

The Pastor as... Aware of the Times

Fulfilling the Charge to Teach Sound Doctrine

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“For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”

– 2 Timothy 4:3-4

1. “Myths” will be a problem in the church until Jesus comes again.
2. Theology can become a way of expressing and justifying our own sinful desires.
3. People need and will seek out teaching and teachers—the real issue remains truth vs. myths.

Pastors and teaching elders have a responsibility to guard the people of God from false teaching. This involves protecting them from falsehood that arises from within their own minds and hearts, and from errors that come from without. Today, as never before, we are exposed to all sorts of ideas, some good and some not so good. The same technol-

ogy that facilitates communication and the rapid dissemination of ideas can easily become a conduit for the good, the bad, and the ugly.

In this presentation I want to make you aware of various hotspots that need to be addressed by pastors and church leaders. This is not the place, nor is there time to thoroughly describe and respond to all of the issues I will raise. My modest goal is to increase your awareness, or to change the metaphor, to put on the agenda issues that I believe should be studied, understood, and where necessary, rebutted in light of the scriptures as traditionally understood by the church for the past 2000 years.

This is not to say that all the questions have been answered and we have everything figured out. Nor is it to suggest that Christians see eye-to-eye on everything. Our understanding and exposition of the truth continues to grow and mature. But there is a Christian consensus that has developed over time and is expressed in our creeds and confessions and statements of faith. And we have a responsibility to articulate the truth in a way that is aware of and consistent with the understanding of those who have gone

before. If we modify or depart from the teaching of previous generations of Christians it must only be because the proper interpretation of the scriptures demand such modification or departure.

As we study and teach the scriptures we must also be conscious of the subtle temptation to pander to the spirit of our age, and to appear wise in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. We must also remember that the truth of the gospel is foolishness to those devoid of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14) and that persecution is part of genuine Christian experience (Matthew 5:11-12; 2 Timothy 3:12). While these realities should never be an excuse to hide behind poor exegesis or lame arguments, or to duck trouble, they remind us that the truth must first come home to our own hearts by God's power and that it will not be appreciated by large numbers of people in this age or any other unless God is gracious.

For the purposes of this presentation I am going to organize my comments using the traditional categories of systematic theology. That is, I will start with issues of Bibliology, and then move to Theology proper, followed by Anthropology, Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology. You will observe that I have left out important categories like Prolegomena and Soteriology, not because there are no important issues clustered around these areas of study, but simply because of time, overlap between topics and relevance to the present situation as I understand it.

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1. Issues relating to the Bible and its interpretation.

a. Creation Issues.

None of the issues I will raise are new but they need to be studied and addressed in our day otherwise we give the impression that we are out of touch with our world, or we will leave our people vulnerable to the insidious suggestion of our opponents that we really do not have answers to the questions being asked.

(1) *Days, ages, framework.* What happened in the beginning? What is described in the opening chapters of Genesis? Did God create the world and all that is in it in six 24 hours "days?" Do the "days" represent long ages of time—which is more in keeping with current scientific theory—during which things developed under that guidance of God? Or is the whole creation account a "literary framework" in which we are being told about the creation of the universe from a theological point of view? (Cf. *The G3N3S1S Debate*, edited by David G. Hagopian. 3 views of Genesis 1 and 2 presented by J. Ligon Duncan III / David W. Hall; Hugh Ross/Gleason L. Archer; Meredith G. Kline/Lee Irons).

In this debate it is not enough to assert and reassert our position. We need to interact with other Christian and evangelical positions and say why we think our position is correct and why the others are wrong. Like all the other issues I will mention in this presentation, this does not mean that we ride these matters like a hobbyhorse. It simply means that we must speak with an awareness of other

ideas and present our position over against rival views when required by the text or the topic we are teaching.

