

A Mini-Theology of the Word

I. Preface

When I was still teaching in seminary I used to pose this question to my pastoral students:

“Just suppose in your church services you had only 15 minutes and you were forced to choose just one component of a typical service, what would you choose? To teach the Word, to sing hymns of praise, to hold a short prayer service, to fellowship, to do some good work, to take an offering or to evangelize lost people who may be attending that brief service. Which one would you choose?”

Of course no one wants a restriction like that, but hypothetically it is worth asking.

Sometimes I got the right answer. Teach the Word of God!

Why? Because, as I would explain, the nature and purpose of the Holy Scriptures is such that the Word catalyzes and nourishes all the other responses. Revelation is the ‘mother’ of all those offspring. But the analogy has this difference: without the constant nurture of divine revelation, those other components of our worship weaken and become deformed or die altogether.

In spiritual formation intake of the Word of God is essential and primary. Everything else is complement. Nothing is an adequate replacement. The Word generates all the other holy responses that edify. That is the premise of this paper.

Unfortunately, that cause and effect relationship is not well understood these days.

In the American church there has been a serious decline of sound, faithful teaching of the Word of God during this last evangelical generation (say 1970-ish to the present). Not that it was anything to brag about before. It is just that what was not so good previously has taken another big step backward. As a result, among professing Christians, biblical literacy, doctrinal understanding, moral convictions and holy habits have nosedived. Worse, even *the appetite* for

sound, prophetic biblical preaching seems to have waned to the point where, sadly, it is almost an endangered species.

Like a teeter totter, as the ministry of the Word has been de-emphasized in public worship (not to mention private study), other things have been elevated (like music, for example) as the carrot sticks that churches depend on to draw and sustain crowds. What were once appropriate *complements* to the ministry of the Word have more or less become *replacements* for its apostolic centrality (see Acts 2:42 where the newly birthed church is described as “continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching).

This digressive tendency has reached a point where I think it is not unfair to say that when it comes to the decision where to attend church (especially with younger people) the deciding factor way too often comes down to where they can find the greatest concentration of their own peer group rather than the finest concentration of sound, searching biblical teaching and godly models that call them up higher (witness the appalling counterpoint in the Mark Driscoll/Mars Hill fiasco). Rarely are the two found under the same roof unfortunately. It says something about where these young folk are that social (and entertainment) values, not to mention their misbegotten perceptions of ‘cool’, trump spiritual values.

Their preference typically will be some venue whose ‘marketing’ strategy targets the below 40 set with the beefy brand of music and edginess they like. The appeal of it has little to do with the (light) spiritual ‘freight’ carried in the lyrics, but more to do with the musical style that generation has grown up with. It’s all about bands, beats and hot vocalists.

They gravitate to these ‘youth’ churches because, to use their phrase, they feature the ‘best worship,’ a terminology that gives away their misunderstanding of the priorities of biblical worship wherein the centerpiece (but not the only piece) is the sound, faithful, prophetic ministry of the Word of God. The appeal in most cases, I believe, stems a lot more from their near idolatrous love of rock-style music than any love for the Rock of Ages and the sacred Word of God.

Lest we be unfair, it should be added that this taste for music over taste for truth is not limited to the younger generation, though it is more prominent in their case. Over my many years in this pastorate numerous times we have had graying newcomers visit our church in hopes of escaping ‘rock sounds’ (drums, acoustical guitars, etc.) they have met up with in other churches. Time and again they have effused at “the bold teaching of the Word of God,” but unbelievably turned away once more because of the music!

My goodness, where are their priorities? Worship is a choice. In a church world where it is harder and harder to find pastors who excel in teaching the Word, they turn their backs on one who by their own definition does, all in hopes of snaring a church featuring the music they

like. That choice I think is disgraceful in the eyes of God. It says a lot about them, none of it good.

But to circle back to the take-off point. What I have sketched as an example is a phenomenon today where what was once *a servant* in worship has been allowed to supersede what God intended to be the *master*---the key feature, the ministry of God's word. That example of inversion of values is really a perversion in our worship habits.

Now admittedly the way it all breaks down these days is more complex than what I have just described. Other factors can (and do) figure in the equation also, none of which alters my main complaint: Today the biblical imperative (i.e. teaching the Word of God) is less and less honored and its priority in public worship is more and more giving way to other less important elements of public worship.

I know of one church not so very far from us where teaching has been much of the time replaced by Sunday morning *conversations!* This is supposed to be cool and trendy, if you can believe it. To my mind things are almost to the point in some churches where it would not matter too much if one put Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse in the pulpit on Sundays so long as other things, especially the music, were engaging.

