

THE PASTOR AS A
BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN

by Earl Palmer

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I WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE at Berkeley when the Bible first became a book I really wanted to read. I lived in a large co-op called Barrington Hall, and it was there in a weekly student-led Bible discussion group that the random pieces of my world view came together. It was my discovery of the Jesus Christ of the Bible that made the difference for me, because Jesus Christ as Lord integrated the parts into a new whole. He resolved a journey that had begun in my childhood and he called me into a growing lifelong adventure called the Christian life. It seems to me that when I agreed to Jesus Christ as Lord, I was granted, along with every other Christian, a fourfold mandate: (1) first we are called to grow in our relationship with God himself, Father, Son, Holy Spirit (Rom. 1: 1–6); (2) we are commanded to *love* our neighbor by word and action (1 John 4) ; (3) we are commanded to share the message of the Good News that Jesus Christ is the Savior and the Lord (Matt. 28) ; (4) we are commanded to build up the body of Christ, which is the church, so that the first three mandates may be fulfilled in the whole world (Eph. 4).

The authority for each mandate is the same: Jesus Christ who himself is the word of God and the work of God. We know the meaning of love because of the historical event in which God's love has broken through as concrete and real. Therefore, the Christian is challenged to love, not out of emptiness, but be-

cause Jesus Christ first loved us. Love is not an energy or a mood; it is word and event inseparably united in Jesus Christ.

Our challenge to share the message of the gospel also has derived from its single source, which is Jesus Christ himself and the historical witness to him—the Bible. The message Christians have to share is not a sentiment or experience. It is not our love, our faith, our hope. It is not a dynamic twentieth-century strategy for peace and justice. We are not the gospel; nor are the forces of history the gospel. The gospel is about Jesus Christ, his love, his reign.

“Every verse of the Gospels tells us that the origin of Christianity is not the kerygma, not the resurrection experience of the disciples, not the Christ idea, but an historical event, to wit, the appearance of the man Jesus of Nazareth,”¹ declares Joachim Jeremias. Who is this Jesus Christ? He is the Jesus of history to whom the Bible bears witness in the Old Testament by its history and expectation and in the New Testament in its fulfillment. We do not know an eternal mystical Christ of faith apart from the concrete Jesus of the first century. Christian theology cannot endorse an ethics which is only conceptual and theoretical; so we cannot agree to a Christology that is ideological or spiritualized. The cornerstone of Christian theology and its most radical cutting edge is the affirmation of the fact that the “Word became flesh” (John 1). If we agree that this is indeed the Jesus Christ in whom we trust and must obey, then we have joined ourselves to the Bible.

Biblical Authority in Conversion

The Bible is the “evidence of the self-evidence” of God himself. It receives its authority in borrowed fashion from its center, who is Jesus Christ. We can understand in practical terms what this means when we reflect personally upon how we ourselves became Christians. Someone—perhaps many people in different ways—turned our attention to consider the person of Christ himself. We read and heard of him within the historical witness

of the New Testament, to his person and work. Perhaps we began our journey with serious reservations, even skeptically, not at all impressed by the importance of the Bible. We nevertheless listened to its accounts, Matthew whoever he is, we said to ourselves, tells about Jesus. Mark, Luke, and John also tell of Jesus’ works, his ministry, his death and his victory. Paul writes letters to pockets of believers throughout the first-century world, and in that correspondence even more of the parts of the puzzle come together of—who the person Jesus Christ is.

Finally, whether gradually or quickly, the New Testament Jesus won us to himself. He gained our respect and our faith. Our trust in the witness to him was confirmed to us by the Holy spirit, and we became Christians; as believers we were made a part of the Body of Christ, and the fourfold mandate was ours.

Biblical Authority over Our Experience

The Pastor, like every Christian, has been granted the same mandates with neither less nor greater imperative. The one difference is that the pastor has been ordained by the community of believers to bear special responsibility as a teacher of the message of the gospel and to be an enabler of the whole people of God in fulfilling their ministries in the world. It is this ordination to teach the gospel and to encourage the gifts of the whole body that now want to consider in some depth.

