

A Pastor's Perspective
"The Biggest Challenge Facing Today's Evangelical Church"
Selected Texts
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We will be looking at a number of passages in this study as we look at the greatest challenge facing today's evangelical church and then I will close with a few opportunities of encouragement in this regard. So let's start by looking at I Thessalonians 1:2–10 which says *[2] We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, [3] remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. [4] For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, [5] because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. [6] And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. [8] For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. [9] For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, [10] and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

He said that the Gospel had come to them not in Word only but also in power, in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. It says they received the Word. Now that begs something for us to understand. The congregation assembled at Thessalonica by the grace of God received the Word because those who came there, came there preaching the Word. They had made a priority to preach the Word. You can't receive what is not being offered. You can't receive what is not being proclaimed. So they received the Word but the reason there was a Word to receive was because those who came were preaching the Word. Now let's look at I Thessalonians 2.

I Thessalonians 2:9–13 says *[9] For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. [10] You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. [11] For you know how, like a father with his children, [12] we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*

[13] And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. They not only received the Word when they came preaching it but they came preaching it as it is – the Word of God. It is not the word of men about God but the Word of God to men which is how they preached it and received it. Now let's look at Colossians 3. This is a series of exhortations in Colossians but I'm just going to draw out one of them.

Colossians 3:16–17 says *[16] Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. [17] And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

(Growing up it was a challenge for my parents to keep me and my sister quiet on a trip and when my other two sisters came along it was even worse. One of the ways they did this was to get us a connect-the-dots books where you would draw these pictures as you would connect the dots and in this study I am going to be trying to connect the dots for you on this.)

Paul says that he wants them to let the Word of Christ dwell richly in them. Let's suppose Paul is doing the same thing at Colossae that he did in Thessalonica which was proclaiming the Word and they are receiving the Word. So as we understand that he now says to them to let the Word dwell richly in you. That is to bring all of the riches from the Word of God in you that you are receiving. The result, connect the dots, will be seen in worship. You will sing the Words in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. You will share the Word with others in admonishment of one another and teaching. You can't admonish and teach one another if you don't know the Word of God. You can't sing the Word of God if you don't know the Word of God therefore the singing, sharing and ministry of the Word one to another is directly related to the disciplined, prioritized commitment of proclaiming the Word by the preacher and then the disciplined commitment of hearer to let that Word dwell richly within them.

There are two things that happen in the New Testament. One is that the Holy Spirit comes to be called the Spirit of Christ and that is because the risen Savior who the Holy Spirit was with from the virgin birth all the way back to ascension is now sent from Jesus to minister in your life so that Christ now dwells in you by faith. Secondly, the Word of God is now also called the Word of Christ. Now on this side of the work of Christ on the cross the Bible now has history. What is history? It is His story. It is the story of Christ in His providence ruling and reigning throughout the world. What is the Word of God? It is the law of God and it is given by Christ, fulfilled by Christ and written upon the hearts of His people through the work of Christ. The Bible is a book of prophecy. Our prophecies come from Christ, our Prophet, Priest and King and they are fulfilled in Christ. The Bible is a book of promises and all of the promises are yes and amen in Christ.

So it's no wonder that the Bible is called the Word of Christ. It's from Him, about Him, focuses on Him to the glory of the Triune God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are glorified through the preeminence of Christ and therefore Christ sends His Spirit and His Word to us and that Word is to be preached. When it is preached the hearer is to let it dwell richly and when it does that it will come out in worship in songs, hymns and spiritual songs. And it will come out in encouraging and admonishing one another. That is the dynamic here.

If all that is true then what do you think Satan is going to do about that Word? He either wants to get us distracted from it, distrusting it or detoured away from it. One of the marvelous moments in my life was when God gave me the privilege to come to Briarwood to pastor this congregation. Although it was somewhat intimidating to follow in the footsteps of Dr. Barker's ministry. When I came here one of the services we did was called 'passing the mantle.' Our elders came up with this service because I had never heard of this one. Frank actually came up to me and said 'what is the mantle I'm going to pass to you, a fireplace mantle?' I couldn't wait to see how they would figure this one out. He actually handed me a Bible and said 'this is how God built the church, this is how God sustains the church so never get away from this Bible – leading with it, preaching with it and teaching with it.' By priority and principles stay focused on its proclamation and calling God's people to embrace it that it would dwell richly within them.

