

CrossWay's Vision: Treasuring Christ Through Teaching
By Jason Huff
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Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 7:28-29; 1 Timothy 4:13-16

Our final Scripture reading tonight comes from 1 Timothy 4:13-16. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “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 a prophetic message 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.”

We like the idea of education. We're told it's how we get ahead in this world – you need a good education to get into a good school to get a good job. But not as many people believe that as we might think. At its highest point, only 2/3rds of American youth entered college after high school. And when you look at the statistics, it's not surprising...because only 2/3rds of grade-school children say they like school. A full third say that they dislike it some or all of the time.

We tend not to like school, or merely tolerate it, because we are rarely taught in ways that we can actually understand the information we're given. We learn through questioning, exploring our interests, and discovering what fascinates us. Some things we need to learn by rote; some things must be taught in a traditional way. But much of what we learn comes from picking it up as we go along.

Recently, a researcher set up computers in some of the poorest parts of India, where children did not go to school. He taught them nothing about the computers at all, yet the children naturally were interested. Many of them learned to read out of their curiosity about the thing. They even began to understand their water system better and about the microbes that made them sick. It happened because they were genuinely interested in learning...not what they were told they must learn, but what they found fascinating.

Understanding how we learn is important for the church because teaching is vital for a fellowship of believers. Our education in the ways and person of God are a top priority. In 1 Timothy, Paul encourages his young friend Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching. He's to work diligently at them. Paul connects Timothy's eternal life and the eternal lives in his congregation directly to Timothy's teaching.

That is an overwhelming call, isn't it? To think that teaching might make the difference in someone's eternity? But that's how important it is. In fact, those of us who are elders and teachers in the church are to keep watch over those souls in the fellowship as “those who will give an account” (Hebrews 13:17). In Ezekiel 33, God likens Ezekiel and the prophets, the teachers of their day, to watchmen keeping lookout. If we sound the alarm and no one pays attention and they come to harm, it's on their own heads, God says; but if we see danger coming and say nothing, then the harm is on our heads. That means we can't ignore teaching the truth of God.

We've reached the fourth point of CrossWay's vision statement. It says, "Our vision is to lead others toward a life-changing relationship with Jesus through service, invitation, fellowship, and the teaching of God's Word, encouraging them to faithfully follow as His disciples." Here's the deal – we've talked so far about service, invitation, and fellowship. We've seen they are really important to what CrossWay is doing for God. But service, invitation, and fellowship are ways we touch people for Christ and lead them towards him. They cannot save anyone themselves. It is in the teaching of God's Word that we learn what we need for salvation.

So how do we bridge the gap between how we traditionally learn and how we actually learn? How do we capture the imagination? How do we sustain interest in learning about God – both for us who are a part of CrossWay and those who are just joining us? How do find joy in knowing the things of God? I have a few thoughts on those for us tonight.

First, at CrossWay, our vision is to teach with authority and passion. Jesus' listeners were stunned not just by His teachings themselves but by the fact that He taught "as one who has authority." The teachers of the Law were wishy-washy, always looking for a precedent, some earlier rabbi to affirm what they had said. They weren't so worried about breaking God's law – they created all sorts of loopholes and technicalities – but they had to find someone else who agreed with them. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke as He did because He knew the Father and what the Father wants for us.

Obviously, no teacher can be Jesus. We make mistakes. And many preachers who speak as though they have authority are nevertheless deeply mistaken. Speaking *as if* you have authority doesn't *make* you an authority – it might just make you a really good public speaker. We don't want to convince people of the truth merely with the appearance of authority.

But we do have authority that comes from the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit leads us, we learn from the Scriptures and then teach and preach it accordingly. When I preach, when I teach – and when, eventually, some of you are called to move into those roles at times – it is with the authority of Jesus. That's why my goal is always to stick closely to Scripture, that you can at all times check Scripture to see if it agrees with what I say. Because Jesus is *the* authority on all things. When we explain the words of Jesus, when we help them makes sense in our modern world, we aren't trying to add to it or change it. We are simply teaching what He taught in a manner that captures our modern imagination.

