

Dear friend,

The Elder Board and Ministry Team Leaders decided this past month that we'd like the newsletter to be organized around a "theme" each month. We felt that our "Core Values" would provide an excellent source for each month's theme. "Our Core Values" are a list of principles of ministry that we developed during the early days of our existence as a church. You will find them listed in the brochure describing our church, which is on the information table each week. They are not a statement of what we believe but rather a description of the principles by which we will make decisions regarding the structures and activities that we engage in as a church. It is how we've decided to "do church." Some of the principles are commitments that every true church will share with us but many of them are descriptions of how we will do certain things and other churches may decide differently.

The first "core value" is this: "We believe that sound biblical teaching creates and sustains love for God and people." This principle is not merely first in order but first in priority. From the beginning of our congregation we have sought to make God's word, the Bible, explicitly and obviously the center of our life together as a congregation. We are confident that God's word, rightly taught is the primary means by which our Lord Jesus Christ builds his church. Not only do we believe the sound teaching of God's word is primary to building sound Christians but it is the necessary means for building faith in and love for God and love for people. You cannot make nor build Christians or a Christian church apart from sound biblical instruction.

God's word alone is the "power of God for the salvation of all who believe (Rom. 1:16)." It is God's word that "builds people up in their faith and gives us an inheritance among all those who believe (Acts 20:32)." It is the Word of God that creates divine, eternal life in us, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.' And this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:22-25). It is only the word of God that has the solution to our greatest problem, our deceiving and deceived hearts. "God's word is living and active, sharper than a double edged sword...it judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12-13)."

At the end of Paul's second letter to his apprentice, Timothy, he makes clear the priority of biblical instruction in the life and health of the church. This command is especially important in light of the fact that in both of his letters to Timothy he is explaining to this young pastor how the church is to live and function. He says in 4:1-4, "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. For the time will come when men 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."

Paul gives two reasons as to why Timothy is to devote himself to preaching the word. First, he is to preach the word because Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead and to establish his kingdom. It is only understanding and embracing the doctrines taught in God's word that will prepare a human being for the return of Jesus as Judge and King. The church is to always live with our eye fixed firmly on the end of all things. We are to never forget that this world is passing away. We are living in a temporary condition that will one day give way to the permanent and eternal kingdom of Christ. The only way to prepare for the appearing of this kingdom is through understanding and depending upon all that this word from God says.

A pastor or a church that does not make the teaching and understanding of God's word central to all that happens in the church is like a group of army recruits who go to boot camp with a sergeant who teaches them how to manage a McDonald's franchise rather than how to be soldiers. He and they are forgetting that in six months they have to pass a battery of tests and then they will be sent to Iraq to fight in a war. Their present circumstances are not permanent. In fact, they are in their present situation, at boot camp, for the purpose of preparing for the tests and the radical change of scenery that is going to come to them. We have a test to pass and a radically new environment to live in and it is only the Word of God that is able to prepare us for this coming reality.

The second reason Paul tells Timothy to make sure God's word is faithfully taught in the church is because humans by nature are looking for a different, more personally satisfying story to believe and live by. Paul recognizes that we live in a world that is full of explanations of reality that are in direct opposition to and competition with the Word of God that are very attractive to human beings. God's word is so offensive to human beings because it removes all ground for human boasting and places God alone as the center of all things. God's word is offensive to us for the same reason it was offensive to Adam and Eve. We want to be gods on our own terms, we don't want to have to depend upon and listen to the only true God.

All of us by nature are looking for teachers who will confirm us in what we already believe and who will endorse our way of living. We want teachers who will not challenge our thinking or our loving but will tell us that God thinks like us and he loves what we love. What we don't gravitate towards is a story that tells us we are ignorant and that we love the wrong things and that we are powerless to gain the things that will truly make us happy. The church is to be the place that never moves from the central story, no matter how much the culture around us moves. It is not our task to relate to the culture but to command the culture to relate to us. The church is the one place that requires people to give up their own stories and their own way of thinking and loving and to submit to God's story and his way of thinking.

What makes a church successful is not how many people show up but how faithful she is to the word of God. It is easy to get a crowd of people together by telling them what they want to hear. We are to be careful that we remain a place that doesn't tell people what they want to hear, but what they need to hear in view of the fact that Jesus Christ is

coming back as Judge and King. It is our task as a church to make sure that we are preaching and teaching God's word so that we and all whom God sends to us are being corrected, rebuked and encouraged by the sound doctrine of God's word so that we will appear safely before the tribunal of Christ and enter into his eternal kingdom.

Preaching the word,