

ZONDERVAN

The Pastor's Ministry

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part 1
foundation

Chapter 1

Guard the Truth

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

2 Timothy 1:13–14

Every father feels a protective instinct toward his own children. And sometimes that means he must overcome his own fears to protect them.

I struggle with a strong and healthy fear of large, mean-looking dogs. Sometimes when I run through our neighborhood, I carry a stick with me, just in case I encounter one on a run. At times, I change my route just to avoid attracting the gaze of an unchained canine.

On one particular sunny afternoon, I was walking down the street with my family when a large, angry dog suddenly broke out from a neighbor's front door that had carelessly been left open. The dog zeroed in on our family. He began charging at full speed directly toward my youngest daughter as she rode her bike, and in that moment, I put aside my personal fears. I was consumed by one thing—an innate desire to protect my daughter, no matter the cost. I was ready to do whatever was necessary to make sure she was kept safe.

Thankfully, everything ended well. No one was hurt. And I didn't have to hurt any dogs that day either! The owner came out

in the nick of time and whistled for his dog, and two hours later, my adrenaline level returned to normal.

In that moment when I first saw the dog charging at my daughter, I reacted instinctively. Sure, there was a moment of fear, and several thoughts flashed in my head, but I wasn't debating the consequences right then. I knew that only one thing mattered—making sure my daughter was safe.

What does this have to do with being a pastor? As a pastor who also regularly cares for and advises other pastors, I know there are many things a pastor needs to be doing. There are sermons to preach, sick members to visit, burdens of leadership and administration to bear. And yet God has called pastors to a unique role, one they bear not just for their local churches but for the kingdom of God. Pastors are called to be guardians of the truth. And like a father protecting his daughter from attack, this calling requires courageous, sacrificial action. A pastor must care for his people, yes, but it means guarding them and guarding the truth by protecting them from false teaching. It means helping them understand and grow in the good news of God's word.

Why is this the first thing I mention? Because if we lose the truth, we have nothing left to give our people.

God has made his truth known to his people throughout the ages, and in every generation he has called and equipped certain men of God to be the protectors, stewards, and guardians of the truth. Busy pastors trying to minister to busy people in our modern world must learn and embrace this biblical priority, or there will be nothing left to say and no one left to hear it. The doctrines and beliefs of the church, rooted in the Scriptures, are the lifeblood of the church. If we fail to guard the truth, the good deposit of God's word, nothing else will matter.

Biblical Guardians of Truth

The Bible tells us God chose one nation from all the other nations of the earth to be his people and told them he would be

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their God. That nation was Israel—a people born of Abraham and his faith in God. God chose to reveal himself and his ways to his people through the words he spoke to them. The same voice with which God spoke and created the universe from nothing would be the means by which God would communicate his perfect character, his sovereign purposes, and his redemptive ways. After Moses led Israel out of bondage in Egypt, God brought them to a place in the wilderness and made a covenant with them. God spoke the terms of the covenant to Moses to share with the people, and the people agreed to God's terms (Exodus 19). God spoke his law to his people, giving them blessings for obedience and curses for their disobedience. And Moses wrote all of this down. These words became the terms of their relationship, the law that would guide Israel's future. Even when the people disobeyed, God continued to make himself and his word known to his people, preserving his word throughout the generations.

In the years of the kings, many of Israel's rulers did great evil in the sight of the Lord, yet God was still moving in the hearts of his people making himself, his promises, and his plan known. He moved the hearts of some in Israel to delight in the law of the Lord and to meditate on it day and night (Psalm 1:2). In each generation, God revealed there was a small remnant of his people who continued to love his law, delighting in its precepts and walking in God's ways (Psalm 119). The prophets carried the torch forward, guarding the law by speaking the truth about what God had revealed. Though they were regularly met by scorn, suffering, and sometimes death, they held fast to the law revealed to Moses and the new covenant promises that were yet to come (Ezekiel 36:26–27), their hope in a future redeemer (Isaiah 59:20).

The gloomy end to the Old Testament shows God's people living in exile, suffering and scattered. The law of God, his precious words to his people, have been lost and forgotten. The temple has been destroyed. The kings are gone; the nation is broken. And yet there is still a note of hope. The law, once lost and forgotten, is rediscovered. This discovery brings renewed hope to a remnant of

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the people of God as they return from exile. One of the most powerful scenes in the Old Testament is found in the book of Nehemiah, when Ezra, the priest, stands to read the Book of the Law, a book that had somehow endured throughout the destruction:

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion ...

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites ... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

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Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Nehemiah 8:1 – 12

Israel returned from years of captivity and exile to a destroyed temple and city. No one had seen or heard God's law recorded by Moses for many years. And yet God preserved for his people his word, his covenant promises, and his revealed character through a few faithful kings, prophets, and scribes throughout the generations. He did this so that when the promised Messiah would come, his people would know and recognize him.