(2) *The historicity of Adam.* One reason for the importance of the creation debate is the historicity of Adam. Was Adam the first man, or was he just a symbolic, mythological representation of the human race? Scholars debate what is figurative and what is not in the opening chapters of Genesis. When the text says that God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life obviously there is some degree of anthropomorphism since God does not have hands or a mouth. But does this mean that there was not a first man named “Adam” who was made by the special creative activity of God? Recently, [in a video clip available on YouTube](#) OT scholar Tremper Longman III, who taught for 18 years at Westminster Seminary and is now the Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies at Westmount College, expressed his own personal belief that Genesis 1 and 2 did not necessitate a historical Adam. However, the problem with a non-historical Adam is that “he” destroys the apparent contrast between Adam and Christ which Paul draws upon to teach some important truths about the imputation of sin (Romans 5:12-21) and the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-58). A non-historical Adam also forces us to reinterpret the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:4-6 dealing with marriage and divorce, and Paul’s teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:31. Furthermore, Paul’s instruction about the roles of men and women is predicated on the historicity of Adam and Eve and their fall into sin that took place in historical space and time (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

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(3) *The Bible and Science.* Creation issues involving the age of the universe and how God created the world are all part of the larger issue of the relationship between the Bible and science. Pastors are not scientists (as a rule) nor should they attempt to pass themselves off such. But we do need to be aware of the claims of science especially when those claims call into question orthodox interpretations of the Bible. If we are unaware, or appear unaware, we may inadvertently perpetuate the notion that there is a divide between faith and real life, and give credence to the charge that faith is troubled by facts and only flourishes in the realm of the irrational. We must be clear that this is not the Christian position. We believe that reason is a gift of God. The creator gave us minds so that we could think his thoughts after him. We do not believe that reality is ultimately irrational because we believe God is all wise and consistent in all his ways. What we reject is rationalism. We do not believe that we can make sense of reality on our own apart from divine revelation. We understand the limits of reason. We are limited because we are finite creatures and further limited because of our sinfulness which complicates our epistemological problems. Today, however, some Christians argue that science is just as much “God’s book” as the Bible. Based on their reading of a passage like Psalm 19 they suggest that science must correct our interpretations of scripture just as the scriptures should inform our scientific conclusions. If our interpretations in either realm cancel out the other, then one or both are wrong and we need

to return to the conceptual drawing board. This raises important questions about the relationship between “general” and “special” revelation. Are they equivalent? Are the conclusions of science as true as the Bible? While reason is required to make sense of both “books” and fallen reason at that, is the creation as reliable a witness to the existence and nature and works of God as the inspired, inerrant word? Historically, the best theological thinking has favoured the latter, we need to understand *why* today.

b. The Bible Itself.

Few doctrines are more basic to historic Christianity than the belief that the Bible is the written word of God. We believe that God used 40 authors over a period of 1500 years to write exactly what he wanted to say. The Bible is a miracle. It is the result of the supernatural activity of God. This is the only way that sinful human beings could have been involved without it being full of errors. Without in any way violating the freedom of the human authors or the uniqueness of their personalities we believe that God carried them along that what they wrote is nothing less than the word of God (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21). While we believe this, and most people in our churches understand it at some level, we need to expound this doctrine in 3 areas.

(1) *The Uniqueness of the Bible.* The Bible is in a category by itself. It is not just one of many religious books that chronicle the human religious experience, it is the word of God. “Tell me something new,” you say! If any of your people watch the National Geographic or the Discovery Channels (and if you do not know what those are you are not prepared to minister in this

culture) or if they watch Christmas and Easter “Specials” on network television they will be confronted with expert scholarly opinion which relativizes the uniqueness of the Bible. Or if they go into Chapters-Indigo and check out the “Christian” section they will find books written by Bart Ehrman with titles like these: *The Lost Gospel of Judas: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed; Misquoting Jesus: Who Changed the Bible and Why; The Apocryphal Gospel: Text and Translations; Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend; Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into the New Testament; Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew.* Ehrman is one of a slew of authors who are publishing books like these. What all of these books have in common is that they minimize or destroy the uniqueness of the

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Bible. They do it by raising questions about the integrity of the Bible and the Christian faith as it has been passed down to us. They tell us that the Bible we have today is the result of a religious power-play in which certain

books were constituted the word of God by the church and other books were excluded for a variety of reasons. Once this idea is planted in the heart the authority and credibility of the Bible is damaged.

(2) *How did we get our Bibles? And what is meant by inerrancy? How do we interpret the Bible?* These questions must be addressed given the attack on the uniqueness of the Bible. Most Christians, even those who have been Christians for many years, have no idea how we got our 66-book Bible. The Bible did not fall out of heaven in its present form. Nor was it created by a church council. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament for good reason. The “canon” or,

list of books that belong in the Bible, and the historical development of the canon, is something that Christians need to know. If they did they would not fall prey to Dan Brown's specious arguments in the Da Vinci Code or anywhere else.

