

“FOR CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH”

Author: Patrick J. Griffiths ©
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 Title: What I have learned about the Word and Ministry
 Text: Acts 20:17-38

Theme: The Word of God is the centerpiece of biblical ministry. The Word is to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths. The Word of God shows us the way (**it points**) and dispels the darkness (**it protects**).

Introduction:

Last week we noted the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. Part of the passage notes the centrality of the Word in shepherding the sheep by shepherds. I would like us to focus on that idea in this study by revisiting Acts 20:17-38.

In commenting on 2 Timothy 4:2, Pastor John Piper provides the following thought:

[Pastor], my message to you is very simple and very precarious. It is 2 Timothy 4:2, ‘Preach the Word.’ I call it precarious, because there is a constant temptation to do other things in the place of this. **There ARE other things to do in the ministry**, as these letters to Timothy show. And we must do them to be found faithful. **But none of them is treated as solemnly and forcefully as this one simple exhortation from the apostle: ‘Preach the Word.’**

Of all the activities a pastor/elder might be engaged in, teaching takes first place. This is so for two reasons. **First**, in the absence of this gift, he cannot occupy the office. **Second**, this gift is noted above all other gifting as it relates to this office (1 Tim. 5:17).

Pastor Ligon Duncan the Presbyterian Church of America has this to say about the Pastor and the work of study:

Protestant pastors don’t read or study very much these days, and most churches don’t encourage them to do so. There are fewer pastor-readers than ever before (and surfing the web, dabbling in this oddity and that, doesn’t count!). There is a strong dose of anti-intellectualism in our circles and it doesn’t encourage a man to do the hard work of developing the mind and expanding his knowledge.

But precisely because our people are bathed in trivial information in this day and age, they need a shepherd with real knowledge, much discernment and a nose for truth. This knowledge must be acquired and those qualities cultivated, and both require that you become a permanent student. This call to study is, of course, entirely biblical.

The Bible emphasizes the importance of pursuit of sound learning for the wise in general, and for pastors in particular. Proverbs 15:14 says that “The mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge, But the mouth of fools feeds on folly” (See also Prov. 18:15; 24:5).

Ezra 7:10 describes this great Old Testament leader in this way: "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel." Hosea laments the want of spiritual leaders like Ezra when it says "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (4:6).

But it is in the pastoral epistles that we find some of the most direct words of instruction and exhortation regarding ministerial study. Paul can say to his Timothy "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Here we have an apostolic directive for a young minister to study with the equivalent exertion and effort of a tireless day-laborer. The true minister is a workman (Paul really likes this metaphor!). He works hard at his task. The true minister is to work hard at study so as to know and preach the Truth rightly.

Furthermore, Paul gives Timothy a sterling example of studiousness from his own practice and priorities. Think of his astonishing request in 2 Timothy 4:13 where he asks "When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments." Now think of it. Paul is only months away from death. He has written the bulk of the letters of the New Testament. He has a lifetime of ministry behind him. And what does he want to do? Study! Winter is approaching and so Paul asks for his cloak, but more importantly he asks for books and parchments. Though almost at the end of his course, Paul aims to keep learning and growing by spiritual reading.

Nobody has ever uttered a more poignant pastoral meditation on this little verse than C.H. Spurgeon. Here is what he says:

How rebuked are they by the apostle! He is inspired, and yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for thirty years, and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He had had a wider experience than most men, and yet he wants books! He had been caught up into the third heaven, and had heard things which it was unlawful for a man to utter, yet he wants books! He had written the major part of the New Testament, and yet he wants books! The apostle says to Timothy and so he says to every preacher, "**GIVE THYSELF UNTO READING.**"

The man who never reads will never be read; he who never quotes will never be quoted. He who will not use the thoughts of other men's brains, proves that he has no brains of his own. Brethren, what is true of ministers is true of all our people. YOU need to read. Renounce as much as you will all light literature, but study as much as possible sound theological works, especially the Puritanic writers, and expositions of the Bible. We are quite persuaded that the best way for you to be spending your leisure, is to be either reading or praying. You may get much instruction from books which afterwards

you may use as a true weapon in your Lord and Master's service. Paul cries, "Bring the books" – join in the cry.

