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FEAST OR FAMINE? THE PRIORITY OF BIBLICAL PREACHING

AS THE CHURCH ADVANCES into the twenty-first century, the stress to produce booming ministries has never been greater. Influenced by corporate mergers, towering skyscrapers, and expanding economies, bigger is perceived as better, and nowhere is this “Wall Street” mentality more evident than in the church. Sad to say, pressure to produce bottom-line results has led many ministries to sacrifice the centrality of biblical preaching on the altar of man-centered pragmatism.

A new way of “doing” church is emerging. In this radical paradigm shift, exposition is being replaced with entertainment, preaching with performances, doctrine with drama, and theology with theatrics. The pulpit, once the focal point of the church, is now being overshadowed by a variety of church-growth techniques, everything from trendy worship styles to glitzy presentations and vaudeville-like pageantries. In seeking to capture the upper hand in church growth, a new wave of pastors is reinventing church and repackaging the gospel into a product to be sold to “consumers.”¹

Whatever reportedly works in one church is being franchised out to various “markets” abroad. As when gold was discovered in the foothills of northern California, so ministers are beating a path to the doorsteps of exploding churches and super-hyped conferences where the latest “strike” has been reported. Unfortunately, the newly panned gold often turns out to be “fool’s gold.” Not all that glitters is actually gold.

GOD’S WORK, GOD’S WAY

Admittedly, pastors can learn from growing churches and successful ministries. Yet God’s work must be done God’s way if it is to know God’s blessing. He provides the power and He alone should receive the glory, but this will happen only when His divinely prescribed plan for ministry is followed. When people-centered schemes are followed, often imitating the world’s shtick, the flesh provides the energy, and people—not God—receive the glory.

Throughout church history, preachers who have left a lasting impact on the church have known that, in the words of Michael Horton, “the regular proclamation of Christ through the close exposition of Scripture [is] more relevant in creating a worshipping and serving community than political causes, moral crusades, and entertaining services.”² In many evangelical churches, however, the centrality of biblical exposition is being demoted to second-class status. In a strange twist, the preaching of the Cross is now foolishness, not only to the world, but also to the contemporary church. The result has been a famine of biblical preaching in our land.

This famine in pulpits across the nation reveals a loss of confidence in God’s Word to perform its sacred work. While evangelicals affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, many have apparently abandoned their belief in its *sufficiency* to save and to sanctify. Rather than expounding the Word with

growing vigor, many are turning to lesser strategies in an effort to resurrect dead ministries. But with each newly added novelty, the straightforward expounding of the Bible is being relegated to a secondary role, further starving the church. Doing God's work God's way requires an unwavering commitment to feeding people God's Word through relentless biblical preaching and teaching.

A PARADIGM FOR MINISTRY

With many ministries forsaking a steady diet of biblical exposition, where is an effective model to be found in which preaching and teaching God's Word is the main entree? What does it look like when a church is being served the meat of God's Word? One need look no further than to the first church in Jerusalem, born on the Day of Pentecost and firmly planted in the soil of newly converted hearts. Today's church leaders would do well to revisit this congregation and rediscover the strategy of its earliest leaders, the apostles.

After the apostle Peter boldly preached to the gathered crowd at Pentecost, three thousand souls were pierced to the heart, saved, and then baptized. In condensed form, Acts 2:42–47 portrays the potent life of this newly formed congregation. These verses contain the major components of the dynamic life of this first congregation—the apostles' teaching, fellowship, worship, prayer, service, and evangelism. Here are the six channels through which God's Spirit pulsated through believers and dramatically impacted the world around them. Each of these spiritual disciplines is critical for the health of any church that seeks to wholly honor God.

Purposefully listed first in this passage, the apostles' teaching will be the focus of this chapter, which examines the strategic place, specific pattern, and supernatural power that such teaching occupied in this first church. This study

is a call to the contemporary church to make biblical preaching central, just as the apostles did two thousand years ago—to move from the present famine to a future feast. The early church experienced spiritual vitality, not because of gimmicky techniques, but because it focused on the priority of biblical teaching. Along this line, Acts 2:42–47 demonstrates the God-assigned role of the apostles' doctrine.

THE PRIMACY OF THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

Listed first in this cluster of ministries, the apostles' teaching was the chief ministry of these first church leaders. First and foremost, the apostles *taught*. More specifically, they taught *doctrine*. Their teaching ministry brought life to all the other aspects of the first church. It is no accident that teaching came first.³ It must *always* come first. In the Christian life, precept comes before practice, doctrine before duty, and exposition before experience. As John Phillips has well stated, "Experience must always be tested by doctrine, not doctrine by experience."⁴

John Stott observed that these "new converts were not enjoying a mystical experience which led them to despise their mind or disdain theology. . . . Anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are mutually incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth."⁵ That is to say, the Holy Spirit worked mightily in this first church by leading the apostles to be prolific in their teaching ministry. Sound doctrine enriched every aspect of this church's life. Every strategy and ministry flowed from the pure fountain of biblical truth. As the chief activity of the apostles, their teaching was primary and powerfully effective, a timeless pattern that was modeled in Jesus' ministry, commanded in the Great Commission, practiced in the early church, and reinforced in the Pastoral Epistles.