The other fact about the Bible that is not well understood is inerrancy. While the term is not found in the Bible the concept is clearly taught as a corollary of the fact that the Bible claims to be the word of God who cannot lie. Inerrancy needs to be understood in light of different literary genres, non-scientific descriptions of reality, less precise standards of measurement, and a host of other things. We need to teach people the difference between what Kevin Vanhoozer calls "thick" and "thin" interpretation, and we need to teach them to read the Bible along 3 horizons, i.e., the textual, epochal and canonical horizons (cf. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Evangelical Theology*). Some knowledge of the form in which the biblical texts have come to us and textual criticism would also be very helpful.

(3) *Near East documents and Bible*. Near East documents is part of the larger issue of extrabiblical documents and the Bible. The use of extrabiblical documents to help us understand the Bible is not a problem as long as those documents are not put on a par with the scriptures. There are lots of things that can help us understand the Bible better including archaeology, geographical studies, material written around the same time, and the comments of non-biblical authors about events mentioned in the Bible. The problem comes when the Bible is interpreted to fit the extrabiblical data even when the interpretation does not square with the biblical data alone. For

example, Tremper Longman III tells us that the biblical creation account is an apologetic against other pagan accounts of creation that existed in the ancient world. This is undoubtedly true. But then he goes further and suggests that the biblical account does not necessitate a historical Adam. This is problematic. Whatever is going on apologetically in the text of Genesis the rest of the Bible interprets Genesis 1 and 2 as real history that tells us about Adam, the first man, whose fall had disastrous consequences for the human race and whose representative headship is inversely analogous to that of Jesus Christ. Moreover, historic Christianity has always believed in the sufficiency of scripture. This means that what God has told us in the Bible all that we need to know to be saved from our sins and to live for his glory until we see Jesus face to face. There are many things that we do not know and have not been told in the Bible.

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But what has been revealed is enough for now. This is true even if we have no access to Near Eastern documents, or information about Second Temple Judaism, or a modern Study Bible. All of these sources can be helpful. But none are essential. And interpretations that depend upon them, because they cannot be clearly established from the text of scripture alone, should be held cautiously and tentatively; while interpretations that contradict the plain meaning of the biblical text must be rejected. In the end, God's word is in a category by itself and does not require external data to validate it or give it authority.

c. *The Beyond the Bible Debate.*

This is a hermeneutical debate. (See: *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*,

edited by Stanley N. Gundry). At issue is whether or not the Bible is a “living document.” Hebrews 4:12 affirms that the “word of God is alive and active” but this is not what the “Beyond the Bible” debate is about. Those who boldly talk about going beyond the Bible in a way that is problematic conceive of the Bible as a living document that yields new interpretations as time goes on. According to their hermeneutic the Bible meant one thing in the past but may mean something different today. They further believe that the scriptures require us to follow the trajectory of the text and the leading of the Spirit and that when they do so they are being more biblical and obedient than the rest of us.

William Webb’s, *Women, Slaves and Homosexuals*, and I. H. Marshall’s, *Beyond the Bible*, are examples of this kind of theorizing. In response to their approach we need to make sure that our interpretations of scripture are correct and fine tune our positions if necessary as new information becomes available. We must also work hard to apply the scriptures to the issues that confront us today in a way that is relevant to the times in which we live. But it is one thing to fine tune our doctrinal formulations and to apply the text in new and fresh ways to our generation, it is another to reverse traditional positions just because they do not fit with what is politically correct or fail to correspond with popular secular beliefs or naturalistic dogma.

Generally speaking, talk of going “beyond the Bible” ought to make us shutter. It is indicative of pathetic state of evangelicalism that those who do so are still regarded as evangelicals! To counteract

this hermeneutical madness we need a good dose of biblical theology which traces the plan of God through the Bible from its mysterious beginnings to its ultimate and glorious consummation in Jesus Christ and the new heavens and earth he will establish. Christians must be taught how to read their Bibles and shown how the various parts of the Bible fit together. Those who advocate a “beyond the Bible

approach” take advantage of the appalling ignorance that too often exists in both the pulpit and the pew when it comes to putting the pieces of the biblical meta-narrative together in a way that climaxes in Jesus Christ. They love to pit Bible verses against Bible verses and the Old Testament

against the New Testament in an attempt to gain traction for their views. Consequently we must teach people how to interpret their Bible even if we never use the word “hermeneutics!”

