

# STARVING FOR TRUTH

## OVERCOMING THE FAMINE OF HEARING

We are starving for God's Word, and most of us don't even know it.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

*Starving for Truth*

Starving for Truth  
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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*Starving for Truth*

Contents

Welcome to <i>Starving for Truth</i>	4
1 A Coming Day Arrived	5
2 The First Fruit	7
3 The Second Fruit	9
4 The Third Fruit	11
5 The Fourth Fruit	13
6 The Fifth Fruit	15
7 Hearing the Word of God	17
Questions for Reflection of Discussion	19

## Welcome to *Starving for Truth*

This generation of Christians is starving for truth, and most of us don't even recognize this is so.

We are awash in the Bible and flush with *opportunities* for hearing and learning the Word of God. But where is the evidence that this powerful and living Word is at work within us, making all things new?

The prophet Amos foresaw a day when the people of God would suffer from a famine of hearing the Word of God. While he was thinking of Israel's immediate future, his words can be just as truly applied to us.

But what will it look like when we are truly hearing the Word of God? And how can we hear it so that such fruit arises?

These are the questions we will consider in this series.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 A Coming Day Arrived

*“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord GOD,  
“That I will send a famine on the land,  
Not a famine of bread,  
Nor a thirst for water,  
But of hearing the words of the LORD. Amos 8.11*

### *A famine of hearing*

The prophet Amos foresaw a day in which the absence of any *hearing* of the Word of God would wreak tragic effects on the people of God. The people of God would be starving for truth, and every aspect of their lives would suffer.

In the grim scenario painted in Amos 8.11-14, people weary and spent stagger in every direction, looking for some sure word to which they might cling, yet without success. The best and brightest of them are at the point of wasting away. Meanwhile, all around, pagan peoples dutifully serve their false gods and made-up deities, yet without any evidence of lasting satisfaction or hope.

Amos casts a vision of spiritual desolation, desperation, hopelessness, and despair. The cause of this tragic situation, as Amos foresaw it, was that there was no *hearing* of the Word of the Lord in the land.

### *A vision for our times*

We hardly need persuading as to the relevance of this dour vision for our times. The characteristic features of Amos’ prophecy are visible on every hand. We recognize them in the ills and confusion that beset us in these days of spiritual shallowness, relative truth, pragmatic ethics, and the tyranny of taste.

Our youth are wasting the prime years of their lives on pop culture and social networking. The gods of comfort, convenience, and material abundance rule in the souls of many of our contemporaries, and a persistent unease about the economy makes people more anxious about these elusive ideals. The nation is divided politically, morally, economically, and ethnically. There is little evidence of anything other than fleeting happiness throughout the land, and on every hand a sad and lonely people look for someone to blame for their misery, and someone or something to deliver them from their hopeless condition.

And where, in the midst of all this, is that Word of truth that brings life, and sets people free from fear and the tyranny of false hopes (Jn. 8.32)?

### *Awash in the Word?*

In one sense we might be inclined to think ours the most Biblically enlightened of times. After all, there is no shortage of Scriptures and Scripture versions. The Bible remains the best-selling book, year after year. Churches by the scores of thousands dot the landscape, and, week-in and week-out, ministers of the Gospel proclaim Biblical messages to millions of worshippers. Throughout the week supplemental opportunities for additional exposure to the Word of God are available through Bible study groups, radio and television, websites and online learning opportunities, and individual study.

In the United States, evangelicals, that is, Christians in all denominations who profess to believe in the authority and supernatural character of the Bible, “now constitute the largest and most active component of religious life,” comprising as many as 30% of the population, as Mark Noll reported two decades ago (*The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*), a statistic which remains essentially unchanged.

We are 100 million people, awash in the Bible, flush with opportunities for reading and studying God’s Word,

*Starving for Truth*

and in communion with like-minded people who regularly avail themselves of such opportunities.

How, then, shall we account for the spiritual malaise which hovers over our nation, and has left the Church of Jesus Christ a marginalized, ineffectual community?

If the Word of God is truly alive and powerful, able to penetrate the souls of people, to bring real and joyful life, and to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ (Jn. 6.63; Heb. 4.12; 2 Cor. 3.12-18), then why is it, for all our Bible-opportunities, the nation languishes in a spiritual, moral, cultural, economic, and political malaise?

We are a people and a nation starving for truth, languishing in a famine of *hearing* the Word of God. Is it possible that the terrible, vision which the prophet Amos saw as coming, has descended upon us in our own time?