Our first question is theologically crucial and intensely existential as well. Where does the pastor find the ingredient themes and content for the sermon to be preached at Sunday-worship? What is the source for the teaching? Or to put the question in theological perspective: what is the authority for the message of the pastor, or the Young Life leader at a Tuesday evening club meeting, or the seminary professor’s lecture on the Third article of the Westminster Confession; or for that matter for any Christian as he or she seeks to understand and share the meaning of the Christian gospel?

The answer is not as simple as we might suppose! Consider

this possibility: A Christian has experienced with new and fresh reality the full impact of God's grace. The experience is dramatically real and immediate. There is no question in the mind of the Christian that the experience has been granted as a gift from God. He or she is able to point to signs of changed attitudes and lifestyle as proof of God's working. Shall we preach this experience? Is perhaps this very experience the message we have to affirm on Sunday or Tuesday evening? Is not this contemporary work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people the most relevant message for our time? Or add a further possibility: What of the even greater spiritual breakthroughs that some Christians have experienced: visions, dreams, angels? Many would insist that certainly these gifts of the Holy Spirit deserve to be affirmed and proclaimed so that the world may be humbled by such signs and the Christians encouraged. What should our reply to these possibilities?

For visions and for all of the experiences of God's grace we are grateful, but they are not the source of our message! We do not proclaim them as if they were the Good News. What we must proclaim is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The authoritative witness to that gospel is only the Bible. This means that the authority for the church is not the church, not the existential experiences of the Christians, not the challenging new visions of spiritual leaders, not the revolutionary imperatives of each new era, not the safe *status quo* priorities of the present.

The warm and personal endorsements of the Good News that come from our own experiences of the love of God are important twentieth-century witnesses to the timelessness of the reign of Christ, but they lack any binding authority in themselves. In an ironic sense the same observation may be made of the moral tragedies of life, the profound failures that are the result of human sin. These also are twentieth-century signposts which cry out the need of humanity for "total help to meet total need" (Karl Barth.) and they demand a salvation that only Jesus Christ grants. But neither the positive experience of the faithful, nor the negative rejection of a world separate and confused

have in themselves any binding authority over life. Therefore, they are not the content of the Message. For this reason we must reject as false any doctrine which teaches that the Holy Spirit continues to reveal new authoritative doctrines to the church. Jesus promised: "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

John Calvin put it this way in his discussion of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit: "The whole of it comes to this; the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ binds us to Himself."³ Paul prescribes precisely the same testing principle for the Colossian Christians when he warns them against the lofty visions and spiritual breakthroughs that certain members of the Colossian church had evidently made the basis for new authoritative teachings. Paul tells us that every doctrine must be tested by its relationship to the true center, which is God's Speech once and for all in Jesus Christ. (Col. 2)

The early church, by its agreement upon the canon of Holy Scripture, interpreted Paul's testing principle as follows: All doctrine must be tested by its submission to the historical witness that surrounds Jesus Christ, namely, the Bible, consisting of the Old Testament and the New Testament. As we trust in Jesus Christ, we trust in the witness to him. We have been convinced by the Holy Spirit of the Jesus Christ we met in the biblical witness to him. The church's doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures rests on the belief that the Holy Spirit has preserved the faithfulness and trustworthiness of the documents and that the Holy Scriptures are those books God wants us to have. They point us faithfully to the center.

The Bible derives its authority in the following fashion: As the historic Jesus of Nazareth is the only Redeemer and the Good News is complete in him, therefore there are no hidden new gospels to be found or revealed. This conviction of the total sufficiency of Jesus Christ underlies the meaning of the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. By that doctrine we agree that only the one word which has been spoken in word and work—

Jesus Christ himself—shall have final binding authority over our lives and our doctrines.

