

# Chapter 14

## Life Beyond the Bushel (5)

### *Teaching that Makes Sense*

A few years ago, *USA Today* ran a remarkable article about two Japanese soldiers who had been hiding out in a Philippine jungle for decades. They were in their eighties and did not know that the war was over or that Japan had lost. One of the men refused to surrender until his ex-unit commander flew in and personally verified it. That's where the official news report stopped, but not the story. Part two, which went unpublicized, was probably just as compelling: how that the men returned home and found a world changed beyond all recognition.

This is the experience a local church is likely to have as it ventures out from under the bushel into the light of day. After having been sequestered away for so long, preaching to itself, using insider lingo, referring to "*the footnote*," "*the ministry*," and talking about "*the training*," Brother Lee, etc., suddenly the prospect of speaking to non-insiders is more than uncomfortable.

But neither is this a principle that the historical church hasn't had to face. Halfway through the twentieth century, seekers began complaining that in the hands of the religious faithful, the truth had become like beef jerky. It was beef, certainly enough, but religious traditionalists had cooked it to the point of being hard, inaccessible, and all but indigestible to the common man. The response from contemporary

church growth gurus was a pendulum swing to the opposite pole, with too much attention paid to felt needs and relevance. These heralds of the new approach served up “how-to” seminars, sold experiences, promised riches and blessings of various kinds, and utilized the scriptures to teach what has been called deistic therapy (the use of theology for the primary goal of bolstering self-image). Still others saw the pulpit as a means of advancing social agendas and politics. The theology employed fell below being seeker-sensitive and became noticeably sinner-sensitive, avoiding themes that would convict listeners of righteousness and judgment.

These alternate recipes captured attendants and gathered them into mushrooming mega-churches by the thousands. However, their eventual long-term effects have been called onto the carpet. Statistical analyses have shown that disciples (serious, spiritual, and service-oriented Christians) were not being produced.

Fairly speaking, the ideals of the seeker sensitive approach were landmark discoveries. The people who perfected them to a high science had grown tired of the church being a country club for the righteous. Their course corrections made the Christian gathering a less threatening place for the lost. Yet, a consumer-oriented mindset slowly invaded this approach. Congregations found themselves pandering to the appetites of the very people they hoped to save. As a result, too many cues were taken from the ranks of the non-committed to answer questions like “What do you guys want the church to be?” or “What would you like us to preach?”

The inevitable reaction was on the way. A new generation of ministers in the nineties began to perceive this downward slide, and responded by throttling back on seeker sensitive attitudes. They

realized that in some cases, the church had surrendered important scriptural ground.

But rather than dismiss seeker sensitivity altogether, church planters developed toward a logical next phase: contextualization. That meant presenting the Word of God in a context and setting recognizable to the prevailing culture without pulling any punches in the message itself. This trend to date has yielded an explosion of domestic church planting activity. Most of it has been effective in cultural settings as diverse as hipster, suburban, inner city, and rural contexts. Blessing always seems to rest upon the simple opening of the Bible, even when it includes all of the politically incorrect and cringe-worthy parts.

Plenty of new high profile ministries capture this fire. The *Gospel Coalition*, *Acts 29*, and *Sovereign Grace*, are a few that have had a tremendous influence among Christians, as well as new networks that spring into existence practically every month. These brim with youth who love to exegete the Word in the midst of missional life.

Though these discoveries and dividends are exciting, the prospect of listening to or giving messages is not likely to thrill ex-LC Movement members. Expatriates have already endured years of doctrinal repetition that created an unprofitable pseudo-reality. Those who have lived through it know that the Movement has an "eye" and "ear" disorder, that is, an unbalanced emphasis on seeing and hearing so-called spiritual things with little interest in actually being or doing them. As a result, biblical truth was leached of life, converted into outline points, and often used for combative purposes. Having departed this systematized habit, it is difficult to imagine messages once again having a place of importance in a post-LC Movement church.

And yet they must. If we hope to reach the world that exists outside the bushel covering our

assemblies, we will need to do it with coherent, directional teaching. As Paul said, “five words with my understanding” (1 Cor. 14:19), is extremely valuable to the church and its visitors. Most people expect preaching of some kind when they attend a Christian meeting and without it will feel that you are not a normal church. Instead, they may consider you a think-tank or a gathering of disillusioned people whose meeting is shaped by reactions against something in the past. Group discussion of the Word is fine, but when that is all there is to your meeting, attendants will have a difficult time connecting with a serious church consciousness.

