

The need for sound teaching in the church

Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, *and* the strength of salvation; the fear of the LORD *is* His treasure. Isa 33:6

The sheer number of verses that speak of the greatness and necessity of God's word in our heart tells us that truth is absolutely vital for us; without knowledge we will be unstable. There are hundreds of such verses. There is no life without truth as there is no salvation without Christ. Christ himself is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6), and any believer who claims to be a disciple of Christ cannot be so without eternal life in his spirit and divine truth in his heart.

Yet today there is such a dearth of truth in the church, such an ignorance of sound teaching, such a lack of discernment, that one could be forgiven for thinking that the church has utterly lost its way. So few teach the truth with any solidity, so few teach doctrinally, so few apply the scriptures with practical wisdom. Indeed, I have known many cases where men who have sought to bring sound teaching to a group (I hesitate to call them churches) and have been criticised for doing so. These groups want toleration of all ideas, a rejection of any dogmatic certainty, a refusal to align with a confessional stance, and they certainly do not want teachers to rock the boat and make their balancing act with the world unstable. The apostles knew nothing of such religion and would have had nothing to do with such groups masquerading as churches of Christ.

Following Christ always involves some kind of separation (Matt 10:33-36). He came to bring a sword to the earth - the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, and this sword cuts between what is good and what is evil; between what is sound and what is corrupt; between what is godly and what is demonic; between what is truth and what is a lie. If you are Christ's then you cannot ally with the world, the flesh or the devil, and this means that you cannot be united with any of the ramifications of those factors. This means understanding God's word very carefully to know what God's will is, and then fixing one's life on those principles come what may. Such knowledge brings both clarity of thinking and determination to avoid what is false; it brings discernment as to what is right and the good judgment to keep clear of what is false, whether it be doctrine or practice. It also brings pain - since holding fast to God's word always stimulates opposition, often from unexpected quarters. Be prepared to lose friends.

Following Christ thus makes one judicious and determined not to follow all winds of doctrine, not to tolerate every opinion, but to condemn the iniquitous and rejoice in the righteous. This sound behaviour is the product of good teaching; without it no one will either prosper or survive temptation and trial.

This all goes to show that sound teaching is absolutely vital in the church today, and yet such clear dogmatic and practical instruction is hardly seen anywhere. Churches that claim to be Reformed are Amyraldian; churches that claim to be evangelical are ecumenical while churches that claim to be alive in the Spirit are filled with dead works. People have itchy ears for what is novel and exciting, and are prepared to believe almost anything if it stirs them up, but so few are prepared to study and discipline their mind to understand God's word precept by precept. Without understanding, nothing works, thus the prophet explains the importance of understanding, of sound teaching:

My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, *and* apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, *and* lift up your voice for understanding, If you seek her as silver, and search for her as *for* hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; *He is* a shield to those who walk uprightly; He guards the paths of justice, and preserves the way of His saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, equity *and* every good path. When wisdom enters your heart, and knowledge is pleasant to your soul, discretion will preserve you; understanding will keep you, to deliver you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things, from those who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness. Prov 2:1-13

Just look to Proverbs and see the importance it gives to understanding:

- Wisdom comes from finding it. 1:5
- God established creation by it. 3:19
- A man finds happiness by it. 3:13
- We are commanded to give attention to seeking it above all else. 4:1, 5, 7
- Sin comes from lacking understanding. 6:32
- It comes from knowing God. 9:10

We could add many more to this list if we had time. Understanding comes from good teaching, and teaching is a gift given to the church in the form of men sent from the ascended Christ (Eph 4:11). The church is only led by elders and the chief function of elders is to teach (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:2, 24), which is why Paul calls them ‘pastor-teachers’. Leaders who do not teach are not leaders sent by Christ and should resign immediately. If a man cannot teach properly, he should not be in the ministry at all. Yet today the church is filled with leaders who not only cannot teach, but are not required to. Surely this is why *Ichabod* (‘no glory’) is written all over the church at large. If there is no sound teaching in the church, then there is no understanding; if there is no understanding then God is not present. It is as simple as that.

Am I being too forceful? No, I am not! I am not saying that a small church needs to have an eloquent, powerful, dynamic, public speaker; I am saying that sound teaching needs to be evidenced. Initially this may begin with a small church working together through a sound confession or catechism, such as the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Confession, so that sound teaching is the foundation of ministry in the church rather than blessed thoughts and subjective ideas. Good teaching can permeate even a small church that has no gifted teachers if it concentrates upon the truth, upon sound doctrine, until God sends along a man who is gifted as a teacher. Small churches meeting in homes, where a few people have come together to avoid the apostasy reigning in the local area, can still prosper if they focus upon the truth. Sadly, many that gather in this way just listen ad hoc to various audio sermons depending upon favourite preachers and fail to learn solid truth. In time these groups vanish because there was no stability of truth, no foundation of knowledge. If the folk in the local church do not grow in wisdom and knowledge, then that church’s days are numbered, and meetings become simply going through the motions. I have lost count of the number of small churches I have witnessed that sprouted up, only to disappear in a short while because the focus of the meeting was doing things a certain way rather than growing up into Christ and learning truth.