The Messiah, Jesus

Sadly, when the Messiah finally came as the prophets had foretold, his people did *not* recognize him. In fact, their hard hearts and deaf ears led them to misunderstand who the Messiah was and what his purposes in deliverance were. Expecting a warrior-king who would destroy the Roman occupiers, they were not looking for a spiritual teacher who would be crucified on a cross. Jesus was a living example of what it means to guard and embody the truth of God. Jesus fulfilled all that the prophets had spoken and was the perfect sacrifice who saved his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Jesus was more than a steward of the truth; he *was* the truth (John 14:6). He was the Word made flesh, come to dwell among us (John 1:14).

Jesus came to affirm the law and all that the prophets had spoken, and he came to fulfill God's word. We learn this from Jesus'

own words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Jesus spoke to the significance and role the law now has in the kingdom of God.² He came to usher in the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15) through his life, death, and resurrection. After his resurrection, in a conversation with two discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained his unique role in God’s redemptive plan: “‘How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27).

In the midst of their confusion and discouragement, Jesus speaks to his disciples and reveals that he is the one whose person and work fulfill the truth proclaimed by Moses and the prophets throughout the ages. As the risen Savior, he now possesses all authority on heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18) to declare the truth about God, his covenant promises, and his plan of redemption.

Guardians of the Gospel

Jesus soon ascends to his Father, but he leaves the apostles with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and commends them as the sole stewards of the truth of the gospel. He commands them to be his witnesses on earth (Acts 1:8). In this role, the apostles commit their time and energy to “prayer and the ministry of the word” (6:4). The book of Acts contains the story of how the early church is built, recording the faithful stewardship of the apostles doing the very things Jesus has commanded them to do. We see how the Holy Spirit powerfully works in and through them. And we are introduced to the apostle Paul, a converted enemy of the church who has a significant role in raising up and training a new generation of leaders to guard the gospel truth.

In his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul gives a summary of this call. To Timothy he writes, “Guard the good deposit that

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was entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:14). He instructs Timothy to guard the sound words—the doctrines that Paul has taught him—and to entrust them to reliable people (2:2). A key aspect of guarding the truth is this idea of preservation. Paul tells Timothy that one of the reasons his instruction is necessary is the sad fact that his closest friends and ministry partners have deserted him: “You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes” (1:15). Paul was constantly facing opponents of the gospel, men and women who wished to distort the message. Nearing the end of his life, Paul understands it is necessary to pass on the gospel “deposit” to the next generation. He writes to Timothy, knowing that many of the same enemies of the gospel will confront Timothy as well.

This same command—to guard the gospel—is also seen in Paul’s letter to the young pastor Titus. Paul writes to Titus and tells him to appoint godly, biblically qualified leaders in Crete (Titus 1:5) for the very same reasons he wrote to Timothy. Titus is commanded to appoint pastors (elders) in every city who “hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught,” for the purpose of encouraging others with doctrine and refuting “those who oppose it” (1:9). Paul explains to Titus that these are men who will distort and oppose the trustworthy message of the gospel (1:10–16).

From these examples, we learn that guardians of the gospel of Jesus Christ have a twofold purpose: to *hold firmly* to the faithful word and to *refute* those who would contradict it. Pastors are the appointed guardians of God’s truth, and above all else they must hold firm to it, boldly refuting those who come against it and passing it on to the next generation of appointed guardians.

Jesus came as the fulfillment of the law and the words of the prophets. And Jesus spoke his word to his apostles, and they wrote that word down and then spoke it to others—men like Timothy and Titus. Along with this word, they gave a special charge as well: to guard the truth of the gospel. The teaching of the apostles has now been passed down to us, from generation to generation

over the past two thousand years, entrusted to faithful under-shepherds in every generation. And that brings us to you today. As a pastor and leader in the church, you belong to a long lineage of guardians, those entrusted to guard the deposit regardless of the cost and then to entrust it to the next generation. That's your calling, one of the priorities of your ministry as a pastor. But how, practically, do you do this?

Guarding the Truth in Ministry

The gospel is the good news of Jesus. And it is good news *about* Jesus, the story of what God has done from beginning to end to create, save, and bless a people who are his own. It is the truth that God created everything good and perfect, and that through Adam and Eve, sin entered the world. Human sin affects everything now, including those created in God's image. Human beings are born into this world as sinners, cut off from God with no hope to save ourselves, no hope of being reconciled to God by our own efforts. The gospel is the good news that God in his mercy does not leave us in our hopeless condition, but sent his only Son, Jesus, to rescue us, redeem us, and restore us to relationship with God. Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life, and died an atoning death on the cross for sinners, thus bearing the wrath of God in their place. Three days later, he rose from the grave, conquering death, and now sits at the right hand of the Father, ruling over the nations and waiting to return for his bride, the church. Anyone who turns from their sins, believes, and trusts in Jesus Christ alone by faith is rescued from the wrath to come, forgiven of all their sins, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, and adopted as a child of the living God. All of this is a gift of God's grace. This is the truth of the gospel, and for nearly two thousand years this message has been entrusted to those who follow Christ—particularly pastors.

