

TUTORIAL
7.10

Making use of God's Word

This tutorial discusses the fifth question in the area of *Word*: 'Are they increasingly able to make use of God's Word as He intends for His children and His Church?'

Last time

We explored the idea that a cohesive understanding of God's Word (or Narrative) establishes its authority. To consider how this works in reality we imagined two scenarios of new believers from very different contexts who are wrestling with dilemmas. We then considered five questions that might help us decide whether sharing a specific passage from the Bible would be most helpful for them. Also, given that they come from pluralistic worldview foundations, we noted the importance of them having rock-solid foundations of Truth to trust and to live by. We then imagined the advantages if their initial engagement with God's Word had introduced Him and Jesus Christ to them through the Narrative.

The fifth question under "W" for *Word*

- Are they able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God's revelation to them?
- Are they having God's Word presented to them in a way that allows it to enter and engage their hearts at a worldview level?
- Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?
- Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?
- Are they increasingly able to make use of God's Word as He intends for His children and His Church?

There's a fairly obvious sequence that you'll have noticed in these initial five questions. In effect, we've been following the steps of how God's Truth - when it's communicated clearly and effectively - first establishes its own authority, then cultivates faith, develops correct understanding and leads to valid

applications. Finally, in this last one, we're considering how the Word equips God's people to *use* it productively. Having understood, believed, submitted and begun to relate it more widely to their lives, now they begin to learn how to ably use it as God's servants.

But there's also another related progression we should remind ourselves of. As we said earlier in the module, in presenting this W.I.L.D. framework, we've avoided calling it a "church planting model" or even "church growth model". That's because we don't want to infer that it's only about situations where a number of people are involved from the outset. In many contexts a church starts with an individual being saved, then another, and so on. So we wanted to consider how Truth impacts people, whether an individual, a couple, a family, or indeed a much bigger group.

A community of His people

The reality is that we can't really evaluate the ongoing impact of God's Word without fairly quickly bringing the Church - His Body - into the equation. While Truth can be shared by just one isolated believer with another individual, that's not ultimately God's intention, either for the one sharing or the one being impacted. And that's where we can see another inbuilt progression in these questions (i.e. these first five, but also as we move into the other areas of W.I.L.D.).

We might possibly say that the first and second questions could be applied to a one-on-one scenario; *Are they able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God's revelation to them? Are they having God's Word presented to them in a way that allows it to enter and engage their hearts at a worldview level?* But when we come to the third question - *Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?* - and really delve into how the authority of God's Word is established, it quickly becomes obvious that it doesn't happen in a relational vacuum. We know that God has created us, like Himself, as distinct individuals; but it's also true that like the Trinity - the three-in-one Unity of God - He relates to us as individuals-in-a-community. And in this time of history, that community in which He relates to His people is, of course, the *Ecclesia*, the Church. So again, in terms of how authority is established, yes, it's within an individual's heart as they stand before God, but it's also as they willingly submit to God's Spirit speaking to them through other brothers and sisters; hearing, experiencing and living it out together.

And then again with the fourth question - *Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?* - as we've already touched on, arriving at correct understanding of what God's Word means and how to apply it is not a theoretical process one believer is meant to do in isolation. Even though there are many examples of God speaking to individuals -

Abraham, Noah, Moses, David, Paul, John, etc. - it was always with the intention of them sharing that message to a community of His people. The role of His designated prophets and apostles was not only to speak His Word, but also to draw out its meaning and practical implications for the community of faith.

Now, as we ask this fifth question about whether those hearing Truth are growing in their ability to make use of God's Word, it's really not possible to consider that outside the context of a body of believers. That conviction is reflected in the wording of the question itself which talks about God's intentions *for His children and His Church*. So our first five questions that started out considering quite abstract concepts have now come down to some very tangible, practical issues - how people are actually *using* God's Word. And again, that use, if it's valid, if it's what Christ intends, will be in and through the lives of believers who are learning to function as part of the corporate life of His Body.

Hopefully it's clear by now that when we employ a term like *making use of God's Word* we're not meaning to treat it just as information, a piece of equipment, or as some kind of commodity. We don't have to look further than the Psalms to find many very emotional and passionate examples of how we are meant to see the Scriptures. At the same time, God's Word describes itself as functioning like a fire and a tool (Jeremiah 23:29), a lamp and a light (Psalm 119:105), protective armour and weaponry (Hebrews 4:12, Ephesians 6:11-17), as a catalyst for change (2 Timothy 3:16) and the material with which His servants work.

