

2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD IN EVIL DAYS

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”¹

L*et your conscience be your guide. If it feels good, do it. Follow your heart.* Consciously or unconsciously, maxims such as these provide direction for our lives, even though we may not always think of them as proverbs. Adages that become common with a given population reflect the received knowledge of that society. It is almost as though such aphorisms are a polite way of saying, “everybody knows.” Saws like these serve to justify the attitudes and actions of far too many people, including the professed people of God.

Just so, McNugget theology has replaced preaching in modern churches. McNugget theology gives a few spicy thoughts instead of demanding intellectual rigour. Christians increasingly demand entertainment; to a distressing extent, this desire to be amused is reflected through multimedia presentations instead of exposition of the Word. This expectation is increasingly evident in the choice of praise music on the basis of rhythm and musical titillation at the expense of doctrinal accuracy. It does not seem an impossible task, in my estimate, to have both musical excellence and doctrinal accuracy, but if a choice must be made, let us always seek doctrinal fidelity.

The Apostle warned that the time is coming “when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.” I wonder whether that time has now arrived. Years ago, A. W. Tozer saw that the churches were attempting to amuse people into the Kingdom of God. That godly man decried elders and deacons who insisted that if churches only had more movies, provided “Christian” dance, presented more lively music, the lost would then flock to the churches.

On one occasion the saintly savant wrote, “Pastors and churches in our hectic times are harassed by the temptation to seek size at any cost and to secure by inflation what they cannot gain by legitimate growth. The mixed multitude cries for quantity and will not forgive a minister who insists upon solid values and permanence. Many a man of God is being subjected to cruel pressure by the ill-taught members of his flock who scorn his slow methods and demand quick results and a popular following regardless of quality. These children play in the marketplaces and cannot overlook the affront we do them by our refusal to dance when they whistle or to weep when they out of caprice pipe a sad tune. They are greedy for thrills, and since they dare no longer seek them in the theatre, they demand to have them brought into the church.”²

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² A. W. Tozer and Harry Verploegh, **The Next Chapter After the Last** (WingSpread, Camp Hill, PA 1987) 8

These words explain why he became increasingly unpopular as the years passed. What at first was refreshingly honest became tiresome as the listeners resisted the Word and its work in their lives. At one point, it was said that Tozer had addressed more Christian conferences than any other speaker then serving among the churches. By the end of his ministry, he was excluded from more conferences than any speaker then living. Prophetic preaching was unpopular among the churches of that bygone era. Time has not changed the popular assessment—prophetic preaching is still unpopular.

THE CHARGE — “Preach the word.” When Paul writes of “the foolishness of preaching” in **1 CORINTHIANS 1:21**, I am truly fascinated. I have frequently pondered the thought that “God was pleased to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching.”³ The concept is lively and evocative. In my early years of faith I used the **KING JAMES VERSION** of the Bible, so I have been familiar with the phrase since my conversion to Christ.

However, the phrase, “the foolishness of preaching” conveys a concept that is liable to misunderstanding. In **1 CORINTHIANS 1:21**, it is *kērugma*, the message heralded that is rejected; in **1 CORINTHIANS 1:23**, it is *kēruxis*, the act of heralding, that is ridiculed by the world; the proclamation is declared to be “moronic” (*morían*). The Greek indicates that it is both the content of the message that is preached and the event of preaching itself that is considered as folly by those outside the Faith. Both the message and the act of preaching itself are offensive to the unconverted; and since the churches of Christendom are increasingly composed of unregenerate people, we should not be surprised that those in attendance at our services find strong doctrine offensive.

I love Christian music. It is of small moment to me whether I am singing the great hymns of the Faith, black spirituals or whether I am singing lively contemporary choruses of praise to God, music is intimately a part of worship for me. I find myself moving as the music grips my soul, and it would be easy for me to break into joyful dance as God is glorified. However, God has not chosen to use music as the primary means for presenting His message of life. The fact that some are transformed through considering the words of a song emphasises the exception instead of establishing a norm. It is the preaching of the Word that builds saints and transforms the soul of lost mankind.

