

Dear Friends,

When I was a youth in the church, I discovered a group of preachers whom people described as "Experimental preachers." They tended to talk as much or more about their personal Christian experience than about the Lord and Scripture. There is a cautious place in sound preaching for personal testimony; Paul made reference twice in Acts to his Damascus Road experience. However, we should take careful note. He didn't constantly preach about that event to the neglect of a full, well-rounded gospel. When a man reads a passage of Scripture and then proceeds to talk about little else than himself and his personal experience, he fails the Biblical test of edifying preaching. I recall on one occasion the pastor of the church my parents attended spending 15-20 minutes at the close of his sermon telling about his careless conduct while mowing his yard with a power rotary mower the week before, severely cutting his foot which happened to be under the edge of the mower when he pulled the starter cord to start the mower. After church, a family member who was not able to attend the service, asked a four year old child, "What did the preacher preach on today?" Serious as could be, the young boy answered, "His sore foot."

The Lord gave all His people one Book to inform and to guide their lives. And each believer needs the aid of other believers, especially the teaching of a studious, godly, and praying preacher/pastor, to gain wise and balanced insight into Scripture's teaching. The more a believer isolates his thinking from the influence and counsel of other believers, especially that pastor, the more dangerous his ideas prove to be. Aquila and Priscilla were blessed to "...expound unto him (Apollos) the way of God more perfectly" at a time when Apollos was preaching to the edification of his hearers, but he also needed their wise instruction. (Acts 18:26 KJV) Had Apollos adopted the "I don't need or want your ideas; the Holy Spirit taught me precisely what Scripture teaches" attitude of the self-made pseudo-disciple of our time, he would have never known that more perfect way. Isolation may be the single most dangerous habit we can practice as believers in Jesus, for our adversary is well skilled and practiced at taking out self-isolated believers, all the while deceiving them to think they are wiser and more informed in the Scriptures than any other believer they know.

Preachers and pastors, spend large amounts of time in that Word and preach it alone, not yourself. "Preach the word...." (2 Timothy 4:2 KJV) Believers in the pew, join your pastor in your own devotion to personal study, prayerful study, of that Word. Seek counsel and aid from your pastor, not from the most persuasive or entertaining teacher you can find. The results of your study habits--and learning habits--will show clearly in your thinking and lifestyle. Self-focused strong opinions and ever-changing chaos, or quiet wise Bible insights.

Lord bless,

Joe Holder

Biblical Preaching—To Edify, Not Entertain

And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd. (Ecclesiastes 12:9-11 KJV 1900)

Granted, we do not normally use this word, “Edify,” in today’s culture. Biblical edification identifies a long-term process of building people up, making them stronger and healthier in the faith. Although Solomon didn’t use the word in our study passage, he wisely describes the Biblical process. A wise preacher doesn’t preach about himself. He teaches the people knowledge from Scripture. He doesn’t ignore the Scriptural mandate to study and apply himself to the Scriptures, to give “good heed,” “to seek out,” and “set in order many proverbs.” He works to find “acceptable words” that will communicate and teach the congregation, that will edify them.

...because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge. A preacher can’t teach the people anything that he doesn’t know himself. That is why Solomon described the wise preacher as diligently seeking out and setting in order what he finds in Scripture.

This requirement for preachers to diligently study is similarly emphasized in the New Testament.

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV)

In this verse, “Study” was translated from a Greek word that means “To be diligent, earnest, or eager.” A preacher who fails to study Scripture is like a chef who never studies recipes in his assignment to prepare tasty nutritious meals. The food he serves will sadly reveal his failure to apply himself and to learn how best to prepare tasty healthy food. The unprepared chef will learn one or two meals which he will repeatedly serve. Perhaps it didn’t taste too bad the first time people ate it, but they soon tire of it; they need a balanced varied diet to satisfy their body’s needs. Likewise, the preacher who fails to constantly study his Bible, as Solomon describes, may make a few good points, but he will lack a full, well-rounded gospel “Diet” for his people. They shall soon suffer spiritual malnutrition.

For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. (Acts 20:27 KJV)

In this context, Paul compares a full balanced gospel to a nutritious diet. Pastors, what kind of “Diet” are you feeding the congregation you serve?

A healthy Biblical diet is not preaching about ourselves; self-focused preaching is equivalent to giving the people “Junk food.” We only feed people healthy spiritual food when we ignore self and preach Jesus. Paul, a man called and appointed of the Lord to be a preacher and an apostle, emphasized that our Biblical objective in preaching is to teach the people from Scripture, not tell them about ourselves.

