



TONGUES AFLAME

LEARNING TO PREACH FROM THE APOSTLES

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MENTOR





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Introduction

Some of you have heard the words of the old spiritual, ‘Balm in Gilead’.

You may not preach like Peter,
You may not pray like Paul,
But you can tell the love of Jesus,
Who died to save us all.

Is this the way you view your present preaching ministry? As a minister of the gospel you are to ‘tell the love of Jesus’ – to bring to lost sinners the message of forgiveness for sins and reconciliation with God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. But you freely admit that you cannot ‘preach like Peter,’ or ‘pray like Paul’ (and perhaps you don’t see yourself preaching like Paul either).

When you left seminary and entered your first pastorate you hoped to set the church and the world aflame with your sound biblical exposition, your penetrating theological insights, your persuasive applications, and your homiletical eloquence. But after a few years those dreams disappeared.

But should they?
Why not preach like Peter and Paul?
Why not preach *better* than these great giants of the pulpit?
‘Ah,’ you say, ‘what vanity!’

I am not talking about vanity. I am talking about powerful preaching in your ministry. If it were merely a matter of aspiring to their position as masters of the presentation of the ‘good news,’ there would be no reason for a book such as this. But I am assuming here (and will throughout this book) that you, as an evangelical pastor, have a deep desire to be as effective in your ministry as possible, and especially so in the pulpit.

I assume that (if you are like me) you are *unsatisfied* with the present state of your preaching. With Paul you rejoice in the glorious wonders of the message to be preached, but with him you also know that the treasure is deposited in ‘pots of clay’ (2 Cor. 4:7). You know the message deserves more than you give it, and you want to give it more. But how?

Perhaps that is why you have allowed yourself to become disappointed, and have drawn, at least implicitly, the conclusion of the old song that you may *never* preach like Peter. You'd like to, but things are too locked in now, and you are far from having achieved that goal. You have become resigned to the status quo.

Well, don't!!

These are great days for preaching, and you must make the most of them! While some in our day are speaking of the *death* of preaching in the face of our modern communications explosion, God is still determined by the 'foolishness of preaching to save them that believe' (1 Cor. 1:21, AV). More and more evangelicals are relying on 'gimmicky' tools and techniques – on overhead projectors (splashing power point sermon outlines and cartoon illustrations on the wall) and other 'communications technology', on sermon-replacing 'dramas' and hip, upbeat musical performances to help get them through the Sunday morning hour. Meanwhile, if the truth were known, many of God's people – and even some non-Christians – are still looking for the man who is convicted by the truth of God and fired by the Holy Spirit who will take his place in the pulpit and *preach* to them.

Church members by and large are not sick of preaching, they are sick of *not hearing* preaching. Some of our congregations have not heard a decent sermon in years!

Lectures? Yes.

Bible studies with good content? Sometimes.

Moving personal testimonies? Yes.

But powerful preaching of solid sermons week after week? All too seldom.

The purpose of this book is to help you realize that it doesn't have to be that way. You don't have to surrender to the status quo. You can grow. Your preaching can change for the better. This book is an effort to show you one of the sources to which you can look to find help in growing and changing in your preaching.

You may not preach like Peter or Paul, but you can do the next best thing. *You can learn about preaching from them.* You can become an imitator of their preaching

Imagine if one day, in that pile of mailings and flyers that comes to the church every day, there was a brochure announcing a preaching seminar in your town, and as you looked to see who the key speakers would be, you found (to your utter amazement) that they were Peter

and Paul, with Stephen thrown in for good measure! Would you attend? How much time and money would you be willing to devote to participating in such a seminar.

Well, you don't have to do that. You already have access to a seminar by these great apostolic preachers in the Book of Acts.

As a Bible-believing minister you are already accustomed to using the Scriptures for the *content* of your messages. Now I am calling you to examine the way the sermons in Acts can also give you insights into how to shape the *form* of your messages, and to let the apostolic preachers become your examples of how to *deliver* sermons that will be *powerful* and *effective*.

I do not know how you would evaluate your personal strengths and weaknesses as a preacher, but since there is seldom anything 'new under the sun', you probably share problems with other preachers.