*For reflection*

1. What's the difference between a famine of truth and a famine of *hearing* the truth?
2. Why do you think the Christian movement is becoming increasingly marginal and ineffectual in our society?
3. Why is it important that Christians feed regularly on the Word of God? How can we tell when that feeding is producing real spiritual health?

*Next steps – Preparation: How many different Bible teaching opportunities exist in your church each week? See if you can find out. Ask some of your church leaders, study the weekly calendar of your church, visit your church's website. How many people participate in these opportunities? How many churches like yours are there in your community?*

## 2 The First Fruit

*Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.*  
Daniel 9.3

### *Marks of faith*

Historically, Protestants have identified as first among the marks of a true church, regular and faithful preaching of the Word of God. By this standard, it would seem, we in the contemporary evangelical Church may rejoice and give thanks for the abundant opportunities for the hearing of the Word of God that we presently enjoy.

But surely there is a difference between *opportunities* for hearing the Bible and *actually bearing* it. In this regard, it is just possible that we may have misunderstood our Protestant forebears with respect to the marks of the true church, and have become too easily satisfied with a lesser standard than they intended.

John Calvin, for example, described this most important mark of a true church in this way: “From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached *and heard...*” (*Institutes*, IV.i.9, emphasis added). Calvin believed, rightly, that the “face of the church” should be *visible* in its community, with a mien radiant with the image of Jesus Christ. For Calvin, the mere *availability* of the Word, even “purely preached,” was no guarantee that such a church would appear. In his view, *opportunities* for hearing provide no assurance that *real bearing* of the Word occur. The Word must be *truly heard*, that is, received in such a way that it bears fruit in the lives of those who *hear* it.

The marks of the church, Calvin wrote – that is, faithful preaching *and bearing* of the Word – “can never exist without bringing forth fruit and prospering by God’s blessing” (*Institutes*, IV.i.10). Where the Word is truly heard, it bears fruit in the lives of those who hear it, and where that is happening, a true church can be rightly discerned.

### *What kind of fruit?*

But what kind of fruit? What were Calvin and the other reformers expecting from the faithful preaching and hearing of the Word of God in the churches of the Reformation?

Here we cannot cull their writings for detailed answers. Instead, following their lead, we will let the Word of God itself speak to us. What does the *Bible* expect of those who *hear* the Word of God? For what kinds of responses should we be looking from our teaching of Scripture?

We may identify several, but the first among the fruit to expect of those who truly *hear* the Word of God, is repentance. Even the prophet Daniel, who stands out among the giants of Biblical characters with respect to personal piety, fell to profound and passionate expressions of repentance for himself and his nation upon reading in the book of Jeremiah concerning the end of Israel’s captivity in Babylon (Dan. 9.1-5). In his prayer of repentance, we see a man broken before the faithfulness and grace of God to an undeserving people, a man not in the least reluctant to apply Israel’s wickedness to himself and to exert himself in dramatic and outspoken declarations of repentance, pleading with God to restore favor to His people.

Daniel read the Word of God. Daniel heard the Word of God. And Daniel repented. Where the Word of God is truly *heard*, repentance is the first fruit.

### *Absence of repentance*

We evangelicals have established a place of prominence for ourselves in this society by our penchant for declaiming loudly against the sins of others. We have denounced the secular humanists, chastised the

*Starving for Truth*

evolutionists, decried the postmodernists, and raged against the immoral practices of the people of our day.

Yet we hear little such passion in the acknowledgment of our own sins before the God of judgment and mercy – sins of complacency, failure in mission, poor stewardship, ecclesiastical in-fighting, and a host of others.

This absence of repentance suggests to me that we in the Christian community are starving for truth. We have descended into a famine of *hearing* God's Word. For all our reading and study, the clean, pure, true, and uncompromising Word of God is not breaking through to our sinful hearts. Some of the most profound and moving words of repentance in the history of Biblical religion are from the mouths and pens of the great saints of God: David's plea in Psalm 51; Augustine's *Confessions*; the meditations of Christian mystics; the great liturgies of the high church tradition; the writings of the Puritan fathers, the tears of multitudes, awakened in times of revival

Here is heartfelt repentance in response to the clear teaching of God's Word concerning our wretchedness, God's holiness, and our infinite need of renewing grace. It is just such repentance that is lacking within the evangelical church in our day, and that shows just how in danger we are of spiritual starvation.