Paul herein is a picture of industry. He is in prison; he cannot preach: WHAT will he do? As he cannot preach, he will read. As we read of the fishermen of old and their boats. The fishermen were gone out of them. What were they doing? Mending their nets. So if providence has laid you upon a sick bed, and you cannot teach your class – if you cannot be working for God in public, mend your nets by reading. If one occupation is taken from you, take another, and let the books of the apostle read you a lesson of industry" (from Spurgeon's sermon #542 "PAUL - His Cloak And His Books" in the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* 9 (1863): 668-669).

February 13, 2006, Pastors - Studying and Reading (1), by Ligon Duncan,
http://blog.togetherforthegospel.org/2006/02/pastors_studyin.html

John H. White offers us this thought concerning the Pastor and his role:

"We have ceased to think theologically about the ministry. Instead, we characterize it almost exclusively in functional or institutional terms. There are at least two reasons for this shift in emphasis. On the one hand there are the new developments in clinical psychology and counseling procedures, and on the other the requests of parishioners, the denominational programs, and the culture of the local community. Much has been written about various aspects of pastoral theology, but there is a remarkable scarcity of literature that explores the theological issues that lie behind it."

It is unfortunate but there is a strong cultural pull away from viewing the Pastor/Elder as shepherd to that of "running the church." A pragmatic mindset seeks to establish the criteria for determining the character of the church. "Does it work" becomes the question asked rather than, "Is it right?"

Dick Staub in his work, *The Culturally Savvy Christian* notes how the church in its attempt to win the culture has been won by the culture. He thus concludes,

Marketing-driven church growth strategies resulted in large, event-driven churches serving individuals' felt needs through well-crafted programs and products fronted by winsome personalities – the evangelical celebrities. **At one time, churches and denominations had sought out thoughtful biblical expositors to serve as pastors,** but now they recruited entrepreneurs and magnetic personalities who could establish new churches or develop strategies to reach target markets. Pastors were expected to be CEOs and leaders who operated their local churches like franchise, submitting statistical reports to regional managers who evaluated the health of a church by its numbers. (Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian*, c2007, 38, 39).

Being Word-centered or a "teaching church" is not a point of pride or an excuse for what we do, low numbers, or poor financial giving. Sticking to the text and seeking to make and

mature disciples is the biblical model and mandate. Anything less than this is wrong and anything more than this must be carefully weighed and guarded against.

Last week we noted how the under-shepherds are inseparably linked to sheep, and the ministry of oversight is one whereby the sheep are fed. Paul's words tell us that this feeding is through the Word of God. All shepherds are to be characterized by a commitment to the text of Scripture whereby the whole purpose of God is taught consistently and faithfully. Today I would like to share with you what I have learned about the Word of God and the Ministry of God.

Our text points out four ideas concerning this commitment to the text of Scripture. They help guide us in our understanding of the ministry entrusted to the shepherds and the place the Word is to have in all ministry.

THE BIG PICTURE

- July 20 What I have learned about the Shepherd and the Sheep
- **July 27 What I have learned about the Word and Ministry**
- August 3 What I have learned about Christ and His Church
- August 17 What I have learned about Grace, "Counseling," and Disappointment

Its Eternal Value:

Although God communicates through all things, His primary, objective, and unlimited means is through the Word of God. We neglect this venue to our detriment. In the absence of the Word, our soul suffers.

The Present Danger:

There are two extremes we must avoid in our view of the Scripture. First, that we have to read the Word in the same manner that we have to swallow certain ill-tasting medicine. We do not want to but it is best if we do. The second extreme is that we do not have to read the Word since we already have all we need in Christ.

First, the Word is the means through which God communicates to us His person and His work. It is through the Word we learn the purpose of God for us and His world. Second, there is something intrinsic to the Word that is powerful. It is for this reason the Bible likens it to bread and honey. Both are desirable. Who He is, what He has done, and who we are in Him is known primarily and, at points, exclusively through the written Word. It is by faith I read and study the Word.