Pastors do more than speak the message of the gospel; they guard the *essential truths* of the gospel. Paul, in writing to his

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young disciples Timothy and Titus, is aware of the looming presence of false teachers, those who twist and distort the truth of the gospel. Like Timothy and Titus, we must be aware that a key part of our responsibility in guarding the truth of the gospel is making sure we understand it and that we declare certain key aspects of the message. We need to speak about the sinlessness of Jesus, the fully divine and fully human natures of Jesus, the substitutionary atonement of his death, the imputation of righteousness and reality of forgiveness for his followers, the physical resurrection of Jesus, and his rulership at the right hand of God.

We know there will always be people who speak against the truth of the gospel, who will try to distort it in some way, so our defense against these distortions is a primary responsibility of pastoral ministry. Yet in addition to guarding against these overt false teachings, a pastor in a typical evangelical church today faces two additional, even more subtle dangers. First, out of a desire to keep things simple or sometimes for rhetorical appeal, a pastor may leave out several important and essential elements of the gospel. Simplicity is a good virtue, but we cannot sacrifice truth on the altar of simplicity and clarity. So even if something is hard to understand or requires a more complex explanation, we must take the time to teach it and explain it. Don't avoid the more difficult teachings of Scripture in an effort to keep things simple.

Second, it is possible for those who have been Christians for a long time to begin to *assume* the gospel. They may assume everyone knows it already (which is not true). Or they may think that once a person has heard and understood or responded to the gospel, there is no need to talk about it anymore. I once heard a pastor talk about the danger of assuming the gospel, and he said this: "A generation that assumes these essential elements about the gospel loses the gospel in the next generation."³ So how do you keep your people from assuming the gospel? How do you encourage them to value and uphold the beauty of the gospel? Pastors guard the truth of the gospel by *regularly* proclaiming it among God's people and then winsomely *applying* it to life through the

weekly preaching of God's word. Don't assume the gospel; preach it regularly. We protect the truth when we speak about it, when we pass it on to others, and when we show how the truth of the gospel continues to apply to the daily concerns of life. When we fail to do this, we fail to guard the gospel. The gospel's power in our church and in our own lives will be weakened.

Defend the Authority of All Scripture

The gospel is the good news of Jesus, which reveals how the redemptive plan of God throughout history culminates in the coming of Jesus. And as essential as it is to guard the gospel message, this doesn't mean we should neglect the other teachings of Scripture that relate to and flow out of the gospel. We need to uphold the sound words of the apostles' teaching, and this means teaching on the entirety of Scripture—what we know as the Old and New Testaments. Paul writes that “all Scripture is God-breathed,” indicating it is inspired by God, and Paul adds that it “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul refers to the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament), noting that the examples of Israel's disobedience “were written down as warnings for us” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Guarding the truth means recognizing that we need to instruct from the Old and New Testaments. The *whole* counsel of God is God's authoritative, inerrant, infallible word. Let me offer three suggestions on how a pastor can do this.

First, as you plan your preaching, make it your goal to preach through entire books of the Bible. While there is a place for topical preaching, one of the problems with it is that it allows a pastor to avoid dealing with hard texts. Topical preaching allows a pastor to choose the texts he wants to refer to in addressing a specific issue and thus avoid controversial or challenging passages. But if you are committed to preaching through books of the Bible and your people know it is your commitment, you

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cannot dance around difficult passages. Preaching through entire books provides a balanced diet of biblical exposition for your church, and at the same time it defends the authority and value of the whole Bible.

Second, following the intent of the last suggestion, try to preach and teach a balance of the Old *and* New Testament in your church. If the overwhelming majority of a pastor's sermons come from the New Testament year after year, a message is communicated to the congregation that the Old Testament isn't as important as the New Testament, and they will not value the Old Testament as useful for teaching and training in righteousness. The need for balance can be extended even further, making sure a balance of genres and sections is preached as well. For example, if most of a pastor's sermons are pulled from Paul's letters and rarely from the Gospels, a congregation may conclude that Paul's words are more important than those of Jesus. A steady and balanced diet of both Old and New Testaments and the various genres within them is critical.

One of the ways we have tried to strike this balance in our church is to preach from different Testaments in the morning and evening services. At times, we have even tried to take the passage from the morning sermon and select a passage from the other Testament for the evening that somehow connects with the morning passage. We also try to vary genres between the two Testaments. Though that balance is off at times, the goal is to uphold the whole of the Bible before our people so they understand that *all* of it is profitable for teaching, correction, and training.

Third, if you aren't rotating your preaching between the Old and New Testaments, at least try to have a reading from both the Old and New Testaments in every gathering for worship. This has historically been the practice of the church, and this balanced approach allows a service planner to show how the Bible fits together as one book—one redemptive story. These simple efforts, done well over time, will effectively train people in understanding their Bible and in coming to cherish all of it as a gift

from God. In doing this, pastors teach their people how to guard the truth.

