

# “THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

## Compromising Preaching Weakens Churches

By David Weeks

Uncompromising preaching of Bible truth is the key to strength in local churches. Israel was destroyed by sin when the prophets refused to preach the truth (Ezek. 22:28). Soon, the people didn't want any more truth and told the prophets to keep their “prattling” to themselves (Mic. 2:6). Peter warned that we can fall victim to the same damaging trend today, because just like there were false prophets, there will also be false teachers among us (2 Pet. 2:1). This will result in a corresponding absence of truth and weakness in churches of Christ.

Churches grow weak when Bible authority disappears from the pulpit. Generations of faithful Christians learned from childhood how to derive divine authority from the scriptures. Brethren “cut their teeth” on sermons about command, approved example, and necessary inference. For example learned that we observe the Lord's supper on the first day of the week because it was commanded (Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:23-25). We also learned from the example of early Christians who *“continued steadfastly in the...breaking of bread”* (Acts 2:42). Moreover, Paul and company waited at Troas for a week so they could *“break bread”* on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). We also learned scriptural behavior in worship from inescapable conclusions (necessary inferences) about authorized activities. The Lord's supper was to be observed *“every first day of the week”* because every week had a first day. Precedent confirmed this. Every week had a Sabbath, so Jews were required to observe every Sabbath (Ex. 20:8; Acts 20:7). Do you remember, years ago, when every gospel meeting had at least one lesson on Bible authority? We were constantly reminded that it was wrong to alter the word of God in any way (Rev. 22:18-19). We were taught to *“speak as the oracles of God”* (1 Pet. 4:11). We knew from sound teaching that to embrace any other gospel was anathema (Gal. 1:6-9). Our duty was to *“build all things according to the pattern”* (Heb. 8:5). When was the last time you saw a slate of meeting sermons on the bulletin board with *“How To Establish Bible Authority”* on the roster? The absence of such emphasis, in favor of “theme meetings,” is concerning.

Churches are weakened when the work and organization of the church is not preached regularly. The very first Sunday I attended church services at the age of twenty-one, I heard a sermon on the work and organization of the church. The preacher contrasted the church of Christ with denominationalism. I was a Catholic at the time, but I had no doubt that something was different between what I was and what this preacher was showing me from the Bible. I had to learn more!

The work of the church has not changed since the first century. Its mission is still to be the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), to edify the saints (Eph. 4:11-16), to provide specific benevolence to needy saints (Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:1-5; 9:12). Liberal churches of Christ have long gone the way of denominationalism, on this point, and they altered the Bible plan for the church to be whatever work they believe “does good” (the end-justifies-the-means, philosophy). When I was a young Christian, I was never allowed to forget what the work of the church was. Preachers, teachers, and elders uncompromisingly exposed the errors of the social gospel, and made it clear that all the schemes of men were merely human deviations from God's pattern (Mt. 15:7-9). There was no denying the truth, and brethren's faith was stoked by this regular teaching on the fundamentals. The power was in the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17), and our faith was built to a roaring fire by the “Old Jerusalem gospel.”

Churches are weakened when a speculative gospel is preached and taught. We are told that “nature abhors a vacuum.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the pulpit. When Bible authority and the work and organization of the church is absent, something else is going to take its place.

I once heard a preacher tell his audience, “This, that I am saying, is probably going to make you feel uncomfortable!” Why in the world would truth make an audience of Christians uncomfortable? Truth shakes up sinners, because it cuts their hearts (Acts 2:36). The scribes and Pharisees surely were uncomfortable because of the truth Jesus preached (Mqtt. 15:12; 21:45). This is what the gospel does; it affects people differently based on how they are living their lives. It is desirable to people who love the truth, but to those who do not love it, it stinks (2 Cor. 2:15-16). If a preacher today is going to make his audience of New Testament Christians uncomfortable, it must be that he is about to tell them something you can’t find in the Bible!

Churches are weakened when elders become office holders rather than men committed to doing **“a good work.”** The first thing that Paul mentions when he begins discussing the office of bishop is that it is **“a good work”** (1 Tim. 3:1). Elders are not figureheads, they are men charged by God to watch for the souls of the saints under their charge (Heb. 13:17). One of their specific duties is to **“hold fast the faithful word as he has been taught”** and to **“convict the gainsayer”** (Tit. 1:9). The truth is their concern, and strengthening Christians is their business (Eph. 4:11-16). When a church doesn’t have such leadership, it lacks something truly necessary (Acts 14:23). Even worse, is the condition of a church which has elders who do not do their work of edifying saints, watching for weakness, and confronting error.

Churches are weakened when discipline becomes a thing of the past. Church discipline is hard, but necessary. It is hard to provoke people unto love and good works when they don’t want to exercise love and good works (Heb. 10:23-24). Discipline is the process of training Christians to be faithful to God. It not only includes Bible instruction, it also includes warning those who are walking **“disorderly”** (1 Thess. 5:14). When all efforts to restore the erring one are unsuccessful, it becomes necessary to mark that person and withhold from him the connections of family with the assembly that he craves. He has chosen to be out of fellowship with God (1 Jn. 1:5-7), and it is necessary for the church to acknowledge this and to **“deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved”** (1 Cor. 5:5). The hope is that he will repent because of the pain of discipline.

Unfortunately, church discipline is a thing some churches do not practice consistently. It is a painful process that brethren choose to ignore. Family entanglements mean some parents won’t help the church discipline their wayward children, nor husbands and wives, their disorderly spouses. This failure weakens and destroys churches, because sin is like leaven that leavens the whole lump (Gal. 5:9). Churches which are weak on discipline are eventually overrun with sin.

Churches are weakened when error is legitimized. Churches are strongest when members are regularly reminded that there is **“one true church”** (Eph. 4:4; 1:22-23). The church of Christ is entirely unique and singular. Jesus died for just one church, His church, the church of Christ (Acts 20:28; Mt. 16:18; Rom. 16:16). It is not uncommon for liberal preachers to water down this truth with talk about **“our fellowship”** rather than by speaking boldly about the **“church of Christ.”** A subtle change in language can blur the line between the one true church and the denominations. The **“church of Christ”** is seen by some to be too exclusive and divisive, but **“our fellowship”** implies that churches of Christ are just part of a broader tapestry of **“fellowships.”** Sometimes preachers are coupling the phrase **“our fellowship”** with **“our tradition.”** This is a subtle suggestion that maybe **“our tradition”** (i.e. the Lord’s church) is not alone in its approval by God.

The New Testament makes the distinction between the church of Christ and sectarianism clear and easy to see. Gospel preachers once freely used the words **“liberal”** and **“institutional”** to describe erring brethren. Now, the softer terminology that some preachers use implies that sound brethren are the ones who are wrong in their understanding of the scriptures, precisely because they do not embrace broader fellowship. At the very least the brethren are urged to be suspicious of the notion there **“one true church.”**

Conclusion: Brethren, we live in an age of compromise. Compromise in the pulpit is weakening the faith of Christians and it is weakening churches. ■

Service Times — Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM — Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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