



THE TEACHERS

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Ephesians 1:8-12

Fourth Message

Brian Morgan

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In the aftermath of the elections last week, I asked a friend whose wife is active in the pro-life movement how his candidates fared in the voting. "I don't even want to talk about it," he replied. The very next day I received a letter from my friend Ioan in Romania. He, too, was discouraged with their election results, following the electoral victory of Ceaucescu's right-hand man in that country. Here is what he wrote,

Unfortunately, our people lost the test of the recent elections and chose a president and a leading team with a strong atheistic past and atheistic inclinations. Surely in the future political evaluations they will fail to take options according to the Lord's will, and will bring misfortune to our nation. A very sad situation indeed, after the great signs the Lord did perform here, when we witnessed together the fall and the punishment of the anti-Christ, just on Christmas Day...To choose now again as leaders men of this kind is really unpardonable, a total lack of spiritual maturity. Therefore we think that the judgment upon Romania cannot be avoided and that it will be necessarily severe, to purge at once a rebellious and stubborn people inclined constantly to evil. We do hope the American elections would have a more happy result...

There is sadness in both of our worlds as family values take a back seat to political expediency. But only time will tell what God is doing in the midst of these apparent political defeats.

A fascinating story from the gospel of Luke came to mind as I thought about this. The story, from Luke 24, concerns two disciples of Jesus who were walking to Emmaus, a little village outside Jerusalem. Certain political events of their day had saddened them, too. They had put their hopes in a young Jew whom they thought would become king and deliver Israel from her political enemies. But their leader didn't just lose an election, he was crucified! As they walked to Emmaus, Jesus in his resurrected body came alongside them and walked with them. They didn't recognize him, and when he asked them what they were talking about, they said, "Haven't you heard? We were hoping that it was He [this Jesus] who was going to redeem Israel." They found it hard to believe there was someone who hadn't heard about recent events. But Jesus rebuked their foolish minds and their hard hearts for failing to believe the Scriptures. Luke continues: "And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Later, when Jesus had departed, the disciples said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (24:32). Jesus did not make any change in the political circumstances that had caused them sadness of heart, but his presence with them and his words to them radically altered their understanding of events. His reinterpretation of these happenings in light of the Scriptures had caused their hearts to burn with hope and anticipation. Isn't this what the church desperately needs today — teachers who have the ability to cut through the confusion and depression of the day and give us a new understanding by faith, turning our *sad* hearts

into *burning* hearts? Just think of the many crises we are facing today: the aftermath of the Gulf War, the AIDS crisis, cancer, unemployment, divorce, death itself. Do we have the eyes of faith to see what God is doing?

And where do we go to get help concerning these things? In our study today in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we will see that God has made provision for just this sort of thing. We have been learning of the wonderful blessings that are ours in Christ through God who has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). We have been chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and thirdly, as we will see today, we are taught by the apostles.

I will begin by reading the entire text that we will take this morning.

In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him unto an administration of the fulness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. (Eph. 1:8-12)

A careful reading of these verses reveals that a subtle distinction enters the text here compared to what has gone on before. I am referring to a change in pronouns. Throughout the first 12 verses, the apostle has made use of the pronouns "we" and "us," but now, beginning in verse 13, he changes the pronoun to "you." It is very important that we take note of this. The "you" he is referring to here, of course, make up the Ephesians (and, by extension, Christians throughout the ages). Who are those, then, who make up the "we"? We have the answer in chapter 3, verse 5, in the apostle's reference to the "...mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy *apostles and prophets*..." The "we" is referring to Christ's apostles.

Throughout salvation history, when God reveals himself in mighty acts of salvation, he selects for himself eyewitnesses who record his acts in writing. Their task is not only to record events, but also to interpret them. Moses, for instance, wrote down the history and the implications of the Exodus; Joshua recorded the taking of the land; Samuel and David enlightened us as to the implications of the monarchy in Israel; and Nehemiah recorded the return to the land following the Babylonian captivity. God does not repeat these acts of salvation for everyone to witness, but these writings are valid for all time, for all generations.

The apostles stand at the end of that great tradition. To them fell the task of interpreting the implications of the coming of the Messiah, the greatest event in salvation history. This was not the task of the Roman press, of Josephus, Pilate, the scribes or the rabbis. To the apostles, and to them alone, was given that sacred

trust. They were personally selected by God to be his spokesmen.

In this text, therefore, Paul demonstrates the importance of the role of the apostles in the long line of salvation history. Here he deals with different aspects of the office of the apostles, and how important they were to the process of Christians receiving these blessings in Christ.

