

Plain Theology for Plain People

Charles Octavius Boothe

Introduction by Walter R. Strickland II



– *Introduction to Plain Theology for Plain People*

Walter R. Strickland II

Charles Octavius Boothe (1845–1924) was a reluctant teacher. To spare others his frustration with learning and teaching from books laced with dense theological rhetoric, Boothe wrote *Plain Theology for Plain People*.¹

Boothe wrote for the average sharecropper. He accommodated an unlearned audience that included pastors, teachers, and community leaders born into poverty with little access to education. While leaders and laity alike desperately needed biblical and theological truth, they had little time, energy, and resources to pursue education. “The doctrines of our holy religion need to be studied in order, according to some definite system,” he wrote, “but simplicity should prevail—simplicity of arrangement and simplicity of language.” Thus, Boothe set out to write a succinct and accessible theological handbook.²

WHO WAS CHARLES OCTAVIUS BOOTHE?

On June 13, 1845 Charles Octavius Boothe was born in Mobile County Alabama. He was the legal property of Nathaniel Howard.

As a slave he was treated relatively mildly. “I think I can say that [my master] and I really loved each other,” he wrote.³ Nevertheless, he was a frank critic of slavery. He indicted all white Americans for imposing barbarous

1. Edward R. Crowther, “Charles Octavius Boothe: An Alabama Apostle of ‘Uplift,’” *The Journal of Negro History* 78, no. 2 (1993), 113.

2. Charles Octavius Boothe, *Plain Theology for Plain People* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publishing Society, 1890), 11.

3. Charles Octavius Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama: Their Leaders and Their Work* (Birmingham: Alabama Publishing Company, 1895), 10.

conditions upon his people.⁴ Proponents of slavery argued that God used the practice to bring blacks to salvation; in contrast, Boothe contended that the gospel spread to slaves *despite* chains and oppression. "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Gen 50:20 ESV). God takes no pleasure in the denial of his image; yet nothing prevents his will.⁵

Nearly four million slaves were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865. Still, blacks remained captive to social and economic norms that complicated daily life. Legislation did not eradicate four hundred years of white contempt. Former slaves had few skills, resources, and institutions to support themselves. Due to these economic challenges, sharecropping—freed slaves rented and tended part of a white farmer's land in exchange for a variable percentage of its yield—became a common practice for blacks. They still lacked the means to be truly independent.

Racial uplift was Boothe's consuming passion. Following the Civil War (1861–1865), 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.⁶ Boothe focused on education because an educated black populace contradicted the notion among whites that blacks would regress into "savagery."⁷

Boothe learned how to read at a young age. At the age of three he learned the alphabet from the lettering of a tin plate. His ability was nurtured by several teachers who boarded at the estate where he was enslaved.

As a teenager, Boothe worked as a clerk at a local law firm. He explored Scripture on a regular basis, because mid-nineteenth-century legal practice was rooted in biblical logic. As he became increasingly conversant with the Bible, his faith matured. From childhood he prayed and heard the Bible read, but Boothe said that "In 1865 ... I reached an experience of grace which so strengthened me as to fix me on the side of God's people."⁸ In March of 1866 he received baptism.

For Boothe the church must play a crucial role in racial uplift. He established and pastored two churches: First Colored Baptist Church in Meridian, Mississippi, and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was always a pillar in the Montgomery community, but in recent decades, it has become internationally renowned for its role in the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of its twentieth pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968). It has been renamed King Memorial Baptist Church.

In the years following Emancipation, the church became the epicenter of the black community. The church was the sole institution that African Americans controlled, and it was central to the black community—not only as a spiritual outpost, but also as a social hub and political nerve center. Often the most educated people in the black community were pastors who had the rhetorical skill necessary to advocate for their congregants. Moreover, full-time ministers at large churches were uniquely situated to advocate for racial justice. They were financially independent from whites, so they could represent blacks on social issues without fear of lost wages—though they could suffer other forms of retaliation like church burning, physical violence, and intimidation.

