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Preaching the Word in the Local Church

by David Dunlap

“...For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” —Acts 20:27-28

The Bible is God’s life-transforming message for the church; therefore, we are exhorted to preach the Word. We read early in the book of Acts that the believers, “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Paul counsels Timothy, “Preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine”(2 Tim. 4:2). The Word of God taught in the power of the Holy Spirit is an indispensable discipline for the local church.

Preaching, the Church, and a High View of Scripture

Those who minister the word of God must have a high view of Scripture. There are some who preach the Word of God without authority and conviction. God reveals Himself through the pages of the Bible, and that written revelation must be held up as the believer’s final authority. One of the worst assaults on the Word of God comes from those who say they believe the Bible yet do not know what it teaches. There are Christians all across the America who say they believe the Bible but know very little of its contents. Some would scarcely know the difference between John the Baptist and John the apostle. How can we believe the Word of God if we don’t know it?

Many Christians are vague about doctrine. Many pastors offer little sermons that are nice and interesting. Sometimes they make you feel warm, fuzzy, sad, or excited. But seldom do you hear doctrine discussed. Very few ministers of the Word of God explain great Bible truths about God, life, death, heaven, hell, man, sin, Christ, angels, the Holy Spirit, the position of the believer, the flesh, or the world. We need truths that will root us and ground us in the faith. A minister of the Word needs to read a text, find out what it means, draw out a divine truth, and then drive that truth home in the minds and hearts of his hearers by preaching it.

If we have a high view of Scripture we will be committed to living it out and putting it into practice! The Lord Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). If we are fed by every word that comes out of the mouth of God, we ought to study every word, so that we might declare the whole counsel of God.

“I was terribly depressed after preaching tonight. Felt as though I had no preparation, no liberty, no power. I felt compelled to stop during the sermon and tell the people I didn’t have a message from God...I never want to preach that way again. How sadly and slowly I am learning that loud preaching and long preaching are no substitutes for inspired preaching.”

Jim Elliot
(1927-1956)

***“Souls are harmed
by an easy-going
ministry that does
not arouse the
conscience, which
lets people
complacently drift
on to a lost
eternity.
Conversion must
be a real
experience. The
words of the Lord
Jesus Christ surely
rebuke such folly:
Except you be
converted, and
become as little
children, you shall
not enter the
kingdom of
heaven”(Matt
18:3).***

Harry Allan Ironside
(1876-1951)
from “Sailing with Paul”

Providing a Balanced Spiritual Diet

Therefore, it is the responsibility of the elders of a local New Testament church to provide a balanced spiritual diet in the ministry of the Word. Unfortunately, in many New Testament churches the spiritual diet is a barren, uninspired, and unorganized presentation of the Word of God. Believers are hungering for all the Scriptures to be taught with power, conviction, and with sound biblical understanding. Well-known missionary Jim Elliot (1927-1956) once wrote about his own preaching:

“I was terribly depressed after preaching tonight. Felt as though I had no preparation, no liberty, no power. I felt compelled to stop during the sermon and tell the people I didn’t have a message from God...I never want to preach that way again. How sadly and slowly I am learning that loud preaching and long preaching are no substitutes for inspired preaching.”¹

His exhortation that “...loud preaching and long preaching are no substitutes for inspired preaching” needs a greater re-application today.

Improving Spiritual Diet in the Local Church

How can a local church improve the quality of the teaching and preaching of the Word of God?

1. Ministry Guidelines – Not infrequently, the ministry of the Word is handled by men who either are not gifted, or are gifted but very busy; or it is taken by a capable brother from the outside who may just be filling a date on his calendar. First of all, the goal should be that the majority (80-85%) of the teaching of the Word of God should come from within the local assembly. The elders should carry a greater load in teaching than the others in the assembly. Through their teaching, they deliver quality, focused ministry; gain spiritual authority among the believers; and provide a godly example of gifted ministry. If there are only a few gifted men, they should faithfully carry the preaching load until the Lord brings in other gifted men. Elders should exercise a discerning eye on new ones and younger men who can minister the Word effectively. In one assembly, a gifted young man was in that assembly for well over a year before he was given any opportunity to speak. Men who are not gifted in the ministry of the Word should be gently directed to other areas of service in which they are gifted. Outside speakers should be used on an average of one Sunday per five or six weeks. An assembly that does not seek, train, and use gift within will become spiritually weak and eventually close its doors.