II. Precipitating Factors

Now the question needs to be raised: What factors have precipitated (and accelerated) this displacement of the main thing in public worship? I will start with the human catalysts in the equation, then identify what I believe to be the underlying, but hidden cause, namely, the punitive hand of God against an evangelical church culture that largely doesn't give a rip.

Like many things, the answer is complex, but I will mention a few that stick out.

- 1) Our church growth mentality:** American churches are to some extent 'children' of the culture. We like to grow things, get bigger. 'Success' in America, including in our churches, tends to be defined by growth. And our philosophical mentality (Wm. James) tends to be pragmatic. What works? Carried over into church life, what works in drawing a crowd and building a church (as opposed to building people)? If a rich supply of bonbons every Sunday fills the pews, then bonbons it is.
- 2) A general loss of appetite for the Word.** We are in one of those cycles, mentioned by the apostle Paul, defined by a general loss of appetite for the Word.

2 Tim. 4:1-4 *"For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great*

number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

Many people come to church to feel- good (and say so). They are averse to being spiritually strip searched and probed by the Word of God. They do not wish to be called to repent and trust in Christ nor to be challenged to radical discipleship or to change their attitudes and behaviors and to be conformed to Christ, etc. They want fluff. They want psychology, not theology. They want to talk about relationships with their spouses and kids, less so about their relationship with Christ. They want ear candy. A prophetic pulpit grates on them. So pastors and church leaders, fearing losses in the numbers column, give in, soft pedal it, pander to it, and scratch their itches.

- 3) **The mixed multitude:** Just because the greater goal (not the greater good) is to grow our churches, we have harvested a lot of chaff. The penalty for selling out to draw the world in, is that now we can't get the world out. This creates a mixed multitude like that crowd that accompanied Israel out of Egypt. That worldly presence typically leads to some dumbing down to the lowest common denominator when the natives get restless, so to speak. Got to keep them happy. Nothing that might offend or put them in a twist.
- 4) **Postmodern creep:** This post-modern generation is mentally tilted to the subjective (as opposed to the objective word of God). More or less it makes 'experience' the measure and supreme interpretive principle of all things. For those infected, truth is not fixed; truth is what they 'feel' and there is no talking them out of it. In fact they can even reconcile themselves to contradiction on the basis of personal experience. "Your truth, my truth, hey, whatever works. You connect with God your way; I connect with God my way. It's all good!" And it is not big on authority. Unfortunately that includes biblical authority. "Thus saith the Lord" tends to ring more hollow to their ears than the rest of us.
- 5) **Pentecostal/charismatic slop-over:** The surge of the Pentecostal/charismatic movement in this last generation with its experiential emphasis and its 'praise' orientation (meaning a disproportionate emphasis on music in worship, i.e. letting God hear from us rather than us hearing from God) has been an enormous factor as denominational lines have been blurred. One can see how this movement finds a sympathetic audience among a generation that unwittingly has been sipping Kool Aid from a postmodern cup.
- 6) **Narrowing of the definition of worship:** More on this later, but for now just let me say that when people say, "I missed the worship this morning," what they mean is they missed the music portion of the service. You can see the obvious implications of this unscriptural transition from the conception of a worship service as one that features the breaking of the Word of God as the focal point of worship to one where music has supplanted it. In this conceptuality, the teaching of the Word is an awkward appendage

that we continue to do because we have always done it and don't quite know how to dispense with it. Nothing could be less biblical.

- 7) **The scarcity of compelling preachers.** In this last generation the crop of compelling preachers/teachers is diminishing. The average preacher out there today is only marginally gifted and tends to be boring (for all the right reasons). That circumstance is traceable in part to their lack of equipment. That deficiency is linked usually to their lack of a divine calling (which a great many actually don't even believe in). One ominous sign of this sobering fact is that these days His Spirit is calling fewer and fewer men into the ministry. Don't be fooled. There is no correlation between the numbers of students attending seminaries (and going into counseling!) and those who give any evidence of God's calling to preach the Word. In my years in academia I witnessed that phenomenon up close and personal. It has only gotten worse since 1991, I assure you.

All that (and more) are the degrading factors on the human side of the problem.

But really these are just symptoms, I believe, of the underlying cause, which is a contemporary judgment of God on our generation. What am I talking about?

A swelling famine of the Word of God. The Lord told the prophet Amos about that penalty in Amos 8:11:

"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land---not a famine of food or thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the word of the Lord."

This pronouncement came when ancient Israel neither wanted to hear the Word of God nor were they willing to heed it when they did.

