



ABILITY TO TEACH

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**ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES**

Biblical Foundations

In 1 Timothy 3:2-7, Paul gives a list of qualities that ought to describe those who aspire to leadership in a local church. Most of the qualifications pertain to the man leading himself in holiness and leading his home with honor (above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, managing well in the home, children that obey, a home that is hospitable). But there is one key qualification of this would-be leader that extends his personal and home leadership to the outside world: *the ability to teach*.

Paul saw a leader as one who, like him, lived an exemplary life (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; Philippians 3:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:9) and was able to teach others how the truth of God had the power to change them in the same ways (Romans 12:7; 15:4; 16:17; 1 Timothy 1:3; 4:13; 6:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9).

Exemplary living is not a unique calling upon those who aspire to leadership. All followers of God are to set themselves apart as living testimonies of the faith they have inside (1 Peter 2). However, it is that *ability to teach* that sets apart the overseer/pastor/elder to the task of leadership. Apart from that quality, all other things that pastors/elders are to be in 1 Timothy 3 are true of other believers. Paul is clear: those who lead in the church must be those who are able to convey sound teaching to the church.

This is why throughout Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus, his understudies in the ministry, he seems preoccupied with the need for them to see that teaching and preaching will be central to the task of gospel advance through the church. In 2 Timothy 2:15, there is the call to rightly handle the word of truth. 2 Timothy 4:2-4 warns that people will desire to turn away from sound doctrine, but the faithful minister is to "preach the word" despite this yearning of the crowds for something easier to hear. Titus 1:9 and 2:1 continue the idea of teaching, stating that the minister is to "hold firm to the trustworthy message" to both encourage those who believe it and to refute those who oppose it.

In doing so, the New Testament writers were not conceptualizing a new method of ministry, but carrying on what they observed in the Old Testament and what they saw from Jesus himself. From both the life of Christ and the testimony of the Old Testament, we are likewise able to see that God's pattern for ministry is to have his people be led by men who are able to stand among them and proclaim his truth. God's men speak God's truths and it shapes God's people.

In the gospels, Jesus' diagnosis of the main problem with the religious leaders of the day was their false teaching. He warns the disciples to be on guard against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:12). His disciples are to be those that teach the truth. So he prays for their witness as ministers of truth (John 15:27; 17:17) and calls them to proclaim the gospel in all nations (Luke 24:46-47; Matthew 28:18-20).

We see the teaching ministry Jesus desired for his disciples play out in the book of Acts. After Pentecost, Peter teaches the crowd (Acts 2:14-36). He leads the apostles into seeing

their role (and subsequently that of the role of elders/pastors) as a man of prayer and ministry of teaching the word of God (Acts 6:4; 1 Peter 1:12, 2:9, 5:1-4). We've already looked quickly at Paul's view of the importance of teaching, but it is interesting to note here that when the book of Acts changes focus from Peter to Paul, it is around the observation that "the word of God increased and multiplied" (12:24). Peter had done his part. He had so lived and taught that the word of God was going out like never before. Now Paul would carry that baton of teaching the gospel and commissioning other leaders unto the same task.

The ability to teach was of primary focus for God's leaders in the Old Testament as well. Moses writes that he was "commanded" to teach the commandments of God to the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 6:1). And the people were to also feel the burden to teach what they learned to others (6:7, 20). In the Psalms, David is seen as longing for restoration of personal integrity, so that he might "teach transgressors" the ways of God (Psalm 51:13). Ezra, the priest sent to revive the people of God in Jerusalem, set himself first to study and observe God's word and then to teach it (Ezra 7:10). All of the prophets show the same calling that we see from the Lord to Isaiah in Isaiah 6:9 (NIV): to "go and tell" the people. With these examples in mind, it could be said that the story of the Old Testament is the story of those the Lord appointed as teachers and how the people responded to their teachings.