MODELED IN JESUS' MINISTRY

As the apostles taught this first flock, they were following what they had seen Jesus Christ do. For more than three years they had been directly taught by Christ Himself and had witnessed His public ministry. They understood the central importance He placed on teaching. From the time Christ first called them to follow Him until His ascension, teaching was His chief occupation. No doubt His disciples-in-training noted this priority in His ministry. So central was His teaching ministry that the Twelve called Him “Teacher” (John 13:13), and He called each of them His “disciple” (Matt. 10:24–25; Luke 6:40), a word used of any learner who sat under a teacher and absorbed his teaching.⁶ Such terms clearly indicate the primary place of teaching in Christ’s ministry.

As Jesus launched His public ministry, He came “preaching the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14). Soon after that, He entered a synagogue in Nazareth and read from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives” (Luke 4:18). He thus claimed that His preaching fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy. When large numbers came to Him to be healed, He withdrew from them, stating, “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also” (Mark 1:38).

Nothing would deter Him from His primary ministry of preaching and teaching, not even the compassionate healing of the sick. When the multitudes came, “He began to teach them” (Matt. 5:2). Throughout His public ministry, the proclamation of God’s truth remained paramount. Even the night before He was crucified, Jesus gathered His disciples in a cloistered upper room and taught them (John 13–16).

After His resurrection, the focus of Jesus’ ministry remained the same. While walking on the road to Emmaus,

He appeared to two disciples and “explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). When the disciples met in the Upper Room, Jesus appeared in their midst and “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (v. 45) regarding “all things which are written” about Him “in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (v. 44). And just before Jesus was taken up into heaven, He was instructing His disciples (Acts 1:1–9).

This central thrust in Christ’s ministry, namely, preaching and teaching, left a deep impression on His disciples. As the Twelve began their pastoral work, as stated in Acts 2:42, they were merely imitating what they had observed Jesus do, repeating what had been modeled before them. As they shepherded this first church in Jerusalem, they immediately began teaching, because this was what Jesus had done with them. Any other ministry priority would have been a departure from the consistent example they had seen in Christ’s own ministry.

COMMANDED IN THE GREAT COMMISSION

Furthermore, the apostles taught these new believers because this was what Jesus had commanded them to do. In the Great Commission issued only days earlier, Jesus had charged them: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

In this authoritative mandate, their essential responsibilities—going, making disciples, baptizing, and teaching—climaxed in this last charge of “teaching,” as they were commanded to indoctrinate the new believers in all He had taught them. As Jesus had instructed them, He now directed them to do the same with others. In fact, teaching is so

foundational to fulfilling in the Great Commission that Jesus identified His future followers as “disciples,” or learners. First and foremost, the apostles were to make *learners*—not “fellowshippers,” breakers-of-bread, or prayers. Although these other spiritual disciplines of fellowshiping with each other, communing with Christ, and praying to God are undeniably important, they would become a reality only as these new followers were *first* taught the essential truths of the Christian faith. So in obedience to what Christ had commanded in the Great Commission, the apostles taught new believers.

PRACTICED IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The fact that these new believers were “*continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching*” (Acts 2:42, italics added) implies that the Twelve were teaching on a regular, ongoing basis. The apostles’ ministry of preaching and teaching is mentioned more often than any other activity in which they were engaged (Acts 2:42; 3:11–26; 4:1–2, 8–12, 19–20, 31, 33; 5:20–21, 29–32, 42; 6:2, 4, 7–10; 7:1–53). So overwhelming is this evidence that it can be argued that Acts is primarily a record of apostolic preaching and teaching. John MacArthur concluded, “The early church sat under the teaching ministry of the apostles, whose teaching, now written on the pages of the New Testament Scriptures, is to be taught by all pastors.”⁷

No matter where they were, these apostles were preaching. Whether in Solomon’s temple (3:11–26; 5:20, 42), in public gatherings (4:2, 33), before the Sanhedrin (4:8–12; 5:27–32), or from house to house (5:42), they boldly taught in the name of Christ. Even in the face of life-threatening dangers, the apostles refused to be silenced, declaring, “We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (4:20). When the demands of ministry grew complex, they would not be diverted from their central task of teaching. They

said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God” (6:2). Most notably, when the successful expansion of their ministry was described, it was measured in terms of spreading “the word of God” (v. 7). Similarly, when those under their teaching—men such as Stephen and Philip—were thrust into ministry, they taught the “word” with extraordinary effectiveness (7:2–50; 8:5–6, 25–35, 40). In fact, the first disciples filled all Jerusalem with their teaching (5:28). Unmistakably, the apostles’ teaching was most important in the early church.