Christian drama can certainly move the soul and glorify the Lord Christ. Throughout the years of my pilgrimage I have been privileged to view a number of excellent dramatic presentations that moved me deeply. However, it was not drama that God chose to build up the saints and to redeem the lost. It is the message of life proclaimed by one’s fellowman that transforms the individual, bringing the lost to life.

Without doubt, the graceful movement of men and women as they perform an interpretive dance can serve to transfix observers, but the message of Christ is conveyed most effectively and with the least possibility of being misunderstood through the open proclamation of the Word of God by one appointed to his task by God.

Though the message today applies to every Christian in that each believer is responsible to declare Christ at every opportunity, in particular it is those who have received appointment as elders who are held responsible by this charge. Moreover, the people of God, the churches that receive those elders whom God has appointed, are responsible to hold the elders to the divine task of proclaiming the Word of God.

³ **The NET Bible, New English Translation**, Biblical Studies Press, 2003. All rights reserved.

The **NEW ENGLISH BIBLE** translates **VERSE TWO** of the text before us in a scintillating and exceptionally clear manner. The translators beautifully capture the Apostle's ardour, "proclaim the message, press it home on all occasions, convenient or inconvenient."⁴ The man of God must seize every opportunity to declare the message of Christ the Lord, whether those about him wish to hear the message or whether they wish only to be entertained. It is of no consequence whether the man of God proclaims the message of life in a public forum or privately, in a mass meeting or one-on-one, the burden of God remains that he must proclaim the message. Moreover, if a church will truly be a Baptist church, that congregation will exalt the act of preaching, adhering to the apostolic Word.

I particularly enjoy visiting church buildings, and especially historic church buildings. I enjoy seeing where God's people meet for worship week-by-week. I make no claim to being architecturally adroit, but I have nevertheless made some observations concerning church buildings. I have taken note of the design of church buildings used by different communions and I have witnessed the emphasis of those churches. Churches holding a sacramental view of worship almost always place the pulpit to one side of the chancel and before the nave. These same churches usually situate the altar, and perhaps the baptistery, at the centre of the chancel, effectively saying that the sacraments, rather than the preaching of the Word, will be central to their worship.

Baptists, however, are neither sacerdotalists nor sacramentalists. Rather, Baptists have always been distinguished by an emphasis upon preaching the Word of God. Accordingly, Baptists place the pulpit at the centre and before the congregation. There, the Bible will be read and the message of life delivered. This arrangement of the furniture in auditorium is an unconscious affirmation of the centrality of preaching—the pulpit, or the lectern, being central to worship. Whenever a church ceases to make preaching central to worship, it will cease to be a Baptist church.

Baptists have, historically, been distinguished by expository preaching. They emphasise doctrine—the truths that God has presented in His Word. This doctrinal emphasis is expressed through sound biblical exposition. When I say that Baptists have distinguished themselves by expository preaching, I mean that they have carefully adhered to the text. The great preachers of the Faith have used a portion of the Word of God, whether a verse or a chapter or some particular pericope, and they have carefully presented that portion of the Word. As they provided an exposition of that portion of the Word, they carefully explained what the original hearers or readers would have understood the writing to mean, and then they have applied the intent of the Scripture to the present generation. The Baptist message has throughout the whole of history been, "Thus saith the Lord!"

It should be no great surprise that I enjoy reading the messages of the great preachers of years gone by, just as I enjoy reading the messages preached in some of the great pulpits of this day. During the course of my reading, I have made an observation concerning great preachers and their impact on the great churches of history. There has never been a great preacher who made a lasting impact for the Faith who was not an expository preacher. Perhaps a church would make a temporary stir in the Christian community when the preacher was a topical preacher or when the preacher was a textual preacher, but expositors of the Word build strong churches and create great saints.

⁴ Samuel Sandmel, **The New English Bible with the Apocrypha, Oxford Study Edition** (Oxford University Press, New York, NY 1976)

I enjoy Chicken McNuggets. Truthfully, three McNuggets are not enough to satisfy me. I want a full-meal deal when I eat; and because I am concerned about my health, I want to balance my diet with vegetables, grains, and dairy products in addition to the meat I crave. No mother would approve of her child eating three McNuggets and calling it a meal. Certainly, she wouldn't permit that to go on day-after-day.