2. Issues relating to Theology.

a. Theology.

(1) *The new atheism.* When it comes to the doctrine of God there is always something to talk about. In recent years we have seen a very public and vicious attack come from a radicalized atheism. These so-called “new atheists” are determined to discredit all religions, particularly ones considered fundamentalist, and to show that religion is the cause of many of the world’s ills. Their motto is best captured in the slogan “There’s probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy your life!” We know from the Bible that atheists are self-deceived and sinful because Psalm 14:1 tells us that “Fools say in their hearts,

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'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good." The apostle Paul confirms David's testimony when he writes in Romans 1:18-32 about the knowledge that human beings have of God as their invisible, powerful and divine creator. In verse 32 Paul makes the amazing statement that "although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these things but also approve of those who practice them." Consequently, the new atheism will never gain much ground because people know inside that there is more to life than what they can see with their eyes, hear with their ears and touch with their hands.

Nevertheless, the new atheism reminds us that there could well be trouble ahead for us as Christians. In this part of the world we have had it relatively easy during my lifetime. But that may change. We need to prepare people for persecution. We need to help them see that this world could turn against us, and that one day it will, if we live to see the end of the age.

(2) *The providence of God.* In my lifetime there has been a recovery of the doctrine of the sovereign rule of God. I can remember a time when it was hardly mentioned, but now it has become commonplace in many churches. This is not to say that the doctrine is common. It is a gloriously reassuring truth calculated to humble, encourage and inspire, and we should continue to proclaim it as it is presented in the Bible. However, to proclaim God's sovereign, providential rule accurately in today's world we need to set it over against naturalistic interpretations of history like the one advocated by Pulitzer Prize winning

author Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Diamond argues that world history can be explained in terms of geography without any reference to a divine being. It is a fascinating and frustrating book that is rabidly anti-theistic. While full of interesting insights it fails to banish God because the biblically informed reader can see God's hand in history even when Diamond cannot. Nonetheless, if we are preaching on the sovereign providence of God we need to show an awareness of

Diamond's work, even if we never quote it, so we can counter its influence and bring glory to the God who reigns over all.

(3) *The holiness, justice and goodness of God.* There has probably never been a time

when these three attributes of God have not been called into question by sinful people. Today is no exception. However today human antipathy to these doctrines is seen in the teachings of universalism, annihilationism, and the rejection of penal substitution.

Universalism is the idea that everyone will be saved in the end, or at least those who sincerely practice their religion will be saved. "How could God be good and do anything else?" they ask.

Annihilationism is the belief that those who are not saved will cease to exist. It is a rejection of the concept of eternal punishment. It is based on the idea that it would be unjust for God to punish forever human sin, no matter how evil.

Penal substitution is based on a traditional understanding of the holiness of God that cannot look on sin. God is superlatively holy and he cannot forgive sin as if it did not happen. There is no cosmic rug under which he can hide it. Sin must be

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atoned for. The holiness and justice of God demands it. The sticking point for many today is the goodness of God. How can God be good and demand the death of his Son? Surely this is a barbaric form of child abuse! But no matter how caring and sentimental this might sound at first blush it betrays an ignorance of the holiness, justice and goodness of God. Sin is serious and God is holy. Therefore, sin must be atoned for in a very particular way. Not just anyone can take our place. We need a substitute who is both God and man. We need a willing substitute who meets all the demands of God and who is able to bear our sins away. Thankfully, this is what we have in the Lord Jesus Christ, the ultimate expression of God's love among other things.

If we do not come to God through him we will perish in our sins. Perishing in the Bible is not cessation of existence but separation from the presence of God forever. Nothing could be worse. Such is the horror of our rebellion and the complications caused by sin that only Jesus can provide atonement for our sins and bring us back to God.

3. Issues relating to Anthropology, Christology and Pneumatology.

a. Anthropology.