*For reflection*

1. What's the difference between opportunities for hearing the Word of God and actually hearing it?
2. What is repentance? Who needs to repent? When?
3. Why is repentance necessarily the first indication that the Word of God has been truly heard?

*Next steps – Conversation: What is repentance? When is it needed? How does one practice repentance? What should we expect where true repentance exists? Get some Christian friends together and talk about these questions. Consider together what place repentance should have in your own walk with the Lord, and how you might help your church understand the importance of it.*



### 3 The Second Fruit

*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8.31, 32*

#### *Sanctification*

We are considering the “famine of hearing” God’s Word which the prophet Amos foresaw in the eighth chapter of his prophecy. We live in a time in which, while we possess many *opportunities* for hearing the Word of God, there is a paucity of evidence that much *real hearing* is taking place. We expect to see fruit whenever the living and transforming Word of God is preached and heard, and we’re considering the specific kinds of fruit the Scriptures indicate we should be able to observe.

The first fruit of hearing the Word of God is repentance, a deep and transforming sense of the awfulness of our own sin, and a desire to turn from it and be done with it, is hardly in evidence today.

A second fruit that Scripture identifies as following from the hearing of God’s Word is freedom from sinful practices. “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Here Jesus promises a life of sanctification, which He prayed that God’s Word might bring about in us (Jn. 17.17). Sanctification, and the increasing virtues which accompany it, is the second fruit of hearing the Word of God.

#### *Called to newness*

Sanctification is the life of increasing holiness, without which no one can expect to see the Lord (Heb. 12.14). As we read and meditate on it, Scripture draws back the veil of eternity, allowing the glory of the uncreated God to shine with transforming power upon our sinful hearts, minds, and ways (2 Cor. 3.17, 18). Where that glory penetrates to the heart – where, that is, the Word is *truly heard* - it illuminates the darkness of lingering sin, burns away the dross of wickedness, cauterizes the wound of guilt with searing grace, and sets in place a healing power that obliterates the past and progressively makes all things new (Ps. 103.13; 2 Cor. 5.17).

By its transforming power, the Word of God calls into existence a new people, “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people,” who walk no longer in the darkness of unbelief but in the newness of life in Christ (1 Pt. 2.9; 1 Jn. 1.5-7).

That we in the contemporary evangelical Church are *not* such a people is clear, not only to us but to everyone else as well.

Studies persistently reveal very little difference between our way of life and that of our unbelieving neighbors and associates. In the workaday world, where men and women buy and sell, trade and invest, maintain their homes and pursue their hobbies, we in the evangelical church evidence little to distinguish us from our contemporaries. Only in our peculiar habit of assembling together for this and that do we stand out markedly from this unbelieving generation.

One can only believe that, if we were more adept at *hearing* the Scriptures – if, that is, we were not blighted with this famine of hearing the Word of God – we might shine more brilliantly with the radiance of their glorious, liberating truth.

#### *The demands of holiness*

You cannot hear the Word of God and be indifferent to the demands of holiness. Jesus said, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” (Matt. 7.18-20).

### *Starving for Truth*

Where the Word of God is taught *and heard*, people turn away from their old ways of thinking, feeling, speaking and acting, and they take up a new way of life, defined by increasing in Christ-likeness. As long as we continue to live like the unbelieving world around us, and to maintain our casual attitude toward sanctification, it will be difficult to conclude that we've really *heard* the Word in a transforming way. We are starving for truth, as is evident by our failing to thrive in sanctification. When we begin to *hear* the Word as God intends, He will bring forth in us the fruit of the Word, leading us to repentance and setting us free from sinful thoughts and ways into a life of becoming more like Jesus Christ.

As we hear the Word of God, repentance *opens our eyes* to the presence of sin. From there, we must *turn away* from sinful practices and seek the sanctifying power of God's Word to make all things new in our lives. When that begins to be more in evidence, we will know that the famine of hearing God's Word has begun to abate.

The Word of God demands that we bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1). We are starving for the truth if increasing in sanctification is not our daily pursuit.

#### *For reflection*

1. What is sanctification? What is holiness? Why is the Word of God necessary for sanctification and holiness?
2. Why should we expect sanctification to follow repentance?
3. Can we be sanctified apart from the truth and Word of God (Jn. 17.17)? Explain.

