

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, June 19, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 12:6,7

“Through the grace of God, we have different gifts... If our gift is teaching, let us give all we have to our teaching.” (Phillips)

ARE YOU PART OF “THE MOTHBALL NAVY”?

Do you know that the third largest fleet in the world is the famed “mothball” navy, consisting of almost 800 ships anchored in various United States harbors? In a national emergency, these vessels could be prepared for action in less than three months. To preserve them, each is regularly repainted and treated with a protective coating. All openings have been blocked. Steel and aluminum “igloos” have been built over exposed equipment. Inside the various compartments, dehumidifiers hum 24 hours a day. Outside, rust and corrosion are prevented by electrodes ringing the hulls with a continuous electrical current, which blocks the normal chemical reaction.

Sad to say, many believers seem to be in mothballs. Anchored in some sheltered ecclesiastical harbor, they forget that spiritual warfare rages. The Church should not be isolated up some religious river, in inactivity, but should be out on the high seas engaging the enemy.

One gift many Christians seem to have put in mothballs is that of teaching. With Sunday Schools and other areas of service crying out for competent, Spirit-filled teachers, you, as a believer, should examine your own life to discover whether, in fact, you have received the gift of teaching.

Evangelism results in new life, but it takes teaching to sustain spiritual life. Without teaching, there can be no discipleship. Our Lord, in His “Great Commission” to the Church, said, “Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20). Ignore teaching, and you eliminate spiritual maturity. Paul says in Colossians 1:28, “We proclaim Christ...teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”

Dr. Richard Patterson, President of the Evangelical Teachers’ Training Association, reminds us that a serious problem is facing the Church in North America, namely, the ineffective equipping of Church members to teach others what our Christian faith is all about. Do you know that in the past 16 years we have seen Sunday Schools in the United States decrease in enrollment by 31%? Do you know that churches in America spend six times as much on music as they spend on teacher training materials? That doesn’t mean that we should spend less on music; it simply means we should spend more on teacher training. Indeed, some evangelical leaders say today that “we are raising a generation of biblical illiterates.”

American churches are in serious trouble. Oh, we know that some pack people into huge

auditoriums, so that we now have churches of thousands of members, where a decade ago we saw churches of hundreds. But, alas, many members of these megachurches are simply spectators of the evangelical show. We have many spectators, but few participants, and we have too often neglected to place emphasis upon the gift of teaching, and the equipping of our church members to develop their gift of teaching.

We might define the gift of teaching as the supernatural ability that God gives to certain members of the Body of Christ to explain clearly the truth of God's Word, so that those they teach will learn and understand that Word, and apply it to their own lives, in obedience to the will of God.

As I said once before, if, when you become a Christian, you receive the gift of teaching, that doesn't mean that the next morning you would wake up a supernatural teacher. But you would wake up with the capacity to develop that gift and to become a very effective teacher of God's Word; and that is why we need to train and encourage, in every possible way, those who believe they have this gift.

This gift of teaching is mentioned in all three of the primary lists of spiritual gifts: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 14. This does not mean that it is any more valid than a gift that is mentioned only once, but it probably does mean that the percentage of members of the Body of Christ who receive the gift of teaching is higher than the percentage for many other gifts.

Now I would ask you to look with me at three affirmations that we find in the definition I gave you of the gift of teaching.

1. Teaching involves a body of truth. "God gives to some Christians the ability to explain the truth of God's Word." The truth of God's Word is the basis of all godly living. I'm sure you have heard people say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you live right." That is nonsense, simply because you cannot live right if you do not believe what is right. Your conduct is always determined by what you really believe. For example, Communism is based on the belief that there is no God. Therefore, man is not the unique creation of God; he is basically no different from other animals; and if he gets in the way of or opposes what the Soviet leadership demands, he is simply eliminated, like a fly on the wall. That is why 50 million Russians have been sentenced to death in Soviet concentration camps since 1917. What you believe determines how you live and behave -- and that is why it is so important to learn and understand the truth of God's Word, so that we may build the only solid foundation for a godly life.