Ordained ministers like Boothe played a significant role in elevating literacy rates among black Southerners from 10 percent in 1860 to nearly 43 percent in 1890.⁹ Boothe promoted literacy so former slaves could read the Bible and break free of the oppressive interpretive practices that made the Christian faith a tool to subjugate blacks during slavery. By reading the Bible for themselves blacks could escape manipulative interpretations that were used to foster docility in slaves and make obedience to their masters synonymous with obedience to God.

He engaged society based on the biblical premise that all people are granted equal dignity as divine image bearers. Boothe's theological convictions compelled him to be vocal concerning immigration.¹⁰ In 1901 he joined

4. Crowther, "An Alabama Apostle of 'Uplift,'" 111.

5. Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, 20.

6. Crowther, "An Alabama Apostle of 'Uplift,'" 112. See U.S. Const. art. I, § 2.

7. William Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 123.

8. Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, 10.

9. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: American's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 96.

10. Crowther, "An Alabama Apostle of 'Uplift,'" 114.

Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) to oppose Alabama’s legal disenfranchisement of blacks.¹¹

Boothe established institutions vital for blacks to flourish beyond slavery’s chains. He taught for the Freedmen’s Bureau, which supported black education and provided emancipated slaves food, shelter, medical care, and legal assistance. As a member of the Colored Baptist Missionary Convention, Boothe facilitated literacy programs and theological training for black preachers and laypeople. In 1878 he and other convention leaders founded Selma University; he served as its second president (1901–1902). Boothe also served as the editor of *The Baptist Pioneer*, which helped underwrite Selma University.

In his life and ministry Boothe emphasized interracial cooperation—even though he ministered during the onset of Jim Crow Segregation and at the height of lynching terror—perhaps in part because as a boy Boothe had had positive interactions with whites. At a Baptist church near his home, whites and blacks worshiped together, served each other, and washed each other’s feet. Whites and blacks alike sought out his grandmother, a respected woman of prayer, for comfort during times of sorrow.¹² So he cooperated with those willing to support black social advancement and combat racial oppression despite their race. Boothe worked collaboratively with white Baptist groups like the Alabama Baptist Convention (of the Southern Baptist Convention), the American Baptist Home Missionary Society, and philanthropists to obtain funding for training ministers and for the operating expenses of Selma University.¹³

After decades of pastoral ministry, educational innovation, and public engagement, Boothe doubted the effectiveness of his efforts for racial reconciliation in the South. The pace of change was slow. In 1910—just before the Great Migration (1915–1930), when 1.6 million blacks moved from the rural South to Midwestern and Southern cities—Boothe moved to Detroit, where he died in 1924. Little is known of his time in Detroit—not even the precise date of his death.

11. See Booker T. Washington, “Petition to the Members of the Alabama Constitutional Convention,” in *Booker T. Washington Papers Volume 6: 1901–2*, ed. Barbara S. Kraft (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1977), 129–33.

12. Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, 9.

13. Crowther, “Charles Octavius Boothe.”

WHY REVIVE PLAIN THEOLOGY FOR PLAIN PEOPLE?

Plain Theology for Plain People destroys reductionist stereotypes of black faith. Many are unfamiliar with the African American theological heritage because of its limited corpus. 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.”¹⁴

Plain Theology for Plain People shows black evangelicals that they belong in the broad evangelical tradition. Many thoughtful black Christians—often educated in evangelical universities and seminaries—have an enduring sense of homelessness in the evangelical tradition. Their ancestors are seldom, if ever, included as contributors to Evangelicalism. Boothe offers a window into an underexplored vista of theological expression. Black evangelicals have equal claim to the evangelical tradition—even though evangelicals have historically muted their voice.

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.

Unity in Christ demands an openness to collaboration and to mutual sharpening in the theological task. Evangelicals often presume that the task of theology is merely to comprehend God. But the goal of theology is wisdom—a lived demonstration of knowing God. God, not context, has ultimate authority, and yet wisdom demands understanding the context in which Christians live and God works.