The Problem:

"The biblically mandated function that will give the pastor his sense of identity is preaching. It becomes the foundation for all other functions.

http://www.the-highway.com/pastor_White.html "The Pastor - His identity and Authority," by James H. White."

The Storyline:

It is in creation and special revelation that God sets forth His story. Creation tells us who He is by its magnificence. Special revelation tells us who He is objectively, what He has done, and who His people are.

Question:

1. How important is the Word of God? How would you describe the Word of God? Could you with the Psalmist say, "How sweet are your words to my lips, yes sweeter than honey to my tongue"?
2. What place does the Word of God have in your life? Is it something you think about on a regular basis?
3. What can you do to make the Word a more regular part of your day?
4. How do you measure "success" as a church?
5. Do you see your salvation and sanctification coming from Christ through His Word?

The Holy Spirit is calling to us from this passage to consider three ideas:

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know that God gave us the Word for our delight. He reveals Himself through it to us.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose to place ourselves in the Word. We should read with confidence and faith what is written

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of delighting in His Word. The Holy Spirit only and alone causes us to treat the Word as bread and honey. Let us seek Him through the Word to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Outline:

In this passage Paul notes several aspects about the ministry and the Word. This is what I have come to "taste and see" concerning the Word of God.

- I. The Word is to be taught holistically (vv. 20, 26, 27).

I am using the word "holistic" in the following manner: "Emphasizing the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts."

There is wholeness to the Word whereby the totality of the Word is to be studied and understood. Only the Word of God has the effectual power of God behind it. It is the Word of God that communicates the grace of God for guiding and guarding of the people of God. It is this Word that builds up and renders certain the people of God.

"He had told them all God's will and pandered neither to the fear nor the favor of men." (William Barclay, *Mark*, 152).

"Interestingly Paul used several words in referring to his role in communicating the gospel: (a) 'preach' (Acts 20:20) and proclaim (v. 27), both from **anangelo** ('proclaim, announce'); (b) 'taught' (from **didasko**, 'teach,' v. 20); (c) 'declared' (v. 21) and 'testifying' (v. 24), both from **diamartyromai** ('solemnly bear witness to'); (d) declare

(martyromai, 'testify,' v. 26). (Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *BKC*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 414).

There are four thoughts describing Paul's teaching in our passage.

A. His teaching was powerful (v. 20 "I did not shrink back")

The word "shrink back" can mean, "To withdraw oneself, to cower, to shrink, to conceal, and to dissemble." Paul's preaching was courageous and brave. Paul did not hesitate to tell them what they needed to hear. The idea behind the word "shrink back" is "to draw back in fear, to shrink from. It is the opposite of speaking boldly." (*Roger and Rogers*, 285).

The Geneva Bible of 1599 makes the following comment: "I did not refrain from speaking, neither did I conceal my motives in any way at all, either for fear or for wicked gain."

Albert Barnes correctly notes how, "A minister of the gospel must be the judge of what will be profitable to the people of his charge. His aim should be to promote their real welfare--to preach that which will be profitable. His object will not be to please their fancy, to gratify their taste, to flatter their pride, or to promote his own popularity." (*Albert Barnes' New Testament Commentary*, Commenting on Acts 20:20). The shepherd needs to know the needs of the sheep and should seek to feed them in a manner that is readily received. Sometimes sheep need something other than what they want. It is still the shepherd's responsibility to give them what is needed, not simply what is wanted.

If we are interpreting the Scripture properly, we should be able to see the continuity in the purpose of God from Genesis through the Gospels and into Paul's Letters and the Book of Revelation.

B. His teaching was profitable (v. 20 "profitable")

The word "profitable" is a present active participle. Paul never hesitated to give them anything that would contribute to their edification.

