

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Thoughtful Teaching in Word and Example

And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd. And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12)

Was Solomon referring to his writings in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in this lesson or to a larger life mission? Can we use these words as a guide for ministers today? What is the Biblical charge to a minister of the gospel? And how may he successfully accomplish that mission?

Many years ago someone asked me how he could know if a man is called of God to preach. An interesting question, I thought a minute and gave the simplest answer that I could frame. He preaches! Speaking before a church from the pulpit is not preaching. Teaching a solid Biblical truth, essentially an instructive lecture, is not Biblical preaching.

Today I would add an additional trait to my original response. Look at the people to whom this man speaks. What impact does his teaching have on them? If the people are made stronger and more stable in their faith by his teaching, and if his teaching motivates them to godly conduct, he gives evidence of a true calling from God. If the people respond with approval, but more like they just heard a good lecture that is interesting and informative, but not motivating to godliness and good works, he does not give evidence of a call to preach. He may very well have the gift of teaching or exhortation, both specific gifts mentioned in the New Testament. A life changing power accompanies Biblical preaching that gets into the hearer's life and transforms (Romans 1:16-17). Mental energy—indeed, spiritual energy—accompanies true preaching that sets it apart from lectures, however true and informative.

Perhaps we tend to view spiritual "gifts" too narrowly, thinking that the only

worthwhile gift is preaching. Important as preaching is according to the New Testament, the Bible lists a surprisingly wide variety of spiritual gifts. In fact in the most extensive passage in the New Testament dealing with spiritual gifts Paul compares the complexity of the New Testament church with the human body. From that basic analogy he lists a wide variety of spiritual gifts that are all necessary for a healthy spiritual "body" to exist.

Another evidence of true Biblical preaching appears in its content. If a man studies to find a novel (obscure rather than the obvious) meaning, nudges the passage toward a mystical (rather than the literal and transparent) interpretation, he fails the test of his position as well. The power of Biblical preaching appears when a man presents the old and obvious truth of the passage, but with a freshness that causes the hearers to be excited and motivated, as if they were hearing this old truth for the very first time in their life.

Should a preacher give thought to his sermon before entering the pulpit? Or should he simply enter the pulpit with a mental vacuum and hope that God will fill his empty mind with whatever He wants the congregation to hear? When Jesus told the disciples to "give no thought" to what they would say, He was referring to their being arrested for their faith and appearing before their accusers, not to ordinary preaching. Solomon set the example some nine hundred years in advance of Paul. The wise preacher will work long and hard to gain sound Biblical knowledge. He will further work long and hard to find ways to present that truth simply and understandably so that

the people will clearly understand his message. He will apply what he teaches others to himself (give good heed), not contradict his pulpit message with his “foot message,” his personal conduct. The sermon lived out by the preacher will have far more influence on people than the sermon preached from the pulpit.

Goads were long pointed sticks used by shepherds to prod slothful sheep into staying with the fold where safety was provided. On occasion believers in Christ, however sincere, become careless about their church attendance. Or they faithfully attend, but carefully put up walls around themselves, avoiding social contact and true “fellowship” with their brothers and sisters in the church, thereby losing a protective shelter from spiritual dangers. Those old popular music philosophers, Simon and Garfunkel, touched a crucial point in one of their songs, “Sound of Silence.” They depict a person living in the midst of a large city, always surrounded by people, but carefully remaining apart from people. What is the result? The deafening sound of silence!

No perfect church exists today. Every church is an imperfect group of people who are trying to grow into the perfect model of a New Testament church that is described in Scripture. Why did the Lord institute the church? We are social beings who need and respond to other people. He knew that true and regular fellowship would insulate His people from the dangers of a fallen and unfriendly world. Thus He instituted His church and directed His first century inspired writers of the church’s handbook to write of its value.

The New Testament uses the word “church” in *only two ways*. In most instances of its appearance it refers to a local body of baptized believers who live and function together. In a few instances it refers to the final and eternal gathering of all of God’s children in heaven. Despite the common reference to a whole fellowship or denomination of people—or at times to all of “organized” Christianity—as “church,” this use of the word *never appears* in the New Testament. Faithful attendance that is mandated by Hebrews 10:25 cannot occur while we visit other churches than the church of our membership. We only fulfill this New Testament directive by regular and faithful attendance at the church of our

membership. I recently visited a church in Texas, requiring that I miss a Sunday at the church of my membership. While I was involved in preaching and fellowship, I was not specifically fulfilling my obligation to my home church on this particular Sunday. While the church that I serve was quite happy for me to attend this special meeting, I could not constantly travel, however busy ministering in other churches, and fulfill my personal obligation to the church of my membership, either as a member of that church or as its pastor. Contemporary pseudo-church organizations reject the idea of specific “church membership,” rather teaching that, if you are merely present under one roof on a given occasion where Christians meet and attempt to worship God that you are on that occasion a “member” of that church. This obtuse concept is altogether alien to the New Testament. Specific and formally defined churches existed in various locations. When visiting them or writing to them, inspired New Testament writers addressed them as a specific body of believers. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul confronted the church in Corinth for its toleration of a member in that church who had an affair with his step-mother. He directed the church to grieve both the man’s sin and its own failure to confront and rebuke that sin, in the end instructing the church to excommunicate the man. However, some eighteen months later in 2 Corinthians, he instructed the church to restore the man who had subsequently repented of his sin. This whole scenario would be senseless and impossible if there were no formal identity of a local church body and formal membership in it.

A gospel “goad” motivates people to remain faithful both to their God and to the local assembly of their membership.

Nails are used by carpenters to firmly attach one piece of lumber to another in constructing a building. Do you sense the analogy of a nail in 1 Corinthians 15:58? Paul’s preaching on the reality of a literal, bodily resurrection served to “nail” the Corinthian church together and to “nail” them to faithful steadfastness in the gospel. Without a firm grasp of the resurrection this church had no stability.

Thus we find the value of both goads and nails in the New Testament description of the gospel. As with many of the lifestyle issues that appear in Ecclesiastes, Solomon is as contemporary and relevant in this lesson as in his other teachings in this book. May we eagerly embrace his exhortation and seek the power of the gospel to transform our lives.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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