In effect God said, Fine. Have it your way. You don't want fed on My Word? Then I will give you a famine of it until you change your minds. Nothing has changed about His approach to people who don't want to hear it or heed it. God serves people the straw they want as punishment for despising the bread they don't.

In Hosea the Lord says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" and He adds that this result is "because you have rejected knowledge." (Hosea 4:6)

Whenever taste for the truth is wanting in the pews, God will see that it is lacking in the pulpits. That is what we call a stroke of poetic justice.

I have no illusions about launching a counter-revolution that will change the drift of contemporary evangelical churches away from our best means to accomplish God's work in the hearts of men and women. My more modest hope is that at least on my watch we here at Lake

can re-capture a sounder theology of the Word and anchor our ministry, as much as possible, to those premises and convictions that prevailed in the ministry of the apostles.

III. The Imperative of a Word-Centered Ministry

Now let me by means of a series of interrogatives share in a hopefully linear way an informal, but brief 'theology of the Word' (a bit overstated, to be sure). To get to the heart of the matter, one really must start at the foundation of what we human beings exist for.

If we agree with the great Westminster Confession that the chief end of man is to glorify God in our lives (1 Cor. 10:31 "Whether then you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," for (Acts 17:28) "in Him we live and move and exist."), then one must ask how does one glorify God?

That answer should not be elusive: Be what He wants us to be, do what He wants us to do, and go where He wants us to go.

From what reliable, authoritative source does one determine those things?

Through divine revelation, i.e. God's Word. How else?

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (all of which obedience or fruit assumes a root of faith). Micah 6:8

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, [the nature of] which God prepared beforehand [i.e. prescribed in His revelation so we don't have to guess] that we should walk in them." [brackets mine for clarity]

But do not some particular things (like where God may want us to live or what school to attend or what person to marry, etc.) need to be discovered through prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit?

Yes, but here we are speaking in marco, not in micro terms---in grand terms, not granular ones.

Yet even the smaller, gritty questions must be run through the filter of the Word. For it is only by means of the Word that we know diddly squat about prayer---what deity to petition and on what terms and conditions, etc. Also, it is only through the Word that we know boo about the Holy Spirit---who the Spirit is and the terms and conditions of His presence and guidance. And every 'answer' must be tested by the standards of the Word, lest we deceive

ourselves or be deceived. For the Holy Spirit has been accused of millions of 'directions' He never gave.

So, the bottom line is, knowledge of God's Word (and trust in it) are pre-requisite to any approach to God and any applications for guidance. *Everything* comes back to the knowledge and priority of the Word in our engagement with God.

Even so, unless we heed and believe the Word, it is to us a dead book.

So, what ignites faith so that we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to obey it?

"Faith comes by hearing (i.e. assimilating the Word) and hearing (is turned on) by the Word of God." Romans 10:14 (parenthesis mine for clarity)

Ah, there's the imperative and urgency of the Word again not only in our private life, but, what we are talking mainly about, in the ordering of our public worship. The Spirit working through the Word of God not only births faith, but stimulates it, informs it, sustains it and strengthens it. And that faith in turn will, unless some spiritual pathology is in play, resonate with the Word.

"He who is of God hears the words of God. For this reason you do not hear them (i.e. embrace and resonate with them), Jesus warned, "because you are not of God." - (John 8:47) (parentheses mine for clarity)

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me," Jesus said (John 10:47)

Clearly something is very amiss when professing disciples don't gravitate to God's Word.

In John 6 some of Jesus heretofore 'disciples' were put off by His teaching about eating His flesh and drinking His blood (which were metaphors for appropriating Him by faith). In verse 66 "many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore." Where faith declines or fails, appetite for the Word declines or fails with it. So, alarm bells should go off anytime professing Christians show little appetite for the Scriptures.

Is it then true that all spiritual life and positive movement toward God and every appropriate response to God starts with and is sustained by the Holy Spirit working through the Word?

Absolutely. That is exactly what I am getting at.

Put this principle down and never forget it: *The Word mediated by the Holy Spirit is God's primary (I did not say exclusive) catalyst (or stimulus) for making and maturing disciples.*

When it comes to *saving* effects (i.e. making disciples), it is “the living and enduring word of God” that gets the job done.

“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” (2 Peter 1:23)

“Living” word? That is not a figure of speech. Yes, living because the Spirit is not only that behind-the-human-hand author of the Word but also the Word is mysteriously imbued with His power. The word is organic. It is dynamic. It is a supernatural, ever-existing Force.