REINFORCED IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

The primacy of the apostles’ teaching was a central theme in the Pastoral Epistles. The apostle Paul encouraged Timothy and Titus to devote themselves to the ministry of preaching and teaching God’s Word. The first duty with which Paul charged his young associate, Timothy, was to “instruct” the church about proper doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3), which is “the pillar and support of the truth” (3:15). Timothy was to be “constantly nourished on the words of faith and of the sound doctrine” (4:6) and to “prescribe and teach these things” (v. 11). He was to “give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching” (v. 13), never neglecting his “spiritual gift” of teaching (v. 14). He must “take pains with” and “be absorbed in” his teaching, paying “close attention” to his “teaching” (vv. 15–16). All ministers, Paul wrote, must “work hard at preaching and teaching” (5:17), instructing (6:17), and guarding the truth (v. 20).

In 2 Timothy, Paul reinforced this theme with his young son in the faith. Timothy was to “retain the standard of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13), “guard” it (v. 14), and “entrust” it to others (2:2). He was to “remind” others of the truth (v. 14), be “handling accurately the word of truth” (v. 15), and be

“able to teach” (v. 24). Solemnly charged before God, Timothy must “preach the word” “with great . . . instruction” (4:2).

Paul also encouraged Titus to minister God’s Word. All pastors must “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). He told Titus, “Speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (2:1). Paul charged him, “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you” (v. 15).

Thus, in these three Pastoral Epistles, the apostle Paul affirmed the *primary* responsibility of the ministry, namely, to effectively disseminate the apostles’ teaching.

THE FOREMOST RESPONSIBILITY

Biblical preaching must *always* occupy the leading place of influence in the life of any church. At the core of any healthy congregation is a vibrant exposition of God’s Word. Unfortunately, though, many pastors are turning away from the central role of expository preaching and doctrinal teaching. But in so doing, they fail to realize that new converts, first and foremost, need to be taught God’s truth. As a result, many other things are competing with—and even replacing—the primary role of biblical preaching in the church. Christian concerts, drama, pageants, festivals, musicals, talk shows, and religious movies are establishing a greater foothold in the life of the contemporary church. *Some* of these activities *may* have a place in the church, but they must never compete with nor overshadow the Spirit-energized proclamation of God’s Word within a church.

In diagnosing the ills of emphasis on these auxiliary methods, Martyn Lloyd-Jones lamented, “All this at best is secondary, very often, not even secondary, often not worthy of a place at all. . . . The primary task of the Church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God.”⁸ He echoed the words of the chief pastoral voice of the Great

Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, who declared, “The primary importance of the pastor is to be an expository preacher.”⁹

Evangelical churches desperately need to return to the primacy of the apostles’ teaching. Preaching is the foremost responsibility of the preacher and the church.

THE PATTERN OF THE APOSTLES’ TEACHING

Since the apostles’ teaching was so primary, what exactly did they teach? What was the content of their doctrine?

They expounded the pure truth of divine revelation, firmly grounding new converts in the essential tenets of the Christian faith. At least three things may be noted about their teaching ministry: It was rooted in the Old Testament, focused on Jesus Christ, and centered on doctrinal instruction.

ROOTED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost demonstrates how heavily the apostles drew on the Old Testament Scriptures in their teaching (Acts 2:14–36). Replete with biblical quotations, this first Christian message was a biblical exposition of several key Old Testament passages (Joel 2:28–32; Pss. 16:8–11; 110:1). Even when Peter later stood before the Sanhedrin, he cited the Old Testament (Acts 4:6–10; cf. Ps. 118:22; Isa. 28:16).

In turn, the new believers who sat under the apostles’ teaching repeatedly used the Old Testament. For example, after Peter and John were released by the Sanhedrin, they returned to the believers and reported what God had done (Acts 4:23). In response, the believers spontaneously lifted their voices to God in prayer (4:24–31), quoting several Old Testament passages (Exod. 20:11; Pss. 2:1–2; 146:6).

Stephen, one of the early disciples who studied under the apostles' teaching (Acts 6:3, 5), also addressed the Sanhedrin (7:2–53), quoting extensively from the Old Testament. The following list includes only a few of the many citations and allusions Stephen made to the Old Testament in his sermon.