And if we're following the vision well, we'll teach with passion. Passion in true Christian terms is the desire to see lives changed through our listeners' understanding of Jesus and obedience to Jesus. Passion doesn't lead people to Jesus; only God's intervention makes that possible. But passion shows we care whether or not people are coming to know God through the teaching of our church. It means we pray that our teaching might be effective. It means that we preach with the sincere hope and prayer that God is glorified by our teaching and that He might use our teaching to lead others to Himself. Passion is real grief that more don't hear the message; passion is real joy when someone learns something new and grows deeper in love with God because they heard the message; passion is real pleasure when someone is convicted by the true teaching of God's word, rejects their sin, and follows after Jesus.

It's our passion for knowing the living God that leads the next part of our vision about teaching: *we teach the depth and breadth of God, not just what's comfortable*. The reason we've studied whole books of the Bible together, and why we'll do so again after this series, is because every word in the Bible is important. It's there for a reason. Some passages carry more weight than others, some speak more to our day than others, but every part is important. And it does us no good to wish away the parts of Scripture we don't like and the ones we struggle with. It doesn't do us any good to sanitize the Bible.

I grew up learning all sorts of Bible stories, and for children's ministry, we have to teach those stories faithfully at a level a child can understand. But often, well-meaning people scrub the truth right out of those stories. I thought Esau was the good guy who forgave his brother for stealing his blessing – even though Esau so disrespected his father that he sold his birthright for a bowl of stew Jacob was making. Noah was a fun story about getting animals into the ark, not the destruction of the rest of humanity. I thought Samson was tricked by his girlfriend into betraying the secret of his strength, not a womanizer who gave up his power from God to quiet down the woman he was sleeping with.

It's why I love the "What's In The Bible" series that Catha has done with our children over the last couple of years. It is funny, sweet, and completely age-appropriate, but it puts the characters in the Bible in their rightful place – the best of them are sinners in need of God's redemption, and over and over again, the Bible shows us why we need God's salvation and not simply to try harder or do better.

There are tough things in the Bible. But instead of ignoring them, good teaching deals with them head-on. Because too often, we build our spiritual faith on something less than the full message of Jesus. We build on spiritual sand. And when difficulties arise – suffering, loss, grief, hardship, discrimination – it falls apart because we haven't been prepared from God's Word for those things. When someone questions us about the hard things in faith, we fall apart. But if from the beginning we start building on the rock, answering the tough questions, letting God be God and letting Him deal with our confusion and our misunderstandings about who He really is, we will be able to withstand trouble because our faith is not based on a few Bible verses out of context but the whole thing.

It might not always be comfortable. We will continue to wrestle with hard topics, like some of the ones we dealt with this summer in the "You Pick The Sermon" series. But if we are to do as Paul commanded Timothy, to "watch your life and doctrine closely," we must base them both on the whole of Scripture. Lord willing, we will teach the whole thing as best we can.

The third point really gets into my intro for today, the way we learn: *at CrossWay, our vision is to teach in a variety of ways so that all may hear and know the LORD*. Not everyone learns the same way. Studies show that children learn better when they have plenty of time to play and use their imaginations. It's the reason some children can memorize math tables and others do best when the math problem is made into a story that has a real-world outcome. (Math becomes important when it means you can count money to buy things, for example!)

Jesus knew that people learn in different ways. He used all sorts of teaching methods. He used His amazing powers of healing to illustrate God's love and work. He used parables taken from everyday life in the Ancient Near East. He told captivating stories. He answered the philosophers with philosophical answers. He used object lessons. He even used action, like turning over the moneychangers' tables. Everything He did that was recorded in Scripture teaches us something.

