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The Shared Ministry of the Word

By David Dunlap

There is no greater need in the church today than the compelling preaching of the Word of God. Preaching is the proclamation and exposition of a God-given message. Through preaching, God brings men and women face to face with the power of the gospel and the richness of the truth of the Word of God. "Something awesome happens when God confronts an individual through preaching and seizes him by the soul."¹ God uses the ministry of the Word of God to transform lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

However, if I may be so bold to say, there is something missing or insufficient in the preaching of the Word of God in many churches. It is not the doctrinal content that is wanting or the biblical soundness of the messages that falls wide of the mark. What then is the problem? The problem is that the teaching ministry in most churches is not "shared." The teaching is not in the hands of a number of gifted and experienced men of God. We read in the book of Acts regarding the church at Antioch: "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas,...and Simeon,...and Lucius,...and Manaen..., and Saul"(Acts 13:1).

Today, pastoral "burnout" is at an all-time high (www.pastorburnout.com), good and godly men are leaving the ministry because the ministry work load is too great. Is it possible for one man, even a godly and gifted man, to provide solid Bible messages every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening at the mid-week service? Is one man able to meet all the spiritual ministry needs in a congregation? Is this the New Testament pattern? Absolutely not. The biblical perspective is a shared ministry of the Word of God. We would like to unpack six biblical reasons for a shared ministry.

Six Advantages of a Shared Ministry of the Word

1. A Shared Ministry Protects Against the Inroads of Error - What would happen if one individual, who has a virtual monopoly over all the teaching in a church, should teach false doctrine? Who could or would correct him or even challenge him? He could preach almost anything he likes, and "get away with it." Furthermore, faithful believers place a blind and almost total trust in their preacher. In so doing, the church becomes "doctrinally flabby", seldom studying the weightier doctrines of the Bible. Rather, New Testament believers should be more like the Bereans: "They studied the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). When the ministry is shared, if an error is propounded by a certain teacher, he can be corrected by the other faithful teachers of the Word and elders in the local

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John MacArthur
(1939-present)

assembly. Those who share the ministry in a local church are men who commit themselves to the study of Scripture and are sensitive to false teaching when it arises. When the preaching of the local church is in the hands of a number of gifted expositors of the Word, this is a great safeguard against error gaining a foothold. Proverbs 11:14 exhorts: "Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in the abundance of counselors there is safety."

2. A Shared Ministry Is the Best Way to Meet the Varied Spiritual Needs of the Congregation - In a local congregation there are many personal and spiritual needs. There are young believers in need of the "milk of the Word". There are more mature believers who need the "strong meat" from the Scriptures. There are some going through "deep waters" who need counsel and assurance from a preacher with a shepherd's heart. There are times for teaching on rich doctrines from the Word, such as prophecy, salvation doctrines, messianic psalms, apologetics, biblical creation, and eternal security, among others. There is also a need for strong evangelistic messages. There are few teachers who are suited to meet all the spiritual needs of the congregation in the ministry of the Word. Rarely, does one man have the gifts of evangelism, teaching, and shepherding. At the same time, the Lord has especially gifted some in very specific areas, such as apologetics, discernment (exposing cults), evangelism, missions, theology, biblical counseling, and financial stewardship. There is a need for complementary ministry in the local assembly. In 1 Corinthians 3 the Apostle Paul writes, "I have planted...Apollos watered", highlighting the differences of gift and need for other servants of the Lord to use their gifts in such a way that the seed of the gospel might grow.

3. A Shared Ministry of the Word Is an Effective Restraint Against Glorifying in a Man - When all of the preaching of a church is in the hands of a single individual, the danger of believers exalting and glorying in a servant of the Lord is very great. It is an especially great peril when the preacher is young or very gifted. It is not uncommon to hear of a preacher who has fallen into the "snare of the devil" because of pride (1 Timothy 3:6-7). Pride stems from self-righteousness, which God hates because it is a hindrance to seeking Him. The proud are so consumed with themselves that their thoughts are far from God. The Psalmist tells us: "In his pride the wicked does not seek Him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God." (Psalm 10:4).

The Prophet Jeremiah counsels us, "Let not a wise man boast in his wisdom, nor a mighty man boast in his might, let not a rich man boast in his riches—but let him that boasts, boast of this, that he understand and knows Me..." (Jeremiah 9:23 NASV). The sin of pride and self-exaltation can break through the most humble of soils; but when the ministry of the Word is shared among a number of gifted men, this danger is greatly diminished. When there is great blessing and souls are won to Christ in a local church, the glory will not go to one man, but rather to the Lord of the Harvest.