Following Christ involves growing in truth. If there is no growth in knowledge then there is no growth in Christ. The apostles continually exhorted their churches to follow after truth, develop in discernment, prosper in knowledge and become mature in thinking, because

this is what happens when people truly follow Christ. A person who only drinks milk after years of natural development is not a normal human being, but a stunted, debilitated and disabled patient who needs treatment and cannot live a normal life. Sadly, many so-called Christians live like this in spiritual terms.

Teaching is vital to the Christian life and is a central point of church activity after breaking bread. If it is absent then questions must be raised as to the quality of life being evidenced.

Let us look at some of the implications which scripture tells us about the importance of sound teaching.

Sound teaching is a defence

His truth *shall be your shield* and buckler. Ps 91:4

It is vital for believers to know the truth; if they fail to grow in knowledge, it is like a soldier facing an enemy without armour. As Paul illustrates Christian warfare by comparing spiritual realities with a typical hoplite soldier of the day, truth is paramount. In Ephesians 6:14 truth is listed first as the belt of the armour holding everything in place. In verse 17 the final piece of armour is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Truth encompasses everything else; it is the beginning and end of Christian defence.

Charismatics make much of the power of the Spirit in spiritual warfare but many deny the necessity of the word, preferring their meagre subjective impressions, which they pretend are words of God by prophecy. Scripture gives no sanction for this whatsoever. The Holy Spirit inspired the word and always works in connection with it. Anyone diminishing the importance of scripture will certainly have no power supplied by God's Spirit.

The truth of God, seen in knowledge and understanding, is a shield, a buckler, a belt and a sword. I can think of no other spiritual factor that is so important in spiritual warfare. The fact that truth defends us is emphasised by scripture calling it both a shield and a buckler. The implication is that truth is both a large shield covering the whole body from aerial attacks (such as arrows), but also a manoeuvrable small shield used in close quarter combat. God's truth is able to defend us in every eventuality we face; we have a defence against every form of attack by the enemy.

Now truth must be understood. Truth has no value if it is locked away and unknown. An unbeliever may have a Bible, but has no defence against the devil since the value of scriptural knowledge is lost to him. Believers must learn truth in order to use it and grow in wisdom and this is done through teaching. Teaching instructs and applies truth to people so that it has practical use. If you want the truth of God's word to be a shield to you, then you must develop in understanding of what that word says. The Bible is not a book of magic incantations that can be memorised and spoken to ward off evil, it is something to be understood by a rational process of learning.

Truth is learned by a process of growth in knowledge

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Heb 5:12-14

Young believers are unskilled in the word of righteousness; they are spiritual babies who do not know how to use truth. Any believers that remains in this state is to be most pitied and is useless in spiritual warfare; indeed it is impossible to do almost any good work at

all. The key reason is that such people do not know what is right and what is wrong; they have no discernment. Practising righteousness requires knowing what is righteous.

The writer here tells us that this needs practice and that it is a rational process. Our senses must be exercised by attention to the truth to learn what God's will is. Only by learning this can we discern what is right and what is wrong, what is God's desire. We learn what is the right thing to do and think by carefully studying God's word with our senses and slowly growing in understanding.

Paul compares this to working out in a gymnasium. As an athlete trains his body by strenuous exercise, so he builds up the muscles he is training. This is costly, takes time and requires discipline; without this discipline the athlete remains weak and un-competitive. The word 'exercised' in verse 14 is *gumnazo*, from which we derive our word 'gymnasium'. It referred to exercising naked in a *palaestra*, or school of athletics, thus 'to exercise vigorously'. What is being said so colourfully is that growth in spiritual knowledge requires rational effort and discipline over a prolonged period like an athlete training in a gymnasium. Spiritual maturity will only come when people apply themselves to God's word with discipline and press on to know Christ.

There is no other option to this. To fail to apply ourselves to learning the truth of God's word properly, results in our remaining in a state of spiritual babyhood; of no use to anyone – not even ourselves; we will be always be weak and ineffective.

Grace comes from knowledge of God

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 2 Pt 1:2

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Jn 17:3

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. 1 Jn 5:20

The beginning of the experience of salvation is knowing God and Jesus Christ. The revelation given by the Spirit to the awakened heart is twofold: first is the understanding of sin, the revealing the need for a saviour; but, more importantly, the second aspect is the revelation of Jesus Christ as God and Man who has brought salvation through his blood. Salvation begins when the convicted heart learns about God in Christ redeeming sinners.

Eternal life comes to those who know God since eternal life is not just immortality, but is the actual essence of the life of God. Those who are joined to Christ, who become new creatures, share in the life of God – eternal life. There is no eternal life unless God is truly known. When Jesus comes to a person in salvation he brings understanding and knowledge of God. There is no eternal life without this understanding and this understanding is spiritual intuition by revelation. It is part and parcel of being born again into a new life.

Thus knowledge of God is the beginning of salvation for the awakened sinner.

However, as the Christian life began with knowledge, it continues with knowledge. All the gifts and blessings that God gives to his people come through knowledge and faith. Grace is multiplied in the knowledge of God. The more we know God, the more grace we experience. Those who press on to know God in Christ, who learn his laws and statutes and practise them, are filled with grace. Conversely, those who never learn much about God are

spiritual dwarves whose stunted growth show that something is wrong with their 'Christian' experience.