We simply cannot expect to lead God's people if we are unwilling or unable to tell them God's news. The ability to teach is not expected of all Christians (Romans 12:3-8). However, essential to the mission of God is that those who are able to teach do so. Christ must be faithfully preached to the nations, bringing about faith-filled following of Christ, to the glory of Christ (Romans 16:25-27).

Theological Reflection

It is imperative for the Christian pastor to have a Trinitarian epistemology that informs a missional pedagogy. Said another way: Christian pastors must know God and make him known.

Christian teaching starts with the theological principle that God is able to be known. It is impossible to teach what cannot be understood. The gospel of the Bible is teachable because the God of the Bible is knowable. Non-Christians' religious arguments against knowing God are essentially that our finite human minds cannot know the infinite being of God. Secularists argue what can be known is only that which can be perceived in science, therefore there is no "god." However, the Christian teaches the God of the Bible because, as John Frame writes, "If God is who the Scripture says he is, there are no barriers to knowing him."¹

God is knowable, and he makes himself known in Scripture through the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 1:18; Luke 24:36-49). Therefore, the task of Christian teaching and preaching is not simply to impart moral lessons from the Bible or exegetical observations

¹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1987), 20.

about the grammar of a particular passage. No, the task of Christian teaching and preaching is to speak of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:17-18, 23; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Galatians 1:6-10). As the British preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, “A sermon without Christ as its beginning, middle, and end is a mistake in conception and a crime in execution.”² To teach as a Christian pastor is to show, from the Scriptures, who Christ is and convey the implications of his life for the life of the hearers. In preaching of Christ from all of scripture, the Christian teacher makes God known.

Upon hearing Christ preached, it is by the Holy Spirit that men, having heard the message taught, can perceive and believe. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, it is not simply the teaching of men that causes gospel growth, but it is only God who can cause that to happen. The Holy Spirit is not only opening the eyes of the blind who hear teaching (2 Corinthians 4:4-6), but he is at work in the teacher. It is wrong to, without the Spirit’s leading, seek to impart what can only be received by the power of the Spirit. As Tim Keller has pointed out, “What the Holy Spirit is to do in the hearts of your listeners he will normally do first in and through you.”³

For the Christian church planter and pastor, the ability to teach is enabled by personal gifting, but must be driven by theological conviction. To teach the gospel, you must hold to the truth that God is able to be known, has revealed himself in Scripture particularly through Christ, and now enlivens the hearts of men and women to receive that teaching by his Holy Spirit.

Cultural Engagement

The pastor or church planter who exercises their ability to teach may find that the audience is not always friendly. When bringing the unchanging word of God to the ever-changing cultures of today, it is often difficult for the teacher to teach in a way that is well received. The ability to teach must include both a persistent kindness and a nimble ambition.

In the face of rejection, the preacher/teacher must carry on with kindness, eager to persuade (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 1 Timothy 1:5). Paul anticipated that truth would not always be received well when he told Timothy, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). The teacher of truth realizes that the audience most often wants lies. And the answer to this is not to get angry and rant. The answer must be a persistent kindness. As Paul outlines in 2 Timothy 4:5, the teacher will be able to be sober-minded (not surprised by the passions of the people) and enduring of suffering (not deterred by persecution).

² Spurgeon, Charles, *Through the Eyes of C.H. Spurgeon: Quotes From A Reformed Baptist Preacher* (Lucid Books: Brenham, TX, 2012), 150.

³ Keller, Tim, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (Penguin: New York, 2015), 205.

The teacher must realize that the culture individuals are in may make it difficult for them to hear, and must also remain resilient and flexible in style, never abandoning the goal of making the message understood. This process of molding the delivery of the message to most persuade the hearers of the message is called “contextualization.” Tim Keller writes about the dangers of contextualizing too much or not enough saying,

If you overcontextualize and compromise the actual content of the gospel, you will draw a crowd but no one will be changed. That is nothing less than a dereliction of the preacher’s duty. You will mainly just be confirming people in their present course of life. On the other hand, if you undercontextualize, so that your communication of the gospel is unnecessarily culturally alien and distant from the listeners, you will find that no one will be willing to hear you out.⁴

