

Preach the Word!

Written by Frank Garner

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In the past several years, there has been emphasis placed on training speakers and teachers for the church. Many years ago, I was involved in such an effort to offer some ideas on teaching skills, techniques, and styles. One of the pleasures of such a session is to see men, both novices and veterans, leave with a renewed zeal to be good teachers and improve the quality of their service to the congregation. These efforts are commendable, and it is our prayer that they have been successful in raising the skill level of teachers across the brotherhood.

Now, I want you to think about those speakers who taught you, really taught you, in years past. Were they dynamic, powerful speakers? Did they bowl you over with their force and delivery? Were they humorous and entertaining? Were they excellent after-dinner speakers? Chances are they were not.

Those who taught me from infancy to my late teens were modest, quiet, humble men. They did not consider themselves good teachers. They taught in a rather rote fashion. They taught verse by verse, chapter by chapter. They did not use catchy titles or buzz words. They did not entertain. Oh, but they preached the gospel. Yes, they did. They not only preached the gospel, they taught the gospel. Why were they so effective? How could their simple presentations and styles turn people to Christ? They taught the Word.

The apostle Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;" (Romans 1:16). The apostle believed in the power of the Word. He believed it had the power to save. He trusted its message. "For Christ sent me...to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.. unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:17-18).

The apostle Paul was careful, determined not to do or say anything that would take away from the power of the Word of God. "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God.. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom.. that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The message was more important than the method!

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The sermons recorded in the New Testament were honest. Look at those powerful messages of the apostle Peter in Acts. One would think this is an obvious point for us today. However, we do not have to look very long or hard to witness so called preachers who are deceitful, who have personal agendas, who modify the message to fit the audience for praise or reward.

Paul told the Thessalonians, "For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor uncleanness nor in guile.. .not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words.. .nor a cloke of covetousness" (1 Thess. 2:3-5). Straightforward, honest teaching is what God expects from those He puts in trust with the gospel. Honest people will respond to an honest message.

The scientific inquiry and intellectual reasoning of today had its beginnings in Greece and Rome at the time of the New Testament. Then, as today, men sought to learn as much as possible about various topics. In many areas that inquiry can be beneficial. In terms of "the faith," such inquiry may be extremely harmful. A teacher may impress his audience by quoting the latest theological jargon yet neglect the Word of God and its truths. Paul told Timothy to "keep that which is committed to thy trust" (1 Timothy 6:20). What was committed to Timothy? The Word of truth. Paul told Timothy to "study to shew thyself approved of God" (2 Tim. 2:15). What was Timothy to study? The Word of truth.

Timothy was advised to avoid "profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called." He was told that "some professing (such knowledge) have erred concerning the faith" (1 Tim-othy 6:20-21). All teachers must study the Word, keep the Word, rightly divide the Word, preach the Word. When we move into secular theological realms for the main source of our knowledge, we abandon the Word that has the power to save. As an extreme example, I have heard denominational preachers quote rock stars and politicians to the neglect of the beautiful words of God.

What are we to teach? When we see the rapid success of numbers gathered by worldly preachers there is the temptation to adapt their methods, styles, and performances. We can quickly be drawn into teaching the "social gospel," "feel good" sermons, and other messages that satiate the "itching ears" of the audience. Both Titus and Timothy, young teachers of their day, were instructed otherwise. "But speak thou the things that become sound doctrine..." (Titus 2:1). "Hold(ing) fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9).

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Let's take a momentary aside. What are we to teach? Not one man has sat down to prepare a lesson that has not struggled with this question. Often we think we need to do something different for variety. We then start looking to other sources for ideas, something other than the same old stuff. Beware! The edition of the Bible that sets before me has 1,232 pages of scripture in it. Do I really mean to say that I can't find anything to present to my brothers and sisters? Within those pages are creation and eternity, salvation and damnation, life and death, personal agony and triumph, courage, extreme cowardice, great heroes and heroines, heinous villains, exciting adventures, and the glorious picture of God's love for us through Christ.

Timothy was exhorted to "shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness" (2 Timothy 2:16). In contrast, Timothy was instructed to "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2).

As teachers in our generation, we must follow the same path. We know the power of God's Word. We must have faith in its power. We must present it honestly, simply, humbly, and in love. We are to let it have its course. Our responsibility to those who come after us is stated by Paul to Timothy. "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

This little piece is not meant to discourage teacher improvement. To the contrary, from my secular vocation as an educator I strongly believe the benefits of such efforts. God has given certain skills to us, and we are responsible to hone and improve those skills to do his work. That includes teaching, song leading, prayer, etc. My purpose is simply to remind us all that we are to attend to "godly edifying," and we are to "teach the truth in love";

"Finally brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified, even as it is with you" (2 Thessalonians 3:1). —fg