STEPHEN'S MESSAGE	OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCE
ACTS 7:3	Genesis 12:1
7:5	Genesis 12:7; 17:8
7:6	Genesis 15:13
7:7	Exodus 3:12
7:18	Exodus 1:8
7:27–29	Exodus 2:14–15
7:30–34	Exodus 3:1–10
7:37	Deuteronomy 18:15, 18
7:40	Exodus 32:1, 23
7:42–43	Amos 5:25–27
7:49–50	Isaiah 66:1–2

Having grown up as a Jew, Stephen no doubt knew the Old Testament well, but he was almost surely taught by the apostles. As a believer in Christ, he told the Sanhedrin that the Old Testament prophets “announced the coming of the Righteous One” (Acts 7:52).

Philip, another disciple apparently taught by the apostles (6:3, 5), showed great competence in handling the Old Testament. For example, when the Ethiopian eunuch asked him to explain Isaiah 53:7–8, Philip immediately gave the true interpretation (Acts 8:25–35). This precise handling of Scripture unmistakably argues for the foundational role of the Old Testament in the apostles' teaching. Thus, the Old Testament was the underlying foundation of their doctrine.

RIVETED ON JESUS CHRIST

The chief subject of the apostles' teaching ministry was the words and works of Jesus Christ. For more than three years, they had been eyewitnesses of His perfect life and keen students of His prolific teaching. They were so closely associated with Him that others noted that they "[had] been with Jesus" (4:13). Understandably, their apostolic teaching focused on the Lord—His life, deity, discourses, parables, promises, conversations, invitations, denunciations, death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement. It has been noted, "The words and works of Jesus . . . formed the burden of the Apostles' message."¹⁰

Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (2:14–36) was a concise, cohesive presentation of the Lord Jesus Christ, outlining His life and miracles (v. 22), death (v. 23), resurrection (vv. 24–32), and exaltation (vv. 33–36). In the Upper Room, He had promised the apostles He would send the Holy Spirit, who would enable them to remember all He had taught them. He assured them, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). Now, in fulfillment of that promise, the Spirit had come and enabled them to remember Christ's many words. So when the apostles taught, they were "teaching in this name" (Acts 5:28), that is, speaking "in the name of Jesus" (v. 40). The apostles' teaching clearly focused on the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus Christ.

REVEALED WITH DOCTRINAL INSTRUCTION

Also, the apostles' teaching clarified many of the great themes of the Old Testament. *Didache*, the Greek word for "teaching," referred to the content of their message, or the body of truth emanating from their teaching. Occurring thirty times

in the New Testament, *didache* often refers to the fixed body of doctrine as taught by the apostles to the church. In the earthly ministry of Jesus, *didache* referred to the content of His preaching and teaching (Mark 1:22, 27; 11:18; 12:38), including His many discourses, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:28), as well as His exposition of the Law (22:33).¹¹ In the book of Acts, *didache* included the apostles' exposition of Jesus' words. This testimony of the apostles to Jesus Christ became known as "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42), "the teaching of the Lord" (13:12), or "this new teaching" (17:19).¹²

As the church grew, the apostles' teaching was identified as "the whole message of this Life" (5:20) and "the whole purpose of God" (20:27). It included the Old Testament, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the rich doctrinal teachings to be recorded in the New Testament. Everett Harrison called the apostles' teaching a "well-defined pattern of instruction for new converts." He added,

*It must have included the high points of Jesus' life and works; His ethical teaching, such as is enshrined in the Sermon on the Mount; an appreciation of the Old Testament prophetic background for His ministry, such as He imparted to the eleven after His resurrection; a digest of obligations toward one another, especially in the family relationship and toward those outside the fold; and a warning about the possibility of persecution and the inroads of false teaching. . . . They needed . . . insight into the epochal character of the new age into which they had entered because of Christ's finished work and the advent of the Spirit.*¹³

Thus, the apostles' teaching covered many facets of divinely revealed truth, including historical truth (Jesus' life and work), ethical truth (practical application), prophetic truth (Old Testament background), theological truth (systematized doctrine), domestic truth (mutual responsibilities), and eschatological truth (the age to come). The apostles'

teaching was God's plan of redemption centered on the Lord Jesus Christ: the facts that (1) He is the focal point of all God's purposes in the earth, (2) people can know Him and how to live for Him, and (3) His kingdom is coming. Far from a mere elementary course in Christianity, the apostles' teaching included the all-encompassing truths recorded in the Old Testament, the mind-expanding, life-changing words spoken by Christ, and the enriched doctrine elaborated on by the apostles in greater detail.