The knowledge of God comes by understanding his word. How does anyone get to know another person? Observation of their behaviour will show something, but it is only by talking to them and listening to their opinions that one really gets to know them. Their words are the expressions of the thoughts and this reveals their inner character. In the same way, believers get to know God by studying his words and understanding his thinking. The Bible is the revelation of the mind of God, the encapsulation of God's thoughts and ideas in literary form. God deigned to express himself in scripture so that his children could understand his will. This truly is grace indeed; believers grow in the knowledge of the mind of God by understanding his self-revelation.

When supposed Christians claim that they do not need the Bible, that doctrinal learning has no value, that they are not called to be a theologian, that dogma is divisive, then they are telling us that they do not know anything about God. Every believer is a theologian, a student of God, and someone who grows in the knowledge of God through Biblical study. This is a fundamental issue; anyone who rejects this matter is really telling us that they are not believers. The rejection of the authority and importance of the Bible is a key sign of an earthly, worldly, fleshly, demonic attitude; it indicates the dearth of any real knowledge of God and thus any real Christian experience. Those supposed church leaders who have publicly derided scripture prove that they are charlatans and wolves. Their prophecies and subjective impressions have absolutely no value and prove the warnings of the Lord himself:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' Matt 7:21-23

Those who utter prophecies and do wonders in the name of Jesus, but who do not really know him, are practising lawlessness. They will be condemned. However, those who are justified and glorified are those whom Jesus then describes in the next verse:

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock:

Those who are saved are those who hear Jesus and do what they heard him say. Today, we must hear what Jesus says to us in God's revealed word. Scripture is the revelation of Jesus, who is the Word of God. What we read in scripture is the revelation of the Son. When we hear and obey the written word, we are following the Son, who is the source of that word as the revelation of the Father.

Let us make this absolutely clear; genuine believers will always treasure God's word and will seek to study it, understand it and obey it to the best of their ability. They will never deny it or deride it; neither will they prefer the foolish words of some leader's subjective impressions claiming to be prophecy. Following scripture is fundamental to spiritual life and the diminishing of its importance in the modern church is a sign of the great deception that has overtaken it – which was itself prophesied by God in his word (2 Thess 2:9-11; Matt 24:5, 11; 1 Tim 4:1 etc.).

Thus teachers, those who explain and instruct in God's word, are vital to a genuine church experience. Those who downgrade this ministry as boring, academic, rational and faith-

sapping, are heaping up trouble for their people. This trouble is worsened when the leaders substitute teaching for false prophecy, self-expression, preaching agendas, whipping up emotions, promoting personal strategies, propagandising and manipulation of audiences. Be warned; churches that have no sound teaching but which focus on a multitude of other things, will damage your spiritual health.

Power comes from knowledge not experiences

His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him. 2 Pt 1:3

Divine power does not come by mystical experiences. Such experiences may grant power within occult disciplines and faiths like Hinduism, but they have no place in the church. Yet over and over one reads about Charismatic leaders who had some amazing mystical experience and then had power to effect healing or the ability to knock people over by blowing on them. Again these effects are common in occultism.

The problem with mystical experiences is, how do you discern their origin? It is not good enough to say, 'I know it is God,' since even Biblical characters were deluded and fooled into following devilish lies. Jesus even scolded Peter for being overcome by Satan and uttering nonsense. If someone tells you that they had a mighty experience of God and were laid out cold for three days in the open air, but then woke up with the power to blow the 'Spirit' upon people (an actual case history), then the question is – 'How do you know that this was God?'. No one can prove it. Such is the case with all mystical experiences. Scripture does not encourage us to behave this way and, in any case, the fruits of such ministry show that the origin is not the God of the Bible who does not make people fall dangerously backward to the floor in order to impart spiritual blessing.

The Lord tells us that knowledge brings power, not some suspicious experience. Everything that we need in this life, all the blessings and power needed to live godly, come through knowledge of God. It is knowing God that is crucial, not having some mystical encounter.

Knowing God is not a mystical matter either; it is a gradual understanding of his character and decrees that comes by diligent searching of his revealed word. Modern impatient people are loath to spend time searching God's word and want a quick fix to gain spiritual power. Charismatic experiences enable them (they believe) to gain power from one zap from a powerful man, thus saving them years of study. As a result they become besotted by this man, believe everything he says, accept his prophecies as God's words and abandon reading the Bible altogether. This is a delusion and a guarantee of spiritual starvation.

If the knowledge of God gives us divine power for all things that pertain to life and godliness as Peter tells us above, then why do we need to search for a different source of power? What more could we possibly need than everything? Knowing God better comes through spiritual understanding, and this comes from being instructed in what the Bible teaches. Thus teaching is the critical factor in church life.