In the same way, a few ethical nuggets here and there are insufficient to create strong Christians, but a full course of expository preaching will with time make strong Christians. Unfortunately, we live in a day when far too many professed saints of God are dyspeptic because they have been fed a steady diet of moral or ethical nuggets. You will never regret encouraging your preachers to “preach the Word.”

THE URGENCY OF THE CHARGE — “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word.” Baptists live in the shadow of eternity. Because we are a people of the Book, we are convinced that Jesus Christ the Lord shall momentarily appear to judge wickedness and to usher in righteousness. Our Lord Jesus Christ presented Himself once as a sacrifice for sin, and now we await His promised appearing a second time. Now, we wait for the fulfillment of this glorious promise.

I am personally convinced that one day I shall stand before the Son of God to give an account for the ministry He assigned me [see **HEBREWS 13:17**]. I fear God and that holy fear impels me to make every effort to fulfil the ministry He assigned me. When I appear before Him, I do not believe that He will ask how many quarrels I settled, or how many nights I worked late in the office, or even how many visits I made to disgruntled saints. He will, however, ask me to account what I have preached—whether I rightly handled the Word. Did I keep watch over the flock, teaching the Word of God accurately and passionately? Did I feel the weight of eternity as I prayed for souls, holding men to account through the preached Word? These are the issues that the Saviour will demand of me, and of all who labour as teachers of the Word while they wait for His appearing.

How terrifying for a shepherd confronted by the Risen Lord of Glory to be asked, “Where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock” [**JEREMIAH 13:20**]? The flock belongs neither to me nor to any group within the assembly. The flock does not belong to mere mortals, but rather, it belongs to the Son of God. This is the basis for Peter's admonition. “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” [**1 PETER 5:1-4**].

Expressing God's concern for His flock, Ezekiel writes, “Surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them” [**EZEKIEL 34:8-10**].

The preacher who will please the Master always labours with the knowledge that the Son of God shall soon appear. Likewise, the church that will honour the Son of God always conducts her ministry in light of His imminent appearing. Do you believe this? What difference does this knowledge make in your life? Do you demand careful study of the Word from the preacher, expecting that he will be diligent both in study of the Word and in the application of the same? Does this knowledge impel you to seize the opportunity to warn your loved ones of the danger of delay in trusting Christ the Lord?

We emphasise worship in our services, but perhaps we should ask what role doctrine plays in worship? Does doctrine—sound, healthy teaching—really rate in our expectation of worship? How we choose to live—how we speak, the manner in which we dress, the way we treat one another—all reflect our doctrine. Our doctrine defines who we are and shapes our lives. Therefore, doctrine must be at the core of our worship. Worship that fails the doctrinal test is unworthy of Christ and displeasing to Him. Doctrine is not esoteric, as we must give an account of what we tolerated at His coming!

There is coming a day when Christ Jesus the Lord will return. The author of the Hebrews Letter spoke of this awesome time that lies somewhere in the immediate future. “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” [HEBREWS 9:27, 28]. At the Rapture, when the Faithful are removed from this earth, all who have named the Name of Christ will appear before His Judgement Seat [2 CORINTHIANS 5:11].

My concern is that I be prepared for that day by living in the presence of the Lord. By that, I mean that I make it my goal to live as though I will momentarily see His face. Each message I prepare is vetted against the knowledge that what is said reflects on the glory of the Living Son of God. Each statement I make either magnifies His glory or detracts from His majestic Person. I am not merely performing a job, I am a herald of the Kingdom of God, and I serve as an ambassador of Heaven. This at once causes me to tremble at the thought of His scrutiny and frees me from fear of the opinion of men.

THE REASON FOR THE CHARGE — “The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” It is not difficult for me to imagine that we have now reached a time when people will not endure sound teaching. Throughout the years of my ministry before the Lord, I have often been advised, even admonished, to soften my message.