Now we are going to really connect some dots. This year I had the privilege to take some people to celebrate the 500th year of the Reformation focusing on Martin Luther's ministry when

he nailed the 95 theses to the wall of the Wittenberg Church. In those 95 these was the fundamental statement of the authority, infallibility, integrity and sufficiency of the Word of God. Out of that will come *Sola Gratia* which means we're saved by grace alone, out of that will come *Sola Fide* which means we're saved by grace alone through faith alone, out of that will come *Solus Christus* which means we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and out of that will come *Soli Deo Gloria* which means we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone but where do all of those 'solas' come from? It comes from *Sola Scriptura* which is the Scripture and which alone is our rule of faith and practice.

Do we appreciate the counsels, commentaries and confession of the church that we use? Absolutely, but our bedrock principle is what the Word of God says. We accept the Word of God for what it is. It is not man's word about God but it's God's Word to man. What does that result in? It results in an unbelievable movement of the authority of God's Word beginning with Luther, moving to Calvin, moving to John Knox, then to the English Reformers and as it's moving you begin to see the drastic nature of the Word of God itself.

Luther, in the area of salvation went back to the sufficiency of the Word of God alone in order to proclaim those 'five solas' where we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone but I think Luther stopped short in the area of the doctrine of the church, the sacraments and most of all in worship. He tried to hang on to what he had and discard that which he knew shouldn't be there in ecclesiology (the church), the sacraments and worship. John Knox and Calvin probably would have told Luther 'what a wonderful start but you didn't go far enough.' I think Luther reached into the pot he was handed and picked out everything he thought shouldn't be there and I do thank the Lord for that but Calvin just emptied the whole pot. Then Calvin went to the Word to see what goes back in it which included the doctrine of the church, the sacraments and worship. He took it another step in terms of the application of supremacy, sufficiency and integrity of the Word of God itself.

That began to show up in the Reformation in architecture. The icons are taken out the worship service and the side pulpit is now put in the middle of the church. It is lifted up above everything else in the church. The communion table is no longer lifted up and fenced so that you have to go through a priest to get to it but it's now put below the pulpit accessible by the people. The pastors minister from behind it and not in front of it because you don't go to it through them but you come to it through Christ. The architecture and choreography begin to change because the Word of God demands it and directs it. It is no longer built on the notion of transubstantiation where the Lord's Supper administered by taking a piece of bread and dipping it making it one action but there is now the embracing of the Biblical commands which are two-fold – take eat, then drink all of it.

The whole choreography and dynamic of worship changes and it becomes simple, saturated with the Word of God and defined by the Word of God. If we worship in Spirit and truth it means God's Word is truth and God tells us what we do in worship. We don't just imagine what we do in worship or what works in worship but we go to the Word of God that tells us exactly what is to be in worship. On the first day of the week set aside the offering. Sing to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Give attention to the reading of the Scripture and the exhortation from the Scripture. We are called to confess our faith and our sins. We are called to engage in all the Bible tells us to do because God who is pleased with our worship as our soul and spirit rejoices and worships God with what He said to bring to Him. We don't bring strange fire like Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10). We bring what God has commanded.

So we see this glorious movement of the Word of God directing the reformed church. All of sudden we see that the church is not run by one elder but the church is guided by a plurality of elders. In the Bible when we see the word church and the word elder, church is singular and elder is plural (elders). A healthy church has a plurality of deacons as well to assist the elders. Then the Word of God authorizes something so sacred as the tithe to be used to support the elder who works hard at preaching and teaching. I Timothy 5:17–18 says [17] *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.* [18] *For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”* In other words, it is not because that elder is important but because preaching the Word is so important. Use the tithe to support them so they can stay focused on working hard at preaching and teaching.

I have often wished another metaphor was used in this I Timothy passage instead of ‘don’t muzzle the ox’ like ‘don’t hold the grain from the Thoroughbred but that is what preachers are – a bunch of dumb ox – where you keep throwing enough down and we keep running around the circle to keep grinding out the Word of God for preaching and working hard. That is how people are saved by faith. People also grow by faith and Romans 10:17 says [17] *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.* So we have this glorious movement that comes from the Reformation. Then we get to the Great Awakening where the very first result is people go into the community to build a church. The first thing they do when they build that church is lift up that pulpit because of the importance of the preaching of the Word of God. This is something we see in history.

Why is the priority of making such practices, practical and principled in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church? It is because you can’t know the God of the Word without knowing the Word of God. We are not a people who have a religion built upon imagination and intuition. We have a pure religion that comes from a revealed Word of God. We reason, not to our religion, but from Divine revelation and God’s Word is designed to be preached and taught. Then it is to be embraced that it would dwell richly so that it erupts from your heart in praise and is thoughtfully shared with one another as the truth is shared in love with each other.