But how *do* we use God's Word appropriately? What reference points should we utilise to gauge whether or not those hearing Truth are learning to make use of it? Obviously there are many ways we could sort and describe these, but maybe three concepts borrowed from agriculture will be apt: *nurture*, *shape* and *propagate*.

Nurture (to care for and protect)

Someone who is learning to make use of God's Word is able to feed themselves. If they are accessing Truth at a worldview level, if its authority has been established in their lives if and they're learning to make sense of each new part in light of the whole, then they are in a position of being able to find nourishment from the Word.

Certainly God makes it very clear that He gives specific abilities and responsibilities within the Ecclesia for the feeding of His *children*, His *flock*. But just as clear is His intention for believers to be motivated and equipped to feed themselves from His Word. At the risk of badly mixing our metaphors, remember how the apostle Peter used the image of a baby craving milk (1 Peter 2:2). There's a clear implication that a child craves the food that's

appropriate to what it can digest at a particular stage of its development. Growth toward maturity is a process that starts with someone completely dependent on others for nourishment gradually progressing to a point where they're able to feed themselves - without, of course, negating the critical role of God's Spirit and fellow believers all along the way.

Paul puts the responsibility on the Colossians (Colossians 1:23) to continue to believe the Good News they've been taught and to "stand firmly" in it. To let their "roots grow down into Him (Christ)" and that their "lives be built on Him" (Colossians 2:7). So the nurture of new believers is most definitely the responsibility of any who share God's Word and those who are placed in positions of leadership within the Body. But as we evaluate a given situation in which Truth is being shared, a clear sign of maturity is when individuals within the Body are also learning to *use* God's Word for their own nourishment and growth.

But most plants or trees don't grow in a laboratory, or even a greenhouse. They're trying to make it out in the real world where they're vulnerable to the extremes of weather and attacks from disease and pests. Of course a healthy plant is also one that can handle heat, cold, insect infestation, mould etc. (We're reminded here of Jesus' parable of the sower and the importance of careful planting.) But even healthy plants often need some strategy to protect them from devastating environmental conditions and pathogens. Careful farmers are aware of what is most likely to harm their crops and take measures to guard against that.

The applications to those growing in their faith are obvious. But maybe the agricultural analogy runs out, because God's intention for His children is not for them to remain in a vulnerable state of relying on others for protection. There is, without doubt, protection to be found within a body of believers (that's why church discipline is designed to be so devastating to an unrepentant Christian). But God also wants each believer to come to a point of maturity where they can *use* His Word, not only to feed themselves but also to protect against attack.

To illustrate this in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses two images from activities that would have been familiar to the church in Ephesus. The first, (Ephesians 4:14), pictures immature believers as small rudderless boats on a stormy ocean, being helplessly pushed around by every gust of wind that comes their way. Paul says in preceding verses that God has given His Word through the apostles and prophets, and also gifted His servants to teach that Word, specifically to help believers move beyond that vulnerable, immature state. They are to be *equipped* with a rudder and the ability to steer a course - in other words, to be able to instinctively apply Truth to the values of the society, in conversations, within relationships, in moments of emotional vulnerability, in the face of temptation. The supreme example we have of this

is, of course, the way Jesus used Scripture to combat Satan's insidious attack on the Father-Son relationship that God had just attested to after Jesus' baptism.

Another striking image Paul uses in the epistle to the Ephesians is to describe believers as defending themselves in warfare (Ephesians 6:10-17). The armour and weapons they're to use, to a large degree, are made available to them through the efforts of God's servants who share Truth in the Body. But each believer is exhorted to put the armour on, to pick up the shield, to know how to wield the sword. No one can hope to stay safe for too long if they always have to hide behind someone else's shield and sword and never join the battle themselves.

Shape (to train and prune)

Most fruit bearing vines, bushes and trees are healthiest and most productive when they are shaped in specific ways: by being trained onto a frame or trellis, through pruning, or a combination of the two. Opening them up to light and air encourages fruit and reduces the chance of disease and insect attack. In His famous description of Himself as the true vine and His people as the branches, Jesus says, "You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you." (John 15:3). God's revelation of His Truth is the way in which He shapes His people for the lives and work He designed them for.