He begins by saying how they were selected in the first place.

I. The Selection Of the Teachers (1:9)

...He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure.

(a) God Initiated the Selection, Implying Authority

The apostles were chosen by God's will. This was what Jesus told them once, "You did not choose me, but I chose you..." (Jn. 15:16). The writer of Hebrews concurs, "No one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God" (5:4). These men did not aspire to the office. In fact, they were minding their own business when Jesus interjected himself into their lives, and to each of them he uttered the invitation which they found irresistible, "Follow Me!"

To emphasize his point that these apostles were selected by God, Paul repeats this idea in verse 11, using three different nouns, the *will* of God, the *counsel* of God, and the *purpose* of God: "in Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will..."

First, the word "will" denotes that God made a free choice. He was neither coerced nor bound by anything but his own good pleasure and delight. He made the choice freely. Secondly, the word "counsel" indicates that God brought about all of this with foresight and planning. His choices were deliberate, methodical, with not a hint of impulsiveness. Before he selected the men who were to be his apostles, Jesus spent a whole night in prayer, deliberating over those who were to be part of his intimate circle. And although Paul himself was a "Johnny-come-lately" in this respect, he implies here that even the choice of him had as much forethought as the choosing of the original twelve.

Finally, the apostles were selected "with purpose." There was a greater end and a greater design in view. These men were not chosen arbitrarily, or with some meaningless end in view. No, the purpose behind their selection was that their writings would lead millions to Christ. Here is the implication: If the apostles stood in that tradition, their writings and their teaching would be authoritative. To reject the apostles, therefore, is to reject Christ. Beware lest you give anyone like Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Charles Taze Russell, or any modern-day guru, equal weight with the apostles in their teaching. This is why the writer to the Hebrews admonishes, "If the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Heb. 2:2-4). "*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*"

If the selection of the apostles implies authority, it also implies intimacy.

(b) The Selection Was Few, Implying Intimacy

The New Testament was written by men who knew and loved Christ. They loved him, they walked with him, and they suffered with him throughout his ministry. This is what produced the intimacy of their writings concerning him. Reading the New Testament, therefore, will inspire your love for Christ. If you want to know Torah, read Moses, because God spoke to him face to face. If you want to know Messiah, read the writings of the apostles because they knew him intimately.

Last week, I attended the memorial service of a Christian woman who died suddenly at the age of 70. The only people who spoke were the deceased woman's seven children and their spouses, selected ahead of time. As each one shared of a different aspect of the love and care which their mother had for them, everyone present caught a glimpse of her godliness and love. By the end of the service all present were weeping and my own heart was burning with love for a woman I had never met. It was because I had heard from those who were closest to her. Such was the manner in which the New Testament was written.

The writings of the apostles are authoritative and love-inspiring. Why would you trust your soul to anyone else?

A second aspect of their teaching is that there is a reality about it that is found in no other source.

II. The Vitality Of Their Teaching (1:8b)

In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will...

(a) Penetrating Insight

Their teaching had a ring of authenticity and reality to it. When God made known his will to the apostles, he did it not by means of boring, ivory-tower religious jargon but with reality and penetrating insight. In his teaching, Jesus laid bare the real issues underlying the fog of hypocrisy and immorality of his day. The undeniable reality of his teaching is what antagonized the religious theologians of his day, and it was this same gift of insight that he imparted to the apostles.

A number of years ago, I studied the Scriptures for a time with Bruce Rosenstock, a Jewish professor at Stanford University. Bruce, an Orthodox Jew and a classical Greek scholar, and I had an ongoing debate about the apostle Paul. Together, we translated Romans 9-11, using the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Septuagint, and the Greek texts. At the end of a year's study, Bruce concluded that Paul must have been an absolute genius. As a Jew, my friend discerned the force and weight of the apostle's argument in a much more profound way than I as a Gentile could. In fact, he was so taken by Paul's theology that he brought me with him to a conference of scholarly rabbis and theologians, the kind of men who would violently disagree with the apostle, and to this group he preached the texts of Romans 9-11.

Having studied with Bruce, I now see even more clearly the impact of Paul's insights into the new covenant. For example, the Galatians struggled with the issue of circumcision. What was Paul's advice to them? Here is what he said: "If you receive circumcision, Christ is of no benefit to you." He was saying that in the new covenant, all religion was out because Christ had redefined Judaism. Speaking of the Judaizers who were enticing the Galatians to be circumcised, Paul said, "I wish they would castrate themselves...the real reason they compel you to be circumcised is that they don't want to be persecuted for the cross of Christ. The real religious marks on the body are not circumcision, but the brand-marks of persecution that I have on my back for the cross of Christ." Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision

mattered. The issue was the new creation. That is the kind of insight that cuts through to the crux of the matter.