The word "profitable" in Acts 20:20 is different than the one in 2 Timothy 3:16. In Acts 20 the word means "to lift up together." In 2 Timothy 3:16 the word means "helpful or serviceable." What Paul preached helped to lift the people up. Paul's preaching came alongside his audience and built them up. Although there is a knowledge base from which our affections must flow, the value of Scripture is not simply found in the accumulation of information. What we know must impact and change what we love.

C. His teaching was public (v. 20 "publicly and from house to house")

"Paul's ministry from house to house (cf. 2:46) is contrasted with his public ministry and probably refers to house churches. If so, each elder was possibly the overseer of a

house church.” (Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *BKC*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 413).

“Three months in the synagogue at Ephesus [Ac 19:8]; two years in the school of Tyrannus [Ac 19:9,10], besides his teaching in the church assemblies.” (*People’s New Testament Commentary*)

There is much talk about the house church, as if its structure and model is the only biblical pattern. I do not believe the idea of the house church is in contrast to what we have here. I believe the house church is a compliment and another idea of what a church family might look like depending on the culture and the community in which it is found.

No matter where Paul was or what he was doing the Word had a necessary place.

D. His teaching was personal (v. 21 “repentance and faith”)

There are two thoughts in this text.

1. Notice the congregant (“both Jews and Gentiles”)

Although the Jews were an honored people because through them came the written Word and the incarnate Word, they still needed what the Gentiles needed. Everyone, everywhere, at all times must repent and believe God in Jesus Christ.

2. Notice the communication (“repentance and faith”)

He called his audience to repentance and faith. Some only see one in the absence of the other. I believe the New Testament teaches both. Repentance and faith are simply two sides of one coin.

Adam Clark offers this insight, “Humiliation is no atonement for sin; therefore repentance is insufficient, unless faith in our Lord Jesus Christ accompany it.” (*Adam Clark’s Commentary, Commenting on Acts 20:21*).

“In the Greek the words repentance and faith are joined together by one article. This may imply that these two words stress two aspects of trust in Christ (cf. 2:38).” (Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *BKC*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 413).

a. The subject offended (“repentance toward God”)

The object of one’s repentance acknowledges who was offended by the sin.

b. The substitution offered (“faith toward Jesus Christ”)

The object of one’s faith acknowledges through whom pardon is secured.

It can be correctly concluded, "Thus we have here **a brief summary of all Gospel preaching.**" (Jaimeson, Fausset, and Brown, commenting on Acts 20:21)

"These items embrace **the sum of Christian doctrine.**" (*People's New Testament*)

- E. His teaching was pointed (vv. 25, 27 "the whole purpose of God" and "preaching the kingdom")

Paul preached the "whole purpose of God" (v. 27). "Preaching" is a present participle (v. 25). The present participle stresses the continual action stated. Paul was always communicating kingdom truth. Scripture has real teeth. There is something of substance to the truth in the Bible. It changes and impacts who we are and where we live.

Let us not forget what the New Testament means by "the Kingdom of God." The Kingdom of God is the sovereign rule of God whereby His purpose for all things is flawlessly executed and brought to their divinely appointed end.

It is my prayer that the ministry entrusted to me will be marked by these five characteristics.

- II. The Word is to be assimilated daily (v. 28).

Paul's admonition to guard oneself is directly tied into the Word of God. No one is guarded who is not exposing themselves to the Word of God. If the Word is absent from your daily meditations, you are placing yourself at risk. As shepherds we must make and take every opportunity to "speak God into every moment and event." This is not something that only happens on Sunday morning.

Shepherds are to make every provision necessary to encourage the sheep toward green pastures and still waters. Remember the words of our Lord to Simon Peter in John 21:15-17?

¹⁵ "So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "**Tend My lambs.**" ¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "**Shepherd My sheep.**" ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "**Tend My sheep**" " (John 21:15-17).

The role of shepherd is to care for the sheep, to encourage them toward maturity, to help them develop. Eugene H. Peterson refers to the pastor as one who "speaks God into each moment and event" (*The Contemplative Pastor*). Apart from my role as shepherd, as a sheep I seek to assimilate the Word daily. It has been my pattern of life from the day I was saved to regularly put myself into the Word. I do not always have the opportunity or take advantage of this privilege, but the Word is always a part of my regular routines. Modern technology makes this idea even more accessible.