The Word of God, you see, is a sort of optical illusion. Appearances are deceiving. Actually, it is something greater than the sum of its parts---something much more than inert, dead letters printed with ink upon white pages between two covers. It is actually a living, ever-working energy that goes forth with supernatural power to accomplish God’s purposes, whatever they may be.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. . .” Paul (Romans 1:16)

And when it comes to *sanctifying* effects (i.e. personal holiness), that maturing work is also accomplished by the Word. In His high priestly prayer just before His crucifixion Jesus prayed for His disciples. In doing so the Lord underscored this purifying operation when He prayed: (John 17:17):

“Sanctify them by the truth. Thy word is truth.”

The Apostle Paul elaborates upon the uniqueness and divine function of the Word as an edifying, purifying and fortifying force of God: (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

“All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

“The sacred writings,” Paul had just reminded Timothy (verse 15), “are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation (in its broad sense encompassing regeneration, sanctification and glorification) through faith in Christ Jesus.” (parentheses mine)

Here plainly is God’s primary instrument for edifying and fortifying the saints. The secret of its power? Its inspiration by the Spirit (it is “God-breathed” in the Greek) i.e. inspired by the Spirit). Hence its infallibility and efficacy as a spiritual resource and guide. It is divinely designed to be peculiarly “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training (your people) in righteousness.” (parenthesis mine)

Wow! Why would any minister or church be so foolish as to slight the ministry of the Word? Why would any church shift it from its central position in the worship of the Church? And why in the name of God Almighty would Christian people turn to psychologists and (usually) biblically illiterate counselors for answers to their problems that have (as most do) spiritual roots?

Things are turned on their heads out there!

The Scriptures are not only designed as God's fundamental instrumentality in shaping disciples, but Paul, you notice, adds this: With the Scriptures in your hands, pastor, you are well "equipped (as a man of God) for every good work." (v. 17 – parentheses mine) Don't overlook the import of that clause.

The Apostle is saying that a man of God fully armed with the Word of God is locked and loaded for ministry. He needs no other creative or cool 'tricks' in His bag to accomplish what God has called him to do.

Not only is God's Word His unique saving and sanctifying instrument, but, get this, it is *actually fail-safe*, despite any appearances to the contrary. In Isaiah (55:10-12) the Lord himself declares:

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the master for which I sent it." (emphasis added)

That implies that even when it seems to fall flat (a lot of the time), His mighty word is somehow quietly working His hidden will so that the message always succeeds. Whether it meets with obtuseness or resistance, even those reactions are in some way comprehended in His secret purpose!

And therein lies our confidence in teaching His Word. My teaching may appear to drop dead in its tracks. But I can be sure of this: if what I taught was faithful to His Word, somehow, someday, it will succeed in what God's Spirit sent it forth to accomplish, despite the weakness of the fleshy messenger and perhaps his flawed delivery of it. And every auditor will be held accountable for his or her response.

Never underestimate the subtle power and disguised purposes of God's Word!

Moreover, nothing we could contrive in a worship service could possibly equal the Word in its probing and penetrating power in the human heart. The writer to the Hebrews explains: (4:12)

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Ah, right there is where we get conviction of sin. Right there is where we get repentance. Also, right there is where we get blow back. Right there is where preachers are sometimes shown the door. Right there accounts for some of the flight factor as some seek cover from convicting preaching that homes in on the guilty conscience.

The Word, I like to say, stirs up the mud in the bottom of character buckets. It forces the often times unwilling to look themselves in the mirror and see themselves for the way they are. For that the man of God catches flak at times. But then so did Jesus and all the prophets and apostles. Good company!

In fact, it is so sharp and effective in our hands that the Apostle Paul in an apt metaphor likens the word of God to *“the sword of the Spirit.”* (Ephesians 6:17) When the Spirit wields it, it goes forth, depending on human postures, to save or destroy, to cut away (sanctify) or to cut up (chasten) or to cut down (condemn) the wicked.

What else, religiously speaking, can one invent for public worship that serves the same powerful purposes?

[By the way, on a side note, lest anyone get the impression that I hold that the ministry of the Word in our lives is best and more fully imparted in public worship, let me clarify. True, that *was* the case in ancient Israel. But today when we all have our own Bibles, the saturation of the sacred Scriptures ought to start with regular personal study and meditation and/or mentoring environments. That part we take for granted for the purposes of this paper. Herein my focus has more to do with the power and place of the Word in public worship where today, as I have said, it is getting more and more short-changed and lightly regarded.]

Again, the Spirit working through God’s Word is the catalyst, directly or indirectly, of every good thing that happens to us, for us, in us and through us.