Congregations that seek to emerge from the LC Movement will need to become acclimated to the preaching of the Word all over again. Simply laundering references to Witness Lee or the Living Stream Ministry will not be enough. A number of other detrimental issues and attitudes plague us at levels not easily detected (although visitors will definitely notice them). It is to these that we now turn our attention.

### *Selling Doctrinal Positions*

Every minister of the word hopes to influence his listeners to Christ and to a healthy spiritual life. So to some extent, we all have something to sell (or more precisely, give away). There is a place, however, where that desire becomes lopsided. Typically this occurs when a minister encounters words in Scripture that bears significance to him larger than their true contextual meaning. This loaded terminology includes words like “life” and extra biblical words such as “process,” “organic,” “recovery,” and “consummated.”

The word “economy” has taken on such proportions in Local Church circles, that it is one of the very greatest words in the entire Bible, although

the term itself is used very little in the New Testament canon. If an objective person reinserts it back into the natural flow of its context (for instance, 1 Timothy 1:4-5), minus the unwieldy status assigned it by Movement advocates, alternate ways of understanding “economy” will quickly become apparent. A responsible, Movement-immune exegesis will begin to demonstrate that “economy” does not necessarily refer to a list of truth topics specified by Witness Lee.

When ministers immediately soar off the launching pad of a word into a "bird's-eye view" of the Bible, they neglect contextual meaning, which is a no-no of basic biblical interpretation. Localized meaning gives a word its particular definition before linking it to the same word in another book.

The order of context ought to be verse, section, chapter, book, author’s writings as a whole, Genre (gospel, epistle, poetry, etc.), and Testament. Yet, well-meaning studies often touch a loaded term and then in true ADD style, fly off to another verse in a completely different Testament and genre, claiming a seamless “truth.” The teaching might be true and spiritually valuable, as responsible chain referencing sometimes demonstrates. But then again it might be just another example of someone with a *Strong’s Concordance* trying to sell a prefabricated doctrinal position.

A minister who has been over-primed toward certain words and thoughts may actually feel a moral indebtedness to elevate them far above their place in the holy writ. This typically triggers a panoramic lecture that starts in Genesis and ends in Revelation (A “Gen-Rev” study, some call it) or by making excessive claims – “This is the greatest verse in the Bible,” or “this is the greatest thought in the Bible.” Either way, hyperbole of this nature can easily come off as reckless, especially as the minister neglects

other verses that may actually contradict what he is saying or at the very least balance it.

In this situation, no matter how much the Bible is referenced, the teaching of truth stops and the selling of a view begins. It is much like words such as “gift” or “faith” or “increase” or “riches” in other Christian groups. Since the speaker has been convinced of the absolute necessity and critical nature of his thought, when he runs across a key word related to it, a torrent of passion takes him outside the natural sense of the passage and into a prepackaged thought of some kind.

The Bible does not prescribe a particular method with which to study itself, whether by crystallization, overview, topical, or exegetical means. However, when we promote a thought that is topical in nature, collected from various places and assembled, we ought to take into account the passages that are not friendly to our viewpoint. Have we done them justice or have we merely dismissed them? Have we artificially forced a harmony onto certain passages from different places in the Bible? Does a natural reading of the passage at hand say what we claim it says without “extra help” from a cherished interpretation? For centuries, Bible scholars have decried the bad habit of reading one's own meaning into a passage. They call this interpretational error "eisogesis."

I once delivered a message on the differences between exegesis (meaning to extract the interpretation from the verse), and eisogesis. I promoted exegesis as the way in which we would handle our upcoming study of Galatians and that we would not be utilizing commentaries (i.e. Life Studies). The congregation was at that time still a mixture of LSM/Midwest people. As a result of my message, an alarmed LSM loyalist reported our church as having strayed from the ministry. This drew a coded response from the LSM pulpit, warning

us about the hubris of directly handling the Bible. We ignored the warning, went ahead with our study of Galatians, and before chapter 1 was completed, the church in Columbus had gotten clear about the sick situation in the LC Movement overall. Directly applied, the Word truly is "living and operative."