*Next steps – Preparation: Meditate on Romans 3.20 and 7.7. How can we know what sin is? What place does the Law of God have in your walk with Jesus? Can we expect to turn away from sin – to hate sin, Psalm 97.10 – if we aren't clear about what sin is?*

## 4 The Third Fruit

*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* Ephesians 2.10

### *Starting points*

We recall that John Calvin wrote that a true church exists and is visible where the Word of God is preached *and heard*. Just because people are *listening* to preaching and teaching, or having daily devotions, or even participating in a Bible study group, does not mean that they are *hearing* the Word of God as God intends. In many ways, the famine of hearing God's Word, which the prophet Amos foresaw, has settled on the evangelical Church in this country. From the evidence – or lack of it – we appear to be a people who are starving for truth.

But how can we find our way out of this famine? By beginning to *hear* the Word as we should, bringing forth the fruit of repentance, and, from there, turning away from whatever the Word of God describes as sin, and bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

We cannot escape the clutches of the materialistic and hedonistic spirit of the times without change taking place in our lives. Repentance, rejection of sin, and the pursuit of holiness are the starting points for *hearing* the Word in all its transforming power and grace.

### *Good works*

A third fruit that blossoms as we hear the Word of God is the proliferation of good works of ministry to touch the weary, searching lives of others with the grace of God (2 Tim. 3.5-17).

God's Word is given so that men and women of God might be perfected in divine grace, "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." We are created anew in Christ Jesus to be, as it were, sponges of grace and truth. In the tight spots and hard squeezes of life, amid the misery and grime of sin, those who *hear* the Word of Christ emit not a squeal of fear nor a wail of complaint, but the warmth of grace to heal and bless, renew and revive, encourage and edify those around us. Having drunk our fill at the fountain of grace and truth (Ps. 36.8), we go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, rivers of living water flowing out from us to bathe the unclean, refresh the thirsty, and buoy the sinking with the message of forgiveness and eternal hope (Jn. 7.37-39).

The Apostle Paul is adamant about this. We are not saved *by* good works, he would say, but we're not truly saved *without* them. To Titus he wrote that God wants His people to be "ready for every good work" (3.1) and to be "careful to maintain good works," "to *meet* urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful" (3.8, 14).

James wrote that you cannot claim to have true faith in the Lord, or to be a true hearer of His Word, unless there is evidence of abounding good works in your life (1.22-25; 2.14-26). And the writer of Hebrews explained that we can only be sure of having heard the Word of God in a saving and sanctifying way when good works of service and love are proliferating in our lives (6.9-12).

### *And today?*

But is this the reflection of Christian life that characterizes the evangelical community today?

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Certainly good works are being done by Christians in many different walks of life. But as a community, it seems to many that we are a people ever seeking, in the first instance, someone to heal our own hurts and bolster our own bruised egos, someone to reach out and minister to *us* rather than someone for whom we may give ourselves as living sacrifices unto the Lord.

### *Starving for Truth*

The Word that was meant to equip us for every good work is too often resorted to only as a momentary spiritual thirst-quencher, a pick-me-up to temporarily assuage our deeper hunger. We take our draught – whether in our devotions, or by hearing a sermon or participating in a Bible study group – and thank the Lord for the refreshing reassurance that all is well with our souls. Then we go out into the world hardly changed and no better equipped to do the good works of ministry that touch others with the grace and truth of Jesus.

We are just too weak in our faith to fulfill that vision of Christian life which turns its world upside-down for Jesus Christ (Acts 17.1-9). We are starving for truth in a world that will die without it.

We will not begin to find our way out of the famine of hearing which has settled on us as a community until we begin to show more spontaneity, consistency, and selflessness in touching others with the good works of love that characterized our Lord Jesus, and that characterize all who truly hear the Word of God. And that will only happen as we *hear* the Word so that it penetrates our souls, floods us with the glory of God, and transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ.

#### *For reflection*

1. We're not saved *by* good works, but we're not saved *without* them. Explain.
2. Where does God want us to do good works? In church activities only?
3. How does the Word of God equip us for every good work? What does it do to strengthen us for good works in our daily lives?

*Next steps – Transformation: Make a list of the people you see each week on a regular basis. What are some ways you might touch these people with the grace and truth of Jesus? What specific good works would enable Jesus to show Himself through you to these people (2 Cor. 3.12-18)? Begin praying for grace to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ, and for opportunities to show His love to the people you meet.*

## 5 The Fourth Fruit

*“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1.8*

*Starving for truth*

I suspect that a good many American Christians are starving spiritually and don't even realize this is the case.

