

The Ministry of the Word

by John Edmiston

Walking In the Spirit – Series 30 (A Ministry of Eternity Christian Fellowship)

Spiritual ministry flows from the Word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit, and which equips the man of God for every good work:

2 Timothy 3:16-17 MKJV *All Scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be perfected, thoroughly furnished to every good work.*

Hebrews 4:12 MKJV *For the Word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing apart of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

Ephesians 6:17 MKJV *... and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God,*

The apostles saw the ministry of the Word and prayer as their two top priorities (Acts 6:2-4). And teaching the word was the main job of the church elders appointed by Timothy and Titus (1 Timothy 2:7, 3:2, Titus 1:7-9) as well as the apostolic leaders themselves (1 Timothy 4:11-13, 2 Timothy 1:11, 2:24, 4:2).

The central focus of the ministry of the Word is Christ, His character and His commandments. Even the Old Testament Scriptures are about Christ (Luke 24:27,44; 1 Corinthians 1:10-11, 2 Timothy 3:15). We should be talking about Jesus a lot!

The focus of the NT is on the four gospels which set forth Christ. Acts and the epistles then explain the message of the gospel and its spread among the nations and correct misunderstandings about Christ, His character and His commandments. The apostles saw proclaiming Christ and Him crucified as their central, even only, task (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Other issues are secondary (though they may be important). There are brief passages about church order, leadership, ethical and moral issues and family life. There is almost no teaching about politics.

The ministry of the Word involves the plain setting forth of Christ and of His salvation. It is not about human philosophy, or politics or the ideas of the age. It is not even about social issues such as abortion or family or health care, as urgent as these may seem.

Unless we teach Christ first and Christ deeply these other issues will be addressed in vain. Without Christ's example of agape love and His commands regarding relationships all our teaching on family becomes futile. Paul's epistles always outlined the doctrine of Christ first and foremost before addressing the practical issues of the Church.

The ministry of the Word is not about theological speculation or even about 'bible knowledge' (as in bible trivia quizzes). The Pharisees had tremendous bible knowledge, and the scribes and Saducees were theologians, but they did not understand Christ!

John 5:39-40 MKJV *You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life. And they are the ones witnessing of Me, (40) and you will not come to Me that you might have life.*

We should not be learning the Bible just for the sake of learning the Bible. Our teaching should come out of the Scriptures but should point to Christ Jesus (as the Scriptures themselves do). We should aim at producing growing faith in Christ and not just at imparting knowledge. Our goal in teaching is salvation and maturity in Christ Jesus and full obedience to His commandments:

Colossians 1:27-29 MKJV *(27) For to them God would make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the nations, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory, (28) whom we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, so that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. (29) For which I also labor, striving according to the working of Him who works in me in power.*

Governments will change and the systems of this world will pass away but the Word of the Lord will stand forever. Therefore teaching Christ from the Word is the most important thing we can do because it has eternal consequences, life for some and death for others:

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 EMTV *(14) Now thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and making known through us the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. (15) For we are the fragrance of Christ to God among those being saved, and among those perishing. (16) To some we are the fragrance of death leading to death, but to others the fragrance of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? (17) For we are not as the rest, corrupting the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.*

The apostle Paul trembles as he contemplates the ministry of the Word crying out: *And who is sufficient for these things?* The ministry of the Word is a high and holy task, not a means of commercial profit (2 Corinthians 2:17 above). It is something to be pursued with purity and integrity and with the awareness that teachers experience a much stricter judgment (James 3:1).

The ministry of the Word is primary because it is the ministry that causes faith to grow in the hearts of believers.

Romans 10:17 EMTV *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

And without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

The other spiritual gifts are useful but they must operate in tandem with the ministry of the Word. For instance, healing the body without proclaiming Christ is just a mere delaying of people's entrance into a Christ-less eternity.

Even prayer depends on the ministry of the Word and the intercessors knowledge of the power and the promises of God.

Finally, we must address the issue of how the Holy Spirit works together with the proclamation of the Word of God. The Holy Spirit's role is to glorify Christ:

John 16:13-15 MKJV *However, when He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth. For He shall not speak of Himself, but whatever He hears, He shall speak. And He will announce to you things to come. (14) He will glorify Me, for He will receive of Mine and will announce it to you. (15) All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and will announce it to you.*

And the Holy Spirit is the author of the Holy Scriptures:

2 Peter 1:21 MKJV *For prophecy was not borne at any time by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke being borne along by the Holy Spirit.*

Thus the spiritual ministry of the Word will involve active cooperation with the Holy Spirit as He seeks to glorify Christ. This will come about as we, with renewed minds, study the Scriptures which are the textbook of the Holy Spirit. As we dig into the Bible the Holy Spirit will 'take of Mine' (the things of God in the pages of the Scriptures) and reveal them to us. Praise be to God!