When conducting a verse-by-verse exegetical study, we should seek to stick as closely as possible to the native thought of the writer. A common extreme with the gospel parables is to overwork them, assigning significance to each tiny point and sometimes even imposing an allegorical Pauline thought upon them. The interpretations of these parables in the Lord's own words are often far more simple and streamlined than the complex, clever way we try to explain them. In short, communicate what the writer conveyed without adding layers of "profundity!"

### *Group Jargon*

Understanding is a huge matter of importance to listeners. You only need to consult passages like Nehemiah 8:12 where "all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they *understood the words* that were declared to them." Honest seekers aren't impressed with Ivy League terminology; they want to know if the Word will speak to them in the native vernacular. If so, the effects can be impressive. I was first made aware of this than when a man from India approached me after a meeting, shook my hand, and then thanked me profusely for speaking the Bible in a way that he could comprehend. Over the years I heard a lot of similar reactions. Most of them came from people who had sat through LC meetings and had not understood or absorbed much of anything. In conversations with them I realized that the specialized Movement jargon that thickly punctuated

all messages and fellowship was like a wall of hawthorn bushes. Except for people who were deliberately looking for some kind of esoteric, alleged “deeper word,” typical visitors were repulsed by impenetrable terminology.

Every group has insider language. Even the New Testament itself utilizes vocabulary that requires some level of explanation to outsiders. Unfortunately, this small challenge can become greatly encumbered by a group’s additional cultural phraseology. The “recovery speak” that easily and mindlessly rolls off the tongues of LC Movement folk, exemplifies what I’m talking about. Recently I heard about an LC wedding where the speaker glowingly referred to “the one publication.” Let’s consider the setting here: Love. Two people entering a life-long covenant. In-laws. Guests. *A wedding*. Yet in the middle of it all, this bizarre reference was made to an unbiblical Movement edict. When the human brain is pickled in terminology and shallow, in-house concerns, we lose all perspective, sensitivity, and appropriate focus.

Nothing resolves the problem of excessive terms better than the requirement to define them. What does “constitution” mean and where is that principle clearly portrayed in the Bible? Why does everything “consummate” in the New Jerusalem? These things may be true, but from where did they originate? High level Movement messages routinely neglect simple explanations to these and many other questions.

Sometimes an etymology of LC terms results in dead ends. For instance the “Seven-fold Intensified Spirit” is a term that is rooted in Witness Lee’s personal interpretation of a thought in the book of Revelation. When it first appeared (presumably in the 1969 Erie conference?), it sprang fully into being with little or no explanation. Up until the past few years, no one seriously took Witness Lee to task over



it. Was the Holy Spirit really intensified? If so, does that imply He was not prepared for the challenges of church history and thus had to “rev” Himself up? Do the verses under consideration really show a “dim” Spirit that had to be brightened like a seven-way lamp? Yet because “intensification” has been repeated hundreds of times without serious challenge in the LC’s, it has today achieved “truth” status.

For a long time now, key Movement terms have become threadbare through overuse (i.e., the subject of the book of Judges is the divine dispensing, as well as Ruth, 1 Chronicles, Ephesians, etc.). When this approach to preaching begins to prevail, a predictable desensitization occurs in listeners and words begin to mean nothing. Jargon always seems to take on elastic properties, meaning everything and yet nothing. As the old joke goes—“What runs up and down trees and eats acorns? Well, it sounds like a squirrel, but I know it has to be God’s economy!”

Think about what you’re saying. If you were an outsider, would you readily understand it? By habitually asking this question, you will gradually become adept at thinking objectively. For extra feedback, have new attendees fill out an anonymous form and let one of the questions be, “Did you understand the speaker (or speakers) this morning?” Remember, don’t live under the bushel, where exclusive terminology multiplies like rabbits.

As a weekly habit, we ask all attendants to write on the back of a card what they got out of the message that morning. If too many responses come back from the twilight zone, we know we need to make adjustments. Talk real talk to a real world. The Bible itself contains difficult words and concepts that teachers need to unlock. How frustrating to outsiders when even the explanation involves puzzling lengthy explanations. Some people love

long messages and terminology, but only because they are conditioned to be that way. You might have cultivated this habit, but that is because you are one of the few that survived it! Don't make the church an environment where only the strong survive. The teaching ministry in a post-Movement church cannot afford that attitude.