It continues to be important to teach people where they came from, why they are here, and who they are accountable to. Otherwise they will not understand who they are, the meaning of life, and where guilt comes from. The Bible tells us that human beings are special among God's creation because they are made in his image. This is what sets us apart from the rest

of God's creatures. This explains our mental, physical, social and spiritual capacities. We are not at the top of the food chain by chance. We are incurably religious because we were made for God. We have dignity and value. And yet because of the fall we are twisted and capable of committing shocking sins.

A proper doctrine of man undergirds what the Bible says about marriage and the roles of men and women. It is necessary to understand why we need a saviour

who is both God and man. Issues such as abortion and euthanasia also turn on what it means to be a human being made in the image of God, as does a proper sense of self-esteem. This is another reason why we must deal with the opening chapters of Genesis very carefully. If we reduce them to the realm of myth, they say little of any real significance about the creation of human beings, their fall into sin, and the task that God has given them. We desperately

need God's perspective on these vital matters today.

b. Christology.

Once again the deity of Christ has been mocked and ridiculed. Books and movies like Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, portray Jesus as a first century Jew who was remarkable in his own way but certainly not the divine Son of God. I think we are going to see increasing pressure to compromise at this point. The religions of the world can come together and can agree on many things. But the Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God and therefore the way, the truth and the life is completely unacceptable. If he were just a prophet or religious teacher there would be no problem. But Jesus Christ's absolute uniqueness as the

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God-man puts him in a category by himself and makes it impossible for Christians to compromise this doctrine. We need to make sure that our people understand the biblical teaching about the person and work of Christ. The biblical presentation is rich and multifaceted and this is one area of truth that all Christians should thoroughly grasp and be able to communicate to others.

c. Pneumatology.

The procession of the Spirit from the Father and from the Son. In this regard see Wayne Grudem's helpful summary of "The Filioque Clause" (*Systematic Theology*, 246-247). Although the biblical evidence is slim it is correct to say that the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son, and not just from the Father as in earlier editions of the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325 and 381; it was altered in the A.D. 589 edition). This is not a reference to the creation of the Spirit but to the way the members of the Trinity relate to one another. We must be careful speculating about eternal relationships within the Godhead because we know so very little about such things. But it is in keeping with the analogy of scripture to argue from what we know about how the three persons of the Godhead as they relate to one another *in time* to how they relate to one another *in eternity*. In historical time we are told that the Spirit is sent by Christ from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father (John 15:26). And while John 14:26 speaks about the Father sending the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name, in John 16:7 Jesus says that he will send him. This may seem like a tempest in a theological teapot but it is not. It is important that the Holy Spirit be linked to the Father and the Son because otherwise the door is opened for the mystical worship of God by means of the Spirit that bypasses the Son. And in more recent years some inclusivists (those

who believe that God's salvation includes everyone) have suggested that the original wording of the Nicene Creed may make it possible for someone to have a Spirit led relationship with God that knows nothing of Jesus Christ, at least initially. This is absurd. It is inconceivable that the Holy Spirit, who is called the Spirit of Christ in Romans 8:9, and who is described as another Advocate who comes in the place of Christ, would lead anyone to God the Father apart from a knowledge of Jesus Christ. As difficult as it is to answer the question "why doesn't God save everyone?" we must be clear that inclusivism is not a biblical option. There is no salvation apart from Jesus. Jesus is the only one who was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. He alone is God come in human flesh. Only he lived a sinless life and died an atoning death on the cross. And only he rose from the dead on the third day. There can be no negotiation at this point. These are matters of life and death. Let God be true and every man a liar.

4. Issues relating to Ecclesiology.

a. "McChurches" and the new denominationalism.

We are living in a new day when it comes to traditional Christian denominations. Old label such as Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Christian Reformed, and Baptist have given way to new denominations that are tied to the ministry of a particular individual or group. What sets these new denominations apart from more traditional ones, and from each other, is not so much doctrine but ministry style. On one level this is quite benign. People come and people go and ways of doing church also vary from time to time and place to place. Since there is freedom in the new covenant to order church life within the boundaries established by scripture we should expect, allow for and celebrate variety when it

comes to how churches are organized and how they carry out their distinctive ministries.

However, there needs to be a balance between elder rule and congregational involvement. Too much power concentrated in the hands of a few dominant, charismatic leaders will only spell trouble down the road. Such a system may be initially efficient, and if the leaders are good men, churches and groups of churches can develop and move ahead quickly. But over the long haul leaders need to be accountable to the congregation and vice versa.