The ministry of the Word is at its best when it connects with the true spiritual needs of the audience and leads to spiritual outcomes such as repentance, conversion and growth in love. The ministry of the Word should have an 'edge' to it like that of a 'two-edged sword' and be able to cut to the heart and divide joints from marrow and soul from spirit. It should be like a healing scalpel of the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 4:12 MKJV *For the Word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing apart of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

The final phrase here is a big clue on how to be effective in spiritual ministry. Aim to be one who discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart and who speaks to them. Once you know what people are thinking in their hearts then you can craft a biblical response:

Matthew 9:2-8 MKJV *And behold, they brought to Him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, Child, be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven you. (3) And lo, some of the scribes said within themselves, This one blasphemes. (4) And Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, Why do you think evil in your hearts? (5) For which is easier? To say, Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, Arise and walk! (6) But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, then He said to the paralytic, Arise, take up your bed and go to your house. (7) And he arose and departed to his house. (8) But when the crowds saw, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.*

Jesus a) saw faith in the hearts of the friends and offered forgiveness of sins and b) knew what the scribes were thinking in their hearts. In response to this He healed the paralytic as a demonstration that the Son of Man indeed had the power to forgive sins.

Moses and the prophets also addressed what people were thinking within themselves:

Deuteronomy 7:17-19 MKJV *(17) If you shall say in your heart, These nations are more than I; how can I throw them out? (18) You shall not be afraid of them, but shall well remember what Jehovah your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. ...*

Deuteronomy 8:17-18 MKJV *(17) and so that you might not say in your heart, My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth. (18) But you shall remember Jehovah your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, so that He may confirm His covenant which He has sworn to your fathers, as it is today.*

Deuteronomy 9:4-5 MKJV *Do not speak in your heart, after Jehovah your God has cast them out from before you, saying: For my righteousness, Jehovah has brought me in to possess this land. But for the wickedness of these nations, Jehovah your God drives them out from before you. (5) Not for your righteousness, or for the uprightness of your heart, do you go to possess their land. But for the wickedness of these nations Jehovah your God drives them out from before you, so that He may perform the Word which Jehovah swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*

Psalms 35:25-26 MKJV *Let them not say in their hearts, Aha! Our Soul! Let them not say, We have swallowed him up. (26) Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor together, those who magnify themselves over me.*

Isaiah 47:8-9 MKJV *Now then hear this, O pleasure seeker, who lives carelessly; who says in her heart, I am, and none else is; I shall not sit as a widow, nor shall I know the loss of children. (9) But these two things shall come to you in a moment in one day, the loss of children, and widowhood. They shall come on you in their fullness for the multitude of your sorceries, and for the great power of your enchantments.*

Zephaniah 1:12-13 MKJV *And it shall be in that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled on their lees; who say in their heart, Jehovah will not do good, nor will He do evil. (13) And their goods shall become a prize and their houses a waste. They shall also build houses, but not live in them, and they shall plant vineyards, but not drink their wine.*

Matthew 3:8-9 MKJV *Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance; (9) and do not think to say within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*

Revelation 18:7-8 MKJV *As much as she has glorified herself and has lived in luxury, so much torment and sorrow give her. For she says in her heart, I sit as a queen, and I am not a widow; and I do not see mourning at all. (8) Therefore her plagues will come in one day, death and mourning and famine. And she will be consumed with fire, for the Lord God who judges her is strong.*

There are many other, much longer examples such as the lament over the Satanic pride of the King of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:1-14) and Nebuchadnezzar's fall in Daniel chapter 4 because of the self-exalting thoughts within his heart. Over and over again God judges people and addresses His Word to the 'thoughts and intents of the heart'.

So our words as preachers and teachers should be aimed at what people are thinking in their hearts. We should aim to speak to their fears and anxieties with words of faith and reassurance, to their doubts with evidence for the faith, to their sorrows with words of comfort, to their wicked thoughts with rebuke, to their lusts with exhortations to self-control, and to their coldness, slothfulness and apathy with words of warning about falling away.

Unless we are speaking to the heart we are totally missing the mark. And if we are to speak to the heart we must first listen to God and what He has to say. And we must listen to those whom we are ministering to so that we will know them and their situation. It is only after we have heard that we can speak.