They keep reading their Bibles and listening to sermons and lessons on the Scriptures, but their lives lack much of the fruit that it is reasonable to expect when the life-changing Word of God is having its way in our souls. They don't seem sorry about sin in their lives, and almost never practice repentance. Many of them aren't even persuaded that sin is all that big a deal. After all, doesn't God accept us as we are? We can't help it that we're sinners, and we shouldn't judge others anyway.

And where is the evidence of holiness, righteousness, and abounding good works of service to the needy all around them?

We are not robust in these areas because we are starving for the spiritual fuel that alone can produce such effects. We are starving for the truth of God's Word, and we don't even seem to know it.

We cannot make ourselves repent, hate sin, or give ourselves to others in good works of love. This is God's work in us, by His Spirit, unto the likeness of Jesus Christ. And He accomplishes this work as the Spirit stokes the fuel of the Word into our souls, so that we *really hear* God's Word, and it begins to change our lives.

Christians today are presently struggling through what the prophet Amos referred to as a famine of hearing, and many of them don't even seem to notice. But if we were really hearing the Word as God intends, we would observe more of the fruit we've mentioned thus far.

*A ready witness*

A fourth fruit of the hearing of God's Word is ready witness for Him. They in whom the Word is alive and powerful, transforming them into the image of Jesus Christ, cannot help but talk about Him with the people in their lives.

God instructed the prophet Habakkuk to write His Word on tablets of stone, so that all who read it could run to proclaim it joyfully and urgently to the people of the land (Hab. 2.2). When the apostles and believers in Jerusalem finally *heard* the message of the Gospel in the Word of God, they spilled into the streets and, ultimately, spread out to every nation proclaiming the Good News to everyone they met (Acts 2.1-11; 8.1-4). Persecution could not stop them, nor could cultural differences, geographic distance, lack of resources, or the duties and distractions of daily life.

In one generation they turned their world upside-down for Jesus Christ (Acts 17.1-9). In little more than two centuries they established the banner of the Gospel as supreme over the civilized world. What they heard they lived and declared to others with such compelling power that multiplied thousands streamed into the churches to give thanks and praise to God (cf. Mic. 4.1-8).

*Where are the witnesses?*

And what of our day? What the late John Stott once described as “our guilty silence” afflicts us still. In the churches today, we prefer to leave the work of evangelism to highly skilled professionals – worship teams, seeker-friendly preachers, parachurch leaders, missionaries, and evangelists – while most believers seem to

*Starving for Truth*

have nothing of eternal significance to say to their neighbors, friends, or colleagues.

We are trapped in a spiral of silence, ensnared in a merely personal faith, overwhelmed by the incessant messages of a materialistic, unbelieving age, and reluctant to speak up and speak out boldly on behalf of the only Good News that can save human lives. We have the *power* to bear witness, but we are failing in that calling, because we are not truly *hearing the Word of God* in a way that taps that power, so that it wells up in our souls and flows out through our mouths and lives.

We are weak as witnesses for Christ because we are languishing in a famine of hearing His Word. Only when we admit the former and correct the latter will our witness for Christ begin to be more in evidence.

We can break out of this famine as we begin to hear the Word of God faithfully, as He intends, and set ourselves for repentance, sanctification, good works, and witness in the normal course of our everyday lives. The famine of hearing will continue until we begin listening to God's Word, seeking the Spirit earnestly to instruct us, and determining to let the Word bring forth real and powerful fruit in our lives.

*For reflection*

1. What does it mean for you to be a witness to Jesus Christ?
2. Who are the people to whom God sends you each week as His witness? Do you pray for these people? For opportunities to share the Good News with them?
3. What can Christians do to encourage one another to greater consistency in our witness for the Lord?

*Next steps – Transformation: Suppose someone were to ask you what it means to be a Christian, or how one becomes a Christian. What would you say? Make a brief outline of the Gospel as you understand it. Share that with some Christian friends and see if they can help you to flesh it out a bit more. Then start praying every day that God will give you opportunities to share this Gospel with the people you regularly see. Start conversations that might lead to a presentation.*

## 6 The Fifth Fruit

*But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too." Acts 17.6*

### *A Christianity of self*

David Wells summarizes the condition of our contemporary evangelical generation. Where we should expect, for all the opportunities we have for hearing God's Word, a vibrantly repentant, gloriously sanctified, humbly serving, boldly outspoken, and energetically activist community, instead we find a religious people stretched out on the therapist's couch, endlessly fixating on their personal needs and hurts, seeking the next big "fun" thing to do in the Name of the Lord.