Furthermore, young leaders need to be encouraged to learn from others but not slavishly imitate them. We desperately need *leaders* today, not just theological clones. We need those called by God to lead his church and to do so by using the gifts and abilities he has given them. What works in one area may not work in another. We need men who understand as a result of prayerful study what God has called them to do and who then pour all of their energies into completing the task assigned to them by the head of the church. It is good to have heroes of the faith as long as we do not stop thinking for ourselves and cultivating our own walk with God.

Every church is unique and churches change with every person who comes and goes. We need leaders who understand that and who seek from the Lord the wisdom, strength and patience to shepherd the flock of God over which he has given them responsibility.

b. Topical expository preaching.

There has been a return to expository preaching in many evangelical pulpits that

is wonderful. As ministers of the gospel we have no authority or power if we ignore or neglect or depart from the biblical text. The scriptures should be read privately and publicly and they should be preached so that people can understand what God is saying and how it applies to their lives.

However, expository preaching does not mean that we have to take months or years going through a book of the Bible. Sometimes, depending on the congregation, this is permissible and expected. Most times it is unwise. We are living in a culture that is transitioning from being one in which verbal communication predomi-

nated to one in which the primary means of communication are visual. Whether we like it or not this has implications for how we communicate the gospel. It does not mean that we abandon preaching the biblical text. That is never an option. Rather it means that we need to preach with an awareness of the times in which we live.

Today people need to grasp the big picture. They need an appreciation for the sweeping themes of scripture and how they apply to their lives. Expository preaching that moves at a turtle's pace runs the risk confusing people and bogging them down in theological minutiae. But this is not the only danger. If preachers are not careful they can find themselves preaching topically on biblical themes rather than on the particular text in front of them. Of course there is nothing wrong with thematic preaching as long as it is rooted in the scriptures. The problem comes when a preacher is working through a biblical book and instead of dealing with the text in the context of the book and the Bible as a whole he extracts themes and starts to preach them in isola-

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tion from the text. If he does this he will inevitably repeat himself over and over because the grand themes of God's love and mercy and sovereignty, etc., run throughout the Bible. This can make expository preaching tedious when it does not need to be. Instead the preacher must listen carefully to the text and work hard to explain and apply its message to his listeners.

In a biblically illiterate society people need to be taught how to read their Bibles and to appreciate how God has disclosed himself to the world in the person of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

5. Issues relating to Eschatology.

Finding the balance between expectation and occupation. When I was a boy I attended churches where Bible prophecy was frequently discussed. Preachers would regularly come with their prophetic charts and sketch out how Christ could come at any moment and if he did what would happen. The return of Christ was thought to be "imminent," that is, it could happen at any time. Eventually I was exposed to other eschatological frameworks that tended to look at things more comprehensively and adjusted the idea of imminence from an "any second" expectation to the possibility that Christ could come during my lifetime. This change in expectation placed more emphasis on what we were to do while we wait for the return of the Lord Jesus, than upon being ready to be removed from the earth at any time. Today I think the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of occupation versus expectation.

In large measure the sense of urgency that marked the great preaching of the past is gone. Living in expectation of

Christ's coming is something that Christians pay lip service to, but the reality is hard to grasp. Somewhere between expectation and occupation there is a balance, or better, a tension that must be maintained.

It is true that we must be busy until the Lord returns or he calls us home via death. But at the same time we need a new sense that this world is not going to go on forever. How much longer, no one knows. But there will come a day when the door will shut on this gospel age never to open again.

A further benefit of eschatological balance is that it will restrain our wretched tendency to build kingdoms to our own glory and honour. It is one thing to give ourselves to the building of the kingdom of God, it is another to chase after our own place in history. Christian eschatology properly configured teaches us that in the end it is *not about us but about God*. The problem is that we can talk about the glory of God as a way of advancing ourselves, our programs and agendas. In the end the true test of anyone's theology is whether or not it brings all who adopt it to the conclusion reached by the apostle Paul in Romans 11:33-36:

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"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

Conclusion

And so we end where we began. We need pastors who are aware of the times in which they live and who know how to bring the truth of scripture to people in a way that is faithful and helpful. Paul's words written to Timothy many years ago still resonant in today's world and we need to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Listen again to 2 Timothy 4:3-4 and to verse 5 as well.

“For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”