Every new doctrinal statement, therefore, must be tested by that biblical witness. Every Christian doctrine, therefore, should itself begin with its own willingness to be tested. The Barmen Declaration of the German Confessing Church of 1934 began in just such a way: “Try the spirits whether they are of God! Prove also the words of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church to see whether they agree with Holy Scripture and with the Confessions of the Fathers. If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us! But if you find that we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God, in order that God’s people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said: ‘I will never leave you, nor for sake you.’ Therefore, ‘Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’”

Christians through the centuries have discovered that such a confidence in the Bible results in our greatest freedom from bondage to the false and the exotic. If we are not clear about this fundamental confidence, we shall be easily victimized throughout our Christian lives by the visions and dreams of people around us. Apart from this standard for testing doctrines we have no defense against their visions — or for that matter, our own visions. They claim so much and try so hard to convince us that since the vision or experience is more recent than older truth, it is more relevant. Moreover, they may support the new spiritual breakthrough with dramatic illustrations of power — and we remember from historical experience that public support quickly gathers around any proof of power.

How are we to answer the claims that now become the underpinnings of whole new schemes and elaborate doctrines? I believe that over the long haul the best corrective in the face of error is the positive affirmation of the truth and the demonstration of what Francis Schaeffer calls the “mark of the Christian”—

the love of Christ at work through us toward others. Jesus Christ is the one who finally proves substantial when the exotic movements have crumbled.

The Authority of the Biblical Text

What then constitutes loyalty to the biblical witness in the teaching and preaching mandate of the church? Confusion over this question has been created by the fact that most of the Christian churches and most of the quasi-Christian movements as well claim loyalty to the Bible.

Our search for a clear answer brings us to the important role of biblical and theological study in the life of the Christian and the church. The vigorous practice of theology and biblical exegesis (the accurate rendering of the essential content of a text), is vital for the health of the church in the world today. What does the text say (exegesis)? What does it mean and how does the individual part of the biblical teaching relate and fit together with the whole (biblical theology)? Then finally, what are the overall themes and conclusions that we may draw together in order to form the basis of affirming our faith to the world (systematic theology)?

In each step of the way, the testing process should be encouraged and never discouraged; our work and our conclusions must not be absolutized. The one absolute in Christian faith is God himself and his Speech. Our faith, our affirmations, even our doctrines about the Bible itself are not absolute, nor do our theological conclusions have final binding authority. Every Christian must always put to every doctrine the question, What is the evidence? Not of my feelings, nor of the popular folk preference, nor of the historical appearances around us—but what is the evidence of the biblical texts themselves? There is continuous need for the earnest testing of doctrine. It is particularly important to stay out of that situation in which a congregation or an individual develops preferences for a few approved themes and then honors as “sound” the teaching that

emphasizes them while avoiding others. In fact, such teaching may not be biblical at all; it may simply be the confirmation of popular folk theology.

It is not surprising that the work of serious Bible study is not necessarily a popular enterprise. The honest exposition of the text of the Bible is what God's people need, but it is not always what his people desire.

The Authority of Biblical Themes in Our Lives

Biblical authority in the church is a broader question for the pastor than only the determination of the teaching content of biblical texts. The question requires us to consider now this larger landscape: How can I be a biblical Christian in my own style of life, in church government, in pastoral counseling?

The basic principle involved here, it seems to me, is that the biblical Christian is prepared to order faith and life on the basis of the gospel. Biblical Christianity has Jesus Christ as center. What matters here is the daily walk of the Christian man and woman with Christ by faith. Prayer, simple obedience, confession of our sins, and acceptance of our belovedness are the ingredients of the Christian life that the Bible invites us to enter into and enjoy. As a result of the personal relationship with the living Christ and the supportive ministry of the Holy Spirit to us in the life of the people of God, the biblical witness draws us into the mandates of the way of discipleship in the world. When it comes to the content of faith, the question that the biblical Christian submits to is this: "If I can be shown that the Bible teaches a doctrine I will believe it." That is the real issue, not how gloriously a Christian speaks about the Bible. But more to the point than the superlatives used to describe its wonder is simply this: Are we prepared to order the way we live and believe on the basis of the Bible's teaching?