All the apostles taught this, such as Paul:

... the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. Eph 1:18-19

The apostles called believers to know the greatness of the power in those who believe, gained through knowing God. The apostle John uses the words, 'we know' 17 times in his first letter alone; seven times he uses, 'you know'. In fact the apostles often use a

compound word for knowledge which means 'full knowledge' (*epignosis*) in order to emphasise the depth of knowledge gained by believers. For instance, it is through the full knowledge, the precise and certain knowledge, of Christ that believers escape the pollution of the world (2 Pt 2:20). It is full knowledge of Christ that ensure that we are fruitful (2 Pt 1:8). We are at the end of our maturing process when we come to a complete knowledge of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:13). While Jews show a zeal for God, they do not have proper, full, knowledge of him (Rm 10:2).

The apostles were concerned that their disciples knew things, not that they experienced mystical things.

God's word is our foundation

Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in *both of* which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Saviour. 2 Pt 3:1-2

Peter writes to suffering disciples to remind them that their encouragement would come from being mindful of God's word. He encapsulates God's words as that which was spoken by the prophets (i.e. the Old Testament) and the commands of the apostles of Christ (the New Testament). The foundation of scripture enables believers to build their lives safely upon a rock; anything less will prove unstable.

Paul teaches the same thing,

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. Eph 2:19-22

Now many arrogant Charismatics interpret this as referring to modern apostles and prophets who form the foundation of the modern church. This is hubris beyond measure; Paul had no such conception. Like Peter, Paul refers to the foundation of God's word as expressed formerly by the prophets and latterly by Christ's apostles. The foundation of the Christian life is the word of God, the cornerstone of which is Christ the word (*logos*) of God. There is no other foundation:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 1 Cor 3:10-11

Paul laid the foundation; how did he actually do this? By the proclamation of the word of God. Paul's chief ministry was to preach and teach God's word and bring people into the church as a result. This preaching of God's word was laying a foundation for the building of the church; it was preaching Christ. There is no other foundation. When Charismatics talk about modern so-called apostles / prophets being the foundation of the modern church, they are blaspheming.

Peter refers to Paul's teaching as scripture a few verses later in 2 Peter:

... as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures. 2 Pt 3:15-1

Note that heretics and wicked people are those who are untaught and unstable. Without God's word as a foundation there is no stability; without teaching the result is destruction.

God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers. 1 Cor 12:28

So the foundation of the church is the word of God and this was first exemplified by the Old Testament, the words of the prophets, followed by the New Testament, summarised as the words of the apostles. God's prophets and apostles came first in laying a foundation of God's word. The prophets pointed forward to Christ as the cornerstone; the apostles gave Christ's final words to the church explaining the fulness of the meaning of the Old Testament.¹

But note that after this comes teaching. With the foundation laid, with the Bible written and complete, and with Christ having fulfilled all his work, it just remains necessary for future generations of believers to understand what all this means. This is the task of teachers. Teachers comes third in the church after apostles and prophets because they explain what the apostles and prophets said. They bring instruction about God's word to men today and, as such, are extremely important.

God's word is the foundation of the Christian life; teachers are necessary to explain this and instruct disciples regarding what God's law means. Those who are untaught live unstable lives that end in error and destruction. This establishes the importance of teaching in the church.

Fear of God is always accompanied by knowledge and wisdom

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7, 9:10). No one becomes wise in spiritual matters unless they are truly reverent, submitted, humble servants of God. There are many popular preachers who claim to be knowledgeable about the things of God yet whose behaviour betrays that they have no fear of offending him. Claiming to wield the power of the Spirit, they teach many things contradictory to God's word and encourage practices that damage the Lord's people. There is no fear of God in such people, but there ought to be since there will be a fearful reckoning for them on the Last Day. Jesus said that it would be better for them to jump off a bridge with a large millstone round their neck rather than endanger just one of God's people, yet such men shatter many lives with their empty promises, failed healings, psychological abuse and money-grabbing manipulation.

Men with true fear of God approach scripture with a reverent desire to understand God's attributes and be instructed in his decrees. They want to know God's plan of salvation and learn how to better serve him. They refuse to bring their foreign ideas to bear on scripture but prayerfully submit to learning precept upon precept. When they see things that convict them, they seek forgiveness and change their lives in obedient repentance. When they are awed by a revelation of God's glory they bow their heads in worshipful submission. When they see a responsibility for the first time, they plan to do something about it in godly service. All of this is reading scripture as if God is actually speaking to them personally; Bible reading becomes an act of communion conducted in the fear of God.

¹ The ministry of the office of prophet in the early church (mentioned in 1 Cor 12:28) was required as there was no published Bible. Few had any scriptures at all and probably no one had all the books of the Bible for 200 years or more. Prophets brought God's word and direction to people by spiritual intuition until God's written word was universal. Prophetic ministry now is the spiritual application of Biblical preaching and teaching with divine grace to bring power to people over and above rational application. Such ministry is much needed today.

If God spoke to us audibly, as he did to Moses, we would be terrified; the glory of God would fill us with fear and dread. Should we be less fearful when we approach his written word? Dare we treat it in a cavalier manner? Those who fear God most will honour his word most.

Abiding in God requires obeying his word

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. 1 Jn 2:3-6

Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. 1 Jn 3:24

These words are so simple and yet often completely ignored. Note the thesis:

- By this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.
- He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar.