A nimble ambition in the teacher will confront these errors Keller points out. There must be the ambition to teach truth. We cannot overcontextualize to where truth becomes subservient to context. However, we must be nimble and responsive with that ambition, always ready to adapt when the message is being perceived as alien. The teacher is not ready to teach unless he knows what to say and how to say it well. As Dan Doriani has said, the expositor must “exegete both the Bible and the audience.”⁵

Few pastors or church planters would stand up and announce that they are against teaching and feel that it is totally unimportant. But many leading a church or church plant reveal that same mindset when the substance of their ministry is not based on clear proclamation of truth. Too often in weekly gatherings, “strategic vision” is a stand-in for biblical exposition as the lifeblood of the mission of the church and “rich worship experiences” are replacements for Word-centered encounters with the living God. In contrast to this, pastors and church planters must conduct themselves in a ministry that reflects the New Testament emphasis on the authority, content, and teaching of the message of the Gospel as the guiding principle in fruitful ministry.

A healthy church will also experience the ability to teach present throughout its ministries. Teaching must not only be done in weekly worship, but should be a presence that is felt in the life of the church. As Steve Timmis and Tim Chester encourage,

Word ministry takes place in a variety of ways, not simply forty-five minutes on a Sunday morning. It takes place through group Bible studies. It takes place when two people meet to read the Bible. It takes place as people are mentored through the word... being word-centered is more than how you teach and disciple. It means governing church life by God’s word.⁶

⁴ Keller, Tim, *Preaching* (102-3).

⁵ Doriani, Dan, “*How Expository Preaching Meets Your Needs*” posted on The Gospel Coalition website. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-expository-preaching-meets-your-needs> (accessed April 30, 2017).

⁶ Chester, Tim and Timmis, Steve, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2008) 115.

When this sort of culture is created in a church family—one where teaching is taking place in everyday life—then a powerful force for gospel advance has been mobilized. The teaching is not dependent on one pastor on one day of the week in one place, but rather it's proclaimed by all who are God's people (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Missional Significance

The ability to teach has particular significance and relevance to church planting. Preaching the Word rightly and powerfully is of utmost importance as we seek to reach more people with the gospel. Humanly speaking, it is not difficult to draw a crowd. If a new church merely aims to draw a crowd, they may spend their efforts on programs and community service that amount to little more than marketing. The numerical growth achieved, however, is often simply transfer growth of Christians from other churches who are drawn to the latest new ministry in town. Because in the work of church planting we are primarily seeking to reach unbelievers with the gospel, a church planter must focus on preaching the Word.

The practice of teaching as primary in planting a new church was the apostle Paul's strategy in impacting Europe and Asia during his day. When arriving in a new city, Paul would go into the city center and begin preaching, often in the synagogues. Acts 17:1-2 says, "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures." It was customary for Paul to reason from the Scriptures with people who would engage with him. On his first missionary journey he preached in synagogues in Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 13), and he went with Barnabas to the synagogue in Iconium (Acts 14). Paul had the same strategy on his second journey and preached in synagogues in Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17) and discussed spiritual matters in the synagogue in Athens (Acts 17). It was no different on his third church planting trip as he ministered in the synagogue in Ephesus (Acts 19). And when there was no synagogue in Philippi (Acts 16), Paul and his colleagues went to the river and preached to a group of women who were gathered there. Church planting, for Paul, always started with the Word of God being preached. The churches he planted were steadfastly centered on the Word.

Church planting is supernatural work. Therefore, our aim in this ministry must be to preach the Word of God, as this is God's means of calling people out of darkness and into his light. There is only one message that saves; we announce the Good News that is God's power for salvation. There is only one food that will grow people to maturity in Christ; we feed sheep with the Word of God. There is one kind of unity that is true community and belonging; we equip the saints to use their God-given gifts to build one another up in Christ. We want to have a missional impact and reach non-believers with the gospel, so we must start with the Word preached. In a sense, a church planter must be willing to let other ministries of the church fall away—all but the preaching.

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.