Communicate in comprehensible words or at least take the time to break down dense terminology. A real master of any subject can explain it in such a way that even a child could understand. Remember: without understanding, truth does not get in.

### *Speculation*

The fact is, we don't have a lot of detail on certain things in the Bible. Even the history of the church in Acts, which in certain respects seems considerable, only offers a limited scope of available information. When we feel free to add, to fill in blanks, make proposals, or surmise, we ought to admit that is exactly what we're doing—speculating. But you can't build a message on speculation. Ministers who do so, implicitly trust themselves as being qualified to define things they can't possibly know. For instance, what was the early relationship between James, Peter, and John in Jerusalem? The available verses certainly can tell us enough to get a rough idea. But going beyond the biblical testimony and “connecting dots” might yield a highly developed picture that never really existed.

The approach of interpretation based on gut hunches will only lead listeners into the speaker's religious imagination. Plenty of spurious ideas have gained traction this way. One of them has to do with identifying Apollos as a major problem in the early church. This opinion stubbornly continues in LC circles today, even though the Bible repeatedly appraises him as a positive factor. Local Church

teaching also gives Barnabas short-shift, citing him as the unilateral cause of the split with Paul.

Although it might be fun for a speaker to indulge in speculative scenarios, it can also be a fast track into error. The work of preaching in a new church ought to remain with announcing what is clearly known. There we will find everything needed for positive spiritual development.

### *Esoteric Nonsense*

Teaching that is inner life oriented or "deeper," often falls into bad habits of its own. One of these has to do with approaching the Bible as though each word were packed with teachings about spiritual experience. When this happens, the preacher encounters a word and then plunges into depths where the writer never intended to go.

In the Midwest, a fair amount of chest thumping occurred over how many messages one could give on the word "Paul" or "in" or some other randomly selected tidbit. Such measures of spirituality seem to be a fixation of sorts for those of the inner life camp.

A while back I conducted a study on the book of Job that required reading a number of commentaries. The absolute worst was written by a famous inner life writer who had trouble putting two coherent thoughts together. The basis for her interpretation was not language or context, but *experience*. As a result, she was occupied with a desire for inward applications, which caused her writing, in my opinion, to hopelessly bog down in subjectivity. According to her handling of it, Job ceased to have a theme or a flow or even a point. Every phrase was a sermon calling us into various experiences.

A favorite LC Movement mantra was the punch line, "We just need to enjoy Christ." Although that

statement is agreeable enough, the biblical writers never repetitively boiled their point down to triteness. Neither should we. Besides, the word “enjoyment” itself has meaning that goes beyond feelings and enters the realm of functionality and purpose.

As long as we don't define what subjective ideas really mean, they remain suspended in midair, not attached to anything real. I recall a small local church that considered adding children's service to its Sunday meeting. One of the leaders sternly counseled “Just give the children Christ.” For those in the room wanting answers, this advice was completely cryptic. What did it mean? Pray-reading? No *Veggie-Tales*? The one who gave the great sounding advice had some package of concepts in mind, but probably no idea how to spell any of it out. And if he had, it might have become evident that what he had in mind was not really Christ after all.

These sayings are kept on life support through the pulpit, where we are assured that the subject of this book or this verse is the experience and enjoyment of Christ. Frustration is sure to occur when listeners are treated to a steady regimen of exhortations to “life” and “experience” and “enjoyment” without being told what any of it means. And yet this is not the worst possible effect. Inner life oversimplifications can lead to an erroneous approach to the entire Christian life. Consider this unfortunate passage from *The Resumption of Watchman Nee's Ministry*, where Witness Lee explains the superiority of “life” over scripture:

"How do you feel when you beat your wife?' [spoken to a hypothetical wife-beater]. He may say, 'After I beat my wife, I feel terrible inside for a week.' I will then tell him, 'If you feel that you will feel comfortable inside by beating your wife, you can go ahead and beat her some more.' I will not tell him not to beat his wife. Instead, I will ask him how he

feels inside. If this brother is touched by God, he will feel deep within that he has offended God.