Finally, apply this principle to the Bible studies, small groups, Sunday school classes, and other group meetings in which God's word is taught by others. For example, consider making adjustments if you find that most of your small groups land in Paul's letters by default. Or provide a few biblical book studies in your Sunday school classes if you tend to gravitate toward topical issues. Evaluate your patterns within children and youth ministries and the biblical instruction provided there as well. Defending the authority of all of Scripture begins in the pulpit, but it takes deep root in a church when a pastor leads in this evaluation of all the church's ministries.

Pursue Cultural Awareness

Every generation of Christian pastors has had to apply the truth of the gospel to their own unique context and culture. So it is essential that a pastor understands the culture he is called to minister to if he wants to be effective in communicating truth. Modern technology, social media, and the rise of secularization have made this even more essential today. One of today's most respected cultural Christian commentators, Dr. Albert Mohler, once told a group of pastors, "We're watching in one generation the collapse of cultural Christianity . . . and it's coming with a new velocity and a new intensity. What is now being mandated as morally right wasn't even morally mentionable a generation ago . . . In short order we are going to find out what it's like to be on the underside of society, rather than the upside."⁴

Mohler's warning highlights our need as guardians of truth to know our culture well. This involves engaging in opportunities to grow in our cultural awareness. Pastors need to study, but they should study and read *broadly*. Pastors should try to stay up on the current events and the latest cultural news. They need to be aware of what is happening in our academic institutions, be informed

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about upcoming political elections, and have their pulse on the moral controversies of our day. Obviously, they can't be an expert on everything. But they need to have a basic knowledge of the world in which they live so they can respond with wisdom. Pastors must be informed so they know *how* to guard the truth and can effectively disciple their flock to guard the truth. Apologetics is not simply knowing how to share the gospel; it requires some knowledge of modern heresies and cultural barriers to the gospel. A pastor who understands the culture is better equipped to guard the truth and to teach others to do the same.

Watch Over the Flock

In addition to providing public biblical instruction as a means of guarding doctrine, pastors and church leaders must guard the truth by exercising discipline as they exhort people to the true practice of their faith. Peter exhorts pastors to watch over the flock as a function of shepherding (1 Peter 5:2), and this means a pastor is to oversee that God's word is taught and preached and that it serves as the standard for the practice of the church in its day-to-day operations. Although often disconnected from the call of shepherding, this task is a key component of guarding the truth. Though some of this responsibility is delegated to other church leaders (deacons and other leaders), ultimately those who are pastors must maintain oversight over the entire church.

Pastors watch over the flock as they administrate. This includes caring for souls, equipping leaders, discipling members, reaching the lost through evangelistic efforts, and being stewards of the church's resources. In large churches, a pastor cannot meet one-on-one with everyone in the church on a regular basis, but he can appoint other mature Christians to meet with two or three other members in the church and report back to the pastors on how these meetings are going. In these situations, the pastor is still watching over the flock, though not directly meeting with everyone in the church.

Pastoral oversight is also needed in the administrative, financial, logistical, and organizational aspects of church life. There are services that need to be planned every week. There are finances to manage, facilities to maintain, staff to supervise, and other leaders to raise up and train. Many pastors avoid these responsibilities or don't want anything to do with this side of church life. Others spend too much time in these areas, neglecting the preaching of the word. It's easy for administrative tasks to eat up great amounts of a pastor's time every week. Exercising oversight means finding the right balance between wisely handing off responsibilities to faithful servants, yet being aware of and in touch with what is happening in the church. In our church, I have nothing to do with counting the offerings on Sundays, nor am I informed about what every member gives. Yet every month, before we share financial details with the church body, I review our monthly financial statement so I am aware of our financial numbers and how the money was spent that month. I have enough information to ask questions, and I understand the general financial condition of our church, yet much of the day-to-day work in this area is carried out by others. This allows me to be involved in unusual or unexpected financial decision making when needed, but it frees me up for other responsibilities.

To watch over the flock means we must be *biblically minded* in our calling, yet *practically minded* in how we apply biblical principles in the administration of the church. Pastors must be organized in wise, efficient, and creative ways so they have a working knowledge of every area in the church without getting bogged down with the day-to-day operations. As a pastor, you guard the truth, not just by watching your life and doctrine, but by operating with wisdom in overseeing all aspects of church life.

Conclusion

A close friend became a pastor at a small, struggling historic congregation in the southeastern part of the United States.

Guard the Truth

Although the church was struggling, it had a rich heritage. Decades earlier, it had been a vibrant local church and a gospel light in its community. This pastor accepted the call knowing the rich biblical heritage, yet he was also aware of the decades of dysfunction and unaware of the precise cause. After beginning his ministry, he researched the church's history and traced the internal conflicts, financial struggles, and heretical teachings back to a single source—a string of unfaithful shepherds. Over the course of several decades, the church had a string of pastors with patterns of moral failings, dictator-style leadership, financial dishonesty, theological ambiguity, and, most apparent of all, a lack of clarity with regard to the gospel and a lack of commitment to the Scriptures as the word of God. Within two generations, unfaithful shepherds not committed to guarding the truth had caused the church to crumble.