PABULUM IN THE PULPIT

Tragically, most of what passes for biblical preaching today falls woefully short of apostolic standards. Many pastors seem content to dole out pabulum to spiritual babies instead of teaching the full counsel of God. Many evangelical ministers have succumbed to delivering secular-sounding, motivational pep talks aimed at soothing the felt needs of restless church shoppers or, worse, salving the guilty consciences of unregenerate church members. Rather than expounding the depths of God's Word, many Bible-believing ministers have chosen the path of least resistance, content to scratch the surface of shallow souls and tickle the ears of languid listeners. The result is congregations are starving—even though many of the famished may not be aware of it—settling for sickly sweet, yet totally inadequate, spiritual pabulum.

If people are to be brought to saving faith in Christ and are to mature spiritually, pastors must teach a comprehensive biblical message that is rooted in both the Old and New Testaments, focused on Christ, and full of doctrinal instruction. *Where* are such pulpits today?

THE PURITY OF THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

The apostles did not espouse their own self-styled speculations; their teaching was the authoritative message of God Himself. As such, it was the highest standard in the church, the unchanging plumb line by which all else was measured. Three facts should be noted about the authority of their teaching.

DECLARED AS GOD'S TRUTH

As God's chosen mouthpieces, the apostles were the divinely appointed means through whom His truth was communicated. Their message was God's message, not their own; therefore, it came with divine authority. "Before He ascended, He delegated this authority to the apostles, who spoke in His name," noted commentator Simon Kistemaker.¹⁴ The Greek word for "apostle" (*apostolos*) means "a messenger, one sent on a mission"¹⁵ According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, "It always denotes a man who is sent, and sent with full authority."¹⁶ Therefore, an *apostolos* was dispatched as an official envoy with authority to speak on behalf of the sender. In the New Testament, the word refers primarily to the twelve men whom Christ designated to represent Him in transmitting His message both to the world and the church. To these selected representatives Christ gave His authority to speak His message. F. F. Bruce aptly remarks, "The apostolic teaching . . . was authoritative because it was the teaching of the Lord communicated through the apostles."¹⁷

The importance of the apostolic office is seen in the way Judas's replacement was chosen (Acts 1:21–26). Certain requirements had to be met in order to be an apostle. First, an apostle had to have been present with Christ from the earliest days of His ministry and to have been an eyewitness of

His resurrection (vv. 21–22). This requirement ensured his full exposure to, as well as deep conviction about, the Lord's life, teaching, and resurrection. Second, an apostle had to be one whom the Lord Himself had specifically appointed to this office (vv. 24–25). Even among the many people who had heard His instruction and seen His post-resurrection appearances, the Lord did not choose all of them to be apostles. Only a limited number were chosen to be His apostles; through these men, uniquely qualified and sovereignly selected, He would speak with divine authority.

In this God-designated role, the apostles spoke divine revelation to the church. Thus, the church's ministry would be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). The apostles' teaching became the unchanging, unshifting bedrock of the church. As Paul wrote, "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). The apostles' teaching singularly points to Jesus Christ, the only true foundation for any New Testament church.¹⁸ Because a foundation can be laid only once—at the beginning of a construction project—the apostles' teaching was given initially at the "groundbreaking" of the first-century church, not to be reissued with each subsequent generation. Throughout the present church age, all ministries must build on this same unchanging body of truth, the apostles' teaching, which was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

DOCUMENTED BY GOD'S POWER

How did the early church know with certainty that these men were true apostles? How did believers have the assurance that these men spoke with divine authority? "Many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles" (Acts 2:43). God authenticated the apostles as His representatives by giving them supernatural power to per-

form miracles (Matt. 10:1; 2 Cor. 12:12). Each miracle confirmed that they were men of God who spoke the truth of God. “Wonders” refers to the amazement people experienced when they witnessed these miracles of God performed by the Twelve. “Signs” point to God’s power behind the miracles, authenticating that the apostles spoke as God’s messengers, bearing His eternal truth, the Word of God.

Wrought by the Holy Spirit, such mighty works were performed through the apostles (Acts 2:43; 5:12–16), as well as their associates (6:8), to validate that their message was from God. Such signs passed off the scene by the end of the first century, but the power of God to change lives today brings unmistakable authentication to the divine authority of the message preached.

DETAILED IN GOD’S WORD

By the end of the first century, the apostles’ teaching was permanently recorded in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Every canonical book was either written by an apostle or backed by an apostle. Most of Paul’s epistles and Peter’s two epistles, for example, begin with an affirmation of the writer’s apostleship. Preserved in the pages of the New Testament, the apostles’ teaching remains the highest standard of authority and only source of doctrine in the church today. Everyone and everything in the church must yield to that New Testament authority. Every decision, direction, practice, ministry, attitude, and motive must be brought into conformity with their instruction.

The *living* Word, Jesus Christ, presently rules His church through His *written* Word, the Scriptures. Thus, everything must be brought into alignment with God’s Word.