Christians need Christians from different cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts to develop wisdom. Boothe grappled with God’s relation to late-nineteenth-century black life—including economic disenfranchisement, lynching terror, and legal segregation. Chronological and cultural distance allows readers today to see how Boothe embodied divine wisdom

14. W. E. B. DuBois, “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 197.

in his context. As a result, believers are encouraged by God's actions in the past: the Lord God is faithful in every circumstance.

Plain Theology for Plain People *exemplifies how the Bible informs Christian doctrine*. Systematic theologians continually fight the temptation to conform Scripture to a theological system (be it Reformed Theology, Liberation Theology, or Neo-Orthodox Theology). While every theological paradigm ought to be based on Scripture, not every verse fits neatly into a system. With his audience in mind, Boothe reinforces the sufficiency of Scripture by giving an organized account of how Scripture informs Christian doctrine. Through his biblical centrality Boothe circumvents the theological skirmishes of the academy. Like Boothe, theologians today must make the lofty ideas of theology plain to common Christians.

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To the memory of the late devoted Rev.

Harry Woodsmall, of Indiana.

A consecrated Christian gentleman; a faithful teacher of the word of God; a self-sacrificing friend of the Lord's poor; a man whose life was a living illustration of the divine life of the Bible; a man, the memory of whose labors for the colored people of the South must be as unfading as the eternities to come, and as lasting as the immortality of the souls who wear his impress, is this little book lovingly dedicated by the author.

— CHAPTER

2

Man

I. HIS CREATION

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.”

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:7).

There are important facts in his creation.

(1) MAN DOES NOT APPEAR UPON THE STAGE OF ACTION TILL THE EARTH HAS BEEN COMPLETED FOR HIS RECEPTION, TILL “GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD.” BEFORE THE “LORD” OF THE EARTH APPEARS HIS HABITATION IS PREPARED TO RECEIVE HIM (GENESIS 1:25).

(2) MAN’S NATURE

Though his body was made from the dust of the ground, still his true being, his higher nature, was a spiritual essence, after the nature of God. No other than a spiritual essence or nature is capable of receiving a moral impress, or of attaining unto the relation of citizenship in the divine government. Moral image and moral obligations suppose a spiritual being.

(3) GOD MADE MAN UPRIGHT, AND A HOLY DISPOSITION, LIKE THAT OF GOD—IN WHOSE MIND HE WAS CONCEIVED—WAS FREELY GIVEN UNTO HIM.

In view of these facts, it is easy to see the purpose of man’s creation. Why was all this careful preparation, except for a great and important purpose? Man was created in the image of God, in order that he might be fit for the presence of God, and prepared to enjoy fellowship with him and with other holy beings whom he had created. But man was, in knowledge, an infant, and, in position, a subject of him who had created him.

II. MAN MADE SUBJECT TO SPECIAL GOVERNMENT

When God placed him in the garden prepared for his habitation, he laid upon him the command;

“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

It was with God as it is with parents when an infant comes into the family. With the child there are two stages of discipline. The first stage belongs to that period in which the child cannot, for the want of development, discern the virtue of principle. At this point we teach him to regard parental authority by giving him special commands, often giving no reasons except that such is our choice. Then comes the period when we appeal to principles and laws, and drill by them. But no matter what the season, obedience to the parental will and regard for authority must be maintained. This necessity existed in the case of our first parents. They must be taught, and must understand, that God himself is law. The tree is called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” and it is said of it that its fruit was good for food and pleasant to the eyes. It had in itself, it appears, no extra virtue; it was a peculiar tree only because it was guarded by a peculiar command from God. God must needs begin at some point to teach and to enforce his authority upon Adam, and he chooses to begin with the command in regard to this one tree.

“Of all the trees of the garden, except *this one*, thou mayest freely eat.”

Here God put the bridle of restraint upon man, but let the reins drop so that man might hold them himself. It appears that for some time he went on well under the discipline imposed upon him. He not only kept up with the work of “keeping and dressing” the garden, but he kept clear of all meddling with the one specially forbidden tree. How we could wish that he had con-

tinued obedient until by discipline he had become perfected and established in righteousness!