Here we must consider some criteria for the use of Scripture in our relationships within the church. As we test out doctrines with one another, some themes become very clear and definite;

others are less clear and, therefore, we are able to be less definite in our advocacy of them. For some doctrines there is strong textual evidence which encourages us to endorse them boldly, while others with less such evidence should be advocated with more modest restraint. For example, we preach many more sermons about the resurrection of Jesus Christ than about the one-sentence mention of baptism on behalf of the dead (1 Cor. 15:29). The one doctrine—the victory of Christ—has clearly more authority for preaching and, therefore, we commend it heartily to those around us. But the one sentence about a baptism for the dead is too obscure of itself and in its setting for us to develop a strong doctrine. We are not completely certain of what Paul means by his reference to it. Therefore, we dare not urge it upon the brothers and sisters in the church.

The same principles apply to the doctrine concerning the woman's roles in the church. In this case there are many different pieces of evidence which do not easily fit together to form one simple doctrinal position. Paul urges women to be silent in church (1 Tim. 2), yet does not urge silence upon the women who prophesy in 1 Corinthians 11. Where such problems of interpretation occur, either because of a scarcity of textual evidence or because of the presence of many different teachings upon a theme, the biblical Christian must show restraint proportionate to the clarity of the whole biblical portrait. We must learn how to discover the relative biblical weight of a particular theme by relating each doctrinal concept we meet to those greater themes which the Bible floods with evidence and confirmation.

The first great theologian in the pages of the Gospels is John the Baptist. In John 3:22-36 we have an example of his theological method in a dialogue between him and a member of the Pharisaic party.⁴ Every Christian pastor is frequently drawn into similar encounters in which a distinctive feature or theological emphasis with which we are identified is a point of debate. In this discussion about baptisms and rites of purification John the Baptist proves to be as wise a theologian as he is daring a prophet. He

seeks for the larger context within which the smaller theme of “baptism and rites of purification“ may be helpfully considered. It is clear from the dialogue recorded for us that John the Baptist realizes what the real question is: the mighty act of God himself in Jesus Christ to which every other theme must receive its own true meaning and weight.

A conversation with my children a few days ago illustrates the point. Our ten-year-old son, Jon, asked the question: “Dad, how does a cassette recorder work?“ Our daughter Elizabeth, ages six, quickly jumped in to answer, “You press this button on the top.“ Jon seemed unimpressed, so she tried again: “Look Jon, these two wheels turn like this,“ John still declined her answer: “No, I know all that.“ She still had answers: “Maybe you didn’t push the right button.“ His patience was wearing thin because it finally became clear that what he wanted was not the information about which switches to turn but the answer to a deeper question--how the music of John Denver is electronically impressed upon the tape. At this point it was Elizabeth who began to lose interest. Anne, our ninth grader, was better able to carry on the conversation John had in mind.

The biblical Christian as theologian must continually move with each question toward the deeper, larger themes. For this task we need each other--those who understand our questions and those who misunderstand. John the Baptist needed the intense questions of the Pharisees to help him clarify and understand the larger issues beyond the practices of first-century baptisms. In the same way, we in our century are aided in our own theological clarification by the challenges that come to us from the world around us. Speaking of his antagonist John Eck, Martin Luther said: “So, too, Eck provoked me. He made me wide awake....Accordingly our opponents are very useful to us, although they thing they do us harm.“⁵

But of even more importance to us in the task of understanding the meaning of doctrines is the two fold humility that should characterize every biblical Christian: first, our prayer to the Lord be our leader in understanding the intent of Scripture

and second, the check-and-balance help of our brothers and sisters in Christ--the church. This is the importance of the historic confessions of the church: they give guidance. So also our relationship with the contemporary church gives guidance in helping us to understand what the Scriptures teach.

