

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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AN EVER PRESENT DANGER

II Timothy 4:1-15 forms what John MacArthur, Jr. calls "the foundation of an excellent ministry."¹ You will note that it follows the classical text on inspiration (II Timothy 3:16-17). What constitutes *success* in ministry? This has become a driving issue in modern Evangelicalism, and there is no shortage of books that explain the keys to success in the ministry. There is a new quest for success today that centers on being *relevant*. Contemporary practicality has transformed every aspect of Christian ministry, and to put it succinctly, it is a "Market-Driven Ministry."² The church must *sell* its product in the same way that a business sells its product; you must make both the producer and consumer happy. Marketing becomes the arbiter of truth—if it works, do it—that is the bottom line. But *whose* bottom line is it? This mentality insists on real results and stresses using only the best insights and technologies available today, regardless of the source. The church, they insist, must *modernize*, it must *innovate*, and it must *adapt* in order to survive. The emphasis is on methodology *not* theology. The Biblical model is something very different. What really matters is what God says, not what works.

I. CONFRONTING THE CULTURE OF OUR DAY

The culture we live in is *not* neutral. We are living in an age of tremendous change that is best described by the term MODERNITY. What is this?³ Modernity is the first truly global culture in the world and the most powerful culture in history to date. Simply put, modernity can be understood as the character and system of the world produced by the forces of development and modernization, especially economic expansion, industrialized technology, and telecommunications. It is only since the mid-sixties that the bitter fruits of modernity, which have been two centuries in gestation, have been widely grasped, eaten, gorged, disgorged, and found socially indigestible. This vomiting, on a fairly large social scale, has been an event spanning three decades.⁴ What are the implications for the church?

A. Modernity Vitiates Any Appeal To Tradition Or Transcendent Order.

In other words, we have the fascination with self, the triumph of the therapeutic. The self becomes both the object of our concern and the source of our values. "Truth is replaced by feelings and relationships; the goal is not so much to be righteous as to be whole and happy."⁵

B. Modernity And The Transmutation Of Our Minds.

We have moved from being a print-oriented to an image-oriented culture, and, as a result, our mental habits have been profoundly transformed. How so? Print requires *linear* thinking, following the sequence of ideas as they unfold through words. Our video culture destroys this. We are a generation incapable of rising above MTV and *USA Today*--it is no surprise that people complain about not understanding Paul's epistle to the Romans. We live, quite literally, surrounded by an artificial environment. We sit in front of our VCR's and suddenly we are transported into another world. We are conditioned on *how* to think, *what* to think, and even *not* to think. We read, not for the development of our facilities or in order to have discernment, but for entertainment. Society pumps our minds, not with logic, but with images. So we distrust the mind, but not our feelings--which we feel compelled often to share. The Scripture tells us that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and not conformed to the pattern of the world (Romans 12:2). But the church is being conformed to the pattern of the world, and Christians are in despair over the upheaval of the family. So they run madly to seminars hoping to have some "practical" quick-fix formula they can easily implement to stem the tide against the assault against the family. We need to realize that the Biblical perspective on the family cannot be disassociated from a Biblical world-

view and pattern that is very theological--it is God-centered--and it should come as no surprise that, if we lose our theological bearings, we will likewise find the practical becoming more and more elusive.

C. Modernity And Social Pluralism.

Our cities, schools, and neighborhoods are made up of many ethnic and religious groups. We are confronted with *other* lifestyles very different from our own, and this tends to reduce the Christian faith to something that is merely a personal (and private!) preference. This can have a devastating psychological effect, causing us to become more and more withdrawn, seeking to avoid either confronting the culture with the Gospel (they will think we are narrow-minded, sectarian-bigots) or accommodating the message of the Gospel so that it is less offensive in a pluralistic society.

II. MINISTERING IN THE AGE OF MODERNITY

The major problem with the market-driven ministry philosophy is that it is the *product* of modernity! It appeals to the very worst mood of our age. "It caters," writes MacArthur, "to people whose first love is themselves and who care not for God--unless they can have Him without disrupting their selfish lifestyles. Promise such people a religion that will allow them to be comfortable in their materialism and self-love, and they will respond in droves." ⁶

A. How Do We Define Success?

Did the Apostle Paul subscribe to the "give-people-what-they-want" theory that is so prevalent in our churches today? This concept is usually called preaching to *felt needs*. Many "user-friendly" (a phrase taken from one of George Barna's book titles) churches have deliberately subordinated Biblical preaching and worship to what is called "evangelistic worship," which in turn is connected with entertainment, and by so doing have subverted the traditional defining features of the church. By catering to *felt needs*, what is really done is preaching to selfish and idolatrous cravings. "What will be the *felt needs* of people who love themselves, money, and pleasure? Our job is not to preach to felt needs, but to expose such felt needs as sinful cravings that must be supplanted by Christ." ⁷ It should be noted that "success," at least as we have come to understand it, as something *external* is never a valid goal in the ministry.