A young man, 20 years of age, was won to Christ through a coffeehouse ministry. Six months later he was asked, "Who is Jesus?" He answered, "The greatest ever, the finest Man that ever lived." Now that was basically a humanistic answer, and it revealed quite clearly that that young fellow had not gotten into a church where he would have been indoctrinated in the Word of God. Today we need to remind ourselves constantly of the truth content of our Christian faith. All new converts need to know that Christianity involves not only excitement and enthusiasm, but above all instruction in and knowledge of the truth of God's Word. Zeal must always be

given direction by knowledge, and knowledge comes from a reverent and painstaking study of Holy Scripture.

Because Christianity cannot survive apart from a body of truth, teaching has always been a central and indispensable part of the ongoing ministry of the Church. No wonder that immediately after the conversion of the 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42).

Paul and Barnabas taught new believers a whole year at Antioch (Acts 11:26). At Corinth, Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the Word of God” (Acts 18:11). The work of the Lord required continuous teaching of both new and established believers, At Ephesus, Paul taught publicly from house to house for two years before going on to other fields of labor (Acts 19:10; 20:20). Teaching is absolutely essential to the chain of communicating biblical truth. Listen to what Paul says to young Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2: “And the things you have heard me say... entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” Do you see the four links in the chain of communication and teaching? Paul taught Timothy, and Timothy was commissioned to teach reliable men who, in turn, would teach others. But it is the same content of truth that is taught from link to link.

Significantly, the gift of teaching seems to be the main, and perhaps the only required gift for a pastor or elder. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 we have the list of the qualities they must possess in order to qualify, and one of them is that they must be “able to teach” (verse 2). That is, they must have the potential and the inclination to teach. Again, Paul writes concerning “the servant of the Lord” — “he must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach... Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will... lead them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:21,25).

Of course, God’s Word must be taught in such a way that it becomes relevant to the lives of those who seek instruction. Here is Ted Jones, for example, who becomes a Christian. A counselor tells him that he now possesses eternal life. His sins are forgiven. If he ever needs help, God will sustain him. With this kernel of biblical insight, Ted is off on his Christian pilgrimage. He joins a church where the pastor preaches only evangelistic sermons -- “Believe and be saved.” So, Ted isn’t really fed spiritually through the preaching. He joins an adult Bible Class where they spend weeks studying Paul’s three missionary journeys! So, poor Ted becomes frustrated. “Is this all there is to the Christian life? Do I just hang on until I die and go to heaven? Doesn’t God have anything to tell me about life right now? I have financial problems. My kids are in those rebellious years. My employer is outraged because I won’t cut corners and engage in business practices which I think are dishonest. But all I get at church is more Bible facts about Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho. God, what do You have for me now?”

So, you see, there must be a high “how to” content in our teaching and preaching if the body of truth contained in the Bible is to be truly helpful to people in the living of their lives in our very complicated, high-tech society today.

2. Teaching calls for clear communication. This “body of truth” of which I have been speaking must always be served up like a good meal, in an attractive way that will whet the

appetite. As our definition puts it: “God gives to some Christians the capacity to explain clearly the truths of God’s Word.”

Teaching, I believe, is usually a full-time gift. If a Sunday School teacher has the gift of teaching, he or she will probably not be able to do very much more as far as service to the church is concerned. Those with the gift love to spend large amounts of time studying the Bible and the lesson for each Sunday. Gifted teachers investigate thoroughly the Bible passage to be taught. They ask questions. Who is speaking? What is he saying? Why does he use this particular word? What does the writer mean? But the teacher doesn’t stop with observation. He isn’t satisfied with just knowing what the writer is saying. He wants to see this truth applied to life. What is the passage saying to me? What does it say to those I am teaching?

Jesus is still the ideal model for us today. He began where people were, using things at hand, simple things like sheep and vines and candles to go on to explain the new and the unfamiliar. Often, He asked questions; someone has counted more than 100 questions He put to people. He frequently countered a question with a question. He illustrated by parables. He took advantage of occasions to make a point. At a dinner one night He spoke of people who made excuses for not coming to God’s great banquet. He taught by example, as when He washed the disciples’ feet.