Martin Luther offered two rules that he followed in interpreting Holy Scripture: “First, if some passage is obscure I consider whether it treats of grace or of law, whether wrath or the forgiveness of sin [is contained in it] and with which of these it agrees better. By this procedure I have often understood the most obscure passages....The second rule is that if the meaning is ambiguous, I ask those who have a better knowledge of the language that I have whether the Hebrew/Greek words can bear this or that sense...and that is most fitting which is closest to the argument of the book.“⁶

Luther's two rules are essential. First, he looks for the larger context within which the particular teaching belongs. Second, he always works hard really to understand meanings of the words in their own language and usage, and what the text means when understood within its own textual setting.

The biblical Christian care about the teaching of the text itself and endeavors to build from the text to the theme. In my view this is why biblical theology as a discipline should always precede systematic theology. This is how the best doctrines are developed, and the best sermons too. Out of serious Bible study comes the most relevant thematic teaching.

Rules for Biblical Interpretation

Let us move beyond Luther’s advice concerning obscure texts and see interpretation in its larger task.

What then are the rules for the interpretation of a biblical text? Our task as preachers/teachers is not simply to read the Bible aloud, but to say in our own words what we think and feel it means. At this point we need guidelines and criteria. Think of some of the steps involved in interpretation:

1. The first is to *establish the text*. The tools for this work are universally available and applicable. Fortunately for the English-speaking Bible interpreter, we have an extensive and very rich resource in the many English translations of the Bible available today. Each of these represents the work of scholars in endeavoring to establish the best English reading of the Greek/Hebrew text, in the same way Luther worked to produce a German text. Though few of us as pastors will become involved in actual translation, yet we also must begin the interpretive journey with literary analysis that seeks out the linguistic meaning of the sentences and of the words used.

2. The second step in interpretation is to determine the meaning and purpose of the text within its own biblical setting. What does the text mean? At this step our own value judgments come into play; the soundest interpretations come from moving slowly and carefully to learn from the whole context of the whole passage or book what the writer is saying. The general rule is that the meaning of each separate part is principally governed by the meaning of the larger part. For example, to find the meaning of one sentence of Paul we must first look to that sentence's larger paragraph; then to the collections of paragraphs, then to the book, and finally to the total body of Pauline literature.

3. A further step in the interpretive journey concerns the meaning of the text within its own early church setting. A New Testament passage might require us to ask such a question as: What is the situation within the church which receives or writes a document? For example, what were the problems in Corinth to which Paul was speaking in his Corinthian letters? In an Old Testament study we might ask what purpose in temple worship a psalm might serve. Such background questions are not only of great interpretive help but lead us to study the cultural-historical-religious setting of New Testament and Old Testament eras.

4. The final step in interpretation is to draw up theological conclusions and imperatives, pastoral encouragement and

prophetic exhortation, which are then affirmed to the people.

We call all of this a sermon.

But often the interpreter's pilgrimage from the text read to the meaning proclaimed is roadblocked by lack of hard work, by preconceived theological agendas, or by careless methods of workmanship. I won't make accusations on the hard work question, but the latter two causes of roadblocks deserve some attention.

Somewhere within the interpreter's journey from text to theology, hidden agendas and careless methods have sometimes conspired to produce very shaky biblical teaching. An example of this is what happened to New Testament form criticism in our own century. Form criticism strongly emphasized the importance of the historical-theological forces at work within the early church itself. The form critics reasoned that since the New Testament documents were written by the primitive church, the most crucial clue to the correct interpretation of any passage was the right understanding of the motives at work within the early church. But this method of analysis often tended to become so absorbed in its search for those motives that it would not allow a narrative in the Gospels to speak simply and directly in its own terms. Reading the Gospel accounts through this grid system tended to result in the double guessing of each passage. Thus the actual literary context of the biblical material was often disregarded in favor of the interpreter's theory as to how a New Testament incident might have been written and/or created by an early church writer in order to support some doctrine important to him. Checked and balanced by historical research and respect for the biblical text itself, this form critical method is very useful, but without those restraints there develops an interpretive arrogance which grants to itself too much certainty.