4. A Shared Ministry of the Word Is an Enormous Advantage in Times of Persecution - It is said that the evangelical church in Spain in the days of Francisco Franco (1892-1975) was nearly destroyed through religious persecution because church leadership was in the hands of so few. In contrast, in the first century, during the days of severe Roman persecution, the church prospered because there was a plurality of leadership. We read of

***"Does a man
wish to attract
crowds? Well get
back to the Bible.
Don't you think
God knows how
to interest
people? What we
need today is
men who believe
in the Bible from
the crown of
their heads to
the soles of their
feet."***

**D. L. Moody
(1837-1899)**

these early Christians: "...These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6). The early church father Tertullian (AD 160-220) once remarked, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." When there is a shared ministry in the local church, no matter whom the state arrests, whom it imprisons, whom it exiles, whom it kills, there are always those left to carry on the work. Today, in many Arab-Muslim and Communist countries where it is forbidden for Christians to freely assemble, the church still thrives because the leadership and ministry is in the hands of the many instead of a few. It has been remarked that in the countries where there is persecution, the church is prospering; but in the western world where there is great freedom and material prosperity, the church is cold, lifeless, and without zeal for Christ.

5. A Shared Ministry Guards Against the Danger of Placing Too Much Power in the Hands of One Man - Our Lord Jesus Christ, while on earth, warned His disciples against being "autocrats", setting themselves up as rulers or kings of some secular power. The Master's master principle was, "He who would be greatest among you must be the servant of all" (Mark 10:36). In the upper room, our Lord washed the feet of His disciples as a humble servant, and instructed them to likewise serve each other as bond-servants (John 13:15). However, it is not uncommon to find an overly-zealous leader of a local church arbitrarily imposing his will over an entire congregation. This eventually will lead to division, rancor, and unrest in the church. This danger is even greater when all of the preaching and teaching is in the hands of one man. A great deterrent to this danger is to place the leadership responsibilities and teaching ministry in the hands of a number of men. Well-known Bible teacher Dr. John MacArthur warns concerning this danger:

*"The Scripture advocates a shared leadership. A plurality of godly men are to share in the leadership responsibility, though they many differ in their specific functions and giftedness. The Bible knows nothing of one-man rule by pastor-kings.. God's plan for choosing leaders in His church is simple. From within each congregation, the Holy Spirit gifts and identifies through their faithfulness a plurality of faithful men. After being confirmed by the people, they share the burden of leadership responsibilities together."*²

6. A Shared Ministry of the Word Stirs Up the Use of Spiritual Gift In Others - When a church appoints one man to be its "minister", there is the temptation for the church to sit back idly and leave it to the minister to do practically everything, from taking out the trash to preaching a sermon on Sunday morning. When believers are challenged to Christian service in the church, the reply is heard, "That's the minister's job." "That's what we pay him to do." "Give a message on a Sunday morning? Me toil away evenings preparing a message from the Bible? No way. That's the minister's job."

By contrast, in New Testament churches where there is a shared ministry of the Word of God, gifted men develop a deep sense of responsibility toward the preaching of the Word of God. More mature, gifted men spend time discipling and training younger, gifted men in the study and preaching of the Word of God. Paul exhorted: "And the things which you heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful

"When a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority. He confronts his hearers no longer with a word of God...therefore, most modern preaching evokes little more than a yawn. God is not in it."

Haddon Robinson
From *Biblical Preaching*,
Baker, 1995



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men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). In time, both the older, more mature men and the younger men become very capable preachers of the Word. The Lord may impress upon the hearts of some of these trained servants of God to serve the Lord in a full-time capacity. Some may go to a foreign field to serve as missionaries; others will serve the Lord as evangelists, church planters, and Bible teachers in the home field.

Final Thought

The Lord has equipped His church with many gifted and capable ministers of the Word. Some may be retired missionaries with years of experience and a rich knowledge of Scripture. Some may be evangelists, teachers, and shepherds with varied backgrounds, and different personalities, all ministering to the building up of the saints. All are practicing the important principle of Ephesians 4:12, "Equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry." We close with a quote from the book *God's New Society*, where John R. W. Stott asks:

"What model of the church then should we keep in our minds? The traditional model is that of the pyramid, with the pastor perched precariously on the pinnacle, like a little pope in his own church, while the laity are arrayed below him in serried ranks of inferiority. It is a totally unbiblical imagery because the New Testament envisages not a single pastor with a docile flock, but both a plural oversight and an every-member ministry."³

Endnotes

1. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), p. 19
2. John MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), p. 216-217
3. John Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), p. 56

Further Reading

Alexander R. Hay, *The New Testament Order for Church and Missionary*, (Audubon, NJ: New Testament Missionary Union, 1947)
Bruce Stabbert, *The Team Concept*, (Tacoma, WA: Hegg Brothers, 1980)