A gifted teacher will search for illustrations that will make the material more meaningful. A friend of mine who is a seminary professor will sometimes spend two or three hours working on an overhead projector slide which he will use for only 15 to 30 seconds in a class. But if it nails down a point effectively, he feels it is well worth the time and effort, and it gives him tremendous satisfaction. We are greatly blessed in the number and variety of visual aids that are available to us today – flannel graphs, overhead projectors, audio and video cassettes, films, together with maps and charts and cutouts - all of which enable the gifted teacher to clearly communicate the truth.

Teachers who have the gift are patient with their students. They create an atmosphere in their classes where students feel free to raise questions of any kind without feeling they will be put down or made to look foolish before the others. Good teachers don’t feel threatened, nor do they go on the defensive when criticism comes. Such attitudes are not the kind of thing that can be learned by just anyone. They are part of the supernatural dimension of having a spiritual gift.

It is interesting to note that some people have a gift that enables them to communicate clearly to children. Others have the ability to relate well to teenagers. Some do best when they teach adults. Some, like Bill Gothard, exercise the gift best in front of large audiences. Others shine when they are teaching the Word in small groups and in-home Bible studies. Some use this gift best on a one-on-one basis. But the bottom line is that a gifted teacher will always communicate truth with clarity and conviction.

3. Teaching requires effective application. Look again at our definition of the gift of teaching — it is “the supernatural ability given to certain Christians to explain clearly the truth of God’s Word, so that those they teach will learn and understand that Word -- and apply it to their own lives.”

“So that those they teach will learn...” It is always necessary to keep in mind what teaching is for. Michael Griffiths says, “Traditionally too much Christian teaching is pulpit soliloquy, and nobody ever checks up to see whether anybody takes notice, or whether teaching produces any action.” How true! If you have the gift of teaching, then you should fully expect people to learn; and if they don’t learn, you ought to doubt whether or not you have the gift. Dr. Roy Zuck has said that there are only three reasons for poor teaching in the church: “If teachers are ineffective, either they do not have the teaching gift, or they are not developing it, or they are not in fellowship with the Lord.”

But not only will those taught learn the truth of God’s Word, they will apply it to their own lives. That is to say -- the gift of teaching should involve more than the imparting of information; it should lead to a definite and godly response on the part of the person being taught.

Let me give you two simple illustrations of what I mean, one negative and one positive.

Two little brothers, both in the Beginner Department, but in separate classes, had studied the same lesson on Sunday morning. It dealt with the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with a lunch that a small boy was willing to share with others. On the way home, each of them could tell his parents the story in great detail, pointing out what a fine thing it is to share what we have with others. But five minutes after they arrived home, they got into a violent argument because they wouldn’t share a toy! They hadn’t really learned, had they?

A senior high class studying 2 Corinthians came to chapter 6, and to the verse that says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (verse 14). Gail, who had been dating a non-Christian boy quite steadily, grasped the truth contained in the verse and was able to express in her own words that Christians should never contemplate marriage with non-Christians. When its personal meaning dawned on her, she realized she would have to make a decision about going steady with an unbeliever. The truth really got through to her when she decided to call her boyfriend that afternoon to tell him that their relationship was over. That senior high teacher was enabled by the Spirit’s gift of teaching to help that girl learn the truth and then apply it to her own personal situation. And that should be the result of all biblical teaching — compelling us to apply it to our own lives.

The teaching gift was given to equip the saints for service, so that they in turn could teach others. If we would be teachers, we must first be equipped by someone else’s teaching. That is why I would like to see every adult here at Faith not just for the 10:30 a.m. Worship Service, but also for Bible Class at 9:00 a.m. The Southern Baptist Convention, which is perhaps the strongest Protestant Church in the country today, has gained and sustained its strength mainly because it lays such emphasis upon getting adults into adult Bible Classes on Sunday morning. Let us emulate their method so that we may share their success. I would say that you could be excused from attending Bible Class only if you know everything there is to know about the Bible!

AMEN.