British New Testament scholar T. W. Manson wrote: "To speak candidly, I find myself, after a good deal of labour in this field, being gradually driven to the conclusion that much that passes for historical study of the life of Jesus consists not

in asking of any story in the tradition: 'is it credible in itself?' but: 'what motive could the church have had for telling this tale?' which can easily become the question: 'what motives led the church to invent it?' The danger is that what is entitled 'Life of Jesus' or the like should turn out to be in fact a psychological novel about a large number of anonymous members of the primitive church."⁷

I believe that the greatest dangers to biblical interpretation today are the various grid systems we superimpose upon the text ahead of time and through which we then demand that the text be read.

Protestant liberals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries placed just that sort of interpretive grid upon the Bible in order to find in the Bible what they were looking for. They wanted a life of Jesus without miracles, eschatology, or heavy teaching on the tragedy of humanity. They wanted ethical encouragement with a safe amount of divine endorsement. Their methodology, therefore, searched for a "historical" Jesus minus the features that nineteenth-century idealism found embarrassing. Form criticism enabled them to give to the early church responsibility for the "not approved" theological themes that are in the Bible, and to keep for their Jesus those parts which contained the approved themes.⁸

In 1941 Rudolph Bultmann reversed form criticism's theological preferences. He found that, instead of rejecting the early church's Easter faith, it was that very eschatological faith which we in our century should embrace. The tragedy in his form-critical methodology is that Jesus still remains the variable while it is the Easter faith of the primitive church that becomes the new constant.

Ernst Käsemann commented: "Bultmann expressly adopts as his own H. Braun's statement 'The constant is the self-understanding of the believers; Christology is the variable.' I hold this judgment to be, quite simply, false, and to pick up Bultmann's own distinction, false both historically and materially."⁹

There are other grid systems which also superimpose upon

the biblical texts theological decisions that cannot be found within the text itself. The C. I. Scofield notes and textual paragraph titles found in the Scofield Bible for Matthew 5, 6, 7 and Revelation 3 are examples of texts that are squeezed into a previously made context which the interpreter brought to the text ahead of time.

Fortunately, there is a rule of thumb that will protect both the text from distortion and the interpreter from speculative error. Insisting upon the primacy of the literary analysis of the text itself will permit a biblical text the right first of all to speak in its own terms.

Developing a Biblical Ministry

How does a pastor express and develop a biblical ministry in the church today? I believe this begins with one's own self-awareness, one's own theological decision to be a biblical Christian in the first place.

It also requires *work* that must be done and skills that must be learned. Serious biblical preaching and teaching and small group Bible study in the context of a local congregation or gathering of Christians are important ways in which a pastor may fulfill the mandate to build up the body of Christ.

In the matter of our self-awareness and the role of our own individual priority decisions, let me comment that one of the very great privileges and dilemmas of the professional ministry is the *right to time* granted to the pastor by the congregation in its care and support of him. This right to time means that the pastor has to a very large degree, varying from situation to situation, the authority to arrange and organize each week. For many in the clergy this authority is carelessly squandered through poor planning, but for others it becomes a creative means of exercising the stewardship of freedom—an opportunity that few professions experience to the same degree. Add to this the tradition of most churches which insures a free pulpit, and we can appreciate the immense freedom that we

who are ordinary Christian pastors have in which to express concretely whatever are the convictions and goals of our lives. We choose the subject matter for seminars we may offer and the texts for sermons. The words and attitudes to be expressed in counseling are ours. We decide on the goals for study, and within the limits of our budget we select the books in our library.

As I reflect upon my own ministry, I realize that small Bible study and biblical theological study groups played a key role in my own student days both in Berkeley and at Princeton Seminary. The Bible study group at Barrington Hall at the University of California had first challenged me to think through the claims of Christianity from a “no-holds-barred” adult perspective. Then at Princeton I became involved in numerous small Bible study groups with Princeton University students. These one-hour-per-week discussion groups were very formative in my life, both spiritually and theologically. They were a proving ground for young theologians in the making. The groups were robust and critical in the best sense, so that every Christian theme was always under scrutiny and evaluation. The groups welcomed non-Christians, and when several of these became Christians, each of us saw in a practical, down-to-earth way that the Holy Spirit confirms the words of a New Testament book to the life of a student.