- The press of pastoral duties takes away time needed to develop your messages fully so sometimes you feel unprepared to preach effectively.
- The dulling sense of routine that can become part of the weekly ministry of the Word can rob you of the sense of majesty and glory you once had when faced with the prospect of declaring the 'whole counsel of God'.
- You are intimidated by the responses you get (or fear you may get) from your congregation if you preach in certain ways or on certain topics, so you blunt the cutting edge of your preaching out of fear of men.
- Your own walk with the Lord has its periods of dryness, and you know well what that does to your preaching.

Entries on this list of common preaching ailments could be multiplied, and our individual problems would all find a place on the list.

If you now face, or have at one time faced, these or other problems in your preaching ministry, then this book is for you. A careful study of the preaching in Acts will greatly help you identify some of your problems, and give you clear directions for implementing useful correction.

It is my prayer that as we work through this study together you will be challenged and encouraged to 'preach like Peter' and the other apostolic witnesses in the Book of Acts, and that in so doing you



will recapture the exhilaration of the preaching ministry once again. If you are a student or new preacher, perhaps these studies will help you get started in the right direction. Your people in turn will know the deep satisfaction of being fed week by week with the good food of the Word by a shepherd who speaks as an ‘oracle of God’ (1 Pet. 4:11).

I worked on this book for a long time before I settled upon the present title. All the working titles were so boring, while I found the subject matter so challenging and exciting. I like this title: *Tongues Aflame*. Not only does it carry the allusion to the Pentecostal tongues of the apostles as they were set afire by the Spirit of God in the first century, but it suggests that today’s preacher must, and can, also possess a tongue (and heart) set aflame by that same Spirit of gospel grace and hope. And the title captures the *connection* between the apostolic preachers of those early days and preachers like you and me in the twenty-first century, which I want you to understand is at the heart of my concern in this book.

We all realize that we share the message with the apostles – the ‘good news’ of the death, resurrection, and transforming power of Jesus Christ. My prayer is that this book will help you share in their preaching methods and abilities as well.

This book was a long time in the making. Many have helped along the way. I’m thankful to the faculty and staff of Westminster Theological Seminary in California. This book is the fruit of my participation in the seminary’s Doctor of Ministry degree program in preaching. Special thanks to my advisors Jay Adams and Joseph Pipa. I would also like to thank my wife, Sherry, and my family, as well as the elders and congregation of Bayview Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chula Vista, California, who all kept prodding me (gently but persistently) to complete this project. Finally, thanks to Alan Wares and Mike Pasarilla who helped me whip the manuscript into shape at various stages.

This book is dedicated to two men who are bound together in my heart around the preaching of the Word of God. Jay Adams is well known to many for his seminal thinking and writing on the subject of biblical counseling. He is also an outstanding preacher, and perhaps more importantly, an able teacher and trainer of young preachers. He was my first instructor in preaching at Westminster Seminary in

Philadelphia in 1970. It was he who, during the evaluation conference following my first ‘practice sermon’, first suggested (strongly) that I should consider becoming a pastor (I had had no such intention in entering seminary). He has had a profound effect on me as a Christian and as a pastor-preacher (as the text before you will demonstrate clearly). And it was at his urging, years later, that I entered the D.Min program in preaching at Westminster Seminary in California, out of which the present study grew. Thank you, Dr. Adams, and praise be to God, for all you have done for me.

The late Tom Stewart was a member of my first congregation in Sonora, California. He was the kind of sermon listener for which every preacher longs: eager, discerning, verbally responsive, a ‘doer of the word’ and not merely a hearer. Tom and his wife Grace were a great encouragement to me over the ten years I labored in Sonora. When I told Tom about the prospect of entering the D.Min program under Dr. Adams, he urged me to do so, and generously provided the financial support for the first phase of my studies. After I moved on to my present pastoral charge in Southern California, I did not see much of Tom and Grace, but on those few occasions we did visit one another, the conversation soon turned to preaching. Tom went home to be with our Lord a few years ago, but I was so grateful to God that before he died he had the opportunity to read the manuscript of this study. The last time we spoke, he had phoned me to say he had finished reading the manuscript, and had found it a great blessing to his heart. Thank the Lord, whose glorious gospel we proclaim, for modern day ‘Bereans’ like Tom.

Roger Wagner
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Chula Vista, California