The teaching of the apostles was vital in another way.

(b) Powerful Moral Implications

Their teaching had not just insight, but *wisdom* for the moral skills of living life. Through apostolic teaching, these ancient texts become applicable to our own age. The Jews of Jesus' day frequently became lost in the strictness of the letter of the law and often missed its spirit and application. But let us remember that the apostles had that same spirit as Jesus, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words" (1 Cor. 2:12-13).

The apostles hold the key to the Old Testament texts, even texts like the obscure one in Deuteronomy that says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing" (Deut. 25:4). Paul said that this text was applicable to the church. The Corinthian church struggled with many things — licentiousness, incest, competition, etc. — but Paul wrote that if they knew the book of Numbers, they would not be in such a mess. The problem with much of the preaching and teaching we hear today is that most teachers who try to be applicable have no theological depth, and the ones who have theological depth are at times irrelevant. But the writings of the apostles are both applicable and theological. They deal with real issues and real situations. Why would you trust your soul to anyone else? When you have the experience of being taught in this manner, your heart begins to burn like it did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

On a pastoral staff visit to Israel in 1976, Dr. Bruce Waltke taught us from the book of Proverbs every morning. I confess I attended these sessions with a sense of reluctance at first because I was not excited about the writings of an ancient sage. But on that first morning I was captivated by the wisdom of our teacher and how he opened up these texts in a new and fresh way. I was junior high pastor at the time, and when Bruce introduced the opening teaching by saying, "These are ten lessons for the home," and then went on to expound on this subject, I saw for the first time how applicable this ancient material was to our own problems in the home today, and my heart burned with excitement as I learned how relevant these texts actually are.

So the apostles were selected by Jesus, and their teaching had penetrating moral insight. What, then, was the content of their teaching?

III. The Crux Of Their Teaching (1:9-10)

...the mystery of His will, ...which He purposed in Him unto the administration of the fullness of times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth.

Here, Paul shares two secrets about the apostles.

(a) They Knew What Time It Was

Some Christians are forever watching for signs such as "wars and rumors of wars," the last days, earthquakes, famine, etc. But when you hear someone say, "The end must be coming soon," you can nod and say that the apostles knew that 2000 years ago. The end times was the subject of the apostle Peter's first sermon in Acts, when he said, "The signs are here. The Spirit is being

poured out. This is the last event before the second coming of Christ." But the apostles knew also that the last days could last a long time, a thousand years or a day, because God is patient, "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

While many in the church today may know what time it is, most don't know the second secret that the apostles knew.

(b) They Knew the Secret Of the Time

The apostles knew the secret of God's administration. Everyone knows that a new administration will enter office in Washington in January. As a result, many are scurrying around trying to discover what this administration will do so they can plan accordingly. But God has told his apostles what he is up to in these last days. And what is that? Paul tells us that it is "the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth." What changed the hearts of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? Speaking of Christ, they said, "We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel." Then Jesus explained the Scriptures to them, interpreting them in light of himself. The disciples were looking only at earthly things and circumstances, but he opened their eyes to see heaven. They were disappointed that Israel had not been redeemed, but Jesus showed them the heavenly throne, the new world order (that he in fact was Israel, and redemption had indeed begun), with universal dimensions, unbounded by time and space.

I will try to illustrate. Imagine you are a Jew, living in the year 5 B.C., and the Emperor Augustus is announcing his new tax policy. "Read my lips," says this candidate, "no new taxes!" You subscribe to a Jewish lobbying group in Rome which sends out a weekly newsletter ("Roman Watchdog"), and their report says Augustus can't be trusted. There are rumors of an upcoming census, and the results will certainly mean a tax increase for the Jews. Send your shekels to us instead, says this lobbying group, support our anti-census campaign and no new taxes. So you send your few shekels. Augustus, however, is reelected. His corrupt government proceeds to hold a census, and a new tax is the result. Your worst fears are realized, and you are depressed by the fact of your own powerlessness.

Then you read the apostolic version of these same events, from the gospel of Luke. Here is Luke's account of this census which was designed to squeeze more tax money from the Jews: "Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth...And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem..." (Luke 2:1-4). At last you see the reasons behind the whole census and tax-hike scam: God was using the machinery of the Roman government to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5 that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem!