III. The Word is to be guarded carefully (vv. 28-31).

“Where truth is, falsehood ever attacks. There was a constant warfare ahead to keep the faith intact and the Church pure.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 152).

In any ministry, it is possible to think that the salvo for the health of the church is to follow certain “how to” strategies. All “how to” books and seminars are pointed at programs and methods. All of these ideas are slow drifts away from the centrality of the Word. Word-centered ministry is always Christ-exalting and Grace-based. When we need something more than the Word in ministry, then we are slowly drifting away from the centrality of it.

Yet let us be careful even here. The Word must be taught holistically. The Word of God is not a **genie’s lamp** or a **rabbit’s foot**. Just because the Word is present does not mean the ministry is Word-centered. Short devotional reads or verse memorization will have little value if not placed in their proper context. Quoting verses or claiming promises out of context is an unfortunate expression of the modern church.

- A. The Word taught holistically and assimilated daily is the divine means of guiding the sheep.
- B. The Word taught holistically and assimilated daily is the divine means of guarding the sheep.

What I find amazing is the truth of this idea from the text itself. Friend, we do not need more programs or ministries. What we need is a fresh revelation of God from His Word that is so soul shaking as to open our eyes and ears and hearts to see, hear, and feel just how beautiful He is and how sufficient He is so we can joyously say, “He is enough in this life and in the life to come.”

Friend, as shepherds we care about your employment, we care about your marriage, we care about your children, we care about your emotional struggles, we care about your bondage forming addictions, we care about your dysfunctional upbringing, we care about your delusional existence. We care when you are on the verge of ending your life, but the solution to your problem is not necessarily what you think it is. Your ultimate problem is that you do not believe God is in control and that He deeply, individually, and genuinely cares for you. Your symptoms are simply consequences of a “loss of soul.”

Listen to what Thomas Moore says in his book, Care of the Soul:

“The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is ‘loss of soul.’ When soul is neglected, it doesn’t just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it.” (Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*, xi).

The only way the sheep can be guided and guarded is by holistically and daily exposure to the Word of God. All sheep need to read the Bible holistically and daily. Let this be a source of great joy and delight.

In ministry there is always a pull away from the simplicity of the Word, and when such happens ministry becomes more complex. My passions lie in the Word as a unique revelation of Jesus Christ and such a revelation is to be celebrated.

IV. The Word is to be kept ethically (v. 33).

Peter addresses this same issue in 1 Peter 5:1-3.

¹“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ²shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight **not under compulsion**, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and **not for sordid gain**, but with eagerness; ³**nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge**, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

As ministers of the Word we are not to become charlatans who are driven by a desire for possessions and popularity and power. In the ministry of the Word we are to keep it from unethical activity. No one should be able to accuse us of using the ministry for personal gain.

Paul was not in it for the money. The ministry to him was a divine stewardship. He did what was done because God called him to it. My personal desire is to serve in such a way that the weight of need and want are adequately balanced. I do not wish finances to become a distraction to ministry or a distraction from ministry.

SHEPHERDING THE PEOPLE: (What’s the NEXT STEP?)

1. Shepherds are to guide and guard sheep in the Word and through the Word. Shepherds are not the Word. All sheep are to come to the Word independent of Shepherds. They are to feed themselves, unless they are sickly.
2. What measures are you taking to insure that you are feeding regularly on the Word of God?
3. Do you have faith in the Word of God? Is it for you credible? Do you trust what it says as true? Does it carry weight in the decisions you have to make?
4. What place does the Word have for you in the church you attend? What is the most important idea you want in the church you attend? If you moved, what kind of church would you look for? If you left WBC, where would you go?
5. The Word of God is to permeate our fellowship, our music, our preaching, and our teaching. In its absence, we lie exposed to the savage wolves of the world, the flesh, and the devil.
6. The Word of God points and protects. It points us to Christ and protects us from savage wolves.
7. Friend, how is it with your soul? May you see this as true.