I know that I am forthright and I know that I have a well-deserved reputation of being “in your face.” I am convinced that I have an obligation to be clear in my declarations and in the teachings I present to the people of God. I know that I do not have permission to be coarse or rude or needlessly harsh, but I am obligated to be truthful and clear in teaching the truths of God’s Word. I know that I am not to “beat” the sheep, but I am responsible to warn the flock and to protect the sheep.

An Area Minister of one Canadian Baptist denomination advised me to “soften” my message. If I would only do so, he asserted, I could serve in any church I wanted. He was not the first denominational leader who considered me to be too “plain spoken.” It was a plea to be less confrontational since I was seen as too doctrinally demanding, too precise in naming sins tolerated and even embraced among the professed people of God.

As he spoke, I thought of the ancient words of the Prophet from Tekoa.

“The lion has roared;
who will not fear?
The Lord GOD has spoken;
who can but prophesy?”

[AMOS 3:8]

My preaching is readily described by the words of Peter that are recorded in ACTS 4:20.
“We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” I accept God’s charge to Isaiah.

“Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.”

[ISAIAH 58:1]

Sound teaching is not always pleasant to hear; *sound teaching* demands that the hearer interact at a personal level, bringing herself or himself into line with the straight doctrines of the Faith. In times of unsettled faith, all sorts of teachers swarm like the flies in Egypt. The demand creates the supply, as the message proclaimed among the churches becomes just another consumer product; the hearers determine what they will get. If they wish to worship a calf, they will seek out a ministerial calf-maker.⁵ That is what we witness in the succession of preachers in contemporary churches. Modern hearers too often become church tramps, going from one church to another in search of something to please them.

There is a sobering verse found in Jeremiah’s prophecy. There, the Lord laments, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes” [JEREMIAH 5:30, 31]? Ancient Israel and religion described in the last days differs only in degree. The churches Paul foresaw and warned against would deliberately seek out and create false teachers, whereas Israel simply embraced error.

Not many years after Jeremiah wrote that distressing assessment, another prophet received a pitiful assessment concerning God’s people. God warned His servant Ezekiel, “They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it” [EZEKIEL 33:31, 32].

Like Luke’s assessment of the Athenians when Paul was penetrating Europe with the Evangel of Christ, contemporary churchgoers seem often to be best described as those who “spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” [ACTS 17:21]. Those who will honour God must remember, as Calvin wrote many years ago, “The theologian’s task is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable.”⁶

⁵ cf. Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 4* (Scribner’s, New York, NY 1904) 321

⁶ John Calvin, quoted at <http://www.cornerstonebooks.org/quotes118.htm>, accessed 28 January, 2005

There is, in the Apostle's words, a warning that is not readily apparent in our English tongue. Notice in **VERSE FOUR** that those who accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, are said to turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. The verb translated turn away is active. The verb translated wander off is passive.⁷ Religious dilettantes of this dreadful day deliberately refuse to listen to sound teaching, and as a result they are easily led into error. They will not tolerate what is right, and as result they are led astray by what is wrong. There is an old saw that warns that those who will not stand for something will fall for anything. Nowhere is that more apparent than among the churches of this day.

What you believe will be reflected in how you live. Likewise, what you believe will be influenced by what you are taught. Preachers are responsible to ensure that they provide a steady diet of sound teaching. The way to determine if the teaching is healthy is to search the Scriptures to assure yourself that the teaching adheres to the Word of God. Your profession concerning the Faith are far less important than is the impact of what you have believed in your life. If you are seeking self-exaltation, you will treat the church with contempt. If you are seeking self-fulfillment, you will use the people of God for your own purposes. If you are seeking to glorify Christ the Lord, you will humbly accept the Word of God as authoritative for faith and practise, and you will make every effort to glorify Christ the Lord in the way in which you live.

Throughout my ministry before the Lord, I have greatly appreciated the wit and wisdom of Vance Havner. The well-salted saint had a pithy manner of speaking that left listeners breathless. The curt comments flew whenever the preacher delivered a message, and listeners were compelled to listen fast. On one occasion Havner made a comment concerning preaching that made an impact on me as a young preacher.