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake. (2 Corinthians 4:5 KJV)

When I first started preaching, one of my fathers in the ministry gave me sage advice, “When you enter the pulpit, you are entering sacred ground. Don’t waste the time or take it lightly. Tell the people what they need to hear from Scripture and sit down.” On the occasions when I failed to practice this advice, I always regretted my action. A preacher will not have overflowing liberty to preach on every occasion he enters the pulpit. However, he should be so studied, and so fresh in his studies of Scripture, that he will always have a helpful Bible lesson to teach the congregation. If a man fails to maintain fresh and vibrant study of Scripture, his mind will grow stale, and he will not have those lessons for the people. You can’t preach what you studied five years ago with freshness. Stay fresh by continually studying Scripture. Although I’m 80 years old and have been preaching over sixty-six years, I am often surprised—and not a little shamed—when I read a passage that I’ve studied for that long time, and a fresh insight pops into my mind from it. God doesn’t show us contradictory ideas, but he often shows us greater depth and richness associated with His fixed and incomprehensible truth in Scripture.

...he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. He “...gave good heed.” He not only studied the Scriptures constantly to learn more, but he also worked hard to practice what he learned from Scripture. The Lord designed His Book, our Bible, to be a lifelong source of truth. The more we study it the more He will open its riches to our minds. When we stop faithfully studying it, He will close its treasures to our insight. As a man cannot preach above his studies, he also cannot preach above his “Feet,” his personal conduct.

He also “sought out...many proverbs.” He constantly studies and looks to find wise and appropriate Bible lessons to teach the people. And, finally, he “set in order many proverbs.” He doesn’t carelessly or mindlessly seek imaginative or novel ideas or interpretations. He respects God and God’s words in Scripture so profoundly that he invests all his being and effort to discover God’s intended meaning, to set those truths in order.

The results of wise, spiritual preaching/teaching are two-fold.

1. It serves as “goads.” A goad was a pointed stick which an ancient shepherd used to nudge the sheep to pay attention or to move to a safer or better place. Wise preaching should warn careless believers to avoid dangerous ideas or conduct, ever to strive to grow away from their/our sin problems and closer to the Lord and healthy fellowship with Him. Study the two lists in Galatians 5:19-23. Cultivate your sensitivity to the Lord’s conviction to increasingly distance yourself from the “works of the flesh,” and to grow closer in thought, word, and deed to the “fruit of the Spirit.” The Lord “Goads” us in both ways.

Pay good heed to His goads, whether in the conviction of your godly conscience, in Scripture, or in wise preaching. All three should “Goad” us in the same direction. They work together in harmony.

2. It also serves as “...nails fastened by the masters of assemblies.” Wise preaching/teaching should constantly and clearly teach sound Bible doctrine to firmly anchor the hearers in that truth. Wandering ideas, believing one thing today and something different tomorrow, is not Biblical. It reveals an underlying instability of faith that often leads the unstable believer to shipwreck of their faith. The shipwrecked believer fails to allow his faith to be confirmed and “Nailed down,” stable and not subject to constant variation.

...which are given from one shepherd. The wise preacher works to avoid his own private interpretations or ideas. He strives to discover the Holy Spirit’s intended meaning by the words of Scripture that he studies and teaches. His goal is to discover the truth and meaning “...given from one Shepherd,” not play symbolic or hidden meaning games with the Scriptures.

How do we test our interpretations of a passage of Scripture? I believe the Lord provides two essential tools to help us in this task. First, He has given us an abundance of Scripture, both divinely inspired and divinely preserved, so that the words of Scripture remain true and reliable for believers today—in every age. Secondly, He has also provided faithful churches whose prime responsibility is to serve the Lord’s intended purpose as “...the pillar and ground of the truth.” Yes, churches can go sideways and be wrong. However, a church that strives to follow Scripture and Scripture alone in all things is a reliable and Biblical authority to validate our thoughts and interpretations of Scripture. (1 Timothy 3:15 KJV) No, the passage in no way elevates any church to a position of superiority or authority over Scripture, but it does describe the Lord’s church as the custodian and preserver of God’s truth; and thereby the faithful church affirms and validates our good conclusions from Scripture, as well as rejecting our errant ideas. The wise believer—and preacher—will avoid his private ideas that contradict the basic beliefs of his church. Paul wrote nothing whatever about our personal opinions or interpretations being the pillar and ground of the truth.

Jude writes of the enduring quality the Lord invested in His church.

Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. (Jude 1:3 KJV)

Notice the closing clause, “...the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” “The faith” identifies a body of truths believed by the “saints.” Contrary to modern Pseudo-Christian teaching, God did not give versions of truth to His people in different ages or cultures, subject to revision or new “Revelations.” God declares Himself in Scripture to be immutable, unchangeable, “once delivered unto the saints.”

For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. (Malachi 3:6 KJV)

The God who never changes never alters His truth, His "Faith" or body of truth which His people are commanded to believe. The faith which God delivered by the outpoured Spirit on Pentecost to the infant church is the same faith which we are to believe today. Jude commands us to earnestly, fervently contend for that faith, not seek a novel or new version of it, or to magnify our private ideas. There is no new version of truth! Our "one Shepherd" gave it to His people on the Day of Pentecost. It was the same truth that Jesus gave to the disciples during His time. And it is that same truth which saints in all ages are taught to seek and to maintain unaltered. It was "once delivered unto the saints."

Elder Joe Holder