I know that no sane man will contend that God should not have put man under command. Some one may ask why God left Adam. To this I reply that the only act that has any personal virtue in it is the act that is born of the intelligent, deliberate, obedient choice of the actor; and the act that is performed only because of the presence of another has in it no virtuous character at all.

III. THE PENALTY OF TRANSGRESSION

"In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

In other words: "In the day thou breakest across the command which I set before thee, thou shalt lose thy life." Let us look into the facts in the case and we shall see the beauty of the truth before us.

Man was a being who had two natures, we may say; he was an animal from the elements of the ground; he was also a spirit, a being of mental and moral powers, fitting him to study and treasure up the facts of knowledge and to the principles of law. It is very evident that the spirit is the higher part of man's nature; that is, is *the* man, for the reason that nothing but a spirit can possess and regard moral relations to the divine government. Hence the words "Thou shalt lose thy life" were spoken especially of the spiritual nature. By referring to Genesis 2:7, we may see what is the life of the soul:

"And the Lord God formed *man* of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

Here we are told that the breath of God made man a *living* soul—a *living* soul, in contradistinction from a *dead* soul. If nothing save the breath of God in man can make him a living soul, it is plain that the absence of this breath of life must leave him dead, even though no wrath from God should be added.

God, the Righteous Judge of the universe, cannot permit and encourage disobedience in his creatures by filling their hearts with his life and blessings. Indeed, they who willfully disobey God, of necessity separate themselves from him and invite upon their heads God's holy displeasure against rebels and rebellion. Nature is not a contradiction of herself—how much less so is nature's God. Right is right, and wrong is wrong, and the one can never and can nowhere be the other. To leave God is not to be with him, and he only is the Life, as well as the Father of spirits.

IV. MAN FELL OF HIS OWN CHOICE

"And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise; she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. ...

"And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves among the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden: and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself" (Genesis 3:6, 8-10).

This third chapter gives the history of the fall. It tells of the cunning of Satan, who, presenting himself in the person of the serpent, professed special concern for man's improvement; he wanted that they should rise from their slavish, ignorant condition to "be as gods, knowing good from evil."

Speaking to the woman, he says:

"Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4, 5).

Thus he hints that God is deceiving them, and keeping them from their highest good. Instead of resisting the devil, Eve gave him respectful attention, loosed her faith from about the word of the Lord, put her confidence in his enemy, disobeyed the command, and ruined her soul. Here, some one may ask, why God did not exclude the tempter, forbidding his presence in the garden.

I do not know why he did not, but we all know this: A friend who cannot remain true to a friend in the presence of his friend's enemy is unworthy the name of friend; and the character that cannot stand except when it is imprisoned and guarded is without virtue: it is only a sham.

Moreover: As the sunshine and storms deepen the roots and toughen the trunk of the tree, so trials and temptations should fix our principles and deepen our convictions. Can we have any guarantee of character, any proof of moral excellence, where there have been no temptations to test our genuine worth? All things are proven before they are sealed. Silver and gold are refined by the wash and the furnace, and are proven by the tests.

To this one thought I turn special attention; namely, Eve's fall began within her, in her thoughts and feelings, before her fall was made known by outward act. There were but three steps from life into death. The first step

was to doubt the word of the Lord; the second step was to believe the word of the devil; and the last step was to eat the fruit. She took these steps in quick succession, and landed in hopeless despair. There is but one unlocked "trap-door" to hell, and that is unbelief in the true God. Eve and Adam fell through this door. All who have fallen in all ages have fallen through this door. This still is the direct route to the "outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth."