Ours, Wells writes, is a "Christian faith that is conceived in the womb of the self" rather than in the forge of God's truth. Compared to historic Christianity, ours

*"is a smaller thing, shrunken in its ability to understand the world and to stand up in it... Where the self circumscribes the significance of Christian faith, good and evil are reduced to a sense of well-being or its absence, God's place in the world is reduced to the domain of private consciousness, his external acts of redemption are trimmed to fit the experience of personal salvation, his providence in the world diminishes to whatever is necessary to ensure one's having a good day, his Word becomes intuition, and conviction fades into evanescent opinion. Theology becomes therapy, and all the telltale symptoms of the therapeutic model of faith begin to surface. The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one's self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The Church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self." (No Place for Truth)*

We are starving for truth, and the world around us is dying because we have no truth to offer it, and little of grace or hope.

### *Turn the world upside-down*

The final fruit of hearing the Word of God is a counter-cultural thrust and movement that strives irrepressibly to take every thought captive and make it obedient to the cause of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10.3-5), and to turn the world of unbelief and sin rightside-up for our Savior and King.

Repentant hearts lead to renewed lives and rejoicing lips. And these, in turn, nurture a rededicated mind, one devoted to the task of individual revival, renewed churches, and a culture and society gloriously awakened to the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The first Christians realized this, as we see in the book of Acts, and over the course of the next three centuries of Church history. In ages past Christians have been instrumental in overturning wickedness and introducing new and more beneficial institutions and inventions to bless the peoples of the world. Societal and cultural renewal and awakening have been hallmarks of Christian experience wherever, in the past, the Word of God has been truly preached and heard, and redeemed believers have set their minds to the task of joining with the Savior in making all things new.

### *The mind of Christ?*

But where do we stand today? Mark Noll has written that today, "there is not much of an evangelical mind" available or interested in such Kingdom projects (*The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*). We have neither the will to engage our unbelieving age with the truth of the Gospel, nor the insight and vision to offer anything different in the way of a comprehensive worldview. The world is, if not devoid of truth, at least lacking in it sorely, and the reason for this is that we who have been *entrusted* with God's truth, and commanded to *feed and*

### *Starving for Truth*

*grow* in it, are more interested in ourselves than the whole counsel of God. We pick at God's truth rather than feast on it, and we are starving for truth as a result. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), but we refuse to stock it with the truth it needs to flourish within us.

Famished for truth, we have nothing of a uniquely Kingdom character to interject into the public square, the university classroom, the editorial pages, the culture of our workplace, or any of the local expressions of institutional life. While the Scripture views the church as a source of beauty and joy for the world, we have neither the mind nor inclination to exert ourselves in such ways on behalf of our communities (cf, Ps. 48). Thus, with but a few exceptions, the Word of God is left on the shelf amid the pressing issues and clamoring needs of the day, leaving debate and reform to proceed without the benefit of divine light.

World-weary, truth-deprived, idol-laden Christians wander the contemporary landscape like the people in Amos' vision. We are desperately in need of spiritual nutrition, and are starving amid a famine of the *bearing* of God's truth. Meanwhile, our sad world suffers in confusion, uncertainty, moral and spiritual poverty, and growing hopelessness.

#### *For reflection*

1. What does it mean to have the mind of Christ? How would your neighbors or co-workers know that you have the mind of Christ?
2. Do you agree with David Well's assessment of the narcissistic nature of contemporary Christianity? Explain.
3. Meditate on 2 Corinthians 10.3-5 and Acts 17.1-9. Should Christians and their churches expect to be agents of positive change in their communities? Why or why not?

*Next steps – Preparation: What needs are evident in your own community that the churches of your community could begin to affect in positive ways? What suggestions can you offer to help your church break out of the famine of bearing that has settled on the churches of our land?*



## 7 Hearing the Word of God

*“Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him.”* Luke 8.18

*How then shall we hear?*

What does it mean to hear the Word of God? We have examined the fruit of hearing, and we can identify a sore lack of such fruit in our day. Where such things as repentance, holiness, good works, fervent witness, and world-changing action are lacking, we are in the midst of generation weak in faith and languishing in a famine of hearing the Word of God.