Let's take another example, this time from the life of King Herod. This wicked man slaughtered every male child under the age of two, causing great lamenting in Israel. Herod was not "pro-life" by any means. But the apostolic version of events, this time from Matthew's gospel, says that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee to Egypt, to fulfill the prophecy that said, "Out of Egypt did I call my Son." "Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying,

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
Weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children;

And she refused to be comforted,
Because they were no more.” (Matt. 2:17-18)

Even during the terrible slaughter of innocent blood, God was in control. The next line in the text says, “But when Herod was *dead*, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt...” The angel of the Lord appeared at the beginning and at the end of this account. What was he doing in between these two events? I think he went and killed Herod. If you read the text in this light, your heart will burn, too. Even in the midst of human tragedy, God can accomplish his purposes to bring everything under the dominion of Christ.

Finally, supposing you were a Christian in Philippi, and you read the news of an itinerant Jew, a tentmaker, who had been placed under house arrest in the midst of religious controversy, there to await trial, without legal counsel. How depressing, you would think, to have the best evangelist in the young church locked up in prison. But then, a few weeks later, a letter from Paul gives you a radically new perspective on this event. He is not Caesar’s prisoner, but Caesar’s household, amazingly, is his prisoner as he proceeds to convert the Roman Praetorian guards who are chained to him! Nothing is outside God’s rule. While Paul is taking new ground in prison, his being locked up encourages the saints to be bolder in their witness to the gospel. This was the perspective of the apostles. God was doing all these things in order to bring everything under the dominion of Christ.

This apostolic view gave the early church a great boldness in evangelism. The problem with the modern church is that it has a fortress mentality. We build big churches so that we may hide from the world, but the early church had an advantage over us in that they had no buildings to worry about. They became an army of liberation, going around freeing captives and taking new ground for the kingdom. They met in homes to encourage one another. They didn’t build buildings for ministry because they knew that Christ as Lord had dominion over everything. So don’t consider yourself chained to your work, but rather consider who is chained to you. This was how the apostles responded to the seeming hardships and tribulations they faced.

So when you read the writings of the apostles, your hearts will burn because they alone have the key to enable us to see what God is doing in this age. Why would you trust your souls to anyone else?

This brings us to the apostles’ final qualification.

IV. The Authenticity Of the Teachers (1:11,12)

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

(a) First-hand Experience

When I wanted to learn more about the cross a few years ago, I picked up a copy of *The Cross of Christ*, by John Stott. It is a wonderful, passionate book on the implications of the cross. Shortly afterwards I traveled to Romania, and there I met Traian Dorz, the leader of the Lord’s Army, a man who spent 16 years in prison for his faith. He looked at me and said, “You teach about the cross, we live under the cross.” I felt my heart burn within me. I have a passion to get this man’s autobiography and to publish it so that we, too, might feed on what the life and ministry of Traian Dorz meant to his people. He had a first-hand experience with the cross of Christ.

This is what qualified the apostles for ministry. They obtained this inheritance; they were the first to hope in Christ; they were pioneers who plowed the new ground; and they had first-hand experience of what they were teaching.

(b) Authentic Hope

Did they really believe it? you ask. And how much did they invest in their hope? The answer is that these early teachers forsook everything they had for that new heavenly inheritance. They invested all their resources. Paul lost his wealth, and he learned to live in poverty. In Philippians 3, he tells us that he lost something else that was very precious to him — his Jewish citizenship. Because he understood that Jesus had redefined Judaism, he knew that to be a Jew merely in the flesh availed him nothing. He lost everything, but he gained Christ. He may have lost his wife, too. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, and a qualification for that group was that one had to be married. Some scholars think that when he converted to Christianity, his wife may have left him. And he lost his health. On the first missionary journey, he probably contracted malaria. An eye disease pained him greatly all his life. (This may have been the thorn in the flesh that he mentions in his writings.) Worst of all, I feel, he lost his reputation. He was regarded as the scum of the earth. He had to depart every city he visited for fear of his life. He was so radical in his faith he was not even fully accepted by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. In many ways he was an outsider all his Christian life because he so clearly saw the new reality, the new order of things. And the final price he paid for the gospel was his own life.

These teachers paid the same price as their Teacher, risking everything for that hope that lay before them. Why would you trust your soul to anyone else?

Are you sad? If you are, you should ask yourself if perhaps you have allowed someone else to usurp the teaching of the apostles. May God grant each one of us the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “And they said to one another, ‘*Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?*’”

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