Those who keep God's word are the ones who have the love of God, and this results in assurance. We know who also belongs to God by observing their life; they are a genuine disciple of Christ if they behave as he did, walking righteously. This is all simple.

Yet it is universally ignored in the modern church. Men are lauded as great preachers, doing signs and wonders, when their lives are the complete antithesis of Christ's. They neither walk righteously nor preach God word. Yet millions of people follow them like lemmings off a cliff, buying their books and DVDs, flocking to their meetings and following their scandalous behaviour over the Internet. Is it any wonder that the modern church is bereft of grace.

Those who do not keep God's commandments are liars and wicked; plain and simple. This is God's word not mine. Now to keep God's commandments means that I must know them; this requires studying all that God says to his people. True Christians will obey the Law of Christ from the heart; they are enabled to do this by the indwelling of the Spirit, taking every thought captive. They do not abandon law, as modern antinomians do, but honour all God's word and obey Christ, the end and fulfilment of the law. God's law is now subsumed in a man, Christ Jesus, and we are able to fully obey that moral law because we are new creatures in Christ with resurrection life. However, it is still necessary for us to learn more and more about God's law by studying his word.

Those who abide in Christ are those who obey his commandments. Here John is merely repeating what he learned from Jesus' own words:

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. Jn 15:7-

10

We know that we abide in Christ's love when we obey his commands. In this we follow Christ's own example, who kept the Father's commandments and abided in his love. Abiding in Christ is not a mystical experience but occurs when his words abide in us ('If you abide in Me ... My words abide in you'). How did Christ obey God and abide in him, by obeying his word. Christ did all that his Father said (Jn 3:34, 8:26, 28). We will abide in Christ if we act the same way; we must obey all that he says. We cannot be abiding in Christ if we are disobeying his word.

Teaching is the instruction to the church of what God says. If you want to abide in Christ then you will strive to understand God's word and listen to sound teaching in order to better commune with God. Fellowship with God is not a matter of emotional experiences or a mystical ascent, but depends on better knowing your heavenly Father.

Doctrine forms character

The law is not made for a righteous person, but for *the* lawless and insubordinate, for *the* ungodly and for sinners, for *the* unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine. 1 Tim 1:9-10

Notice what Paul says; after listing the sins of the old nature he adds, and 'any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine'. One would expect him to say 'contrary to sound behaviour', or 'sound character', but he says 'sound doctrine'! Wicked behaviour is contrary to sound doctrine and emanates from error. Iniquity comes from false teaching; it is the teaching that one accepts that forms character, good or bad. What you accept as good advice forms the foundation of your personal ethics. If your foundation is false teaching, then your character will be bad.

Over and over scripture explains that good doctrine, sound teaching (for that is what 'doctrine' means), is the source of character, life and power. When Jesus rebuked an unclean spirit it was regarded as a new teaching that had power (Mk 1:25-27). When the risen Jesus rebuked the church at Thyatira for committing sexual immorality, he stated that the sinful actions were caused by wrong doctrine (Rev 2:24). The righteousness of the church at Rome was stated by Paul to be due to obedience to sound teaching not strenuous works (Rm 6:17). It is good doctrine that forms righteous character and gives power to serve God; false teaching leads to serving Satan.

For this reason teaching is commanded as a crucial part of church ministry by the apostles:

Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. 1 Tim 4:13

Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. 1 Tim 4:16

[An elder must be] Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. Titus 1:9

We must give attention to doctrine in order to learn how to behave in a godly fashion. Notice that sound teaching is able to save those who listen to it. Good doctrine is merely an explanation of the words of God in didactic form and is thus instruction in salvation. The church is where this instruction for salvation takes place and thus all elders must be able to teach by instruction and confound those who contradict truth. Contending against error is vital since heresy leads the hearers into sin; error is not just intellectual, it is a corruption of ethics and saps faith. Heresy is dangerous and cannot be toyed with. Thus the elder's task is chiefly twofold: to instruct in sound doctrine but also to contend earnestly against error:

I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. Jude 1:3

Elders that fail to identify the current heresies and false teachers are ensuring that their people are put at risk. Heresy is so serious a problem that all those who refuse to repent of it must be expelled from the local church:

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. 2 Jn 1: 9-11

True believers abide in sound doctrine and thus abide in God. Refusal to hold sound doctrine results in evil deeds.

Teaching is the foundation of the church meeting

I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. 1 Tim 3:15

Note that Paul tells Timothy that the purpose of his letter is so that Timothy knew how to conduct his leading in the local church; in that purpose he mentions doctrine time after time. 'Doctrine' is mentioned eight times in this letter, but only once in Ephesians and twice in Romans. This is how important the matter is in church life.

Note especially 4:13 and 16:

Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. ... Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

He does not say, 'give attention to tongues, prophecy, falling over, healing or works of power', but he focuses on teaching; and this is Paul speaking in the time of maturity of his ministry towards the end of his life. The practical centre of church life is teaching expressed in mutual edification and sound teaching ministry (the spiritual focus is Christ and breaking bread – 1 Cor 11).