TO BE SPOKEN WITH AUTHORITY

Such authoritative preaching is desperately needed in the church today. While many churches are catering to the whims of a self-indulgent generation, all who stand before congregations must hold forth the unchanging standard of the apostles' teaching and confront each listener with the unchanging truth of God's Word. The sovereign rule of God in the lives of His people will be realized to the extent that His Word is proclaimed authoritatively and embraced willingly by those who hear it.

With words that apply to all preachers today, Paul charged Titus, "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you" (Titus 2:15). True biblical preaching is authoritative in nature and boldly proclaims God's Word without compromise or apology.

The preacher is not to offer suggestions, or options to be accepted or rejected, but is to issue authoritative commands from God's Word which are to be kept and obeyed. In a day when so many preachers have cowered into being men-pleasers, where are such authoritative preachers today?

THE PASSION FOR THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

How was the apostles' teaching received? As the early-church believers gathered together, they had an unquenchable thirst and consuming appetite to be fed God's truth. John Stott has noted of the early believers: "They sat at the apostles' feet, hungry to receive instruction, and they persevered in it."¹⁹ Of the first congregation described in Acts 2, Luke wrote that they were "continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (v. 42). These spiritual babies—all three thousand of them—were constantly coming to the apostles to be fed spiritual truth. There was no need for gospel gimmicks or spiritual sideshows to entice them to

come, for these starving souls were craving the pure milk of the Word.

DESIRED BY HUNGRY HEARTS

Consider how the early-church believers “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” The verb form of “devoted,” *proskartereo*, means “a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action.”²⁰ This colorful word is a compound in which the verb *kartereo* is joined with a prefix (*pros*) that serves to intensify the action. *Kartereo* means “to be strong, steadfast, also to do something persistently in the face of opposition,”²¹ and *pros* means “to be hard by, near, at.” The compound, then, describes desiring something intensely, or aggressively pursuing a desired object. This word is also used to describe the strong devotion and singular desire of the one hundred twenty who had gathered in the Upper Room for prayer after Christ’s ascension (1:14). Later this verb was used to characterize the apostles’ resolutely committing themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (6:4). In 2:42, the verb depicts the unwavering desire of these new believers to be fed God’s Word by the apostles. This intense desire for the Word “expresses one aspect of the power and vitality of primitive Christianity.”²²

Regarding this spiritual hunger, pastor and author Kent Hughes noted, “Where the Spirit reigns, a love for God’s Word reigns. . . . When the Spirit reigns, God’s people *continually* devote themselves to the study of His Word.”²³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote of the believer’s desire for the Word of God: “Wanting to listen to the Word is inevitable if men and women are born again and have become Christians. A babe . . . has an instinct for milk. He wants it! . . . He is alive and wants the mother’s milk, and rightly so. The point is clear. One simply cannot be a Christian and have no desire for a knowledge of this truth—it is impossible.”²⁴

The first church intensely hungered for the apostles' teaching because they were genuinely converted. This is *normative* Christianity!

DESIGNED FOR GROWING LIVES

The apostles' teaching was designed to nourish the faith of new believers. Those who "were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (2:42) were also those who had previously received Peter's word unto salvation and were baptized (note v. 41). Thus, all who believed were baptized, were added to the fellowship of believers, and welcomed the apostles' teaching. They were continually coming to the apostles to be instructed in God's truth. These first gatherings of the church were designed primarily for edifying believers, not for evangelizing unbelievers. Of course, they were reaching out to the unsaved, for "the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (v. 47). But this "evangelism explosion" was the *result* of their teaching, not the stated *purpose* of it. They gathered for edification; they scattered for evangelism.

The primary focus of their corporate worship gatherings was for building up the believers, not for reaching seekers. When this priority becomes reversed and the church meets primarily to save the lost, the apostles' teaching soon becomes compromised and diluted.

WHERE'S THE BEEF?

The contemporary church seems bent on presenting a non-offensive, felt-need message, which is a sad departure from the model presented in Acts. Delivering a watered-down, man-centered message only retards the spiritual hunger of true believers for the meat of God's Word. Instead of serving a full-course meal of God's truth, many evangeli-

cal pastors have only prolonged this low spiritual desire by offering the spiritual junk food of human philosophies and worldly thinking. Such spiritual junk food, full of “all kinds of artificial preservatives and . . . unnatural substitutes,” wrote Walter Kaiser, has resulted in “theological and biblical malnutrition . . . and a worldwide spiritual famine [due to] the absence of any genuine proclamation of the Word of God.”²⁵

Tragically, many pastors today are catering *to* their people, sometimes under the guise of reaching lost people, rather than catering to them *with* the steak of Scripture. Pastors must avoid this well-intentioned but misdirected trend. They must focus on filling the pulpit, not the building.