Thus, without a steady, relentless drum beat of the Word of God in the human ear the saving and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is stifled and sanctification is stunted. Whatever spiritual progress has been made at a given point is always due to the Spirit working through the Word; likewise, to whatever extent spiritual progress is stymied in individual or in a local

body, that stoppage or stagnation is due either to lack of exposure to the Word of God or to some degree of resistance to it--or both. But there is no substitute for it!

In summation, the Word of God mediated to us by the Spirit (through one window or another) is God's fundamental catalyst that sets our spiritual lives in motion and keeps them headed in the right direction. Yes, other complements come into play (like prayer, praise) but these are responses to God *fed and fueled by His Word*.

Like an auto alternator, the Word is what keeps our batteries of prayer and praise energized. Without its informing and inspiring effects, prayer and praise would go dead (or go crazy, not an uncommon result where the Word is neglected or ignored).

To come back full circle, if we want to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, there can be no neglect of the Word. That is a non-starter. If we want to be conformed to Christ (Romans 8:29), to be children of God above reproach in the midst of this crooked perverse generation, among whom [we] appear as lights in the world, holding fast [or forth] the word of life," (Phil. 2:15-16) there can be no neglect of the Word.

IV. Anticipated Questions

Now let me turn to some questions this brief theology of the Word may evoke.

What about the idea of functional equivalence, i.e. that different people 'connect' with God by different means (i.e. by some other route that gives short shrift to Word-saturation?)

That is nonsense. And quite a dangerous premise upon which to operate.

E.g. On that premise, some would (and do) discard special revelation in favor of communing with nature where they allege they best 'find' and connect with God.

E.g. On that premise, some who are mystically inclined prefer to bypass knowing God through the Scriptures (the starting point) and seek direct, full face encounters with God.

E.g. On that premise, some push aside the Word and profess that they best connect with God and grow in faith through the experience of 'signs and wonders'

E.g. On that premise some get caught up in New Age heresies and the contemplative prayer movement which can really lead them astray from the truth.

E.g. On that premise some would profess that they best connect with God through prayer (though without revelation to guide and inform their prayers they might (and often do) miss the 'target' altogether and pray amiss). For power in prayer is joined at the hip with

revelational in-take and the faith and obedience that the Word guides and stimulates into informed channels.

E.g. On that premise, some would profess that they best connect with God listening to Christian music through which medium they allege the Spirit most speaks to their hearts.

But only insofar as music (the medium) conveys biblical revelation is it possible for the Spirit to speak through it. And there we have two big problems that thwart that strategy. One, not always recognized, is that music is primarily an emotional medium, only secondarily an intellectual medium. What that means is that the music itself (the medium) takes on a life of its own which tends to override, if not blunt or blur, whatever thin message is available in song. Which brings us the second drawback.

Electing to draw one's spiritual nourishment from the revelational content of most modern Christian music is not viable because: 1) there is no way song can carry the weight of the whole counsel of God, meaning i.e. revelational content in Christian music is very, very strained, a worse option than using a devotional guide in place of one's Bible 2) unlike Christian hymnody of the Reformed and Puritan tradition, today's contemporary music is not only like gruel, but way too much of it is more "me" centered than "Thee"-centered, i.e. focused on one's feelings than rehearsing in song the character and works of God and 3) as mentioned above, it is much more about the style than the substance, the latter being more dispensable than the former.

E.g. on that premise some would allege they best connect with God through serving, i.e. humanitarian service or do-gooding.

Of course we are admonished by the Word to do good (Titus 2:7), but how in this culture are we to know what good to do as opposed to the contradictory voices of the culture? Just because humanitarian endeavors make one 'feel good' does not at all mean that it was really the best thing to do or the right time or in the right way. Feeling good about ourselves after a do-gooding field trip does not equate to connecting with God by any means. Even worldings get a buzz from that. .

E.g. on that premise some would say they best connect with God through activism (being culture warriors). Though I have never actually heard this, I can easily imagine it, as these folk feel they are carrying the torch for the truth in trying to turn our culture to God. Here also the good works [that we should do] have been "prepared beforehand (by God and revealed in His Word) that we should walk in them." Ephesians 2:10. One can't make this stuff up; it always comes back to the Word for right direction. Even then, while those works please God, they don't feed the soul and one does not 'connect' with God by means of them.

The bottom line is that God's way, despite how some in their stubborn American individualism may prefer to do their own hand-made connecting with God, for one to truly connect with Him is by simply trusting Him and obeying Him. And, as we have seen, the trigger for that is the Word of God.

Apart from that 'program' there is no true connection with God. Apart from that, any 'connection' with God is illusory. It is emotional deception. Our feelings, no matter how intense, are misleading us, if they do not issue in trusting and obeying. And from my long, long Christian experience and veteran service in the ministry, I have yet to meet a single stable, solid, growing, mature disciple who is infantile in his or her knowledge of God's Word.

