

A Call: Teach The Bible

In 1996 a significant book called “The Coming Evangelical Crisis,” was published. It was written by a number of well-known Christian authors; among them were Kent Hughes, John MacArthur, R.C. Sproul, Michael Horton, and Albert Mohler. The book is a wake-up call about the condition of Christian churches. Its impact is like a fire alarm. The authors warn that churches are slipping from the foundation that Jesus and the apostles had laid. They warn that the teaching of the Bible is being minimized in order to please people, increase church attendance, and obtain larger followings. The goal for some is no longer the honor of God and the spiritual education of those who are in Jesus Christ. As a result, those who seek to know God and to follow Him are being taught simplistic, basic, sugar-coated spiritual truths devoid of meat and substance. As a result of weak preaching and teaching of the Bible - the book of truth - doctrinal error is rapidly increasing. The alarm rang loudly and clearly throughout the book and it still resounds today.

THE ISSUE. In addition to the desire to increase church attendance, R. Kent Hughes captures another reason this situation is occurring when he says,

Over the years, I have encountered ministers, some of whom were fellow students, who have despaired of studying and of preaching. Less and less of their time is devoted to prayer and preparation. Some spend no more than two or three hours in preparation for Sunday. One such pastor makes a habit of preparing his sermon on Saturday night while watching television! Such preaching inevitably makes spare use of Scripture and becomes a series of stories linked around a devotional thought. (Armstrong, John. *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, Moody, 1996, p. 91)

Maybe the worst case I have heard about was from a pastor who stated that he had completed his preparation for his next four sermons in one afternoon. Such shallow preparation results in shallow preaching devoid

of any serious explanation of a biblical passage. How can Christians understand the entire Bible when it is not faithfully taught from cover-to-cover, resulting in doctrine being ignored? The result is summarized by Michael Horton,

What becomes plain is that, when we downplay theology . . . before long we lose the content of Scripture. And not long after our loss of biblical content follows

the loss of authority of Scripture altogether. In practice, it becomes a helpful resource for practical daily living, whose doctrines and historical details may or may not [effect] . . . one’s thought and life . . . (Armstrong, *Ibid*, p. 258-259)



FAILURE OF THE LEADERS. Michael Horton’s comments capture the concern of the fourteen authors. Many seminary students, pastors and teachers are not interested in laying a serious biblical foundation for Christians; as a result, sermons, Bible studies, small groups, and Sunday Schools avoid doctrine and the systematic teaching of the scriptures. Leaders are

failing to teach the followers of Jesus Christ that they need to know the Bible in-depth. As a result,

... most Christians today simply do not seem to have a great interest in reading the Bible . . . What is the most significant expected gain from Bible study? Only 9.3 percent answered that it “helps me to be more knowledgeable about my faith,” while instructions for life won 58 percent, and 32.1 percent answered that it “helps discern God’s speaking to me within.” Obviously this says more about the pragmatic and subjective orientation of popular culture than anything else . . . (Armstrong, Ibid, p. 259)

Did you notice that a knowledge of their faith, the Bible, or of God was not their top choice? One must know the Bible if one wants to know and understand God. Pursuit of the knowledge of God is a life long journey. Did those who responded to the survey want to know God? The authors of “The Coming Evangelical Crisis” warned that the lack of a desire to know the Bible, which leads to a knowledge of God, would result in a weak or non-existent church in the years ahead. This has already happened in countless churches in Europe. Many churches are already dead - they are closed.

I have often told the story about a pastor friend who admitted that doctrine was boring and told his congregation that it was boring. Do you think that his congregation was encouraged to dig deeply into the Bible in search of treasures about God? R. C. Sproul captured the issue well when he said, “To say that theology is boring is really to say that God is boring.”

Near the end of the book, Michael Horton states,

... Apostasy begins harmlessly enough. First, we are told that we do not need creeds, confessions,

and catechisms . . . The result is that the Scriptures go before long. Next, we are asked to tone down on our doctrinal distinctives and emphasize that which unites all religious people of goodwill. The result is the rejection of the gospel. Finally, we are told, “All we need is Jesus,” and we are left with a moral crusader. (Armstrong, Ibid, p. 260)

That is all that is left. If the essence of all that is taught from our pulpits and in Bible studies is that God is only love, then we have missed God. God is more than love and sugar sweetness. He is also holy, just, kind, sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing, infinite, longsuffering, and full of mercy and grace. He will also send those who reject Jesus Christ to an eternal punishment. It is a mistake to teach that God is a loving, soft teddy bear who would not harm anyone, or to teach that He is a cosmic ogre who wants to punish everyone.