Our task as believers in a Bible study group was simply to do our best honestly to understand what the text was saying. We also learned in that atmosphere that Christians do not always come to identical conclusions given the same evidence. There are some who observe that pastors who only preach may not make that discovery. When I graduated from seminary and began my own career as minister to students at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, small Bible study groups were a major part of my own teaching/growing strategy—at church, in homes, on campus, among men, among women, with high-schoolers, collegians, adults—and I found that the pastor grows as well as teaches. I am personally indebted to countless seminars and discussions for the theological breakthroughs in under-

standing a text that have often played a key role in my own theological integration. As a pastor I was of course permitted the privilege of public preaching and teaching, and I made the choice early in my own career to concentrate primarily upon a teaching style of preaching. This has lent itself to serious biblical and theological preaching where people in the congregation are invited also to consider the theme or book on their own along with the preacher.

My second ministry was as pastor at Union Church of Manila in the Philippines. The question in that new setting was, Would adults who are busy and from many different church and national cultural backgrounds also be interested in serious Bible and theological study? I found that they were as eager for serious study as were students. A weekly adult Bible class and small early morning study groups were organized there. I found the key in small groups to be a personal invitation to the potential participants and an inductive study format¹⁰ that enabled each member to feel the value of his own input. At Manila I saw many adults and youth become excited about the Christian faith, and the same has been true in Berkeley; lay people want to study along with the pastor.

When we reflect upon the goals and strategies that express themselves in the use of time, in the themes and kinds of preaching, in the format of small groups, in the method of personal research and study, we see revealed the basic inner decision of the individual pastor. Each of us as minister shows the priorities that are motivationally most important to us by the way we spend the week.

Preparing for Biblical Preaching

“The tediousness of Christian preaching is undoubtedly a greater danger to the church than all historical criticism put together.”¹¹ This statement by Ernst Käsemann shows one New Testament scholar’s estimate of the importance of preaching for the life of the church. But to express in preaching a biblical

ministry that is not simply tedious requires much of the pastor. Let me focus upon four areas that deserve priority from all of us: (1) the work of research into the text; (2) the work of developing a theological perspective; (3) the work of pastoral sensitivity and prophetic listening; (4) the work of message preparation and communication.

1. Is it not possible to argue that too much study is dangerous? Perhaps a pastor would do best to shun all research into the Bible and instead major in a simple daily walk with Christ and a ministry that cares about people and seeks to help them with their pressing human needs. Might not such priorities greatly upset the weekly study schedule of the pastor? I bring this up just as we are to consider the research mandate for a pastor in order to make the point that even so important a task as the calling seriously to study the gospel is itself subject to the greater mandate to obey the gospel. Obedience to Christ may very well shatter the well-organized week and bring a minister to Sunday morning intellectually unprepared for the task of biblical preaching. On such an occasion I believe the pastor should pray for the help of the Lord. But I think it is a fair observation to make about pastors in general that the better organized the week the better able we are to take on the heavy demands of human need for which no one can plan ahead. Also, the prayer for help when I am unprepared and when I threw away the chances I had to be prepared should not be called faith—it is impudence. The fact is this: there is historical content to the gospel, and that historical content deserves our hard work and study in order that its message may become clear.

The ordinary preaching/teaching pastor should go about the research task in the Old Testament/New Testament documents with the same earnestness that a scientist uses in working with the basic data of his or her particular discipline. Blocks of time must be set apart for foundation-building study in the Bible itself and in other support tools to Bible study. Lexical study of Greek and Hebrew is a prerequisite to making full use of

serious commentaries and doing the word studies which are at the core of all exegesis. Since in serious Bible study the pastor is in effect writing a commentary in brief upon each passage that will later appear as the basis for preaching, he needs some workable system of preserving the results, book by book, of the work already done.

