.

Targeted at the Heart

Third, experiential preaching is targeted at the heart. The preacher aims at bringing about authentic transformation of our posture towards God, towards ourselves, and towards the world around us. He is not simply a teacher aiming to expound truth upon his listeners. Rather, as a shepherd concerned with the hearts of his listeners, he is looking to implant the seed of truth deep in the listener’s hearts in order that it might bear kingdom fruit. As Murray Capill has written, “If the great task of preaching is proclaiming tremendously good news, we must never forget that this news is not to wash over people but to penetrate their hearts... Preachers must seek to present the gospel in a heart-penetrating way.”⁵⁵ I will examine Boston’s remarkable ability to hit the heart through two categories: preaching from heart to heart and preaching towards the idols of the heart.

Preaching From the Heart to the Heart

First, if a preacher is to hit the heart of his listeners, his message must flow out of a place of being enflamed with love of God and dependence on God himself. As Joel Beeke has written, “Experiential preaching often grows out of the preacher’s own experience of Christ in the midst

⁵³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 236.

⁵⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 237.

⁵⁵ Murray Capill, *Preaching to the Heart, Preaching Practical Application From Every Text*, (Phillipsburgh, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 38.

of his sorrows and sins.”⁵⁶ Likewise, the Puritan Richard Baxter writes, “In the name of God, brethren, labor to awaken your own hearts before you go to the pulpit, that you may be fit to awaken the hearts of sinners.”⁵⁷ While Boston does not share of his own experiences in *Human Nature*, it is clear from his biography that the passion with which he writes was developed from his own passionate walk with Christ. I offer an abbreviated biography below in order to highlight the profound depth of his personal walk with God.

As a young boy, Thomas’s father John was cast in prison for nonconformity, a moment which certainly left an indelible mark. Boston was converted at the age of eleven under the preaching of Henry Erskine, the father of the well-known Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine who would become his intimate friends later in life. As a young man in his early twenty’s others noticed the nearness of which he walked with God. One biographer has written,

*“Reading the story of his inward life, we do not wonder that his preaching soon began to attract attention. There was a force and freshness in it that arrested the common people. There were gleams of vision in it such as are only granted to those who daily are near God. There was a grip in it that no preacher wins who is a stranger to his own heart. And there was in it a scriptural fulness that nothing but passionate devotion to the Bible gives.”*⁵⁸

In his first pastorate, in a small Church in Simprin, Boston developed patterns of behavior that would last with him throughout his entire pastoral life. He organized the Church with weekly rhythms of preaching, catechism, and visitation. He committed the first hour of every Monday to fervent prayer before the Lord so as not to inundate himself at the start of the week with worldly business. Always, he was relentless in his own study and prayer.

⁵⁶ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Preaching, Proclaiming God’s Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 39.

⁵⁷ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, (The New Christian Classics, 2018), 127.

⁵⁸ George Morrison, *Biographical Introduction*, in Boston, *Human Nature*, 11.

Boston was no stranger to grief and hardship. His wife Catherine and he had five children, two of which they buried at a young age. In later years, Catherine fell desperately ill with a disease that slowly and tragically suffered her intellect. When moved to a new Church, he faced all sorts of troubles among his people, from lax morality and gossip, to topographical challenges that limited his ability to visit his parishioners. It was a difficult season that lasted ten years, but one that was marked by consistent dependence on prayer. It is from these years of struggle and dependence of God, that we are indebted for *Human Nature*.

As his prominence grew in Scotland due to the success of *Human Nature*, so did the attacks he endured and the challenges he faced. He often suffered from depression and physical weakness, and yet persisted weekly in the pulpit. At times he stood alone on national issues, as one whose conscience was set towards God. In one particular case he, along with eleven other ministers, staunchly defended the book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* from its condemnation by the Church in Scotland in what became known as the Marrow Controversy. This willingness to stand and defend his conscience, despite an overwhelming tide in the opposite direction, inevitably inspired the entire nation. In the later years of his life, he gave himself fully to the study of Hebrew, and had such success that he “was welcomed as an equal by the finest Hebrew scholars in the world.”⁵⁹

It is clear that Boston loved God. He wrote and preached the Word of God as it had worked its way through his own soul. His hardships in life served to deepen his resolve. He was a man who, in all things, cherished his savior. “He preached according to his knowledge, and out of his growing experience of Christ. But always, with abounding prayer, he was studying, comparing, writing, and longing for the breaking of a fuller light.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ George Morrison, *Biographical Introduction*, in Boston, *Human Nature*, 33.