This church is an example of what happens when leaders abandon their commitment to guard the truth, yet this church is also a positive example, a testimony to the power of God and the Scriptures. Under the leadership of their new pastor, this once dying and dysfunctional church began to thrive again. It didn't happen immediately, but after a decade of solid, biblical teaching and faithful gospel ministry the church is once again a light in the community. People are walking in the truth, and lives are being transformed. My friend would quickly say this new life is not due to particular strategies, trendy programs, or his own leadership charisma; it is the fruit of God's word bringing new spiritual life. And though he hopes to have several more years of fruitful ministry in this place, he is already mindful of his top priority—to raise up a new generation who will guard the truth that has been rediscovered and reclaimed in this church.

Today, nearly two thousand years after Christ's ascension, Christ's church has been established throughout the world. And by God's grace, it will continue to grow and expand as faithful men are entrusted with the truth and raise up the next generation do to the same. A pastor's primary, instinctive calling must be to

foundation

guard the good deposit and entrust that truth to other reliable men. The priorities of a pastor's life and ministry can be filled with many good labors, but all of these must be grounded in and driven by the stewardship of the truth of God, the gospel of Jesus, and the whole of Scripture. If pastors and church leaders fail to do this, they will end up building their lives and ministries on things that will not last. If we lose the truth, we have nothing left. But if we guard the truth and make it the lifeblood of our ministry, we labor in the work that the Spirit empowers and through which he breathes life to our souls and the souls of our people.

Chapter 2

Preach the Word

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction. **2 Timothy 4:1–2**

Time to study in preparation for preaching often gets squeezed out of a pastor's busy schedule. Yet amid the competing demands of ministry, the study and preaching of the word of God should be the central focus of every faithful pastor's ministry. In recent years, as busy pastors utilize changes in technology and the wealth of resources available on the Internet, an interesting dynamic called "sermon plagiarism" has developed—the temptation to make use of immediately accessible information, borrowing outlines or in some cases word-for-word manuscripts from other pastors and preaching them to the congregation. Pastors who lack a message for their Sunday message can take the sermons of popular, gifted, and successful pastors and easily claim them as their own. Adding to this temptation is the encouragement of some preachers to do this as a matter of convenience, with the intent of freeing busy pastors so they can focus on other responsibilities. One well-known pastor boldly says other pastors should utilize his work to enhance their own ministry: "Use them."⁵ And elsewhere he says, "When I was planting Saddleback Church, other pastors' sermons fed my soul—and eased my preparation!

I hope [my] sermons . . . will do the same for you. Whether you use the outlines and transcripts for sermon ideas or listen to the preaching to fine-tune your delivery, I'll be thrilled if your ministry becomes more effective."⁶

To be clear, Pastor Rick Warren's generosity and his desire to help other pastors are commendable. Ultimately, however, it is shortsighted and unwise to encourage this type of behavior. Why? Because a pastor is called to *preach*. And that involves study. It involves personal reflection on the word. It involves meditation and prayer. There are no shortcuts or substitutes for these things. A pastor is not just called to preach God's word, but to preach a word that has been deeply internalized and appropriately applied to his people.

I want to do more than simply affirm the importance of preaching; I want to commend a particular *process of preparing* to preach. Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 that part of preaching the word is being prepared for that work, and I believe preparation necessarily involves a commitment to study and prayer—a process that cannot be substituted with the work of another person. While the sermons of other pastors can be helpful when used appropriately, preparing to preach involves a definite commitment of a pastor's heart and time. Without that commitment, a pastor's public ministry of the word of God will never be all that it can be, nor will it be what God designed it to be.

A Biblical Command: Preach

Throughout the pages of Scripture God speaks to his people through an appointed leader. God speaks and seeks a response from his people. In the Old Testament, God chooses a nation—Israel—from among the other nations to be his special people. Israel failed to respond to this word as God desired, turning away in sin and idolatry, yet this pattern of God speaking through mediators and calling for a response, would remain consistent throughout the story line of Scripture.

Preach the Word

Israel

When the descendants of Jacob were enslaved by the Egyptians, God listened to the cries of his people in Egypt and rescued them from their slavery. Moses became God's appointed leader, and he was responsible to bring God's word to the people. God made a covenant with his people through the mediation of Moses, who declared God's word to the people. The people responded in agreement. Here is the scene as this covenant (known as the "old covenant") between God and Israel is made:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him."

When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Exodus 24:1 – 8

foundation

Notice that the people and the elders are not allowed into God's presence. Instead, they need someone to represent them and mediate God's word to them. God's design is to communicate his word through an appointed leader (Moses), who will hear that word from God and deliver it to the people. The people respond to the word with one voice, declaring they will obey (Exodus 24:7).