You can teach others from the Bible, and you can exhort others with your theology. But if you do this, you are not the disciple of Christ; you are the disciple of Confucius instead. By so doing, you will never convey God's life to people. This is a pitiful work." (Nee & Lee, Vol. 1, p. 130).

This passage demonstrates a thoroughgoing commitment to subjective feelings that could lead anywhere, and it has...court actions, divisions, lies, and cover-ups. No doubt Lee's followers will say that this quote was taken out of context, yet it is difficult to imagine it being defensible in any context.

The Apostle John was perhaps the most spiritually mature of all the apostles but he never said if "life" is okay with beating your brother, then do it. He said if you hate your brother you walk in darkness. No amount of haggling over what life has to say about it would have changed his assertion.

When inner life groups pit experience against healthy doctrine, it is a false dichotomy. True spiritual life always takes us into the living application of scripture. It never encourages us to set aside God's Word, much less to contradict it.

Spiritual experience is important. No one wants cold servings of head knowledge week after week. We are, after all, hoping to arrive at relational excellence with God as embodied in the Great Commandment. However, the Scriptures are not the enemy of spiritual experience; they narrate, describe, confirm, and promise it. Therefore it serves our purpose well to properly exegete the Bible and render it the full respect due its exalted place as the written Word of God.

## *“Red Flag” Phraseology*

This subsection might have just as easily been entitled “How to Run Off First Time Visitors.” Here are a few ways:

- Say that man is becoming God.
- Condemn or mock other Christians, even in jest.
- Say that the church or biblical truth or the experience of Christ was lost and now your group has “recovered it.”
- Tell them that Satan lives in them (the fallen archangel himself; not just the sin nature).
- Keep over-referencing Brother so-and-so.

These and many other pet ideas or bad habits were normal fodder in old, traditional local churches. However, they will be red flags in the new churches of today, as our pulpits are exposed to community gaze. You can expect that statements which got a rousing chorus of “Amens” in the past will be greeted with stony silence and raised eyebrows. Even if we have disassociated ourselves from the Movement camp for years already, our lingering sympathies with extremes of LC thought can surface, marked by a statement or a point of emphasis in our teaching. These sharply objectionable ideas tell a listener, especially an educated one, that behind our words may lie an iceberg of error.

Let’s dissect a pinnacle concept belonging to the LC Movement. The phrase “God became man that man might become God in life and nature” rings immediately suspicious to the point that it all but eclipses its caveat—“but not in the godhead.” This doctrine has been loudly trumpeted as the highest truth in the universe, presumably with the support of certain church fathers. However, it is theology that will most likely never be accepted as orthodox

among Christians in North America today. In fact, it bears enough passing resemblance to the Mormon doctrine of men becoming gods, that even a beginning apologist would challenge it.

Without a doubt, popularity should not be a factor in determining biblical truth. So, instead of appearing to weigh this teaching on the scale of a mere majority vote, we ought to dwell on a few other considerations.

For one, if the Apostles saw Witness Lee's high peak, why did they not come right out and say it with the same formulaic certainty that he said it? Instead, the official explanation for the "God became, Man became" statement comes from a mosaic of verses that have been recruited for the questionable goal of deification. Usually these are lumped into thoughts having to do with the second birth (John 3:5-6), then the transformation of the soul (2 Cor. 3:18, et. al.), and finally, the glorification of the body (Phil. 3:21, et. al.). The sum total of these three steps, fairly speaking, is that a believer receives spiritual life, changes in accordance with God's holy nature, and enters into glory.

But LSM teachers take the extra step when they describe this as "*becoming God* in life and nature." It doesn't sound like much of a leap, but apparently it is. The Apostles wrote the verses cited above, but never summed them up as "becoming God in life and nature." They had all the component truths, but for some reason refused to assemble them in such a way that the outcome was our becoming God. We shouldn't discount this omission as inconsequential.

Much to the contrary of claiming to be divine, Peter refused to be called anything more than a man in his famous disclaimer that "I also am a man" (Acts 10:26) and Paul's claim to be "men of like passions with you" (Acts 14:15). The most that can be coaxed out of the Apostle John was that "We will be like Him" (1 John 3:2). He did not say we would *be* Him

in any sense—whether life or nature or the godhead. John wouldn't go there. Instead, he wrote, "We do not know what we shall be." Movement gurus, on the other hand, assure us that they know. Their certainty and clarity seems to go far beyond the ken of the canonical writers.