⁶⁰ George Morrison, *Biographical Introduction*, in Boston, *Human Nature*, 7.

Preaching Towards the Idols of the Heart

Secondly, in order to preach to the heart, the preacher must understand the heart of his listeners, their challenges, their faults, and their misgivings. Ultimately, wise preachers seek to perform spiritual surgery by discovering the idols that lurk within their passions, and remove them as a physician removes a tumor. Murray Capill states, “To expose heart idols, we need to go to the bottom of the heart, and address people’s passions: what they desire, love, serve, chase after, treasure, enjoy, and delight in.”⁶¹ Boston demonstrates throughout this work that he is a master physician of the soul. One common tool Boston employs to preach directly to idols of the heart is his use of objections. I will provide three examples of these objections below.

After a powerful discourse on the nature and extent of hell, Boston provides an objection a listener might respond with. “But some will say, ‘Is there not a vast disproportion between our sin, and that wrath you talk of?’”⁶² Here, Boston is probing the heart of the unbeliever, preemptively expecting his internal affections to rage against the Biblical teaching of God’s wrath. His response to the objection is not only full of Biblical insight and plain reasoning, but it is written in such a way to sting with the full force of a finely aimed dart. He reveals the corruption of the heart that asks such a question and then responds, “You are that man, even you whose objection I am answering. How can the wrath which you are under, and liable to, be too great when as yet it is not sufficient to awaken you to flee from it?”⁶³

Boston again uses objections to those who would argue against man’s inability to rescue himself from his total corruption. He imagines the objection, “But God is a merciful God, and He knows that we are not able to answer these demands; we hope therefore to be saved, if we do as

⁶¹ Capill, *The Heart is the Target*, 119.

⁶² Boston, *Human Nature*, 165.

⁶³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 166.

well as we can, and keep the commands as well as we are able.”⁶⁴ As before, Boston utilizes Scripture to breakdown such an object before responding, “Though you should do all you are able to do, in vain do you hope to be saved in that way. What word of God is this hope of yours founded on? It is founded on neither law nor Gospel; therefore it is but a delusion.” Here, Boston asks the reader to consider the very foundation of their argument in order to see the folly of their false hope.

Later, Boston uses this same tool of citing hypothetical objections to speak to worried believers who often fall prey to various weaknesses and temptations and begin to doubt their status as a believer. He imagines the objection this way, “But if the saints be so supported, how is it that they fall so often under temptations and discouragements?”⁶⁵ Boston’s deeply pastoral heart is revealed in his response. “But, though the child of God may fall, and that so low that the waters go over his head, yet there is still a bond of union between Christ and him; the chain is not broken; he will not go to the ground; he will be drawn up again.”⁶⁶ This response is full of both pity and hope. He truly dresses the wound of the struggling sheep as a gentle and hopeful shepherd. He affirms them that struggling believers will not be forsaken by their Savior. Though their hearts are troubled, Jesus has secured their victory, and he will never let them go.

Experiential Preaching is Applicatory

Fourth, experiential preaching is applicatory. Doctrines that stay in the intellect, but never work their way through the heart and into the hands of everyday life, do not transform a person.

Throughout a sermon, each doctrine considered must be applied into the ordinary life of the listener. As Charles Bridges said, “Preaching, in order to be effective, must be reduced from

⁶⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 189.

⁶⁵ Boston, *Human Nature*, 313.

⁶⁶ Boston, *Human Nature*, 313.

vague generalities, to a tangible, individual character—coming home to every man’s business, and even to his bosom.”⁶⁷ One reason this is so vital is that people by nature are slow to apply to themselves, that which they learn. People are gifted at seeing the splinter in other’s eyes without being able to see the log in our own (Matt. 7:3). As Bridges notes, “So unnatural is this habit of personal application, that most will fit the doctrine to any one but themselves.”⁶⁸

Boston, in true puritan fashion, never leaves a doctrine without providing a list of practical uses. Repeatedly throughout *Human Nature*, Boston uses phrase like, “I shall now apply this doctrine,”⁶⁹ to prepare the listener to move towards a variety of practical uses. His applications range across the full human experience. By the time one has finished the book, one is left with a fairly robust view on practical Christian living.