Despite the faithfulness of God, the people do not obey; they rebel. Yet God continues speaking to his people through appointed leaders who speak his word, always calling for a response to that word. This pattern is seen throughout the ministry of the prophets. The prophets remind the people of God's law, his covenant with them, and they let the people know God calls them to repent and turn back to him. Again, the people reject that word, yet the appointed mouthpieces of the Lord remain faithful to speak what God has revealed for them. Many of them suffer and are persecuted because of their obedience.

Israel's history has a few glimpses of the people's obedience to the word, foreshadowing God's future redemption of his people. King David responds in repentance to God's word that comes through the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12). And there is no doubt many of the psalmists had a deep love for God's word, and some people obeyed their calls to love and obey God's word. The beauty, length, and content of Psalm 119 alone remind us that portions of God's people within the nation of Israel loved the law of the Lord and sought not just to obey it but to delight in and meditate on it as well.

Arguably, the most powerful Old Testament picture of God speaking to his people and bringing them life through his word is found in the prophet Ezekiel's vision in a valley of dry bones:

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones

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on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'"

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet — a vast army.

Ezekiel 37:1 – 10

This is a powerful picture of how God brings life to his people. God speaks through his mouthpiece to dead and lifeless people, and the word through his Spirit brings life. In this vision the Sovereign Lord reveals his divine design to breathe life into his people, a plan that is accomplished in the new covenant promises secured by the blood of Jesus Christ.

The Church

The long-awaited Messiah, Jesus Christ, is the one who inaugurates a new covenant. Through his perfect life, death, and resurrection, Jesus purchases with his own blood a people for

himself. Unlike Israel, these redeemed people have God's Spirit placed in them and God's word written on their hearts so they are able to obey God's word (Ezekiel 36:26–27). God's people are now able to hear his word through his appointed servants and respond in obedience. The church depends on the preaching of God's word for its life.

On the day of Pentecost we see how the Holy Spirit comes on God's messengers in a powerful way (Acts 2:1–4). With the pouring out of the Spirit, the church is birthed, and we see on full display God's fulfillment of his plan to build his kingdom. God's appointed messenger, the apostle Peter, preaches the gospel (Acts 2:14–36) and calls his hearers to respond to God's word about Jesus (Acts 2:37–40). The people respond in repentance, faith, and willingness to be baptized (Acts 2:41–42). The apostolic preaching of the word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit is the means by which God builds his church.

As the apostles pass on the torch to the next generation, the pattern set by the apostles is continued. Pastors of local churches continue preaching the apostolic witness for the establishment, growth, and health of the people of God. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus reveal the importance of the ministry of the word. Paul exhorts Timothy to guard the good deposit of the gospel and sound teaching from God's word, for it has been entrusted to him. And as we saw in the last chapter, one of the primary ways this deposit is guarded is through the preaching of the word: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:1–2).

God's divine design throughout the ages to build his kingdom of redeemed people culminates in this powerful charge: "Preach the word." Paul explains how, when, and why a pastor is to preach the word and that it should be done with the patience and precision of a gifted, called shepherd of the Lord Jesus Christ. Pastors

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are entrusted to care for the souls of people as men who will give an account (Hebrews 13:17). The apostles knew a lot was at stake. They took seriously their responsibility to teach and to train a new generation of pastors who would accept the mantle from them. Paul writes to Timothy, emphasizing the importance of holding to the truth and teaching it to others:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Timothy 4:13 – 16

This charge, while applicable in some sense to all believers, is specially given to Spirit-filled, gifted men who are biblically qualified pastors (1 Timothy 3:1–7). They are called to preach the word to the people they shepherd, to live that word, and to call people to respond to the gospel.

Even though we live in a different time and culture, the fact remains that God's church is built this same way today. The Pastoral Epistles outline a detailed template for preaching and how this builds the church. Pastors must study and prepare themselves so they can hear God's word. A pastor internalizes that word and then preaches it to the people by the Spirit, calling his particular people to respond in obedience. This is more than a human activity; it is a divinely designed spiritual experience between a pastor and his congregation. And the work of preparation is an essential component. It does not happen when a pastor preaches another's sermons or skimps on the work of preparation. The heart work is key as well, and it is well worth the investment of time as it bears spiritual fruit.

How to Preach like a Shepherd

A preacher can preach several types of sermons: doctrinal messages, which focus on a particular doctrine such as election, sin, perseverance, Scripture, ecclesiology, and eschatology; evangelistic messages, which communicate the gospel and call the unconverted to believe in Christ; and topical messages, which address a certain topic or felt need in the congregation. None of these are bad in themselves, and all have their place at some point. Yet to ensure that God's people are consistently exposed to the word of God, the best way to preach faithfully and accurately is to preach *expository* sermons.