The church is the pillar and ground of the truth. This means that the body of Christ is a place of teaching, of doctrine, of instruction in the truth. The church is the pillar or column of truth; it holds the truth up and supports it. The church is the ground of the truth, the foundation, prop or stay and base of it. Truth forms the warp and woof of church life. If you want to see the truth of God, look at a sound church. The church is here defined as the dwelling place of God and the place where truth is supported. If an ecclesiastical group has no truth, no teaching, then it is no church, since a true church undergirds truth and holds it up. Supposed churches that ignore sound teaching, instruction in truth, fail to testify to the chief definition of what a local church is meant to be.

Sound teaching in the church is so important to Paul that he lambastes those who oppose it in the most severe manner:

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a *means of gain*. From such withdraw yourself. 1 Tim 6:3-5

Notice this: those who teach error must be avoided; they are corrupt in thinking and destitute of truth. Men who despise theology and wear tolerance and ignorance as badges of honour are singled-out to be avoided. Apostolic teaching is the words of our Lord Jesus Christ and it is doctrine that leads to godliness. The church should be full of it.

Sermons that are just blessed thoughts, academic technicalities, speculation, waffle, pursuance of agendas, exhortations to constant activity, and so on constitute idle babblings or vain empty discussion. True teaching does not entertain or manipulate but builds people

up into Christ. False doctrine that rests upon contradictions (which is common in modern evangelicalism²) is false knowledge and not Biblical doctrine. Paul tells us that following such nonsense will lead us into deception:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane *and* idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge -- by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace *be* with you. Amen. 1 Tim 6:20-21

If we do not want to stray from the true faith, we need sound teaching in godliness. Sound teaching leads to very practical godly behaviour and bears good fruit. Thus Paul gives very practical instruction to slaves to obey their masters in order that doctrine is not blasphemed,

Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and *His* doctrine may not be blasphemed. 1 Tim 6:1

If we want to honour God, then we must follow his doctrine. If we disobey God's teaching, then we blaspheme God. This is why the church must be filled with the truth and manifest it in good teaching.

Scripture must be learned and acted upon

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. I charge *you* therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. 2 Tim 3:14-4:4

We must continue in the things we learn about God's word, and this requires constant encouragement and exhortation, found principally in teaching. Knowing a certain truth is not enough; this truth must be acted upon and shared with others and then it lives in us. Grace given must be passed on; the measure we give will be the measure we get. People who have much teaching to bless others with are those who are constantly giving out what God has entrusted to them.

Salvation received by faith is not the end of the Christian life but the beginning. We must be wise about this salvation, and this wisdom comes from understanding the Holy Scriptures, the Bible. We will be poor Christians indeed if we are not growing in wisdom learned from God's word.

If we wish to be useful, profitable, to God in this life then we must learn from the scriptures. Only these oracles of God will make us fully equipped for every work of righteousness; not experiences, fleshly effort, fellowship with some great man or anything else. We grow as we understand and apply God's word through being taught what it means. There are two aspects to this: the first is instruction to help us learn what to do and the

² Notice the common falling back upon 'paradox' when two opposing doctrines are both claimed to be true (e.g. two contradictory wills in God). Note that much of modern Reformed teaching is actually Amyraldian, which is based upon a self-contradictory hypothesis. This is to say nothing of modern Arminian and Charismatic contradictions.

second is warnings to tell us what (and whom) to avoid. Note that Paul says, ‘for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness’; the wisdom afforded by knowing God’s word equips us to understand sound teaching but also reprove error. Fifty percent of the application of scripture is to deal with heresy; something pretty much ignored by many modern churches. One reason that modern believers are so plagued with problems is because their pastors do not warn them about bad teaching and false teachers.

Understanding how to avoid errors and how to apply scripture wisely leads us to being able to perform every good work and being spiritually equipped. ‘Equipped’ here means ‘properly furnished, prepared, complete’; without a good understanding of the Bible we will never come to an end of our discipleship and will never be able to perform good works. Wisdom is required for righteous living, not supposed Charismatic power.

For this reason Timothy is exhorted by Paul to preach the word, to publish openly what God says. Again Paul explains that his exhortations will need to be accompanied by rebukes and refutations; indeed ‘refute’ means ‘severe censure’. While ‘exhortation’ means ‘calling to ones side to encourage and comfort’, pastors must equally censure false teachers and refute error.

Paul also warns that, at the end, the time will come (it has now come!) when people ignore sound doctrine and prefer fables because pastors failed to censure error. People have itchy ears prepared to hear only the next big, new thing that excites them, no matter how stupid it may be. They long for every new wind of demonic doctrine for novelty’s sake. Thus they stray from the truth and prefer fables, imaginary stories that are fabulous (hard to believe, having no basis in reality). Thus the modern church is filled with fables that excite listeners; such as:

- Every believer is a little god.
- National, fleshly, modern Israel represents the people of God.
- There will be a secret rapture to snatch away faithful saints from tribulation.
- God wants every believer to be rich, prosperous and healthy all the time.
- Falling to the floor backwards is a sign of spiritual healing.
- The world will soon be ruled by apostles and prophets who will be able to fly and invulnerable to bullets.

We could continue, so many fables fill the churches these days.

If we fail to apply ourselves to be taught the truth as it is found in God’s word, we will not only be useless and unable to do good works, but will follow fables and be utterly deceived.