Yet today here we are trying to raise up a new generation of radicalized disciples who know little and care less about God's word---and many churches are pandering to that with a 'have it your way' kind of program that we confuse with Christian ministry.

It won't happen. And our churches are paying and will pay a dear price---our candlelight will be snuffed. When hard times hit and persecution comes, this alternative or entertainment-based church ministry will go up in smoke and its cool-loving acolytes will scatter like cock roaches because they can't take the heat. You can bulk up a congregation on junk food, but not a healthy one.

But what about those who may insist that they just can't connect with God through reading the Bible and being taught from it because they are this or that kind of learner and studying the Bible or being taught from it just does not do it for them?

Arrant nonsense! Frankly, in this technocratic day, way too much is made of these different learning styles. Learning styles are the function of habit. The truth is, if we want to and need to, as long as we have intact brains, we can learn however we want to or need to. It all comes down to desire and focus (the point of Proverbs 2:1-5). For all of our sparkly technology, those who are learners in this world still acquire knowledge in the same old ways, listening, reading, observing and practicing (skills). Human beings and human brains remain the same, just our preferences and habits change.

For example, I personally do not like listening to tapes or CDs or somebody yakking on my computer monitor. Just not my preferred medium for ingesting information. Nor do I like to read instruction manuals. Usually a disconnect, I find, between what is written and the way the stupid things actually work. I get too impatient. However, if necessary, I can summon myself to do what I do not prefer to do to gain knowledge that I really want to acquire.

The real obstacle here is this: many people just flat don't want to read and that includes the Scriptures and they just don't want to listen to somebody teach them because they are too lazy or indifferent to bring focus to the task.

So this is my answer:

- 1) Quite frankly, that excuse reveals a certain level of resistance or indifference to revelation. (John 8:47 – Jesus himself put it succinctly):

“He who is of God hears the words of God; for that reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”

Those who belong to God by spiritual instinct resonant with the word of God. They just gravitate to it. If they don't, well, as Jesus said, that is a really bad sign. (See 2 Tim. 4:1-4 above)

- 2) Moreover, throughout human history God's way of connecting with His people and drawing them into trust and obedience has been through His oral and written Word. Why, even His signs and wonders had to be interpreted by His prophets. Even the songs of Israel (that were a treasure of theological content) were reduced to writing for optimal effect. It was never left for the camel of music alone to carry the message home. Revelation is the pack horse, not music.
- 3) More importantly, the Word itself tells us that it is by hearing the truth that the difference is made in people's lives, as seen in Scriptures cited earlier.

So where there is deafness to the Word, there is a serious sickness in the heart. Where the Word of God does not speak to people, it is a foregone conclusion that their antennae are not working. The problem is not the medium. It never is. The problem is the receptors (the ears). Always is.

But If people find no appeal in marinating their minds in the Scriptures, do not have an appetite for the sound teaching of God's word, attach no great importance to sound teaching, but just want to graze on religious entertainment and music (or whatever), won't we lose them if we do not try to address them on their own terms and accommodate their tastes?

In their present state of mind and heart, they are lost already. The correction is not to pander to that mindset.

It is not as though we were trying to break down the truth to kiddie bite sizes so like children they can understand. Nor is what we are talking about the same as giving milk instead of meat to palates too immature in spiritual understanding to digest meat.

Beware of false analogies here.

Their problem is not so much that they can't understand, but that they are not all that ready or willing to understand. There is no cure for that but from God. (See Hebrews 5:11-6:3 where the author faces that problem, but elects not to pander to it.)

It is not a question of getting truth down to their level so they can understand or speak in language best suited to a given demographic. That is just common sense. We translate and we illustrate the word of God as "windows to let the light in."

With little children we may have to use a spoon rather than a shovel and bring our language down to their verbal levels. With all we use illustrations, examples, analogies, parable, metaphors and similes (as do the Scriptures) to help the understanding.

What we must not do is change the subject matter, avoid the whole counsel of God, focus our message on babble rather than the Bible. Yes, we adapt our mode of communication to suit, but we do not pander to those who would just rather we talk about something else. We don't have a problem; they do and it is serious.

Here's a great and very significant irony: The remedy for distaste for the Word and dullness of hearing is never to try something else that is more agreeable to their palates, but to keep feeding them the good food they don't want. Believe it or not, that is the only remedy.