When they preach, men of God must earnestly pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to create an unquenchable appetite for the Word in the hearts of believers. Spiritual leaders must fervently pray for the spiritual condition of their flocks, asking God to expose any sin that is choking out their hunger for God’s Word (1 Peter 2:1–3). Preachers must once again deliver the truth, the *whole* truth, and *nothing but* the truth to eager hearts who wait to be fed the unsearchable riches of Christ. Anything less is compromise.

THE POTENCY OF THE APOSTLES’ TEACHING

Can a church actually grow under a steady diet of biblical exposition? Can biblical preaching truly stimulate the growth of the church? Of course! The apostles’ teaching greatly enriched the spiritual life of this first congregation as well as expanded their numbers. Never an end in itself, God’s truth is always a means to a greater end, namely, leading God’s people into genuine worship, personal maturity, spiritual service, and evangelistic outreach. Acts 2:42–47 spells out the multifaceted impact of the apostles’ teaching.

ENERGIZED FELLOWSHIP

As these new believers grew in the truth, they grew in the Lord, and, in turn, they grew closer to each other. Forged together on the anvil of God's truth, their relationships in Christ were shaped and molded through their commonly held commitment to the teaching of the apostles. "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship" (2:42). These two activities—the apostles' teaching and fellowship—are closely related, suggesting that the apostles' biblical preaching directly impacted the quality of the new believers' personal relationships. *Koinonia*, the Greek word translated "fellowship," means "association, communion, fellowship, close relationship."²⁶ It denotes "the unanimity and unity brought about by the Spirit."²⁷

These new believers who had come to saving faith in Jesus Christ also came to understand that they were brothers and sisters in God's eternal family. The more they learned about their jointly held relationship with Christ, the closer, deeper, and richer was their fellowship in Him. As God's Word purged and purified their hearts, the quality of their love for each other grew even stronger. Thus, the apostles' teaching breathed life into their fellowship. So it will be today: A *Word-fed* church will be a *fellowshipping* church.

ELEVATED WORSHIP

As they were "continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching," the early-church believers were also engaged in "the breaking of bread" (2:42). Regarding their early expressions of worship, F. F. Bruce commented, "The 'breaking of bread' probably denotes more than the regular taking of food together: the regular observance of what came to be called the Lord's Supper seems to be in view."²⁸ As they were taught the rich truths about Christ's finished

work on the cross, their worship experience at the Lord's Table intensified. The deeper they dug into the Word, the higher their hearts soared in fervent worship.

Never occurring in an intellectual vacuum, authentic praise and worship is always a heartfelt response to biblical truth. When Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), He meant that genuine worship occurs when a believer responds inwardly to God's truth. In other words, theology leads to doxology. Biblical truth ignites hearts and enflames lives with a fervent, passionate love for God.

The more truth about God one learns and personally applies, the more clearly he or she will see, submit to, and worship Him. Noting this inseparable link, Paul wrote, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16). A *Word-filled* church will be a *worshiping* church.

EMPOWERED PRAYERS

Those who "were continually devoted to the apostles' teaching" were also committed "to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Bruce explains, "As for the prayers in which they participated, the primary reference is no doubt to their own appointed seasons for united prayer, although we know that the apostles also attended the Jewish prayer services in the temple (cf. 3:1)."²⁹ This suggests that the apostles' teaching ignited a passion for prayer. That is the potency of true teaching. The more believers learn about God, the more they recognize their dependency on Him in prayer.

Christ had given specific instructions about the right attitude in prayer, as well as the right approach and the right agenda (Matt. 6:1–14). Teaching the apostles to be steadfast

in prayer, Jesus said believers should always be asking, seeking, and knocking (7:7–11). He taught them to pray like a persistent friend (Luke 11:5–10), a hungry son (11:11–13), and a needy widow (18:1–8), bringing their requests to God in Jesus' name (John 14:13–14). Undoubtedly the apostles' teaching included what Jesus said about prayer as they led these first believers to intercede fervently (Acts 3:1; 4:24–31; 12:5, 12).

The same will be true today. Biblical preaching should always lead to bold praying. These go together like the two sides of a coin. As the Word goes out, prayer should go up. A *preaching* church will be a *praying* church.