The value of a commentary methodology in Bible study is that at its center is the art of posing questions to the text, a skill of very great usefulness, since the heart of communication consists in addressing meaningful questions that are in the minds of the listener.

2. The next stage in research is the development of a theological perspective, that is, the pastor's own conclusion as to what is the main burden of the text. The commentary method naturally leads here, as the teaching of a text is understood in its own context and related to other biblical themes, then finally related to contemporary questions and issues of the first century and of our own generation.

3. The pastor who is a good listener to people and a thoughtful observer of culture is better able to build bridges between the historical Good News and the contemporary setting in which we live today. A very large part of communication originates in the accuracy with which we have been able to feel and understand the real feelings and expectations of people. Prophetic listening has a very deep spiritual dimension about it too. It means being attentive to people, and most of all attentive to God. I am convinced that a sense of what is called the *burden of the Lord* in the Old Testament prophets is at the heart of the communication of biblical Christianity to a congregation. It is not a pose or a skill but an outgrowth of the way of discipleship, a mixture of the statesmanship by which the prophet correctly observed the situation with the knowledge of the Word of the Lord, and the love in his heart for the Lord and the people.

4. Preaching may be verbal, but message preparation is primarily a written skill and involves a lot of hard work. Each

minister develops a unique style in the creation of the sermon. As I see it, the principal art involved is that of skillfully narrowing down the very many possible themes in a text to those few most vivid ones, and then properly setting up each theme so than a listener is able to see the point of the text, and to understand what it means for life today.

Timeless Truth for Contemporary Christians

Biblical Christians are not bibliolaters. We worship Jesus Christ, not the Holy Bible. The Bible, taken seriously, never stimulates false worship, but by its texts and themes, its history and poetry, its yearnings and prayers, its real people from Moses to John, points us to its Lord. Therefore, when the Bible is truly authoritative for our faith, there is little danger of that faith becoming sidetracked with insignificant themes and cultic curiosities.

Because of the timelessness of Jesus Christ himself, the Bible's witness to his ministry is also timeless. The biblical Christian is not in bondage to the tyranny of the current, to the oppressive pressure of the "in" cause. The James party at Galatia must have panicked many Greek Christians with the "new word" that the truest Christians would not only believe in Christ but also become Jewish. But Paul had the larger context of the gospel to apply to their claims and, out of that controversy, the Book of Galatians became a declaration of independence for all Christians who have ever been browbeaten by the latest fad or movement. The biblical Christian is free from false gods because the Bible has bound us to the true God.

Biblical faith does not blunt one's ability to be a shrewd observer of the contemporary scene. I believe the pressure of the gospel rather creates just the opposite result—a sharpened sensitivity and inquisitiveness growing out of a stance toward life that does not need to fear truth wherever one finds it. The Bible has committed us to the way of truth without equivocation. "Walk in the light as he [God] is in the light" (1 John 7).

And yet this inquisitiveness is not a form of irresponsibility toward life. There is a doctrinal wanderlust that often takes hold of a person. It tends to create its own momentum, and within it an insatiable appetite for the new and different for their own sake.

This wanderlust should not be confused with the research instinct that we have been describing, or the hard work of theological inquiry. The restlessness in research is founded upon the whole principle of testing followed by meaningful response to truth discovered, whereas the restlessness of doctrinal wanderlust is dominated by inner moods, by the current immediate impression. Wanderlust is not freedom, though it disguises itself as freedom. In the classic river scene in *Huckleberry Finn* it is the slave, Jim, who is in the truest sense free—not Huck—because Jim knows who he is, whereas Huck at that point in the story is simply a young boy adrift on the Mississippi.

I can think of no more exciting task in our age, so often adrift, and yet underneath it all so hungry for the real, than to have the privilege of sharing in the witness to Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.