"You can't preach it like it is if you don't believe it like it was. If you don't believe that the Scriptures are God-breathed and that Jesus Christ was virgin born, that He died for our sins and rose bodily from the grave and is coming again, you can't preach it like it is. You can't preach 'Jesus Christ the same yesterday' today, if you don't believe what He was yesterday. For what He was then He is now."⁸

APPLYING THE CHARGE — "Be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching." In the first two verses of this text, there are five imperatives—*reprove*, *rebuke*, *exhort*, *preach* and *be ready*. *Reprove*, *rebuke* and *exhort* are the immediate means of ministry assigned to the preacher, and he is to perform his duty by being *ready* whether the time is convenient or not. However, the commands that follow are all based on this one singular command to *preach the Word*.

We have discovered through our excursus today that preaching lies at the heart of worship that honours God. Moreover, the preaching that is demanded must declare the whole counsel of God, applying it to each particular situation. The proximity of our Lord's return imposes on each preacher and on each church an urgency to ensure that this plenary declaration is fulfilled. Moreover, there will be a progressive distaste for this aspect of worship as the end of time nears.

⁷ For a discussion of this point, see John MacArthur, **The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 2 Timothy** (Moody Press, Chicago, IL 1995) 182

⁸ Vance Havner, **The Kind of Preaching We Need**, sermon (http://www.thebaptistpage.com/Distinctives/preaching/Havner_Sermon.htm, accessed 28 January 2005)

Daniel Wallace made an observation that should disturb every thinking saint. Wallace provided his assessment concerning the situation confronting us as Christians. “Even with the proliferation of Bibles today, Christians are reading their Bibles less and less. I believe the evangelical church has only 50 years of life left. 50 years left of evangelicalism because of marginalization of the Word of God. We need another Reformation! The enemy of the gospel now is not religious hierarchy but moral anarchy, not tradition but entertainment. The enemy of the gospel is Protestantism run amock; it is an anti-intellectual, anti-knowledge, feel-good faith that has no content and no convictions. Part of the communal repentance that is needed is a repentance about the text. And even more importantly, there must be a repentance with regard to Christ our Lord. Just as the Bible has been marginalized, Jesus Christ has been ‘buddy-ized.’ His transcendence and majesty are only winked at, as we turn him into the genie in the bottle, beseeching God for more conveniences, more luxury, less hassle, and a life without worries or lack of comfort. He no longer wears the face that the apostles recognized. Or, as Erasmus remarked, “When you read the Greek New Testament, you can see the face of Jesus more clearly than if you were one of his disciples”! A bit of hyperbole, but the point is worth underscoring: The God we worship today no longer resembles the God of the Bible. Unless we return to him *through* a reading and digesting of the scriptures—through a *commitment* to the text, the evangelical church will become irrelevant, useless, dead.”⁹

Corporate worship has at its core elements including reproving, rebuking and exhorting—patiently and carefully using the Word to build the saints into mature children of the Living God and protecting against the wolves that seek to make havoc of the flock. There will always be people who follow the latest novel approach to worship—testing the methods first at this church and then testing the degree of entertainment at that church. We pray for such people and seek no harm for them, but we know that we are responsible to worship according to what is pleasing to God.

We will always have some who test our programme for a while and then leave for what seems to them to be a more exciting programme. I recall speaking to one woman who told me that she was seeking something more “fulfilling.” I told her there was no harm in changing the label on an empty bottle.

I am not suggesting that we cease seeking to adapt the methods used in worship to make our time together more meaningful, but I am reminding you that we are always responsible to ensure that the message of Christ is fully proclaimed as we worship. I acknowledge the need to work hard to ensure that the elements of our worship speak to our hearts and to our culture. Whatever the elements that are ultimately included in worship, be assured that if it is pleasing in the sight of the Lord, preaching will be central.

If this truth is displeasing in your sight, is it because you have yet to know Christ Jesus as Saviour and Master? If you have yet to make Him Lord of your life, you need to heed the call of His Word. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Believe this message and be saved. Amen.

⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, **The History of the English Bible: Part IV: Why So Many Versions?** http://bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1825, accessed 26 December 2004