So what does Satan do? Satan wants us to get off of the Word of God. This is how he stops worship, evangelism, discipleship, and from being salt and light. When Satan can get us away from the Word he gets us away from the Spirit of God and the Spirit of God works with the Word of God. Philippians 3:3 says [3] *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—* It is the Spirit who gives life and My Words are Spirit and life. So if they are off the Spirit of Christ and the Word of Christ they just become one more religious institution taking up space as a 401(c)(3) and he doesn’t have to worry about them. This is not new.

Now I’d like to look at Genesis 3:1–7 which says [1] *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”* [2] *And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”* [4] *But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* [6] *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave*

some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. [7] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Here is a final exhortation I'd like to give to you in this study. First, is that Satan is the adversary. He stands against God, all that God has made and man who is made in the image of God. So Satan will attack God and man (male and female) made in the image of God by attacking first the intention of God. Here in this passage he is telling them that God tells them things because He doesn't want them to be like Him. So Satan attacks God by attacking the intention of God. Satan does not directly attack as Satan. Here he comes possessing and speaking through a serpent. I'm surprised that Adam didn't say to even when he had been out naming the animals that he didn't find any serpent that talked, so where did this one come from because there is something not right here. Adam was there with Eve when all this took place.

Satan is crafty. First he has disguised himself. Secondly he is deceiving and thirdly he is distracting. As he does this he then attacks God by attacking the intentions of God and the integrity as he also attacks the integrity of the Word of God. Satan says 'has God said, for did you not know that God is actually trying to keep something from you to make you like Him?' By doing this Satan sends Adam through Eve on a quest for something in the place of God that they had already been given by God. Satan basically tells them 'you can't trust God or His Word, in fact God is lying for you will not die, I'll tell you the truth and that is that God's intention is to keep you from what you could have and that is to be like God. So don't trust His Word because you can't trust God so trust me and my word instead of God's Word.' So Satan undermines the authority, infallibility, integrity and sufficiency of the Word of God.

So what does Satan use to send Adam and Eve on this quest for something they already have? Satan says to them 'you can be like God' but they already are like God for He has made them in His image. Eve is actually hearing that if she abandons the Word of God then she can be God and that is what Adam is now in league with. So Satan with deception and disguise attacks the integrity and intentions of God by attacking the integrity, sufficiency, infallibility and inerrancy of the Word of God. And Satan has not stopped doing this since.

Many of you probably thought I was going to be saying that the biggest challenge today effecting the evangelical church was the destruction of marriage or sexuality or gender clarity and yet all of those things are crucial issues. I believe that those are not the fundamental challenges. I think the fundamental challenge today is the operational abandonment of the power, integrity, and sufficiency of the Word of God in the church of God. I'm asking you to be gracious to me because I don't think it's any accident that there are no high pulpits anymore or that we put plexiglass lecterns out because it's no longer about the Word preached for it's now about the celebrity who leads. I just think that is a symbolic metaphor of what is happening in the evangelical church today. Some might think I'm just trying to work on job security here but I promise you I'm not. This is a deep concern that I have that the church operationally is leaving what it confessionally says it believes. This is happening even in my own denomination.

What is the confession of faith that comes out of the Reformation by way of the Great Awakening that has been handed to us and we dearly love? I believe it is the greatest distillation of Biblical truth obviously that is outside of the Scripture that is based upon the Scripture and not that is infallible and inerrant but it is a wonderful distillation and that is the Westminster Confession of Faith. What is chapter one? It is the Scriptures. The first time I read this confession was when I was at Covenant College and had a class on it. I thought then that the first chapter ought to be God and not the Scripture, but the fact is that you don't know who God

is without the Word of God telling you who He is because God is light and He reveals to us who He is.

When we have left aside the necessity of the foundation of the church which is the Apostles and Prophets with Christ being the Cornerstone where the Apostles give us the New Testament and the Prophets give us the Old Testament then we have the Word of God foundationally. And that Word is to be preached principally, not exclusively. I believe the Word should be sung, shared, displayed in fellowship, displayed in the sacraments and all of those things but they are all based upon the Word of God preached for faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ. So I see increasingly churches and ministers who will nod their head to the confessions in the practice of the church but abandon the authority, sufficiency, infallibility and inerrancy of God's Word in life and practice. We dismiss it or lay aside the Word when we're trying to work on the doctrine of creation, redemption, the sacraments or worship. It is seen as if anything as unclear and worst of all is maneuvered and manipulated to say what we want it to say instead of what God says that it says.

So this is my biggest fear in the church of Jesus Christ today. It is Satan by deception and disguise is doing what he did in the Garden by attacking God's intentions and integrity by attacking the intentions, integrity, sufficiency and infallibility of the Word of God itself. I believe Satan is doing it with a vengeance and I am deeply concerned of the success that he is having today. So what does that mean for us?