Where Lee could not find crystalline corroboration from the apostles, he resorted to extracting it from the opinions of church fathers. Yes, the fathers are valuable resources, but they are not authoritative in matters of doctrine. Nor do they always shine in their theological conclusions.

Obviously church history has employed terminology and phraseology that the Apostles did not use—"the trinity," for example. The adoption of these terms however, followed rigorous debate and examination from all sides. No one group or individual was allowed a free pass in coining new theological vocabulary or teaching it in the Christian public. Those who tried to bypass the check and balance of the Body of Christ at large and make their personal "light" into official doctrine were either denounced as heretics or dismissed as fools.

There is something in all of this for teachers of the Bible to learn: be happy with what is clearly disclosed in the Word. A cardinal weakness of the ancient Gnostics was their apparent boredom with simple truths and their desire to find something more profound. As a result, those who had been attracted to the Christian faith and had Gnostic proclivities, consistently went beyond what was written. Predictably, they were always discovering some new revelation or hidden knowledge.

In saying this I am not suggesting that Witness Lee was a Gnostic. However, there is an unconscious hope within some serious Bible expositors to uncover a new radical thought—to contribute a revelation that will revolutionize the church. This ambition can be dangerous. As some



have said, “Innovative theology is the first cousin of heresy.” If the teacher in question has arrived at erroneous conclusions, his light can be terribly damaging to the group he leads.

There are still further considerations that need to be taken into account. Sometimes things of God that are supremely spiritual, deep, profound, and true are not to be uttered (2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 10:4). Bible teachers must ask themselves about the advisability of saying things, inventing phrases, coining terms, and making hypotheses, even if the concepts touched upon are possibly true. What will be the effect upon those who hear? What will be the fallout from those who do not understand? In fact, will misunderstanding this “deeper truth” somehow lead to subtle perversions of the simpler, plainer fully revealed gospel? Will it lead to suggestions that the gospel already entrusted to us is actually shallow?

For years I heard the praises of “the high peak of the divine revelation.” Not wishing to be overly pragmatic, I withheld judgment. Eventually, though, I did have to ask what was the revolutionary effect that the teaching bestowed upon those who believed it. Having watched the lives of people who were the most zealous for it, and comparing them to the lives of other Christians I knew, I couldn’t see anything necessarily superior.

Advanced truth should alter our living and bring us into closer conformity to Christ. Until this day I have not seen any sort of example from high peak proponents that is higher, better, or more advanced than Christians who model the simple Christian living shown in the New Testament. In fact, I have seen some of the worst behavior in those who claim to have Cadillac versions of truth— everything from cronyism to political machinations to power struggles. Multi-syllabic words are not magic. Neither are startling, formulaic utterances.

## *Have a Meeting, Not a Marathon*

I sat in a meeting once where a so-called Blended Brother ascended the podium and noted his time. He then jokingly asked, “Do you know what it means when a minister checks his watch before speaking? Absolutely nothing.” For some ministers that is true. The proverbial sermon that never ends doesn’t care about time allotments or glazed-over eyes. Such messages are delivered based on sloppy preparation, inflated self-importance, insensitivity, confusion about burden, or poor self-discipline. That was exactly what we had to endure that morning as the speaker joyfully regurgitated outline points that we all already knew.

Unfortunately, such messages are like kryptonite to the uninitiated. If the hapless visitor wasn’t sure about the importance of church attendance before, then he is certainly clear now...that it is preferable to sleep at home in bed than in a chair at the meeting. Obviously people with an LC background have been conditioned to sit for long periods, soaking up information and many of them are glad to do so. But in the world outside, things are different. People have not been routinely taught to suspend the grueling sense of marathon which comes with meandering messages.

In considering the length of your message, factor in the congregation itself (maturity levels and demographic—some foreign countries are more tolerant of lengthy meetings, but not those in North America), consider your spirit (At what point does the life supply stop—20 minutes, 30 minutes or 45?), consider the situation (needs in the church and at home), and consider the subject matter (where will this take everyone?).