We might ask, "Why do we still preach at all? Isn't it outdated?" The truth is, it was outdated in the first century. Paul remembers his first time in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 2. He says, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." In 1 Corinthians 1 he says, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

We preach because God still works through preaching. It has never been the most effective way to reach people in human terms. The church didn't decide one day, "Oh, hey, the best way we can get people to believe in Jesus as their Savior and Lord is to give a long talk in front of everyone." But God has ordained it. He uses it. Jesus preached. So we do it.

Does that mean that there isn't variety in preaching? Absolutely not. Sometimes we use topical series, and sometimes we study a book at a time. Sometimes we have a series like this one all about our vision or a key concept. There is no one right way to preach, and variety gives each of us a chance to hear something that stirs up our godly imagination, our godly conscience, our godly interests. It's why we not only have worship services but Bible studies and youth group. Even the praise team learns theology from some of the songs we sing.

Sometimes – a lot of times in the past – I have three points. Tonight I have four. Hopefully there's never a time when I have no point. But we want people to hear the LORD in ways that God speaks to them. It's why we use both contemporary music and traditional music, why we have extemporaneous prayers and pre-written prayers we all say together, why we hear three Scriptures every week even if some of them aren't tied to the sermon. We want to give God every opportunity to work through us, for us to hear His voice and respond. We will not give up preaching for other things; we will not exchange Scripture for self-help. But we won't ignore means by which God can speak to us through the teaching of His Word.

Finally, our fourth and final thought: *we encourage the diligent personal study of Scripture to know God personally, to grow in grace, and to confirm what is taught is biblical.* Jeremiah 31 tells us that, someday, all of God's people will know Him personally, that he will put His law on our minds and write in on our hearts, as part of His new covenant with us. Teaching will cease. That time has come in part because, when Jesus came, God forgave our wickedness and remembers our sins no more, as Jeremiah says. Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit so that we might have God on our hearts and minds all the time. We can understand Scripture. But until the complete fulfillment of this promise, we need to work diligently to know the Lord.

The preaching and teaching we do in our fellowship is extremely important. But my preaching and teaching are really here to keep you looking at Christ, to bring you to belief in Him as Savior and Lord, to encourage you to know Him better, to follow Him more closely, to grow in the grace that He has given you. All those things are good, but they cannot replace time that you spend personally in the Word and in personal worship. My teaching, hopefully, will help you know God's love for you, His expectations for you, His plans for you. But they are still the introduction to Him. The teaching we do helps you to know Jesus more. But personal time with Him in prayer and reading His Word will bring you into relationship with Him.

For a long time, that's been a problem for Presbyterians. In the past, we have been known for studying, for being deep thinkers, for dwelling deeply on the mysteries of God and sorting them out. That's really good. But if we do it at the expense of knowing God and being known by God, then we have failed. My prayer is that my teaching and the teaching of others in the fellowship will lead us to our knees before Jesus in our everyday lives.

And if you do this, it will help even to point out my own blind spots and flaws. I am never going to intentionally lead you astray. But as I've learned in our conversations in our Bible study, sometimes I'm misunderstood – sometimes I say things the wrong way, or in a way that isn't clear. And sometimes I am just wrong because I've missed something.

The goal of our teaching is for all of us, and all those who would join us, to know and be known by God, to receive His precious forgiveness and salvation, and to become more like Him. But that teaching is only as good as it encourages and convicts you to know God on your own. The last thing I want is for you to know about God but not to know God. So as we move forward on our vision at CrossWay, let's not neglect our call to know God in Scripture, to let ourselves be taught by the Word of God as the Holy Spirit speaks understanding of it into our hearts.

Jesus was a teacher and preacher. While I may be the primary person to do that at CrossWay, He calls us all to be disciples, to follow in His ways, which means that all of us will be teachers in some way or another. Whether it's through helping someone understand a concept or find a book in their Bible, God will use us to help others know the Lord. May we honor the Lord by using whatever gifts of teaching He has given us, and may God use us as careful instructors in His ways.