As an example, after considering the doctrine of our state of innocence, Boston provides three practical uses. The first use is for our minds to be formed correctly. This doctrine informs us of how we came into the situation we are in. The second use is for reproof to various sorts of unbelievers who scoff at God. The third use is for lamentation. It is here that Boston’s masterful use of imagery and wordplay bear their full weight upon the believer’s soul. “Where is our primitive glory now? Once no darkness in the mind, no rebellion in the will, no disorder in the affections... Alas! How are we fallen! How are we plunged into a gulf of misery! The sun has gone down on us, death has come in at our windows.”⁷⁰ As one reads this section one cannot help but inwardly feel the loss of what once was, to yearn for the weight of our former glory with a lamenting agony.

⁶⁷ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 272.

⁶⁸ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 270.

⁶⁹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 229.

⁷⁰ Boston, *Human Nature*, 56.

Likewise, when describing the state of nature and the various doctrines therein, he provides particular uses at various points. After explaining how God takes particular notice of our natural corruption, Boston provides a vital application, “Let us then have a special eye upon the corruption and sin of our nature... Turn your eyes inward to the sin of your nature. It is to be feared, that many have this work to begin yet.”⁷¹ This application seems almost simplistic, but Boston does not leave it there. He continues to develop this particular application by providing four separate strains of practical wisdom to strengthen the readers ability to consider deeply their original sin. First, he describes how most men overlook their natural sin, taking too much confidence in themselves. Second, he provides practical measures to not only make a habit of confessing sins of commission and omission, but to faithfully lay before God our original sin as well. “Yet, if original sin were wanting in it [our confessions], assure yourselves that you have forgot the best part of the errand which a poor sinner has to the Physician of souls.”⁷² Third, Boston provides an expanded six reasons why original sin is to be noticed in our confessions. He stirs the affections of the soul by saying, “Look you into your corrupt nature, and there you may see all and every sin, in the seed and root thereof. There is a fulness of all unrighteousness there (Rom 1:29). There is atheism, idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, and whatsoever is vile.”⁷³ Fourth, he gives specific instructions on how to get a better view of the corruption of our nature. Here, the reader is instructed with a string of simple applications that can be practiced at home, “Study to know the spirituality and extent of the law of God... Observe your hearts at all times, but especially under temptation... Lay out your soul before the Lord, as willing to know the

⁷¹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 140.

⁷² Boston, *Human Nature*, 143.

⁷³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 145.

vileness of your nature.”⁷⁴ This lengthy list of simple applications provides the reader with an entire toolbelt to aid him in his considerations of his own original sin.

Boston proves throughout *Human Nature* that he is not simply an expert exegete of the scripture, but he is also an expert exegete of the human condition. He does not leave his listeners without practical applications to apply the biblical doctrines into their life in a way that pleases God.

Experiential Preaching is Pleading

Lastly, experiential preaching is pleading. The experiential preacher does not speak cold truths with a passionless air but yearns and begs with his listeners to take swift action while action may be taken. Spurgeon instructed his students that, “Cold logic has its force, but when made red-hot with affection the power of tender argument is inconceivable.”⁷⁵ Elsewhere Spurgeon instructed, “Brethren we must plead. Entreaties and beseechings must blend with our instructions.”⁷⁶ This is the emotional force that preachers are to win their listeners with. It is an emotion pleading that is not pasted on as a theatrical trick, but as Richard Baxter so famously said, “I preached, as never sure to preach again, And as a dying man to dying men!”⁷⁷

Boston is powerfully urgent and often desperately pleads with his readers to take action. This is especially true when speaking to the unregenerate, and those who are potentially self-deceived hypocrites. In one section, Boston describes in detail the qualities of the wrath of God. It is a fearful section in which at nearly every turn Boston pauses and pleads with his reader to flee to Christ for safety from such an eternal destiny. “We may now flee from it indeed, by

⁷⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 147.

⁷⁵ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 362.