ENRICHED SERVICE

As the new Christians received the apostles' teaching, they "were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" (2:44–45). Regarding this new love for each other, C. K. Barrett noted, "Holding all things in common meant that owners sold their property. . . . Luke is describing a state that persisted for some time."³⁰ Their biblical preaching generated great concern, compassion, and commitment in their hearts for each other. Jesus had taught His disciples to share their possessions with those in need (Matt. 5:42). He taught them that they could not serve God *and* material possessions, for life does not consist in the possessions one owns (6:19–34). In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus commanded them to love their neighbors by meeting others' needs (Luke 10:30–37). The apostles' preaching no doubt expounded Jesus' words about loving and serving one another. As a result genuine displays of love immediately flowed from the believers' hearts for each other. Truth called for their mutual

love, which they freely gave. It is no different today. A *learning* church will be a *loving* church.

EXPANDED JOY

The apostles' teaching also sparked an atmosphere of contagious joy. "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:46). Of their contagious fellowship, Barrett wrote, "The meals referred to . . . were not weekly celebrations of the Lord's resurrection but, much more probably, the necessary daily meals, which the believers took in common."³¹ The preaching of the apostles, which magnified the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, ignited an explosive joy that spread to all, as they met from house to house.

When received by faith, God's Word always produces joy, filling hearts with gladness. Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (John 15:11). Far from being boring, God's Word, when preached and received, instills great exuberance. A *Word-filled* church will be a *joy-filled* church.

ENFLAMED EVANGELISM

The apostles' teaching resulted in the conversion of many individuals. As the Christians grew in their faith, they shared the gospel. They experienced "favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Flowing into the lives of these new believers, God's Word was then shared with those who were without Christ, and this resulted in the daily conversion of lost souls. Like water rushing through a pipe, the apostles' teaching was pouring *into* these early

believers and then *through* them into the lives of others. Evangelism flourished because the believers were strong in the written Word. With a growing confidence, they shared the good news of Christ with those around them. The apostles' exposition ignited an evangelism explosion. A *Word-centered* church will be a *witnessing* church.

HOW SHALL WE THEN PREACH?

Do evangelicals still have confidence in the preaching of God's Word to create such positive responses? In the first church, these healthy spiritual dynamics—fellowship, worship, prayer, service, joy, and evangelism—were all enriched by the apostles' teaching. And so it must be today. God's Word proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit is still powerful to produce the same supernatural effect.

Acts 2:42–47 headlines the priority of biblical preaching. The apostles' teaching ignited this first congregation, and it will do the same today in churches that are committed to biblical exposition. Listed first in the ministry activities of this initial flock, the apostles' teaching was the driving dynamic in this first congregation, the catalyst that stimulated their spiritual growth.

J. Dwight Pentecost, professor emeritus of Bible exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, was asked what advice he would give seminary graduates going into the pastorate. He gave an answer that needs to be carefully heeded, not only by young men entering the ministry, but also by seasoned preachers and experienced teachers:

The great need across evangelicalism is exposition of the Scriptures. I sense there is a departure from that, even among some of our own grads, who are entertaining the people, giving the people what they want, whereas we are called to teach the Word. It is the Word that is the power of God to salvation, it is the Word that is

*the power for Christian living, and I would want them to make the Word of God the center of their ministry. It may not be popular, it may not build mega-churches, but it will fulfill that to which they are called upon to do in ministry.*³²

Churches today must return to the primacy of preaching God's Word. May God raise up a new generation of biblical expositors who, like those in the early church, are supremely committed to the unashamed proclamation of the apostles' teaching. Now more than ever, may they *preach the Word!*

Notes

1. For a broader discussion of this issue, see the following books: Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995); Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); and David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
2. Michael Horton, "James Montgomery Boice: Servant of the Word," *Modern Reformation* 9 (September–October 2000): 10.
3. James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 56.
4. John Phillips, *Exploring Acts* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 1:61.
5. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 82.
6. Dietrich Müller, "Disciple," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 1:487–90.
7. John MacArthur Jr., *Acts 1–12*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 83.
8. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 19.
9. Ralph Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards: The Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958), 114.
10. William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 81.
11. Klaus Wegenast, "didache," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3:769. (I have shown all Greek words in their transliterated form because of their common usage and usage by the reader. All Hebrew words are shown with the Hebrew alphabet.)

12. *Ibid.*, 770.
13. Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 65.
14. Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 110.
15. G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 55.
16. Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, "apostolos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:421.
17. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 73.
18. Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, 56.
19. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 82.
20. Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 9:289.
21. Ulrich Falkenroth and Colin Brown, "Patience, Steadfastness, Endurance," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2:64.
22. Walter Grundmann, "proskartereo," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1965), 3:619.
23. R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1996), 47–48 (italics his).
24. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), 1:105–6.
25. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1981), 7–8.
26. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 439.
27. Johannes Schattenmann, "Fellowship," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1:439.
28. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 73.
29. *Ibid.*
30. C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1998), 169.
31. *Ibid.*, 170.
32. Kelley M. Mathews, "An Interview with Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost," *Dallas Connection*, winter 2000, 2.