

# The Old Paths

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## “Preaching A Distinctive Message”

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In Nehemiah 8, the people of Israel who had returned from the captivity assembled to hear the law. They were not reluctant hearers, but attentive recipients of the word. Indeed, the text says that “*the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law*” as Ezra spoke from the pulpit “*from early morning until midday*” (Neh. 8:3). Extended periods of listening to God’s will have never been boring to those who love the Lord and His truth.

Their exemplary response to God’s law began in reverence when they stood as the book of the law was opened and concluded with the people voicing, “*Amen, Amen,*” to the teaching as they worshiped God. The day ended with the people being joyful “*because they had understood the words that were declared unto them*” (Neh. 8:12). Though the day began with many being ignorant of the law’s teaching, they understood and rejoiced by day’s end.

The book of Nehemiah goes on to record the people’s confession of sin and their vowing together “*to do all the commandments of Jehovah our Lord*” (Neh. 10:29). How was this great change in understanding of God’s will and the consequent uplifting of the people accomplished? What kind of teaching aided this much needed transformation of will and action? Our questions are answered as this is revealed about the teaching of Ezra and his fellow teachers:

“*And they read in the book, in the*

*law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading*” (Neh. 8:8).

This was a case of distinctive preaching that should serve as an example to us. The same things that made this distinctive preaching acceptable to God and effective in reaching honest hearts can do the same in our time. Notice the elements of this distinctive preaching:

1) It was preaching **founded upon the word of God.**

2) It was preaching that **examined and applied the principles of truth.**

3) It was preaching **designed to be understood by all hearers.**

It is incumbent upon God’s people to examine the preaching of our day to see if it meets the divine criteria of such distinctiveness. Those of us who preach must honestly measure our teaching by the divine standard, not the standard of popular appeal or cultural correctness. Those of us who listen must demand distinctive preaching that fosters an understanding of the truth and a proper application of its principles as we commit ourselves to total faithfulness.

### **Preaching the Book**

Ezra preached what is sometimes called an expository sermon for half of one day. His teaching was not based on a joke or a story of what happened to him while out fishing. Those listening to Ezra went away with the words of God upon their hearts. Divinely approved, distinctive preaching has always been “*book, chapter and verse*” preaching.

New Testament preachers did the same. Paul said that the Scripture was

given “*that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work*” (II Tim. 3:16-17). Peter referred again and again to Scripture as the proof in his sermons (cf. Acts 2 & 3). The Hebrew writer used Scripture to prove each point he made. Thus, Paul gave the simple instruction for all preachers of all time: “*Preach the word*” (II Tim. 4:2).

In our time, many denominational preachers and “televangelists” have blazed the trail of minimizing the use of the Scriptures. Sadly, too many of our brethren seem to be following their lead. Sermons with three, two or just one Bible passage cited during the entire sermon are becoming far too common among us. As the volume of cited Scripture diminishes, the dependence upon uninspired poetry, jokes, stories and literature has increased. Though such material is sometimes good to illustrate a Bible truth, let us always show our emphasis upon the word of God by appealing predominantly to it.

### **Examination & Application of Bible Principles**

Ezra did not merely read the law and leave the people to interpret it in any fashion they desired. He correctly recognized that a divinely inspired message instructed a right path of faith and conduct. Thus, the text says he “*gave the sense*” of God’s instruction. This was done as each principle was examined and applied so that the hearers might comprehend both the truth taught and how that truth had practical application in their lives. It was this process that helped the people understand that they were not living as God had commanded within His law. Their initial examination of that law caused the people grief as they faced the fact of their unwitting disobedience. Their past failure to keep the Feast of

“Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk

Tabernacles as ordained by God was then corrected as they understood “the sense” of God’s commands and applied themselves to obey the law in this matter. Distinctive preaching made this progress possible.

The New Testament requires the same kind of distinctive preaching which examines “the sense” of truth in propositional terms and shows the practical applications of that truth by calling upon the hearers to correct their actions in obedience. Whether those preaching in the first century affirmed the proposition that Jesus was the Christ, that salvation was by grace through faith, or that Christians have an obligation to holiness, they examined the doctrine of Christ to ascertain the truth and gave “the sense” of that teaching.

Such preaching demanded that they oppose false concepts which would lead people away from God and His truth. While affirming that the crucified Jesus was the Christ, they exposed and opposed the Jews and Greeks who denied that propositional truth (I Cor. 1:18-25). While affirming that salvation was by grace through faith, they had to expose and oppose the Judaizing teachers who taught otherwise (e.g. book of Galatians). While affirming the necessity for holiness in Christians’ lives, it was also necessary to expose and oppose those who turned the grace of God into a license to increase sin (Rom. 6:1-11; I Jn. 1:6; I Cor. 5). Preaching that accentuates the positive and eliminates the negative may please the ears of the world, but it does not please God by following His plan for distinctive preaching. Preaching that follows the Bible pattern will pointedly rebuke immodesty, social drinking, dancing, unlawful divorce and remarriage, doctrinal compromise and other sins of the day.

The hearers of the first century were also given responsibilities to insure that such preaching would continue in their presence. John told the hearers to “*believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world*” (I Jn. 4:1). John then gave specific truths to test for false teachers. When the hearers asked a teacher regarding the specific points of truth and compared the teacher’s words to the word of God, false teachers could be identified, exposed and avoided.

### **Preaching To Be Understood**

Finally, Ezra preached “*so that they understood the reading.*” New Testament preachers did the same (Eph. 3:3-4; 5:17). Distinctive preaching seeks to be understood by all hearers (Isa. 35:8). Distinctive preaching does not gain its distinctive nature from the advanced vocabulary or oratorical ability of the preacher (I Cor. 2:1-5). The servant of God does not seek to be remembered for his unique delivery and style, but seeks for the audience to understand and remember the truth of God’s word.

One of the common characteristics present in false teachers is their repeated claim to have been misunderstood. When accused of teaching error, they often shift the blame to the defender of truth by saying it is all just a confusion over terminology. A teacher who truly

finds it too difficult to speak so that he is understood needs to reevaluate his usefulness as a gospel preacher. When one denies that the truth is clear and can be clearly presented, it should serve as a warning that the “truth” he teaches is not the truth of God. Those who preach the distinctive message of truth will be understood because the message was designed by God to be understood by hearers who could then apply the principles into a life of service to God as He clearly commands in His word. Let us unashamedly preach the distinctive truth of God so as to be understood.

(From: *Reasons For Hope*, 8/4/02)

### **Editor’s Note:**

How I appreciate brother Osborne’s continued stand for the truth, and his being unashamed of the gospel of Christ. May we all consider ourselves, and learn the lesson he taught. You know, it is one thing for men to tolerate sound doctrine being preached (which many do). It is quite another thing to demand it (which few do)!! Are we demanding that sound doctrine, teaching like Nehemiah, Jesus, the apostles, and other Bible characters, be done here? If not, we need to repent, and return to the “*old paths*” (Jer. 6:16) while there is still hope for us. If we refuse sound gospel preaching, we will lose our souls. It is *that serious!* (II Tim. 4:2-4)

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