

Lesson 4

Brief Biography of Dr. Vance Havner

The Life and Ministry of Dr. Vance H. Havner (1901 – 1986)
“And he gave some prophets ... for the perfecting of the saints.”
Ephesians 4:11-12



In every age, God has blessed His church by raising up gifted individuals to serve in unique and effective ways. Surely, one of the most greatly used individuals of recent years was the late Vance Houston Havner. Through a preaching and writing ministry that spanned over 70 years, Vance Havner spoke forth the truth of God’s Word in a most effectual manner. A testimony to his lasting influence is seen in the frequent quoting of Dr. Havner by Christian writers and speakers everywhere. To this day, many a sermon, book, or magazine article will open with a “Havner-ism,” when the author wishes to arrest his audience’s attention in a positive way. The influential ministry was a result of an intimate walk with Christ and serves as a lesson for believers today.

Vance Havner was born October 17, 1901, in the Western North Carolina locality of Jugtown. Though his ministry eventually took him to major cities throughout America, Dr. Havner maintained a love for the quiet and simple ways of his more rural past. His academic experience began at Hog Hill, Jugtown’s schoolhouse. Later, he attended schools such as South Fork Institution, and Boiling Springs High School, which later became Garner-Webb College. He also attended Catawba College, Wake Forest University, and Moody Bible Institute.

Even though he had exposure to a variety of educational experiences, Vance Havner was largely a self-taught individual. His family attended the old Corinth Baptist Church, and often-times visiting preachers would stay with the Havner family. Young Vance enjoyed the theological discussions that would be a part of such visits, and these times were no doubt influential. But much of Vance Havner’s spiritual development took place as he spent time quietly alone with God. Vance loved the out-of-doors, and it was in the woods as a boy that he opened his heart to Christ. His love of God and knowledge of scripture was manifest at a very young age, and as a child he frequently drew pictures of Bible stories that were accompanied by his own handwritten commentary.

Reflecting back on his call to ministry, Dr. Havner once said, "I've never known a time when I didn't want to preach. The desire was always there."

Dr. Havner's first pastorate was at the Salem Baptist Church in Weeksville, NC. While serving at Salem Baptist Church, the first of his 38 books was published, *By the Still Waters*. In 1934, Havner went to Charleston, SC to serve as pastor of the First Baptist Church. Later, he was called to an itinerant ministry of evangelism and conference speaking, and it was in this capacity that his greatest contributions were made.

Havner's reputation grew as he traveled and spoke in increasingly larger circles. His influence extended to a national level, but Dr. Havner's approach was always to minister where God directed, regardless of the size of the church. His appeal and influence transcended denominational lines, and he spoke to many different groups of people.

In addition to preaching in many of America's most influential churches, Dr. Havner was a highly sought speaker for conferences at places such as Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He frequently spoke at both state and national meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Havner delivered chapel messages and baccalaureate sermons at colleges such as the Citadel, Columbia Bible College (now Columbia International University), Liberty University, Southeastern Baptist Seminary, and Garner-Webb College.

While speaking at Florida Bible Institute in 1939, Vance Havner met Sara Allred, whom he married in 1940. She was a dedicated Christian, and faithful helper with her husband's ministry. For thirty-three years, Dr. and Mrs. Havner traveled to many meetings together, and their labor yielded much fruit.



Thousands of people made decisions for Christ in revivals and evangelistic services where Vance Havner preached. Thousands more were impacted through the many books that Vance Havner had opportunity to write. These included such titles as *Why Not Just Be Christians?*, *Pepper 'N Salt*, *Playing Marbles With Diamonds*, *Hearts Afire*, *Peace In the Valley*, *Pleasant Paths*, *On This Rock I Stand*, and many others. After Mrs. Havner's death in 1973, Vance Havner wrote *Though I Walk Through the Valley*, a book which has been a great comfort to many grieving persons. Dr. Havner lovingly wrote of Sara's "innumerable ministries as wife, homemaker, and companion."

Recognition of his contributions to the Christian community came from many sources, but Vance Havner ministered for the glory of God alone. In 1973, he was named "Preacher of the Year," by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Protestant leaders from many denominations called Havner, "The Dean of America's Revival Preachers." His unique sense of humor endeared him to many, and Havner could choose the right words to express a truth like no other communicator. He was truly gifted with an ability to phrase a thought in such a way, as to drive home a point with absolute effectiveness. During a hospital stay in the late 1970's, Vance was told by Billy Graham, "You can't go home just yet. We preachers need more sermon material!"

Dr. Havner's perception and communication skill is evidenced in quotes such as the following:

"We are the salt of the earth, mind you, not the sugar. Our ministry is to truly cleanse and not just to change the taste."

"Too many churches start at eleven o'clock sharp, and end at twelve o'clock dull."

"Plenty of church members are shaky about what they believe, while not many are shaken by what they believe."

"Some preachers ought to put more fire into their sermons, or more sermons into the fire."

"The church is a hospital for sinners, and not a museum for saints."

During the 1950's, Vance Havner was asked his opinion about the Hollywood movies coming out that were based on Biblical themes. Havner noted the irony of Hollywood putting the Bible on film: "I'd just as soon hear a gangster lecture on honesty," he observed.

When asked about the duties of a minister, Havner once said, "The preacher is to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable." Throughout his ministry, Vance Havner lived and preached that a Christian should exhibit faithfulness to Jesus in all areas of life. He taught that the Christian should attend to, "the outliving of the in-living Christ." Havner wrote, "To some, Christianity is an argument. To many, it is a performance. To a few, it is an experience."



For over 70 years, the church was blessed and challenged by the ministry of Vance Havner. For the past 29 years, the church has been strengthened through his ministry of the Word of God.

Though Dr. Havner died in 1986, his influence for Christ continues. His ministry is a testimony to the way in which God can use one surrendered life to touch countless other lives.

As far as I know, the only thing we would disagree with Havner on is the matter of Calvinism. When a Calvinist says, "God is sovereign", he means God decides everything, including who will be saved and who won't be saved. This believe did not show itself in much of Havner's preaching.

I want you to hear Havner, mainly because of his quaint sayings and his loved for the Word of God. Some liken him to A.W. Tozer while others liken him to Will Rogers.