The prophets 'stood in the counsel of the Lord' (Jeremiah 23:18) in order to get a word to speak. They listened for a download from Heaven. It was only after much listening that they would come forth with a powerful message :

Jeremiah 23:29 MKJV *Is not My Word like a fire? says Jehovah; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?*

So the ministry of the Word involves:

- a) Loving the Lord and knowing His will
- b) Loving your audience and knowing the thoughts and intents hearts
- c) Speaking the truth you heard from God in ways that the audience you are speaking to can grasp clearly, so that spiritual results ensue.

Ok, you might be asking "What is the difference between the thoughts of the heart and the intents of the heart?" The thoughts of the heart are simply what you are thinking in your inner man. This can be something like Nebuchadnezzar's "Behold Babylon, that I have made..." The intents of heart are your plans, schemes and will. They are what you intend to do, either good or evil:

Psalms 10:2-3 MKJV *The wicked in his pride persecutes the poor; let them be taken in the plans that they have imagined. (3) For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire, and blesses the covetous whom Jehovah despises.*

Psalms 20:4-5 MKJV *May He grant you according to your own heart, and fulfill all your plans. (5) We will rejoice in your salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up banners; may Jehovah fulfill all your prayers.*

Good preaching and teaching aims to speak to people at their point of interior spiritual need. This is different from their felt need or their perceived need. Most people, if asked, will tell you that their felt or perceived need is something such as: finances, good health, a partner, resolution of a family conflict, success, a new car, to pay off the house or to fulfill their vision and destiny. But these acutely felt needs are seldom their true spiritual needs. God may fulfill these desires as well (for they are normal good desires) but these are not the primary needs of the human soul.

The true spiritual needs are things such as: repentance, faith, salvation, grace, peace, a better prayer life, a more loving heart, patience with others, endurance, forbearance, knowledge of God's will, self-control, wisdom, sanctification, hope and a deeper anointing in ministry. Our preaching and teaching need to be aimed at these second set of needs. If these spiritual needs are being met then the other (felt and perceived) needs will often be taken care of along the way. For instance wisdom, a more loving heart and greater patience with others will help end most family conflicts.

We need insight into the Scriptures, insight into people, and insight into God's will for those people, at this time. When those things come together in our teaching we can wield the sword of the Spirit and tear down powers and principalities that are lodged both in human hearts and in the spiritual realms.

The spiritual ministry of the Word involves diligent, careful and prayerful study:

2 Timothy 2:15 MKJV *Study earnestly to present yourself approved to God, a workman that does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.*

Every good bible teacher I know has a house full of books, commentaries, different bible versions, maps, bible dictionaries and language helps for Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. There is simply no getting away from the requirement to study. Paul's request to Timothy was to '*bring... the books and parchments*' (2 Timothy 4:13) indicating that of all Paul's possessions these were among the most vital. It also indicates that Paul was still studying even in his old age. (2 Timothy was written just before his death).

2 Timothy 4:13 MKJV *When you come, bring the cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments.*

We are to be earnest students of God's Word. We are to rightly divide the Word of Truth. There is to be scholarly integrity in the process. We cannot just make it up as we go along in a fanciful way. Inspiration does not excuse carelessness.

False teachers tend to fall into two different camps:

- a) Firstly the liberals who deny the Scriptures in the name of reason and insert their own humanistic philosophies.
- b) Secondly the cult leaders who are fond of their own personal inspiration and who over-ride the plain meaning of the Scriptures with their imaginations and dubious 'revelations'.

As different as the personalities of these people may be they have this in common – they refuse to carefully, prayerfully submit their minds to the task of understanding the Scriptures as the final, inspired, inerrant and authoritative word of God.

Spiritual ministry should not neglect serious bible study. Prophecy, tongues, words of wisdom and knowledge are good. But unless we commit ourselves to serious diligent study of the Word we can quickly go off track and end up preaching 'chaff':

Jeremiah 23:28-29 MKJV *The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream. And he who has My Word, let him speak My Word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? says Jehovah. (29) Is not My Word like a fire? says Jehovah; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?*

We need both the Spirit and the Word, prayer and study, inspiration and perspiration, revelation and application - trembling with a holy carefulness based on the fear of God.