God’s word is eternal

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away. Mk 13:31

‘All flesh *is* as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever.’ Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. 1 Pt 1:24-25 [From Isa 40:6-8, partly quoted from the LXX, partly from the Hebrew text.]

Now this is important to understand: God’s word endures forever and will not pass away. There is never a time when scripture ends or fails to be the mainstay of the believer. In the glory God’s word will be expressed solely in the person of Christ, the fulness of the word of God and the express image of God; however, until the Second Coming and the new Earth, the manifestation of God’s will is given to us in words. The written words of scripture are the revealed manifestation of God’s mind to us in precepts. To aid our understanding of the fulness of God these precepts are illustrated by historical narrative, poetry, commands,

didactic teaching, warnings, apocalyptic literature and so on. The variety of expression gives fulness and completeness to our understanding of God. God's word is thus the expression of his mind and the clear manifestation of his will for men.

There is never a time when we do not need clarity regarding God's will; thus there is never a time when we can discard his word. If we wish to understand more about God and what his will is for us, then we must study what he says in scripture.

This means that the teachings of modern Charismatics who deride the Bible are the words of impostors and wolves, nothing less. Any man who encourages 'Christians' to neglect the study of scripture will face certain judgment. Yet some very famous evangelical church leaders have done exactly this and have faced no discipline. The basis of their teaching is that the Spirit is more important than the word since it is 'now' and 'living', while the word is a dead book. Charismatics require the immediacy of the Spirit's communications today rather than the stale words of dead writers. This is blasphemy, plain and simple.

The first thing is that no man can be certain of the origin of supposed words from the Spirit. They are never better than subjective, emotional expressions which are normally sourced by imagination or demonic temptation. We can be sure of this since the prophecies fail to be accomplished and the teaching turns people away from God's written word. Furthermore, the lifestyle of these men often reveals much ungodliness and their ministry spouts heresy.

The second thing is that it is extreme folly to suggest that God's word is dead. Heb 4:12 says, '**For the word of God is living and powerful**'; and so it is. It is by the entrance of God's word that people get saved because, '**the entrance of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple**' (Ps 119:130). No person ever experiences salvation without the reception and application of the word of God since it is by hearing this word that faith comes (Rm 10:13-14; 1 Thess 2:13; Jm 1:18; 1 Pt 1:23). God's word is said to be like fire, like a hammer (Jer 23:29). It is the power of God that leads to salvation (Rm 1:16).

A third thing is that the Spirit never works without the word (Eph 6:17); indeed he inspired the word to be written and is active in the revelation of its truth to men to regenerate them. The Spirit and the word always go together and cannot be separated, since the Spirit brings the things of Christ to men (Jn 16:14) and Christ is the truth (Jn 14:6) and the word (Jn 1:1-12). To tell people that they can glorify Christ by neglecting the word is not only blasphemy but utterly stupid. The Holy Spirit is deeply grieved by such heresy.

Let us expose some of the men who have taken this erroneous view.

Gerald Coates

We have taught people to be biblical, but to be biblical is to be led by the Spirit, not the Bible. [*An Intelligent Fire*, 1991, Kingsway, p172.]

It is no more the primary purpose of the church to teach the scriptures than it is for British Rail to promote timetables. [*Contending Earnestly For the Faith* magazine, 4.2, p8.]

Tommy Tenney

God chasers ... are not interested in ... dusty truth known to every one. They are after the fresh presence of the Almighty, ... The difference between the truth of God and revelation is very simple. Truth is where God's been. Revelation is where God is. Truth is God's tracks. It's His trail ... the masses of people are happy to know where God's been. ... A true God chaser is not happy with just past truth; he must have present truth. God chasers

don't want to just study from the mouldy pages of what God has done [i.e. the Bible]; they're anxious to see what God is doing. [*The God Chasers*, Introduction.]

Paul Cain

The word will do you no good. [speaking at the *School of Prophecy*, Anaheim, Nov 1989 session 7.]

Such statements are the words of demons spouted by false prophets and the church should be warned. Sound teaching will always centre upon explaining the doctrines of scripture and demonstrating the character of God. The word is central in church life.

We could continue searching the scriptures for further information about teaching in the church, but enough has been revealed to conclude this matter.

Historical observations

If one looks through church history one finds many examples that prove the thesis of this paper. Those periods which most glorified God were those which established sound doctrinal teaching, where godly teachers spent their lives serving the churches with effective instruction. Look at the Reformation period, the English Puritan period or the Dutch Second Reformation. Note the effect of men like John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, William Ames or Richard Perkins. Observe what good theologians like Francis Turretin, Guido de Bres, Henry Bullinger, John Brown (Haddington), RL Dabney, BB Warfield or AA Hodge achieved. Note the beneficial effects that preachers like Benjamin Keach, Octavius Winslow, John Gill and George Smeaton achieved. The list is endless. Compare this with the mess that followed emotional and doctrinally confused preachers like Charles Finney, Smith Wigglesworth, William Branham, Andrew Fuller, Hannah Pearsall Smith, or of compromised theologians like Moses Amyraut, Pelagius, James Arminius and Hugo Grotius. While modern media-driven evangelists cause mayhem with their doctrinal lies, there are a few sound teachers quietly working away to establish the hearts of the faithful. The proof of good ministry is seen in the effects of those who are taught. Charismatic showmen are exposed, not only by their false teaching but in the confused and broken lives of those who put their faith in them.