Where do we get a crazy notion like that? From the Apostle Paul in fact:

Consider again the logic embedded in 2 Tim. 4:1-4

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with such doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around then a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (emphasis mine)

Apart from reinforcing the fact that **Job One** is to preach the Word, notice that "in season, out of season" qualification. For the reasons he cites below, namely, an anticipated

cycle of distaste for sound teaching, he solemnly admonishes Timothy not to let up for any reason, but to keep hammering home the word “in season, out of season.”

Now “out of season” is an expression for those times (they do run in cycles) when a church or a culture is not attuned to sound teaching, but, like in our day, many prefer an unhealthy, fast-food diet. By this phrase, Paul indicates that *the only hope to cure that situation is more of the same*. If anything will break through, it will be relentless teaching the Word. Changing the menu to appease perverse tastes is not a remedy; it is a capitulation. So, Paul charges Timothy not to change channels when he runs into interference.

As in the philosophy of Woody Hayes, the late, famed Ohio State football coach noted for his bulldozing ground game, teaching the word is our “three yards and a cloud of dust.” If anything will get ‘er done, it is that program. In season, out of season. Stick with it. Any other remedy is no remedy. It is just humoring people to draw a crowd. It will not draw blood.

Do we want people to get it? Do we want them to get their act together? Do we want them to turn on for Christ? God has appointed His Word, inspired by His Spirit to turn the trick, if it will be turned. We must not forget that!

We must understand what an *organic* weapon the Word is in the spiritual battle for the souls of men, the warfare between light and darkness in the lives of the people in front of us. I reiterate what the writer to the Hebrews declares: (4:12)

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

As I have said previously, the word of God gets down and dirty with us. It roots around in our consciences and finds where we are trying to hide things from both God and ourselves. It is truly a creative and re-creative force of the Spirit of God mediated from dead letters on white pages and through flawed, earthen vessels like us pastors.

I would emphasize that it does not matter so much how divine revelation (i.e. biblical teaching) is conveyed to the human consciousness as the fact that it is conveyed---regularly, relentlessly, soundly, and fulsomely delivered. That saturation should start, where possible, with intense personal study of the Scriptures. And in the ministry of the local church the teaching of the Scriptures at all levels ought to be paramount in all that we do. Everything beyond that is *complement*, perhaps an important complement, but a complement. And those complements, I repeat, spring from the light and the stimulus of the Word. The Word is therefore the head and not the tail in God’s scheme of church life and public worship.

Back during the 80's when I was teaching in seminary, local churches were in the throes of what then were called "the worship wars." Mostly it was about styles of music. Many churches wanted to stick with traditional music, others were going contemporary, still others were trying to pacify everybody by splitting the difference---holding both a traditional and a contemporary service. That was not the really bad thing, as divisive as it could be. What was really alarming in the battle was the start of the trend to narrow the meaning of 'worship' to music. That created something of a crisis in many quarters. If music (praise) is the essence and heart of 'worship', what do we do with the traditional sermon? Suddenly (in those circles) it seemed that the preaching of the Word was a sort of vestigial organ that needed to be at least trimmed down (if not trimmed out). (Robert Webber of Wheaton College)

For example, during my last couple of years there, the chapel services were turned over to the head of the music department to 'design' appropriate worship services for the student chapel times. After all these years my memory of that time has faded a bit, but I can say this: I cannot recall a single chapel service arranged by that faculty member that called for any teaching of the Word of God!

A sign of the times. As far as he was concerned, worship did not involve preaching. The student profited as much or, in his mind, more without it. He was by no means the only professor in that school or others who took that point of view. Little wonder then that students emerge from these institutions with such cockeyed notions of worship, failing to understand that before we can appropriately talk to God, God must first talk to us---a lot.

The ministry of the Word, I repeat, is not just a piece of a proper worship service, but the centerpiece. But uncalled 'preachers' whom God has not gifted to teach and dull of hearing people in the pews are perfectly content to change up the menu with creative flourishes that deliver themselves and the people from the 'burden' of sitting under the Word.

Which evokes another point. Almost as important as the fact that the Scriptures are faithfully taught or studied is *how* they are taught or studied. The teaching of the Word should be addressed to the affections and the will, not just the head (as a source of information only). Properly taught, and that includes the whole counsel of God, the Scriptures are intended to do far more than simply serve as an informational resource about divine things. The Spirit sends the Word forth (from whatever source) to convict, to convince and to convert; to reprove, to rebuke, to comfort and to counsel and to inspire, to exhort and admonish.

For a teacher to misuse the Scriptures can be as bad as not to use them. Unfortunately this often happens. We must teach what bites as well as what blesses; what discomforts as well as what comforts, what warns as well as what promises.

