

Missional Marker #1

The Centrality of the Word of God

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My father's bible took a beating. It was all marked up, pages dog eared and the cover peeling away. Most specifically I remember that it became water logged on several occasions on Saturday evenings as my dad prepared his Sunday school lesson in the bathtub.

With only a tenth grade education, dad did not come across as a scholar by any stretch of the imagination. He was not grounded in a deep theological tradition. His background was mostly of the baptical variety, small churches and a street level faith. But his love for God was notable, and his passion for the Word was evident. He memorized scripture and taught me the significance committing passages to memory.

I followed in those footsteps. I memorized scripture consistently at a young age. I won awards in church youth clubs for memorization. I always believed that the bible, as God's revealed word, was central to my life experience.

During the late 60's and early 70's the way we handled scripture was questioned, like everything else, as being too restrictive, emphasizing the rigidity of the text over life application. Churches began to articulate the proposition of scriptural integration over and above the specifics of "rightly dividing" the word of truth. I don't think the emphasis was completely misplaced. As with most things, when the pendulum swings, it takes time to find the center again.

When my oldest son, Micah, went away to college with faith firmly in place he told me that he wished he had a more foundational grasp of the scriptures. "You know, memorized more, knowing where to find certain passages, the way you do," he said. I immediately knew what he was talking about.

One important marker of a healthy congregation is the "centrality of the Word". Throughout the formation of the church in the book of Acts we see the Spirit guided reflection on scripture, primarily the psalms and prophets. Acts 2 indicates that the apostles' teaching, went hand in hand with fellowship and the breaking of bread. The scriptures pointed to the revelation found in the person of Christ and those who were being drawn to God saw God's plan plainly through the written revelation.

As I grew into ministry I was drawn through scripture to an understanding of God's heart of justice and that emphasis was the foundation for decades of urban ministry. As I grew more in understanding, it was scripture in this context that affirmed the wideness of God's grace. I challenged every aspect of life and vocation through the lens of "where is it written".

I go through gaps in my commitment and appreciation of the word. I confess that my life at times gets too consumed with all of the urgencies to take the time I need to stay scripturally refreshed. One such time occurred several months back. I was busy in ministry and moving from event to event. I always found time for the morning paper and a few online journals, but not much for scripture.

In the middle of advent, preparing for a family celebration, I was taken to the prophecy of Simeon, the light which God prepared for all people. As I began to read and be refreshed again by the wideness of God's salvation, my eyes filled with tears. Not sadness, but the freshness of being reacquainted with an old friend, the freshness of God's word which brings everything in the world and in my life into focus.

How does your church, your fellowship, continue to hold the centrality of the Word of God? What is it doing right? How could it be better? How about your own life? Does the Word of God do its work in you while pursuing Christ and His Kingdom? Are you even asking these questions?

If you are like me, just asking these questions help us understand that we can all do better. The health of your congregation depends on each of us being recommitted to scripture as central to who we are and who we are becoming.