Good teaching builds a solid foundation in the lives of disciples and helps them to grow into the temple of God and produce spiritual fruit that glorifies God. Ignore sound teaching and the result is eventual apostasy.

Conclusion

Teaching is the vital ministry in the church. For this reason God gave gifts of teachers to his people when he ascended to heaven. The prime ministry of the word comes from elders, who are called to teach as part of their pastoral ministry. Without teaching there is no feeding of the sheep or warding off wolves. However, teaching also comes from the mutual ministry of each other. Every man is called to edify the church through his gift, in encouragement, exhortation and even singing (Col 3:16). We are to exhort one another to love and good works (Heb 10:24-25).

We ignore the importance of teaching in the local church at our peril. Churches that over-emphasise something else, such as mystical experiences, Charismatic phenomena, communal activities or mission activity, will endanger their people and commit them to lifelong immaturity, weakness and risk. The doctrine of Christ must not only be understood, but must be held fast if we are true disciples:

Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 2 Tim 1:13

I return to the words quoted at the beginning of this paper to conclude:

Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, *and* the strength of salvation; the fear of the LORD *is* His treasure. Isa 33:6

If we want to be stable and effective in our Christian life then we need to be wise. To have wisdom means that we need to know things. We know things as we learn truth through being effectively taught, and we are taught as we learn from God's word. Only as we follow this process can we be strong in our salvation.

Teaching is vital in the church; without it there is no hope.

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Appendix One

The Principal lesson of Ps 119

- 1 Blessed *are* the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD!
 2 Blessed *are* those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart!
 3 They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways.
 4 You have commanded *us* to keep your precepts diligently.
 5 Oh, that my ways were directed to keep your statutes!
 6 Then I would not be ashamed, when I look into all your commandments.
 7 I will praise you with uprightness of heart, when I learn your righteous judgments.
 8 I will keep your statutes; oh, do not forsake me utterly! Ps 119:1-8

The principal lesson of this psalm is summarised in the first acrostic section in verses 1-8. It lays out the purpose of the psalm – to magnify the word of God, and this lays the foundation for everything the believer is to do in order to glorify the Lord. In these eight verses we see the following features of godly behaviour:

Walk

Who walk in the law of the LORD!
 They walk in His ways.

Seek

Who seek Him with the whole heart!

Look

When I look into all your commandments.

Learn

I will praise you with uprightness of heart, when I learn your righteous judgments.

Keep

Blessed *are* those who keep his testimonies.
 You have commanded *us* to keep your precepts diligently.
 Oh, that my ways were directed to keep your utterly!
 statutes!
 I will keep your statutes; oh, do not forsake me

These break down into two basic actions which the believer must ensure result from his attitude to dealing with God's word:

1. *Doctrinal instruction*: learning (seek, look).
2. *Practical application*: obeying (keep, walking)

The purpose of learning God's word is that we may worship with an upright heart (v7). The way we do this is by learning the way God wants us to walk. If we do not know God's righteous judgments, then we will never worship correctly. His judgments are his decrees and these decrees are only understood as we study his word diligently. This is not mere background Bible information, but systematically assessing and evaluating what the Bible teaches – doctrine. As the psalmist later says in verse 34, 'Give me understanding, and I shall keep

Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart'. To please God we must have understanding; clarity of thinking regarding God's word.

The idea that believers can worship God acceptably without conformity to his word is the most extreme folly. Any worship that stimulates the emotions but is in conflict with God's judgments is sin.

Many modern believers speak foolishly regarding theology, claiming that they are not theologians and have no intention of ever becoming one. Far from this being the case, every believer is a systematic theologian. Whether they like it or not, they form their own systematic theology by what they read and listen to; they have views on what scripture teaches on various issues. However, unless they study, compare, evaluate and discern what is true by studying the Bible carefully, their systematic theology will be false. Instead of a Biblical theology, instead of knowing God's desires, they will follow every wind of demonic doctrine and be filled with sensual thinking. We must keep God's precepts and follow his statutes.

Why would any Christian not want to search out God's law? True believers have an implanted principle, by virtue of their baptism in the Spirit at Pentecost, to love God's word and thirst for it. Who wouldn't thirst for truth when God's word gives life and comforts in affliction (v50)? Any professing believer who ignores God's word and despises its teachings cannot be saved. It is God's word that gives life and births men into the kingdom of heaven; a good root produces good fruit. This matter of ignoring scripture in preference for subjective feelings, claiming to be prophecy, is a most serious situation and speaks of outright deception.

This psalm champions the value, importance and necessity of God's word. It does this in many ways using symbols, didactic teaching, commands, exhortations, examples and so on. It is noteworthy that the longest psalm, and one which is acrostic in structure, sets forth the glory of God's word. It is a passage of scripture that cannot be ignored, and it demands that we follow and obey God's word as we would follow a light in a gloomy forest. Without it we are in spiritual darkness.

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