All that I have said above, starkly contrasts with the erroneous notion that in the process of spiritual formation, there are, so to speak, different strokes for different folks. I do not for a minute accept the idea that various people 'connect' with God, no matter what they may say, other than through serious and sustained exposure to the Word or God. I do not subscribe to the notion of any functional equivalent in the evangelism or edification process. It is sheer myth to imagine there is any other pack animal in God's gifts to the men or the church that carries the weight of His revelation in doing His work in the lives of individuals and churches. They may and do function as supplements or complements but never should anybody think they are satisfactory *replacements* for those who may not yet have acquired a taste for the Word of God. It does not work that way.

A relatively 'Wordless' (Word-deprived or starved) believer is never stable, their 'faith' is inevitably shallow and scarcely ever rises above folk religion and they are constantly driven by every wild wind of doctrine. Never do they nor can they have a cutting edge in our spiritual warfare. When things get hot, they are the first to go down or go out. And the fact that they do not hunger and thirst for better knowledge of God and 'go through channels' to acquire it, is evidence that something is amiss in their spiritual receptors.

The dimmer the light, the dumber the disciples. Always.

I close with these thoughts from the Word:

Do we want to be blessed?

Psalm 1:1-3

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way of that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruits in season and whose leaf does not wither whatever they do prosper.

And in a world of relativism where 'truth' is up for grabs and society is in a state of moral vertigo, we have a reliable resource to keep our lives on track and out of trouble:

Psalm 19:7-11

The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.

In a dark and confused world where one needs an accurate compass of right and wrong, and a benchmark of truth, to what resource should one be turning first and foremost? The prophet Isaiah nailed it:

Isaiah 8:20

Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.

But aren't tons of people out there just dense and spiritually thick heads with hearts harder than adamant? Don't we need something other than 'Bible thumping' to get their attention? Not according to the prophet, Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 23:29

"Is not my word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock to pieces?"

If a people ever needed a re-set, it was the remnant of Israel that had just returned from 70 years of Babylonian captivity. The scribe Ezra had the right plan for fixing Israel spiritually. His program is still relevant:

Ezra 7:10

"For Ezra had set his heart to study the law (the OT revelation they then had) and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel."

As their spiritual leader, no sophisticated 'spiritual engineering' required. His 'program' was right on.

The apostles in their early church ministry were no less intent on leading with teaching the Word of God. Shortly after the birth of the Church and believers were multiplying and they saw that they were about to be overwhelmed with 'table duties', distributing alms, they immediately called a meeting, elected deacons and re-set their priorities. Said Peter

Acts 6:4

"And we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

In Corinth note how Luke summarized the ministry of the Apostle Paul in that city, a characterization that could said of fewer and fewer pastors in our day, at least not meaningfully:

Acts 18:11

“So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.”

And why not? That was his main focus. Let it be ours as well.

V. Timely Illustrations

While I was writing this paper, I was directed to the Facebook page of a former student and dear friend of mine, Nikki Barker Carroll, wife of Bruce Carroll. Bruce is a Dove and, I believe, also Grammy Award winning singer (in fact in the early 90’s Bruce and his manager dropped in on us at Lake).

On her page she was talking how about 35 years ago she suddenly disappeared into a cult for a time, but how God used that strange episode in her life to bring her to Christ through His word. Shortly thereafter she enrolled in the Bible college where I was then teaching. There we formed a bond of friendship that continues to this day..

Her testimony, especially at the end, is so on point it seems most fitting at the conclusion of this paper.

Incidentally, over the years in our communications and because she and Bruce are insiders in the Christian music industry (that is what it is), she has more than once lamented the (im)moral state of that industry. Some many of these musicians that our youth go ‘gaga’ after, whose recordings they buy, and whom they view of the epitome of great Christians, are moral hypocrites to the extreme.

But, hey, I don’t think a lot of them even want to know. Moreover, I don’t think it would make a great difference to a lot of them even if they did. They just idolize music (idolize is the right word) and the source of it is pretty much immaterial.

For an illustration of the point I have made in this paper about substituting music for the ministry of the Word and the appeal it has as an alternative to “experience Jesus,” see the attachment excerpted from the Fall 2014 issue of *Worship Magazine*. Conveniently (and I think providentially) it arrived in my mail box just as I was printing this paper.

Finally, I have appended several internet print outs concerning the Mark Driscoll/Mars Hill (Seattle) saga. It is disgusting to the core. He is perverted, but worse, what is to be said for his cult following. What is wrong with these people anyway? Where is their discernment?

Somehow I think the Apostles would have collectively exclaimed, “What!?” But this is where we are today. **Bees go to honey; flies go to corpses.**