2 Corinthians 5:10-11 MKJV *(10) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive the things done through the body, according to that which he has done, whether good or bad. (11) Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...*

The first duty of the bible teacher is to be accurate and truthful. Solid Christian lives can only be built upon the Truth, spoken in love:

Ephesians 4:15-16 MKJV *But that you, speaking the truth in love, may in all things grow up to Him who is the Head, even Christ; (16) from whom the whole body, fitted together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of each part, producing the growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love.*

1 Timothy 2:7 MKJV *To this I am ordained a preacher and an apostle (I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie), a teacher of the nations, in faith and truth.*

In the light of yesterday's devotional about speaking to the 'thoughts and intents of the heart' and the previous devotionals about Christ being the essence and center of all spiritual ministry, we can arrive at the conclusion that the ministry of the Word involves:

Being a diligent earnest workman, who rightly, prayerfully, lovingly and truthfully divides the Word of God, so that Christ is clearly presented to the hearts and minds of the audience, addressing the thoughts and intents of the heart like a two-edged sword.

We need to speak the truth in love. Though rebuke is sometimes necessary, inappropriate harshness does not win souls. While spiritual ministry should be accurate and to the point it should not be burdensome, overly heavy, or humiliating.

Isaiah 42:3 MKJV *A bruised reed He shall not break, and a smoking wick He shall not quench; He shall bring out judgment to truth.*

We need to study not just what we should teach (as in the subject matter), but also how, when and where we should teach these things (timing of the Word, curriculum design, teaching methodology, use of media and the Internet etc) as well as who we should be addressing (teaching for a specific groups such as teenagers, bible students, leaders, non-Christians, etc) and even why we should be teaching these things in the first place (what is our philosophy, vision, mission calling etc.).

For instance you may decide to do a simplified outline and summary of the book of Romans for new believers, that are teenagers and you will do this in print and upload it to the Internet and make it available as an upload on mobile phones because you are a youth pastor and you are called to reach post-modern Western youth with a deeper understanding of the gospel. You will do this prayerfully and carefully and you will not compromise on the truth along the way.

You don't need access to a pulpit in order to teach the Word. You can teach individuals who you disciple, or small groups, or even online. Just start wherever you can start!

The requirement to be a good workman, assiduously seeking the Truth means that highly speculative areas of the faith should be left well alone:

1 Timothy 1:3-4 MKJV *Even as I begged you to remain at Ephesus, when I was going to Macedonia, that you might charge some that they teach no other doctrine, (4) nor to give heed to fables and endless genealogies (which provide doubts rather than the nurture of God in faith).*

1 Timothy 4:6-7 MKJV *Having suggested these things to the brothers, you shall be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the Words of Faith and by the good doctrine which you have followed. (7) But refuse profane and old-womanish tales, and exercise yourself to godliness.*

2 Timothy 2:14-16 MKJV *Put them in memory of these things, charging them before the Lord not to dispute about words to no profit, to the subverting of the hearers. (15) Study earnestly to present yourself approved to God, a workman that does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth. (16) But shun profane, vain babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.*

Titus 1:13-14 MKJV *This witness is true; for which cause convict them sharply, so that they may be sound in the faith, (14) not giving heed to Jewish myths and commandments of men, turning away from the truth.*

We are to avoid myths, fables, legalism, commandments of men, disputes about words, endless genealogies, Internet rumors and wild tales, end time date-setting (see Acts 1:7) and the like.

We should also be sufficiently humble to not teach on areas which we do not yet understand. God does not ask you to be an instant expert on all things! Not many single people are able to teach well on marriage and very few married people are able to teach well on long-term singleness. Some books of the Bible (such as Job) are more difficult to teach on than others and some areas of theology take years to fully grasp. Faithful, careful, prayerful bible teaching involves teaching what we know, not what we do not know!

The ministry of the Word is a heavy responsibility (James 3:1,2) precisely because it is so vital to the growth of the Church. Wrong teaching can be incredibly destructive. We should teach as those who know they will have to give an account to Jesus for our words:

Matthew 12:35-37 MKJV *A good man out of the good treasure of the heart brings out good things; and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings out evil things. (36) But I say to you that every idle word, whatever men may speak, they shall give account of it in the day of judgment. (37) For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned.*

If we are diligent, careful and craftsman-like in how we handle the Scriptures then we will be *a workman that does not need to be ashamed*. Diligence will save us from judgment, and from having our work burned up like chaff, straw, wood, hay or stubble. Studying to show ourselves approved may be hard work now, but it will be well worth it on that Day!

John Edmiston

This Article – The Ministry of the Word is © Copyright AIBI-International 2009

This article may be freely reproduced for non-profit ministry purposes but may not be sold in any way and must be reproduced “as is” without alteration. Just e-mail us at johnded@aibi.ph