But what is it to *hear* the truth in such a way that it yields the fruit for which it is intended?

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* concisely answers this question. Question 160 asks, “What is required of those that hear the word preached?” The answer is a devastating indictment of our pick-and-choose approach to the Word of God:

“It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts; and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.”

Here, truly, is guidance for every student of the Word of God: diligent and prayerful *preparation* for hearing the Word; careful *examination* of what is heard by *comparison* of Scripture with Scripture; *trust* in God’s Word, *love* for Him, *humility* before His mercy and grace; a mind ready to be *shaped and to respond*; deep *pondering* and *questioning* of the Word; heartfelt *embrace* of its teachings; and *faithful obedience* to its every demand.

Such hearing of the Word of God is the very thing that we lack, and the only thing that can deliver us from our famine of hearing and get us back on the path of renewal and reformation once again.

*Faithful teachers and guides*

But to achieve such hearing of the Word of God, we need faithful teachers and guides to lead and instruct us. Most of all, we need the Spirit of God to instruct us in the whole counsel of God in Scripture, searching all the Scriptures and comparing one passage with another to guide us into all truth, showing us the glory of God, and working in our mind, heart, and conscience to transform us into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. Pray for and seek the filling of God’s Spirit, for only He can lead us out of our present famine into a feast of growth and ministry.

But it also pleases God to put *faithful* teachers and guides in the community of His people, and we should seek out such teachers to help in our feeding on God’s Word. But how can we tell which teachers are, like the Spirit Who fills us, faithful and reliable to guide us into God’s truth?

Acts 8 tells the story of one such faithful teacher, Philip (Acts 8.26-40). We can see from his example five characteristics of teaching which is designed to help us *hear* the Word of God as we should.

*Five characteristics*

First, we consider Philip’s *aggressive approach*. He ran up to the Ethiopian in his chariot (v. 30). The Ethiopian’s invitation to Philip to join him in the examination of God’s Word was the direct result of his initiating contact. Faithful teachers are eager and determined to lead people into the Word of God, and they take many initiatives in doing so.

### *Starving for Truth*

Second, Philip knew the value of *pointed questions*. “Do you understand what you are reading?” he asked, hereby challenging the notion that mere reading of Scripture was enough, and implying that greater depths of discovery were essential for truly *hearing* the Word of God.

Third, Philip led the Ethiopian to *search the Scriptures*. Beginning with Isaiah 53, he preached Jesus to the eunuch, comparing Scripture with Scripture (1 Cor. 2.13) to make the Gospel story vivid, relating text to text as he built his case for the claims of Christ.

Fourth, Philip *left no doubt as to the implications* of the Word of God. The eunuch was made to understand perfectly well what the Gospel required of him (v. 37).

Finally, Philip *led his reader to take specific Kingdom action* consistent with the message he had studied (vv. 36-38). His mission to the Ethiopian was not complete until the eunuch had come to repentance and saving faith, had submitted to baptism in the name of Jesus, and was rejoicing in the newness of eternal life.

These five practices, it seems to me, coupled with a readiness to hear the Word of God, are the great need of the day if our truth-famished generation is ever to move beyond mere reading and study of God’s Word to real hearing of it. This is the kind of teaching and learning that the Spirit of God is willing to use in guiding students of God’s Word into all truth. This is the kind of feeding on Scripture that can deliver us from our famine of hearing the Word of God.

#### *For reflection*

1. Review the *Catechism’s* definition of what it means to *hear* the Word of God. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest rating, to what extent does this definition describe you? Explain.
2. How can we be sure that we are submitting to the Holy Spirit as the primary Teacher of God’s Word?
3. How can we encourage the teachers in our churches to be more like Philip?

*Next steps – Demonstration: Share this week’s study with a few friends. Make copies or send them a link to the weekly PDF. Work through the lessons together as you strive to be more consistent in hearing the Word of God.*

*Starving for Truth*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What did Amos mean by a “famine of hearing”? What were the symptoms of this, as we see them in Amos 8.11-14?
2. What fruit should we expect in people’s lives where the Word of God is truly *heard*?
3. How does it appear that our generation of Christians may be languishing in a famine of hearing, starving for God’s truth, but not even knowing it?
4. What can you do to keep from declining into a famine of hearing in your own walk with the Lord?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you implementing that lesson in your daily life?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.