(1) IMMEDIATE RESULTS OF THE FALL

Obedience was their covering, their righteousness, their robe of heavenly citizenship. While this remained untorn they were honorable, appearing in royal apparel. But now it is torn, and their nakedness shames them. They are troubled for garments, and fall to "sewing fig leaves together" to cover themselves. These dry and crumble and fall off. God is heard. They flee from his approaching voice, and seek to hide among the thick trees of the garden. He pursues them, overtakes them, holds them to trial. For the first time, that lordly pair of creatures begin to experience complainings and bitter feelings against each other. Here we come in sight of the first signs of human cowardice and deception. The man lays the blame on the woman, and the woman lays it on the serpent. Here it may be asked why God did not perfect their faith in him, so that doubt would have been impossible. Replying to this, I would say that active faith is composed of two operations; namely, first, it is the putting forth of evidence on one side, and, second, it is the acceptance of this evidence on the other. In the case of faith in God, it engages two parties: First, God puts forth the word which he wants us to receive. He shows us the strength of that word. What remains to be done must be done by us; that is to say, man must perform the part of resting on the word put before him. God put the word before Adam; he satisfied Adam of his power, wisdom, sovereignty, and goodness. God had done his part. Now if Adam refused to rest his confidence, his interests, and hopes in him, it is plain that the fault was entirely his own.

"Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove the man out: and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubim and a flaming sword, which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:23, 24).

Sad sight! Bitter cup! Dark and doleful future! The soul is leprous! Woe to the world for the mournful sounds and woeful sights which it must now hear and see!

(2) MORAL EFFECTS UPON THE RACE

We need not go far to see how Adam's sin has affected his offspring. Look at those blood stains on the hands of Adam's oldest son. Those stains come not from the slaying of the beast: it is the blood of his brother Abel, whom he slew in the fields. Cain is no exception.

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

"The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Psalm 14:1, 2).

"By one man's disobedience many were made sinners" (Romans 5:19).

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9).

That one act of disobedience plunged the world in sin and misery.

"By one man sin entered into the world and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men" (Romans 5:12).

"By the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation" (Romans 5:18).

Sin of every name, and disease of every form, come upon his seed through his crime. But we are not coerced sinners; for each man is a sinner in his own will, a sinner of his own choice.

"The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him" (Ezekiel 18:20).

(3) LEGAL EFFECTS UPON THE RACE

"The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20).

A beautiful thought is this:

"The Lord God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man become a living soul" (Genesis 2:7).

Is it not intended by this expression to signify God's nearness to man? Two must be close together, when the one can breathe into the nostrils of the

other. Is it not a hint to man that he must keep his life-receiving apparatus close to the mouth of God, if he would be a living soul? But sin parts a man from God: it is a departure from him and a straying far away.

Then sin deserves to be punished. Sin is a tremendous and fearful evil. What it has done is proof of this. No man ever sinned and failed to feel its ill desert. Its horrors and ruin are in itself. How can God let it go unpunished? So it is written:

“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18).

“There is no respect of persons with God. As many as have sinned without law shall perish without law; and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law” (Romans 2:11, 12; Ephesians 2:1-3).

Alas! without God in this world, and without hope for the world to come (Ephesians 2:12). No hope, no help, no plea, no audience with the King, no friend, no advocate with God—lost, lost, lost! Desolation and death reign!

— CHAPTER

3

The Way of Salvation

I. THE PURPOSE OF GRACE ORIGINATED WITH GOD

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

This is the language of the Son of God, and is a wonderfully compact statement of the way of salvation from the mighty and gracious Saviour himself. It does not state when the purpose was formed; but there are many passages in the Scriptures which show that it was no afterthought in the mind of God. The first indication of the purpose of God to save sinners is found in immediate connection with the sad story of the Fall. In the Garden of Eden both the justice and the mercy of God are manifested. Justice demands that the sinners should be driven from the Garden; but before the Lord God compels them to go he graciously sets a star of hope in their dark skies. He speaks to the serpent in a way to arouse anxious fear in his mind, and at the same time to allay the fear of Adam and Eve. He says:

“Because thou hast done this ... I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:14, 15).

Then also God showed his kind care for the guilty man and his wife, for we read that before they are driven forth—

“Unto Adam also and his wife did the Lord God make coats of skin and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21).

What a touching picture passes before our minds as we read this short, but pathetic record! God is thus hiding the shame of their nakedness, but he