B. Pursuing The Divine Standard.

This was Paul's concept of success--the goal is not external success but Biblical excellence--doing the will of God regardless if it is unpopular and regardless of the consequences.

III. THE FOUNDATION OF A BIBLICAL MINISTRY

In vv. 1-5, we have Paul's definition of Biblical ministry. There are *nine* definitive reminders from Paul to Timothy. If this is not our model, we have departed from the Apostolic one.

A. Remember Your Calling: Paul's Charge.

The Apostle uses the solemn verb DIAMARTUROMAI. It is a very strong word, found three times in the Pastorals (I Timothy 5:21; II Timothy 2:14, and here in II Timothy 4:1). The word reinforced the binding obligation to make known the message and will of God. ⁸ Note in particular the stress on the centrality of God. Ministry must be guided *not* by what people want, but on what God says! (cf. Romans 14:10-12; II Corinthians 5:10).

B. Preach the Word

What kind of ministry pleases God? Obedience to this simple command, "Preach the Word" (v. 2). What does this involve? Proclaiming (not sharing) the *whole* counsel of God (Acts 20:27). The message the minister of the Gospel is *required* to preach is often offensive. Christ is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (Romans 9:33; I Peter 2:8). The message of the cross is a stumbling block to some (Galatians 5:11) and mere foolishness to others (I Corinthians 1:23). What was Timothy to preach? The Word of God--the God-breathed Scriptures (3:16,17). He is to master this (II Timothy 2:15), to devote himself to this as his *major* task (I Timothy 4:13). This was Paul's calling (Colossians 1:25; cf. I Corinthians 2:1-2).

C. Be Faithful In and Out of Season.

Preach the Word, Timothy, regardless of the smiles and frowns of the people, regardless of the times--be faithful, Timothy, to your calling (I Corinthians 4:1-2). Preaching in the Biblical sense

is not popular today--and besides, theology is irrelevant. Who needs it? Paul told Timothy he needed it.

D. Reprove, Rebuke, and Exhort.

Notice that this has to do with the tone of Timothy's preaching. Preaching that fails to confront and correct sin through the Word of God does *not* meet people's real need. It may make them feel good, and they may really respond enthusiastically to the preacher, but it is not Biblical preaching.

E. DON'T Compromise in Difficult Times.

Timothy is warned--the time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine but will oppose it openly and will gather around them a *great number* (note this emphasis!) of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will deliberately turn away from the truth because they want *their* own emphasis. Ear-tickling preaching is an abomination, and Timothy is not to accommodate his preaching to them.

Note: In v. 3, Paul mentions a certain group of "men." To whom does this refer? Is he talking about the world or people in the church? The world has never cared for the preaching of sound doctrine. Paul is addressing a situation that is exposed to preaching and, therefore, this has to refer to people in the church. A very similar reference is Acts 20:29. This is exactly the condition of the churches today. The market-driven philosophy of so many churches today says, "Give the people what they want!" Remember the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai. The people desire a calf to worship and a ministerial golden-calf-maker is readily found (Exodus 32). This isn't happening today, you say? Evangelicalism has abandoned its heritage and has embraced the spirit of the age. Look about you, look at the Christian TV programs--what do you see? Christians madly pursuing extra-biblical revelation in the form of visions, dreams, and prophecies. Evangelical preachers and theologians blatantly deny the reality of hell and openly embrace universalism. There is a massive re-orientation taking place in Evangelicalism today, and hardly any doctrine of historic Christianity is left unaffected. The attributes of God are re-defined. God is no longer all-knowing. He learns like the rest of us. The Spirit of Christ can speak just as easily in other world religions as He can through the Bible. This is being advocated by a growing number of Evangelicals. Just as bad is the larger number of Evangelical churches who have lost all interest in doctrine and the need for teaching and preaching the *major* themes of Christianity: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and nature of the atonement, justification by faith, the sinfulness of man--the church has virtually gone mute on these themes. The Biblical teaching on the role of women, homosexuality, and abortion is discarded as being culturally conditioned. Music becomes the focal point of why people choose a church, and, in many cases, people want to worship, not the Lord God of Scripture, but want to worship their worship! Modern Evangelicalism has fallen into the old liberalism that H. Richard Niebuhr described as believing in "a God without wrath bringing men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a Cross."⁹

F. Be Sober in All Things.

This has reference to being self-controlled and attentive. The Greek work ΝĒPHŌ describes a state of mental alertness. The same verb is found in I Thessalonians 5:6, 8, to denote a watchful and alert attitude. A minister should be characterized by being steadfast and stable, not changing with every cultural change that blows his way.