An expository sermon flows from and is built completely on a text from Scripture, not on an idea, a doctrine, an event, or a topic. To help visualize this, imagine a stack of building blocks where the bottom foundational block is a text of Scripture. In building an expository message, every block you place in the sermon is built on this block. Expository preaching functions best when pastors preach passage by passage through different books of the Bible.

I have three reasons for believing expository sermons are the most helpful and faithful way for a pastor to feed his people regularly:

1. *Expository sermons affirm the authority, power, and sufficiency of Scripture.* As I mentioned in the last chapter, a pastor cannot avoid the hard passages when he preaches expository sermons. When I was preaching through 2 Samuel in my local church, I preached on David's adultery and murder one week, and rape, incest, and murder among David's children the next week—passages I would not have chosen to preach on if I were randomly picking a passage for the week. Yet our people need to hear what God is saying through these passages, and we as pastors need to wrestle with them to understand what God wants us to learn from them. Preach the hard passages. If your congregation sees you are not afraid to wrestle with them, then they will surely grow less afraid of them too.

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2. *Expository sermons help our people know how to read their Bibles as intended.* A pastor and his people will come to better understand the meaning of each book or section of Scripture. I am always amazed at how much better I understand a writer's intent after preaching through the natural flow of his argument or narrative. For example, when I was preaching on David's adultery, I saw how it linked back to David's acceptance of a second wife in 1 Samuel. This was not something I read in a commentary; it came to me through following the narrative's progression as I preached through this Bible book. It is difficult to see connections like this unless a pastor spends time poring over the passage week after week.

3. *Expository sermons help keep a pastor focused on preaching God's words instead of human words.* Expository sermons on entire books of the Bible provide a fruitful and steady diet for a church. This type of preaching also teaches listeners how to read their Bibles. When we commit to preaching through books of the Bible, not picking and choosing what we want to read or study, we teach our people to do the same on their own.

Preach Your Own Material

While not every pastor is tempted to preach someone else's sermons, most rely on the opinions, insights, and scholarly wisdom of others found in commentaries, language tools, and theological writings. Let's face it; we live in a blessed time! We have easy access to the thoughts of some of the most brilliant theological minds in history, and we can see what they think about almost any passage in the Bible. With access to these kinds of scholars, the temptation we face is to rely on the thoughts and insights of others before formulating our own thoughts about the passage. What is the balance here? When should a preacher consult the scholars, and when should he go with his own insights?

The words of the nineteenth-century English pastor Andrew Fuller are just as sound in our commentary-saturated time as they

were in his day when resources were scarce. Fuller wrote this in a letter to a young pastor:

The method I pursued was, first to read the text carefully over, and as I went on, to note down what first struck me as the meaning. After reducing these notes into something like a scheme of the passage, I examined the best experts I could procure, and, comparing my own first thoughts with theirs, was better able to judge of their justness. Some of them were confirmed, some corrected, and many added to them . . . But to go first to expositors is to preclude the exercise of your own judgment.⁷

Pastors, we need to be grateful for the abundance of commentaries and theological writings we have available to us. Use them! Let them confirm and even correct your own thoughts *after* you have done your own study. But guard yourself from relying too heavily on them. Busy pastors are frequently tempted to take the path of least resistance and preach the thoughts of others instead of doing the hard work of allowing the Spirit of the living God to work that text in us as a word that will speak specifically to our flock. Authentic, biblical, Spirit-filled preaching happens when a preacher has been deeply impacted by a passage, and it is just as necessary today as it was in Fuller's day.

Preach with Your People in Mind

The task of preaching is more than just preaching the word; it involves carefully and wisely applying that word to the lives of the people entrusted to your care. As you prepare to preach God's word, you should have your people on your mind. Think about the difficulties they are facing, the challenges in their lives right now. How does God's word from this passage minister grace to them? Ask questions like, "How does this truth relate to Joe's marriage? How does this characteristic of God speak to the pain Margaret is feeling after losing her husband? How does this passage help Sarah care for her home more faithfully, help Doug deal

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with his difficult boss, or minister grace to Sally, who just found out she has cancer? A pastor should have specific people on his mind to help him apply the truth of God's word directly to the unique situations in his congregation.

Another way to be considerate and conscious of your people is to think through *how long* you should preach. Biblically, there is no specified time for a message. So the length should be determined by several factors, largely affected by your cultural context and the spiritual needs of your people. First, consider the spiritual maturity of your people—where they actually are, not where you think they should be. We should always challenge our folks to grow, yet I hear of pastors who preach long sermons, knowing full well they overwhelm the majority of their congregation. Their reason is that they are pushing their people, stretching them so they can listen to God's word for the amount of time the pastor *thinks* is appropriate. By all means, push your congregation to grow, but don't exasperate them or kill their love for the word by preaching long sermons they can't handle. God must do his work. Preach faithfully, but meet them where they are. Let God mature them to the place they need to be. Your preaching should lead them to long for more, not to wish you had ended sooner.

