

God's Sufficient Word (1)

By Todd Pruitt

If you read much church history you have probably come to discover just how often we Christians can tend to drift from the truth. From Arius' denials of the Trinity (4th c.) to Pelagius' many heresies (5th c.) to Rome's centuries long errors in doctrine and practice to Finney's denial of the atonement and justification by grace through faith (18th c.) to the prosperity "gospel" of our own day the church has been riddled with unfortunate departures from the plain teachings of God's Word. Even within so-called evangelical churches the disdain for identifying error has led to compromises which will, in the end, cost us more than we are able to bear.

Whether it comes from the market-driven, consumerist prophets of the church growth movement or the advocates of post-modern deconstructionist philosophy the disdain for biblical clarity will be the same: a corrupt and impotent church. The church marketers prefer "happy-clappy" celebrations and self-help "talks" over weighty God-centered worship and biblical exposition. The postmodernists indulge in doctrinal flights of fancy which have led them to deny the innerancy and authority of God's Word, the objective nature of truth, and even the substitutionary atonement of our Lord. They prefer questions to answers and ambiguity over certainty. Both of these strands have and continue to flourish in the evangelical church. Whether it is our desire to be large and powerful or our misguided notions of what it means to be "relevant" the results have been devastating: a biblically illiterate church unable to identify clear departures from God's truth.

I see three conditions that have helped these troubling developments to flourish. First, *anti-intellectualism*, which has deep roots in American evangelicalism, has led to an unfortunate disdain for formal theological training. While probably not as bad as it used to be there are still preachers who brag about their lack of education in the Scriptures. While God has and does bless His church through countless individuals who have not received formal training, there is little excuse for those called to the full-time ministry of the Word to not be educated at one of many great Bible colleges and seminaries. Many of the aberrations of the prosperity gospel, for instance, are the result of ignorance as to what the Bible actually teaches. I cannot help but wonder how many of today's well known false teachers would be orthodox had they just invested the time to receive formal training the Scriptures from godly scholars.

A second reason for the proliferation of error is our infatuation with *egalitarianism* which holds that all opinions carry equal merit. Today, it borders on sacrilege to suggest that someone's long-held and cherished opinions about God or the Bible are actually wrong. We live in the "How do you feel about this verse?" or "What does this verse mean to you?" approach to Bible study. A

willingness to gladly submit to what God has clearly spoken has given way to explorations about what we feel or think about what God has spoken. More times than I care to recount I have heard professing Christians say “I know the Bible says *such-and-such* but I believe *this...*”

A third reason behind many of the errors that prevail within the church is *the tragic absence of expositional preaching*. Few churches will openly admit that they have an aversion to the preaching of God’s Word but the truth is, a great deal of humanistic therapy, political activism, and moralistic legalism parades as biblical preaching. “After all,” the preacher may reason, “I used a lot of Bible verses.” Expository preaching is the great cure for these problems. Simply put, expository or expository preaching is preaching that takes the point of the biblical text to be the point of the sermon. It is preaching that says what the text says and intends what the text intends. It also protects the preacher from the temptation to advance personal agendas. Faithful biblical exposition not only teaches the content of God’s Word it develops within the church a great respect for the Scriptures and teaches by example the necessary skills of biblical interpretation. This kind of preaching is every pastor’s responsibility before God. In speaking his tender farewell to the Ephesian elders Paul said, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27).

Just as pastors are called by God to preach the Bible faithfully, so the church is called to devote themselves to the eager reception of biblical preaching and teaching. When the church was birthed in Jerusalem at Pentecost we are told first that they “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching” (Acts 2:42). Before their serving, their fellowship, their giving, and their evangelizing they shared a common commitment to the Word of God spoken through the apostles. We have that same teaching in the form of the New Testament. During Paul’s ministry he praised the believers at Thessalonica because, “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (I Thess. 2:13).

We must gladly affirm the great Protestant cry of *Sola Scriptura* or “Scripture Alone”. Indeed, in past centuries men were hounded by church authorities, tried as heretics, and even burned at the stake for their insistence that the authority of Scripture trumps all other authorities including that of popes and councils. In addition to authority *Sola Scriptura* speaks to the Bible’s sufficiency. The Bible gives us all we need for our doctrine, preaching, godliness, and spiritual experience. A faith without the Bible at the center worships a god of our own imaginations or sentiments rather than the God who reveals Himself. The Bible reminds us that what we believe, how we worship, how we “do church,” and how we live are not matters left to our own determination.

A *Newsweek* article from the mid 1980’s describes well the church in our day: “They have developed a ‘pick and choose’ Christianity in which individuals take

what they want...and pass over what does not fit their spiritual goals.” What is more, it seems that the most successful practitioners of the “pick and choose” religion are those within the evangelical camp. Commenting on this phenomenon George Lindbeck of Yale University has written, “Playing fast and loose with the Bible needed a liberal audience in the days of Norman Vincent Peale, but now, as the case of Robert Schuller indicates, professed conservatives eat it up” (Postmodern Theology, 45). I could add to that list a number of very prominent “evangelical” preachers who use the Bible as a kind of garnish to their preaching rather than the foundation.

The church must insist that her preachers give them the Word of God. How can those tasked to preach the Scriptures do any less? How can churches be satisfied with sugary snacks when God has set before us such a bountiful and satisfying feast? The Puritans often referred to the Bible as a “cordial”, indicating that Scripture does for the soul what a Jacuzzi does for the body or fine chocolate does for the taste buds. As the Psalmist declared, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me...I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps 119:97ff).