⁷⁶ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 363.

⁷⁷ Richard Baxter, *The Poetical Fragments of Richard Baxter*, 4th edition (London, England: Pickering, 1821), 34.

fleeing to Jesus Christ... O sinner! How will you be able to endure that wrath, which will tear you in pieces (Psa 50:22), and grind you to powder! (Luke 20:18)...⁷⁸ Then again after continuing his description of the unbearable nature of God's enduring wrath, Boston writes, "O miserable soul! If you flee not from this wrath unto Jesus Christ, though your misery had a beginning, yet it will never have an end."⁷⁹

This pleading nature of his writing comes forth not only in the directly pleading passages in which he exhorts the unregenerate to flee to Christ, but it comes also in his precise surgical cuts upon the soul, that leave the reader truly searching. In his discussion of the doctrine of the mystical union between Christ and believers, Boston provides a lengthy hypothetical journey of an unbeliever's journey towards faith in Christ. This exposition of the heart of a hypocrite is so precise and so chilling that when it is completed Boston offers a condolence to the tender consciences of newer believers who endured his words, "By what has been said upon this head, I design not to rack or distress tender consciences; for though there are but a few such at this day, yet God forbid that I should offend any of Christ's little ones. But, alas! A dead sleep is fallen upon this generation."⁸⁰ Even in his comfort towards the tender Christian, he is pleading with the hardened hypocrite.

The process of coming to Christ in this section is worth considering at least in part. Far from some simple four step process, the reader is taken on the miserable journey of the common hypocrite who fills the pews, with no less than twelve markers to define key points in the journey. The description itself is so stretching and terrifying, that one can read the pleading between the lines of Boston exhorting the hypocrite to not leave themselves in a place of self-

⁷⁸ Boston, *Human Nature*, 160.

⁷⁹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 161.

⁸⁰ Boston, *Human Nature*, 279.

delusion. The first step begins with the Spirit of the Lord coming to deal with the person by a laying down of the law upon his heart, “Therefore He darts in some beams of light into the dark soul and lets the man see that he is a lost man... There is a criminal court erected in the man’s breast, where he is arraigned, accused, and condemned for breaking the law of God.”⁸¹ In the second step, the law of God weighs heavily on his soul, “And each of the ten commandments discharges thunder-claps of wrath against him for his omission of required duties.”⁸²

At this point, the man underneath the conviction of the law of God takes a wrong turn however. He seeks to live a positively holy life, apart from a new birth in Christ. He even begins to make some headway among others who see his change in demeanor, “Their good opinion of him confirms his good opinion of himself.”⁸³ But if he be elect, the man is prompted yet again that even though his outward morality has improved, his failure to live up to the whole law has left him grasping. Over the next few steps of the journey, the man turns to religion, vowing to God and performing religious duties. Yet the deeper he commits himself to be a student and practitioner of the law, the more he finds his inward passions remain. He cannot escape his inward nature. “The law charges home on the man’s conscience, that he was a transgressor from the womb, that he came into the world a guilty creature and that in the time of his ignorance, and even since his eyes were opened, he has been guilty of many actual sins.”⁸⁴

This man’s journey continues until he finds himself utterly broken, cut off from all hope. He pleads with Christ to make up his deficiency. He has done all he can, and now he begs Christ to do the rest. “Thus doing what he can to fulfil the law, and looking to Christ to make up all his defects, he comes at length to sleep securely again. Many persons are ruined this way.” Again,

⁸¹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 269

⁸² Boston, *Human Nature*, 270.

⁸³ Boston, *Human Nature*, 270.

⁸⁴ Boston, *Human Nature*, 271.

Boston is surgically cutting away the false faith of many, a false faith that holds that our salvation is some mixture of our works and Christ's. His method of pleading here is through the power of description. It is through the power of painting such a vivid picture of a deceived soul, that one cannot help but discover that they have never truly received the unadulterated gospel.