But we're not talking about topiary - you know, when shrubs are trimmed into weird, tortured shapes like spirals or animals. And it's not bonsai - keeping plants unnaturally dwarfed by restricting the growth of their roots and branches. Jesus said that knowing the truth would set His followers *free* (John 8:31-32). When we see the Bible being used by believers to place themselves or others under Law, to generate fear, or to coerce people to live up to human expectations, we can readily identify that as an improper use of His Word. The kind of training and pruning we are talking about is based on the amazing reality that believers have been freed from the Law through their participation in Jesus' death and resurrection. That's why; Paul explains to the believers in Rome (Romans 7:4-5), they are now able to "produce a harvest of good deeds for God".

Of course humans have been deceived into believing that real freedom is all about doing whatever their appetites and inclinations dictate. Ironically, as God's Word makes clear, that is actually the ultimate slavery. Through Christ He has made His children free, not to be slaves to their own sin-corrupted wills, but to do *His* will, to do what He created them for. This new freedom involves learning a whole new set of habits and behaviours. Thankfully, He has given His Word, *breathed* out from His own holy, powerful being, to reveal what needs to be changed, to correct what is wrong and give us the opportunity to do things that God delights in (2 Timothy 3:16).

When Paul, under the Spirit's guidance, was reflecting on Scripture that way, it was in the context of encouraging Timothy in his ministry among the believers in Ephesus. He chose a term, which in modern English is often translated as "useful". He was telling his young friend to view God's Word as something that has very real, practical benefits. It works! It's not just theoretical truth, not just religious dogma, certainly not a set of confining rules. God's Word is a wonderful resource, a functioning toolbox that was available to Timothy and all believers; to parents, disciplers, teachers and church leaders. Or to go back to our agricultural analogy, it is the trellis God provides to give us the shape that we're meant to be, the pruning shears that in His loving hands leave only what's healthy and productive.

Propagate (to spread and reproduce)

A third area to consider in how individuals or groups of believers are *using* God's Word, is how well they are learning to pass Truth on to others. Genesis records that when God first created the vegetation that covers the planet, He said that each species would reproduce the same kind of plants and trees. This wasn't a fatherly, divine suggestion; it was a sovereign command. Plants *will* produce seed, they *will* be fruitful, they *will* spread out, and they *will* reproduce. It is a force built into their DNA by their Creator. If you've ever been in a tropical, rainforest area, you'll have a sense of just how powerfully this drive to propagate can be in certain ecosystems - the verdant riot of growing things everywhere can be almost overwhelming.

Isaiah likens the rain God sends to water food crops, with Him sending out His Word to feed people spiritually. In words that echo His proclamation about the fruitfulness of trees and plants at Creation, God says that His Word always produces fruit. It accomplishes everything He wants it to (Isaiah 55:10-11).

But as the apostle Paul reminds the believers in Rome, God has determined that in the normal course of events, if lost people are going to hear the Good News, it will be through His people taking it to them. But they need to be sent, to know they are sent (Romans 10:14-15). And that is a beautiful thing...God's people intentionally going out to share Truth - ordinary, weak, very human people, but with a wonderful treasure to share (2 Corinthians 4:7). This spreading out, this self-seeding, is something built into the DNA of the Church in the same way that God built fruitfulness into the plants and trees of creation. So yes, we would hope to see groups of believers like a garden or orchard that is nurtured and watered, well protected from disease and infestation and also enjoying the freedom that comes with being shaped and pruned by God's Word.

But a healthy tree sets fruit. It seeds and reproduces itself. In the same way, when God's Word is doing what He intends for it to do among His people, we can expect to see people who know they are sent... a group who knows how to reach out. We should see them sharing God's Word clearly and faithfully so

that it is understood; presenting Truth so it engages with people's hearts at a worldview level; teaching so that God's Word is given its proper place and authority; sharing in such a way that people understand God's complete Narrative with Jesus Christ as its centre.

Some extra questions

To go along with the fifth question under *Word*, 'Are they increasingly able to make use of God's Word as He intends for His children and His Church?', we can also ask:

- *Are they learning to use God's Word to spiritually feed themselves and to defend against attacks from the Enemy?*
- *Are they using Truth practically to correct wrong thinking and habits of life, not in a way that produces fear and bondage, but real joy and freedom in Christ?*
- *Are they learning to reach out with the Good News of Jesus Christ so it is communicated clearly and faithfully within the Biblical Narrative?*



DISCUSSION POINTS

Making use of God's Word

1. Imagine you move to a new town and become part of a small house church. Finding out that you have thought and studied about how churches grow to maturity, they invite you to evaluate the impact of God's Word on their group. How do you think you'd go about this? Where would you start? What situations would you want to be in to make observations?
2. If you care to, please share anything you've been learning about making use of God's Word in any of the three ways highlighted here: nurture, shaping and propagation.