If you are not a gifted speaker, please acknowledge that. Don’t try to force yourself into the place of a preacher. There are ways around the

limitations that come from not having big time ministry. For one, have “little-time” ministry, instead. Keep it short, more in the vein of an introductory word than a fully developed thought. You can also make the meeting more input oriented with a few others adding content to supplement what you have to say.

As to complexity, please, no 27 point outlines! Most people off the street will not show up with highlighters and sponge memories. Conventional wisdom on the subject states that the average church goer who was actively engaged in listening on Sunday morning will have already forgotten 57% of what he heard by that afternoon. In another 24 hours, that margin will have grown to 80%. By the end of the week, he will only remember an amusing anecdote about how the minister's cat fell into the washing machine. Knowing this, you will want to use your time wisely and only try to make one or two solid points.

### *So What?*

Disconnected doctrine is for seminarians and academics, not for the guy next door. Notice I didn't say doctrine, but *disconnected* doctrine. That means doctrine that has not been associated with any kind of real significance. The speaker has left it simply as a thing to know.

Pay attention to the relevance of your messages. And please also note that this is not the same as the relevance so eagerly embraced by pulpits today--that the meaning of the word itself has to do with topics such as losing weight, starting a business, or coping with difficult kids. It is true that scriptural wisdom can be brought to bear on these and a thousand other items. But pack the preaching calendar with such things, and the church will begin to sound more like a life skills class than “the pillar and base

of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:16). Motivational speaking and encouragement is fine, yet we must all remember that the theme of divine redemptive passion dominates the scriptures. All other topics are only associated items.

What would you think if someone read a history of the world from 1940-1945 and their takeaway was that it was all about improvements in the newspaper industry, better nylon stockings, and the addition of new ice cream flavors? Naturally you’d conclude that the reader missed what had been driving the entire globe at that time—World War II!

Relevance means making clear why that a point or passage is important. What difference does John 3:16 really make? Who cares if the Holy Spirit is a Person rather than a force field? Why do we need to know the parts of man? Our job is to show the relevance *of* the Bible, not to find something more relevant *than* the Bible.

Probably none of the New Testament exists simply to showcase theological ideas. Just about everything occurs in a context of related needs either current or future. Be aware that words shared in meetings will seem to go into the air when they have no apparent connection to the varied necessities of spiritual life. Neither will recycled doctrinal adages and formulas render any comfort to the man on the street.

Back in 1999, we were preaching a series that took us to the book of Genesis. That was the weekend after the Columbine shootings. A woman came to the meeting that day quite shaken over the event. She told me that she was looking for answers. I wish we would have postponed or at least altered the study for the meeting. Not only she, but the entire nation had been distressed about the killings, and it seemed appropriate to offer some kind of commentary on it. Unfortunately I was still somewhat under the Movement mindset that cuts off emotional connections to the outside world. I could

have scored a number of important theological points that morning. Instead, I made one lame, passing reference to Columbine and kept going.

It made me realize that sometimes people attend Christian meetings not only because they're curious or desiring some biblical education, but because they're looking for answers, angles on painful or puzzling things. It doesn't pay to habitually ignore the world around us and only care for our Bible study plan. That habit makes it appear that the church has no power to process current events and no truth to apply to any of it.

### *Stop Being Needlessly Combative*

The LC Movement has become notorious for its denigration of Christianity concepts. It honestly believes that launching into critiques against the idea of going to heaven or use of the word "pastor" is a defense of the gospel. However, real spiritual depth doesn't feel the need to obsessively correct utterances. Instead, it takes people into exciting, helpful new places in the Christian life.

The psychological constitution of Movement people react with visceral dislike to phrases like "community church" for one chief reason. Group conditioning has occurred. Even inside the Movement, an emphasis on "speaking the same thing" has literally devastated the landscape, with some being accused of speaking differently, others of speaking the words of the ministry without the spirit of the ministry, etc. Where such damage has been inflicted upon one another, how will outsiders fare?