2. Content Guidelines – The subject matter of the ministry should build up, challenge, and exhort to godly living. It should be doctrinal, practical, and applicable to the lives of the believers. The teaching should not be aimed at the youngest believer or the most mature believer, but toward the believers in the middle who are growing and eager learners. Often the ministry of the Word is so basic and fundamental that it doesn’t challenge even the youngest believer. On the other hand, it can be so academic and technical that it doesn’t reach and edify the hearts of most believers. The ministry of the Word should be organized, spiritual, and doctrinally balanced. It should be superintended by godly leadership within the assembly. Sound, doctrinal preaching produces sound, mature Christians. The writer of Hebrews exhorts us: “Any who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature...” (Hebrews 5:13-14).

a. **Doctrinal Content** – Important topics should include messages on the doctrine of the Church, great words of salvation (ie. justification, etc.), the nation of Israel, basics of dispensational theology; end-times biblical prophecy, life of Christ (miracles, parables), and verse-by-verse exposition of books of the Bible such as Romans, Hebrews, and Ephesians. Messages on key passages of worship (Ps. 130, Isa. 53, Gen. 22), the doctrine of Satan, angels, and demons, doctrine of the Bible (inspiration, inerrancy, canon, etc.), and spiritual gifts are all needed in the church today.

b. **Majesty and Reverence of God** – Teaching on the person of Christ, attributes of God, and great works of God are desperately needed in our pulpits today. The Scriptures exhort us that “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” It is essential for believers young and old to be gripped by the holiness and majesty of God. Reverence for God anchors the servant in the holy privilege of preaching. Respected writer A. W. Tozer exhorts:

“I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.”²

c. **Practical Content** – Messages on “How to Study the Bible”, improving Christian marriages, the Christian family, participation at the Lord Supper, “How to Lead a Child to Christ”, and practical methods in the preparation of Bible messages (especially for young men) are all important in fostering growth in the Christian life.

d. **Practical Disciplines** – Messages on “spiritual vision”, humility, prayer, faith, holiness, discipleship, abiding in Christ (John 15), obedience, witnessing to the unsaved, and the exchanged life (Romans 6-8) should be included in a healthy diet of ministry.

e. **Missions Emphasis** – Also important are messages on Paul’s missionary strategy in Acts, or topics such as “What of Those Who Never Hear the Gospel?” Use the mid-week service once a quarter for “Missions Night” to pray and learn about missions. Be aware of missionaries who are passing through your area and invite them to minister on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening. In our missions emphasis, a special effort needs to be made to remember the persecuted church. “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them...” (Hebrews 13:3). Resources—from Open Doors Ministries and Voice of the Martyrs (www.persecution.com) are very helpful.

f. **Warning of Error and Current Trends** – Messages on current trends such as: “Replacement Theology,” and cults (Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons), the Roman Catholic church, creation, and apologetics are helpful and needed in the teaching ministry of the local church. The use of DVDs is very helpful in this area. Helpful DVDs on cults and current trends can be ordered at the *Berean Call* website.

g. **Bible Conference Topics** – It is very beneficial to have an annual Bible conference. It can also be helpful to have a women’s conference or a youth retreat at the chapel or a nearby campground. Consecutive teaching on a relevant, well chosen topic during the weekend can yield rich spiritual dividends. The fellowship among believers at a comfortable, rustic setting must not be underestimated in bonding believers together in a special way.

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A. W. Tozer

The Knowledge of the Holy
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Pitfalls of Preaching

Spiritual leaders in the local church must be discerning when some of the ministering saints swerve into doctrinal "hobbyhorse" topics or pick up unsound teaching. Common topics can include "one-naturism", extreme Calvinism, secret codes in the Bible, popular but unsound books like *The Harbinger*, or the *The Secret of the Shemitah* by Jonathan Cahn. It is not uncommon for eager believers to be taken up with a new teaching discovered on internet sites, or popular but unsound books purchased at the local Christian bookstore. Evangelical bookstores can be a resource of sound biblical material, but also a source of unbiblical material. The internet and YouTube can often promote unsound Bible teachers. A form of ultra-dispensationalism promoted by mid-west television Bible teacher Les Feldick has gained popularity among older believers. Some of his unsound ideas have often found their way to the pulpit. Often, well-meaning brothers become passionate about conservative politics or even liberal politics and want to use the pulpit to present their views during election season. The pulpit is no place for politics, and politics almost always divides believers! Shepherds of the flock should be discerning guards of the preaching diet of the local church.

Conclusion

The preaching of a balanced doctrinal diet will raise up strong and effective believers in Christ. Spiritual leaders in the local church are commanded to feed the flock of God. In order to feed the flock, ministers of the Word must be students of the Word. When the Word of God is taught with passion and clarity, believers will know God more deeply, serve Christ more fervently, and worship Him more earnestly. May we heed the words of the apostle Paul, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shall be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine..." (1 Timothy 4:6).

Endnotes

1. Elisabeth Elliot, edited, *The Journals of Jim Elliot*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1978), p. 353
2. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper, New York, 1971), p. 8