Both thoughts are untrue. God is a divine person! A study of doctrine will reveal who He really is.

**S E C O N D
ALARM.** The first

alarm was sounded, in part, because 40% of the followers of Jesus Christ no longer believed that the Bible was without error, and 33% of seminary students in seven major evangelical seminaries did not consider theology to be important (Armstrong, Ibid. p. 258). Unfortunately, the situation did not improve.

The alarm sounded again in 2002 in an article by Holly Peters of BIOLA University when she wrote,

Garry DeWeese - philosophy professor at Talbot School of Theology and former pastor [stated,] “There are seminary students who admit they have never read the entire Bible . . . A few years ago, that would have been shocking.”

Andre Stephens, director of undergraduate admissions

*F*or the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (NASB) 2 Tim. 4:3-4

at BIOLA [University], said that - in the six years since he's held the position - an interesting number of freshman applicants are having trouble articulating their faith in their entrance interviews.

. . . evangelicals are accepting beliefs that would have horrified people 50 years ago . . .

To make Christianity seem more "tolerant" and, thus, more acceptable to the culture, other "harsh" doctrines are being watered down . . . Including the reality of sin, the wrath of God, and the exclusivity of Jesus as the only Way. "When we lose those doctrines, the glory of our salvation is also lost because a Savior no longer seems necessary," he said.

Coupled with this de-emphasis of the "harsh" teachings is a growing emphasis on . . . more therapeutic" teachings, such as how to live a good life, have a good marriage, and be a good parent. "These are important teachings," he said, "but there seems to be an unbalanced emphasis on making Christianity relevant to this life, rather than preparation for the life to come." (Evangelicals on the Decline. "BIOLA Connections." 2002, p. 13)

THIRD ALARM. Then in 2006 another alarm was sounded in the article "Ditching Doctrine" published in BIOLA Connections. The message of the article was that doctrine had become a dirty word, and 47% of pastors now reject the doctrines of the trinity, hell, sin, exclusivity of Jesus, and believe that the Bible has errors. So it is not a surprise that at a well-known pastors' conference in California some pastors have discovered that they do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is not a surprise that for the first time in their lives, some tell God that they are sinners, that they believe in Jesus Christ, and that they will allow Him to change their lives. It is also

not a surprise that some who claim to be Christians are not Christians. When one does not know the Bible, how can one know God? When one does not know the things the Bible teaches, how can one become a mature Christian (Heb. 5:11-14; 1 John 2:12-14)?

In May 2006, my wife and I attended a very large church on Father's Day. The music was lively and contemporary. The musicians on stage were very professional. Eventually, the pastor started his message with a 3-4 minute video about fathers. His message was from the book of Esther, and he focused on Mordecai as a model father. His illustrations for his message were from Mordecai's interactions with Esther. He told the audience that Mordecai was a great example of how a father should encourage, protect, and provide for

his children. Those were his three points. Then he ended his message with a 5 minute secular video about a father's dedication to his son. His entire message, including both videos, lasted 20 minutes. The video was very moving emotionally and masterful. But the pastor never mentioned God or Jesus Christ. He never said that a good father would be a Christian and a spiritual example of holiness to his children. He never said that a godly father should seek to be like Jesus Christ, teach the Bible to his family, pray with them, take them to church, or be an example of faithfulness. God was never mentioned and the service was over. How would someone who was seeking God learn about God and what God desires? Later I discovered that this



was typical of this church.

A personal friend once said that he did not preach the Bible in-depth to his congregation since they were not very intelligent and would not be able to understand him. He did not stop to think that maybe his responsibility as a pastor was to teach and to help them know the Bible. He did not stop to realize that by his teaching through every book of the Bible and by explaining the passages in-depth, his people would grow in their understanding of the Bible and mature

in their walk with God. This requires one to study the Bible.

The article “Ditching Doctrine” summarizes the issue as follows,

A 20-minute sermon may only include five minutes of biblical content,” said Dr. Jonathan Kim, an associate professor of Christian education at Talbot. Even small groups, these days, are mostly about relationships and life-related issues.” (Smith, R. Scott, Ditching Doctrine. “BIOLA Connections. Summer.” 2006. p. 15)

A serious study of the Bible is being missed.

WHAT SHALL WE LOOK FOR? How should we respond? If we are more content with developing relationships with one another in this life or being entertained than in discovering God, then we will do nothing. But if we want to know God, then we will seek to find Him in the pages of the Bible.

The apostle Paul challenged Timothy to teach the Bible to those in his congregation.

Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture,

to exhortation and teaching . . . Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them . . . Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (NASB) 1 Tim. 4:13-16

Notice that Paul challenged Timothy to give attention to three things: reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching. Immediately, we discover that teaching is not reading, nor is it exhortation. Otherwise, Paul would not have used three different words. Reading is a concept we understand. Exhortation is an encouragement to a course of action. Many call exhortation the application derived from the passage or “How do I live my life?” But teaching is something different. It is not reading nor exhortation. Biblical teaching

should explain the meaning of each verse and sometimes the meaning of words and phrases in a verse. Background information should be provided and the meaning of key Hebrew and Greek words as needed. Yet, many pastors and teachers spend most of their time on exhortation and very little time explaining the meaning of the Bible or doctrine.

There are three basic types of messages that pastors and teachers tend to give. The first message is one in which the Bible passage is read and then ignored. The speaker then presents illustrations and jokes and an application.

In the second type of message, the pastor or teacher reads the passage and then may teach only a part of the passage - a verse, a phrase, or a word and then ignore the rest of it. Sometimes an overview of the passage is given with very little detail. This is usually a clue that the pastor or teacher has not taken the time to discover the meaning for himself. His heart is not emotionally “on fire” because he has not spent time in the passage seeking its truths. As a result, the speaker fills the rest of the message with illustrations and a biblical application.

Some- times the goal of the speaker is to capture only the main thought of the passage. As

*F*or the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. (NASB) Malachi 2:7

a result, the passage does not come alive with the details of people, places, events, and doctrinal truth. Difficult passages are often avoided and key concepts and doctrine may never be explained. Unfortunately, such an approach does not completely and adequately explain the Bible, nor does it teach the listeners how to study the Bible by example. Some Christians wonder how teachers and pastors discover the meaning of the Bible. The truth may be that they did not study the passage or simply used another’s sermon or materials. Sometimes the passage does not teach what the speaker says it does.

The last basic type of message is to read the Bible passage and make it come alive with the details of people, places, events and doctrinal truth. Words, phrases, and difficult statements from the passage are explained. If we look back at Paul’s encouragement to Timothy, we discover that Paul

challenged Timothy to emphasize teaching and not exhortation when he said, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching . . .” Notice that Paul challenged Timothy to “give attention,” “take pains,” “pay close attention” in his teaching. This requires more than two hours on a Saturday night preparing for Sunday morning while watching television. This requires more than piecing together a series of stories, jokes, and personal comments. It requires a study of God’s Word and a commitment to mature the saints through solid, biblical teaching of the Word of God. Reading and exhortation should join preaching and teaching, but they should not be the core of the message. Paul’s emphasis was the teaching of Scriptures.

Yet, many pastors and teachers avoid the third type of message in favor the first two approaches. The third approach requires more time and effort. No wonder Paul said, “take pains,” and “pay close attention.”

NEW TREND. The September 2006 issue of Christianity Today has a feature article titled, “Young, Restless, Reformed” by Collin Hansen. Collin indicates that a number of churches scattered across the United States are emphasizing the sound, solid teaching of the Bible. The churches have many young adults in their twenties and early thirties. One such church is Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. The pastor is Mark Dever. Collin visited the church and describes what he experienced,

I visited Capitol Hill Baptist in January. The church kicked off with Sunday school, which really should have been called Sunday seminary. Class options

included a survey of the New Testament, spiritual disciplines, and a systematic theology lesson on theories of the Atonement. (Hansen, Collin. Young, Restless, Reformed. “Christianity Today.” Sept.. 2006. p. 38)

Collin explains that the pastor is serious in his study and teaching of the scriptures. The pastor’s sermons are 55 minutes long. Hymns are emphasized, and the church is packed out with the under 30 crowd. This story is being repeated in key parts around the United States. But it is the under-30 crowd that appears to be interested. The thrust of Collin’s article is that the new emerging under 30 crowd wants to know the Bible and doctrine. They are serious. They are hungry for truth - the Word of God. They are hungry for God. They want to know about God.

CONCLUSION. Some churches have heard the alarms and have responded. Not everyone is interested in the solid teaching of scripture, but not everyone wants to know God either. What type of church should we look for? We should look for pastors and teachers who teach the Bible and who do not just give illustrations and an application. We should look for churches that are serious about teaching the entire Bible. Only then can we be strong in our faith. Only then can we know the character of God and discover hidden treasures about Him. Do you have a hunger to know God? If so, then seek to know the Bible. But remember, the goal is to know God through a study of the Bible.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. (NASB) Hosea 4:6