The LC standard of speaking the same thing of course, was not modeled by John, Paul, or Peter, the principle writers of the New Testament. Although they held the same truth, they did not carbon copy one another's terminology nor did they strive toward it as a goal. Instead, religious sects down through

the centuries have utilized this parroting benchmark, including the LC Movement. Its fruit becomes clear in the compulsive need to correct the idea of "going to church," or when people mention "the ministry" in a way that has nothing to do with Witness Lee. Unless you want to make enemies and slam doors before people even have a chance to walk through them, plan to eliminate conflicts over semantics.

*Create Community, Not Just Classroom*

Although this chapter addresses teaching, I advise aiming to create community in the church, not just classroom. Local Church culture delights in utterances, outlines, and teachings. Its very existence is bound up in those things. But the Bible speaks of the church as a household (Eph. 2:20)—a redeemed family environment. Raising up such community is terribly difficult and requires the vigorous living out of love, compassion, forgiveness, and longsuffering. Living out, that is—not getting clear on an outline point about the “god-man living.”

All of God’s children need a home. If the church is true to its description in the New Testament, it will be a place for every believer. Its motivations will be more than just academic, because some Christians will never gravitate to books and conferences. Their passion may involve works, services, giving, praying, or preaching the gospel, but not memorizing and shouting phraseology.

Witness Lee himself wrote hymn 851 about the church. It contains the line, “Even the sparrow finds a home, and swallow there prepares her nest.” Yet as much as the church has been celebrated in Movement circles as being home, and "where we've ended our search," its militant attitudes about doctrine and teaching have managed to create the opposite feeling.

As we go forward into new church environments, let us use the milk of the word to nourish the believers and not as something in which to cook them. We will become blessings to God's people as we strive with an earnest and genuine desire to feed them guileless food.

### *Some Personal Recommendations*

In addition to being faithful servants who give the house of God its "food at the proper time," (Matt. 24:45), all of us need help cooking. Where will this come from? On a closing note, I recommend taking a long break from footnotes and Life-Studies. If you don't, you will never give yourself a chance to minister outside of the Movement box. Instead, you will continue to recycle some of the bad habits I have just written about. Read some contemporary books (or even classics). Albert Barnes has become a favorite among us when we prepare messages and occasionally need to get "unstuck." No, Barnes is not our replacement Witness Lee, but he handled verses contextually and did not have an axe to grind with the rest of the Christian world.

There are a lot of study Bibles available today. My reigning favorite at the moment is the English Standard Version study Bible with tons of notes (by different authors) and color graphs. I don't agree with every thing I read there, but then again, I don't have to. Neither do you. Unfortunately, though, for decades many of us were under the impression that we needed to agree with everything a ministry said for it to have legitimacy.

A lot of excellent young writers have come up in the last 10 years. Ministries like "the Resurgence" and publishers like Crossway (the publisher of ESV) have given a platform from which these new voices can talk to the world. Try them, but please remember that for decades your palette was set to

appreciate a particular ministerial fare. It will take time to acquire a new taste.

Even within the Bible, you may want to switch up your preferred writer and genre. Rather than Paul, how about John for a change or Peter or even Jude? Rather than an epistle, how about a gospel? Instead of the New Testament, how about something in the Old? We recently conducted a Bible study covering the book of Job. It was challenging, to say the least!

There's a lot of benefit in listening to the messages of accomplished Christian communicators as well. Though all may not equally reach you, some effective evangelicals are Andy Stanley, Charles Stanley, Mark Driscoll, C.J. Mahaney, John Piper, Tim Keller, Tullian Tchividjian, Matt Chandler, Mark Dever, Mark Batterson, Greg Laurie, Ravi Zacharias, Don Carson, and scores of others. Most of these are freely available online.

As to message preparation and delivery, books can also be helpful. Although there are many, here are a few I have recently read that seem especially insightful:

- *Communicating for a Change.* Andy Stanley. Dwells on the idea of topical preaching to the needs of listeners and how to deliver messages that can easily be followed.
- *The Passion-Driven Sermon.* James Shaddix. Marches to the beat of strictly exegetical preaching, trusting that the Bible will answer all needs if it is preached line upon line.
- *Preaching to a Post-Everything World.* Zack Eswine. Enters the philosophy of message preparation and how communicators today can avoid pitfalls of preaching to post-modern audiences.

These three books have slightly divergent points of view and will at times contradict each other. However, together they offer a balanced approach



that will enrich anyone hoping to minister to congregations.