It is not until the twelfth step of this man's journey that he finally comes to the Lord in true brokenness. "Like a dying man, stretching himself just before his breath goes out, he rallies the broken forces of his soul, tries to believe, and in some sort lays hold on Jesus Christ."⁸⁵ But even this step of desperation is proven fatal, for no man can muster the strength to believe on Christ. It is not until the man comes to the final end of himself, and he truly believes that even the faith to believe must come from outside his own nature, that Christ Himself meets him in his distress and grafts him into the true vine. The point is that our salvation is wholly a work of Christ doing what we cannot do by our own nature. "You can no more believe, than you can reach up your hand to heaven, and bring Christ down from thence."⁸⁶ This is pleading at its finest. Yet, it is pleading that comes in the form of an artist, displaying the layers and the contours of hypocrisy in bold vivid color.

Conclusions

I have demonstrated that Boston's *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* is a prime example of reformed experiential writing. I would like now to consider a few ways in which this work can benefit the modern experiential preacher.

First, Boston's work on the depth of original sin and the process God uses in drawing the elect to saving faith, is one that reveals the need to preach the law. Many modern preachers I know are very hesitant to preach the law of God. In fact, many preachers struggle to have any

⁸⁵ Boston, *Human Nature*, 279.

⁸⁶ Boston, *Human Nature*, 279.

sort of conviction over what we ought to do with the law of God. Boston himself struggled with these questions early on, but would eventually write, “The preaching of the law is most necessary. He that would ingraft, must needs use the pruning-knife.”⁸⁷ Modern experiential preachers must use the full weight of the law to bear down upon the conscience of their listeners. They must not fear the sting of the law in their preaching. The law and the uses of the law are in fact one of the greater tools the experiential preacher has in discriminating between his listeners and preparing them to receive the Gospel. One’s thoughts on God’s law reveal greatly one’s disposition towards God and his kingship.

Second, the modern experiential preacher can learn from Boston the great precision which is required to break down the false security of the hypocrite. Boston’s pity for the hypocrite and his eternal damnation, is the cause for his repeated and extensive writing on the topic. He exemplifies a courage in his writing that is unwilling to permit a true hypocrite to go on without the knowledge that indeed they might not be born again. “There is a great difference between adhesion and ingrafting. The ivy clasps and twists itself about the oak, but it is not one with it, for it still grows on its own root.”⁸⁸ Modern preachers would do well to recognize the presence of hypocrites in their pews, and preach with the kind of passion and pleading fervor Boston exemplifies as he labors to see them experience true and saving faith.

Third, Boston’s use of cases and objections in developing his arguments, reveals his deep knowledge not just of the Scriptures but of the hearts and minds of the people he ministered to. He was, at the end of the day, a shepherd. His experiential writing digs into the real-life experiences and thoughts of his listeners. One cannot help but sense his deeply pastoral awareness of the doubts his congregation experienced. Describing one such potential doubt he

⁸⁷ Boston, *Human Nature*, 281.

⁸⁸ Boston, *Human Nature*, 282.

writes, “I never read in the word of God, nor did I ever know of a child of God, so tempted, and so left of God, as I am; and therefore, no saint’s case being like mind, I cannot but conclude that I am none of their number.”⁸⁹ Boston’s use of the shepherd’s rod and staff is an example to follow. One can imagine preaching a section like this, and knowing that perhaps only three or four in a room of hundreds are thinking such thoughts. Yet the good shepherd goes after the one lost or struggling sheep (Luke 15:4).

Lastly, Boston exemplifies a man who not only preached and wrote with theological and pastoral excellence, but who set a pace for the truly experiential pastor to follow. He lived what he taught. The words he wrote flowed from a life of experience. He led a life of deep prayer and spiritual perseverance. He steadily pursued the things of God, for the glory of God. One cannot read this work nor study his life without seeing the spiritual integrity of the man. In this way, he provides a challenge to every modern preacher, to preach and teach first to oneself before any other. Modern preachers are tempted by every kind of shortcut. We are tempted to abandon our visitations, to bend on theological convictions, to pursue fame and selfish ambition, and to waste one’s time on social media strategies rather than laboring over the Word of God in their original languages. Boston as a pastor, serves as a sort of reorientation towards the type of diligent work, fueled by an honest and profound life in Christ, that every pastor ought to aim for.

Boston provides an example of a Pastor worth imitating. It is no wonder God has so mightily used this wonderful work of his, *Human Nature In Its Fourfold State*.

⁸⁹ Boston, *Human Nature*, 240.

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