G. Endure Hardship.

The ministry is hard. It involves dealing with difficult issues and with some difficult people. It demands hard work--not business, which is often the lot of a pastor--but the hard work of studying and teaching the Scriptures. Paul had previously counseled Timothy on this subject (II Timothy 2:1, 3).

H. Do the Work of an Evangelist.

Part of the duty of a faithful pastor is to reach out beyond the walls of the local church to people outside the church, and not with a message of compromise, but of confrontation. Timothy is urged to be solemn, persuasive, and Biblical in confronting unbelief.

I. Fulfill Your Ministry.

The NIV has "discharge." The word ΠΛĒΡΟΦΟΡΕŌ means, "to accomplish"--Timothy is exhorted to devote himself wholeheartedly to the task of "Preaching the Word." There is no

place for compromise, timidity or delay, and there is no need for fear. This is the kind of ministry that pleases the Lord.

CONCLUSION: Faithfulness, godliness, and spiritual commitment are the virtues that God esteems. External things such as affluence, numbers, money, or even positive response have never been the Biblical measure of success in the ministry. Size does not necessarily signify God's blessing--nor does popularity. Church of the Redeemer, by God's grace, will seek to be faithful to a ministry that pleases God, and I seek your prayers and support to that end.

ENDNOTES

1. John MacArthur, Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Crossway Books, 1993), p. 29. This is one of the most important books I have read in the last few years and has helped shape this particular sermon.
2. George Barna, one of the most respected (and widely read) spokesmen for the church-growth people has actually authored a book that has the title, *Marketing the Church* (NavPress, 1988). "I believe that developing a market orientation is precisely what the church needs to do if we are to make a difference in the spiritual health of this nation for the remainder of this century" (p. 13), and "My contention, based on careful study of data and the activities of American churches, is that the major problem plaguing the church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing driven environment." (p. 23) In a recent article in *Preaching* titled, "The Pulpit-meister: Preaching to the New Majority," Barna departs from his role as a sociologist and assumes the role of professor of preaching. He does state that "the core of our message must never be compromised," but the paradigm he proposes can lead only to compromise. He suggests that "the new majority," the group of so-called Boomers and Busters (those born from 1946 to 1964 and 1965 to 1983, respectively), have certain characteristics which prevent them from being attentive to typical, traditional preaching. I recognize that preachers must develop their individual styles and that preaching in certain parts of the world may vary due to particular cultural influences. But when the preacher must change his use of language to purge it of any hint of the theological or judgmental, he finds himself positioned to be more of an inspirational speaker than a preacher of God's Word. When he must keep his sermons under twenty minutes, filling them with stories, avoiding "moral absolutes," and going light on scriptural references, he has no hope to teach and explain the doctrines of the Word. Barna goes so far as to state, "Increasingly we find that the entire approach of 'talking at the audience' is an ill-fated form of communication." He suggests that preaching in any kind of series will not work since the audience may change from week to week. cf. Phil A. Newton, "Biblical Preaching," *Reformation and Revival Journal* (Vol. 9, No.1, Winter 2000), p. 13.
3. Those of you who attended Redeemer's Forum in November of 1993 heard Os Guinness on this subject in which the substance of his book *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Baker, 1993) was presented. I would urge you to read this book in order to understand the impact of modernity on the Christian Church.
4. I owe this time-frame analysis to Thomas C. Oden, "On Not Whoring After the Spirit of the Age", *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, editors, Os Guinness & John Seel (Moody, 1992), p. 193.
5. David F. Wells, "Evangelical Megashift: Assaulted by Modernity," *Christianity Today*, Feb. 19, 1990. I am indebted to Wells on these points and would urge a reading of his book, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993). This book is required reading for all Elders at Church of the Redeemer.
6. MacArthur, op. cit., p. 28.
7. Michael Scott Horton, "Corinthian Distraction", *Modern Reformation* (Mar/Apr, 1993), p. 23.
8. *Dictionary of New Testament Theology III*, ed. Colin Brown (Zondervan, 1971), p. 1044.
9. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper & Row, 1937), pp. 191-192.