The length of a message should also be based on your own abilities and skill. Be honest; how good and seasoned a preacher are you? I tend to spend time with other pastors who love to read the Puritans, and when you read that these men preached one- to two-hour sermons, it's tempting to think, *Hey, I want to be like the Puritans*. But the honest truth is that many who want to preach for an hour are not yet good enough or seasoned enough to preach for a full hour. Each pastor needs to honestly evaluate his own preaching. If you have trouble with this, get some input from those you trust. Ask your wife. Ask a friend or a trusted elder. Be ready to hear their honest feedback, and receive it as an invitation to grow and learn. If you are in your first year of pastoring a church, your sermons will probably need to be shorter and simpler than you probably think they should be.

Lastly, as I briefly mentioned above, remember that it is good to leave your people longing for more, not less. Every preacher has been there. You sense you are losing people—and you still have ten minutes left in your sermon. Give adequate time to the preaching of God’s word, but try to leave your listeners longing for more when you end. I would rather leave my people in a place where they wanted a little more, where they look forward to coming back next week, than overloading them to the point where they can’t wait to leave. When someone is thirsty for a big glass of water, jamming a fire hose down their throat will quench their thirst, but it isn’t a pleasant experience—nor is it one they’ll want to repeat.

Remember you aren’t just a voice mechanically communicating a message; you are a shepherd of God’s people. Think like a shepherd. Push your people to grow, but do it wisely. Nurture them by meeting them where they are. Then trust that God will use his word and your efforts to find a balance than encourages growth.

Preach with Yourself in Mind

In 1 Timothy 4:16, the apostle Paul urges Timothy to “watch your life and doctrine closely.” A preacher of God’s word will not have the same impact on his people if he has not first been deeply affected by the word. The nineteenth-century English pastor Archibald Brown understood this as he spoke to his congregation:

Oh, brethren and sisters, I would to God I could speak to you this morning as I would. I only wish I could make this text blaze away before your eyes as it has before my own. I would that its tremendous force might be realized by you, as it has been felt in my own heart before coming here. Oh, how it would shake some of you out of your selfishness, out of your worldliness, out of your pandering to the maxims of this world.⁸

Brown’s words capture an essential element of powerful preaching: *A preacher must be deeply affected by the word he steps*

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into the pulpit to preach. Before he can persuade a sinner to turn to Christ, he must first be persuaded himself. Before a preacher can convince fellow Christians to trust in the promises of God, he must first believe those promises. Pastors cannot be changed *by* the word unless they spend time *in* the word as they prepare to preach. It is essential that every pastor preaching God's word makes sure this word is a part of him and that he truly believes what he has prepared to preach. This heart preparation gives his preaching an earnestness that only comes from meeting with God and experiencing his help.

This help only comes through the work of the Holy Spirit. A pastor should first realize his own inability to preach powerfully and faithfully apart from the work of the Spirit. Gifted, eloquent pastors are tempted to rely on their own gifts and abilities when they stand before their people to preach. But every pastor, regardless of their own gifts or abilities, must realize that the power in their preaching comes from rightly handling the word of God through the Holy Spirit. A. W. Tozer cuts through much of the superficial and cultural emphasis of our day in regard to preaching with these insightful words:

Let me shock you at this point. A naturally bright person can carry on religious activity without a special gift from God. Filling church pulpits every week are some who are using only natural abilities and special training. Some are known as Bible expositors, for it is possible to read and study commentaries and then repeat what has been learned about the Scriptures. Yes, it may shock you, but it is true that anyone able to talk fluently can learn to use religious phrases and can become recognized as a preacher.

But if any person is determined to preach so that his work and ministry will abide in the day of the judgment fire, then he must preach, teach, and exhort with the kind of love and concern that comes only through a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit—something beyond his own capabilities.⁹

A pastor's intellect, gifts, training, and speaking ability are all helpful in the preaching task, but they do not make one a powerful, Spirit-filled preacher. Powerful preaching comes through a work of the Spirit when God stirs the pastor's own heart, and a love for his people and the souls of men rise as his greatest burden.

Modern pastors should heed Paul's words to "watch your life and doctrine" through diligent study and preparation to preach. This means not just thinking about the best way to communicate to people, but also about preaching to our own hearts. A pastor's greatest asset when preaching the word is not a sharp mind or smooth eloquence, but rather a humble and contrite heart before the Lord, relying on the Holy Spirit to do its work.

Conclusion

God builds his church and his kingdom through his appointed messengers who speak God's word. This is how the church was birthed, and it is how God will continue to build the modern church to display his glory. God builds his church, and he does it by his Spirit breathing life into the church through his life-giving word. A pastor's task is to preach the word with deep passion because his own mind, heart, and soul have been moved by it throughout his preparation. He is to prepare the message with his own unique group of people on his mind, thinking of how to speak this life-giving word into their lives. He is to proclaim God's word as if life and death, heaven and hell, hang in the balance. Pastors, make it your aim to guard the good deposit entrusted to you until the Chief Shepherd returns, passing on that deposit to the next generation.