First of all it means that we need to have the same principled commitment that Paul does when he writes the last thing he writes before he dies. He writes to Timothy and says in II Timothy 4:1-2, *[1] I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] **preach the word**; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. Be poured out as a drink offering Timothy (vs 6).*

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God, the soon coming of Christ and the Judgment Seat, to preach the Word. Every time you preach it feel the eyelash of God. You are in His presence. This is His Word you are handling. Every time you preach it hear the footsteps of Jesus for He is coming. Every time you preach it hear the gavel at the Judgment Seat where everyone whom you are preaching to is headed and you alone have the Message that will deliver them. It is through hearing that Message that they are delivered and born again by the power of the Spirit of God. Pour yourself out as a drink offering to accomplish it.

I believe that is what we are to hold on to, grasp and embrace as the people of God. So we say to pastors and preachers 'there are a lot of things you need to do so would you mind going to work every day but work hard at preaching and teaching.' I think the rise of plagiarism is because a lot of men are feeling the pressure from churches to do everything rather than go to their study but Sunday rolls around with amazing regularity. So where are they going to get a sermon that they didn't have time to develop because of all the other stuff they were doing this week. My oh my isn't the internet now convenient?

Secondly, we see how Paul sets the example when he says to Timothy to pray that the older pastors will set an example. I am grateful for all those who have gone before me and the models that have been set before me. Pray that I will model and an example of those coming after me. Pray that God would raise up many models and examples of pastors who are churchmen who are committed to the preaching of the Word of God. Paul says to Timothy to follow him as he follows Christ.

Thirdly, we have to raise up another generation of Gospel preachers. I am so grateful for the Fellows ministry here at our church and we have a new season starting up. Could it be possible to have a Pastoral Fellows Program here and at other churches in our area where we invest in the preachers that are coming? Thankfully we have a lot of young men on our staff whom I am grateful for that are on that trajectory but what would it look like to bring those coming along under our care through our Birmingham Theological Seminary, our pastoral staff and the senior leadership under our elders and deacons to bring them in for a year to two years where they might be able to develop their gifts and skills at preaching the Word of God? What kind of contribution would that make to the next generation as the people of God? I am not exalting Briarwood but there are not many churches that value the preaching of the Word any longer. So we who do it by the grace of God, could we also give ourselves to it in order to encourage it in the lives of God's people?

Fourthly, is that we must never play word games with our confession. If we say we believe in the inerrancy of the Word of God, the primacy of preaching and the priority of prayer then we need to be committed to it and not abandon it for something else while saying that we're committed to it. We want to be not only orthodoxy, that is believing what's right but we also want orthopraxy which means we want to make every effort to do what we say we believe. Now I'm going to kind of turn this on you.

Finally, would you please pray for the preaching of the Word of God and the integrity of the church of God in its confession of the inerrancy, the sufficiency and the authority of the Word of God? Would you prioritize your own embracing of it in your life and would you let it dwell richly within you? Learn that blessing of meditation on what you have heard. What a great way to spend the Lord's Day to take what you've heard through a stumbling preacher and to get some goody out of what you heard that day. Then meditate on it with you and your family in the afternoon.

What would it be like to have a Scripture memory dynamic in your life and in your family? I'm not asking you to be able to quote the whole Bible but let the Word of Christ dwell richly within you with meditation, memorization, fellowship and sharing. Recently some men went with me to look at revival and reformation in Scotland. While we were there every evening each man shared the Scripture and his testimony and it was unbelievably rich. There's a supper club for you! How about we share the Word of God as we sit around the table and fellowship together so that the Word of Christ is dwelling richly within us.

I can promise that Satan will not stop deceptively with disguise and distraction attempting to undermine our confidence and use of the Word of God in preaching, teaching, and discipleship. I can tell you that the Spirit of God who gave us the Word of God who is within you can give you a love and understanding for the Word of God and with that a joy in the salvation you have from that God and the privilege to share it with others. Let the Word of Christ dwell richly within you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word as a people who love You because You first loved us. God, cause that Word to be the honey that drips from the comb into our soul and use that Word as a rock to break our heart wherever it's hard. God, use that Word as the balm of Gilead to soothe our soul and then Father, take the Word of God to equip us and to inoculate us so that we do not fall prey to Satan's devices and we will not abandon our confidence in the Word of God, infallible, sufficient, inerrant, authoritative and our only rule of

faith and practice which is why we loved to hear it preached and make sure our church is committed to its preaching so that all of its benefits would flow as we sing what we hear, as we share what we hear, as we embrace with obedience what we hear and the God of the Word is exalted for I pray this all in Jesus' Name, Amen.