

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Centrality of the Word

Introduction: Michael Horton has observed that biblical religion is unique among the religions of the world in that it centers around *hearing* rather than *seeing* as the main sense we use in worship. Think about when the Israelites were entering the promised land under Joshua, to conquer the Canaanites: “The Canaanites and other nations in the region were much more culturally sophisticated and technologically advanced than the children of Israel. Furthermore, they credited their prosperity to their own efforts and the approval of the gods. **Each of these gods they could see:** There were visible manifestations or points of contact with these deities in the form of huge statues and altars raised up on the highest points on the horizon. **Israel was tired of hearing**, which corresponds to patient waiting for God’s timetable in hope. Instead, Israel **wanted to see**, which corresponds to reality itself: ‘Seeing is believing.’ And that really is true for us as fallen creatures, born untrusting and cynical.”¹ This is why it seems so strange that God would make the reading and preaching of his Word central to the worship service. Instead of giving us something we can see, and taste, and touch, he asks us to patiently *hear* his words, which takes much more concentration for most people. Yet like with every other aspect of our worship, the reading and preaching of God’s Word is a reminder that he designed worship, not us, and we come to him on his terms, not ours. In this final chapter of Paul’s second letter to Timothy, we can see just how much weight the Apostle puts on the public preaching of the Word of God. The other elements are important, yes, but Paul presents preaching as the most essential. Without this, everything else falls apart and we are just wasting our Sundays.

1. 4:1-5 - The Apostle’s Charge

- a. Verse 1 - Note how extremely serious Paul is as he introduces this final section of this letter. The way he frames it, as a solemn charge in the presence of God and Jesus Christ, is designed to make sure this sticks in Timothy’s mind forever.
 - i. This is similar to when a father sits his son down and gives him a piece of life advice that he wants his son to live by for his own good. Typically this involves removing distractions and making serious eye contact.
 - ii. The phrase, “By his appearing and his kingdom” calls Timothy (and by extension, us!) to remember Christ is coming again, with overwhelming power, to consummate his kingdom. None will be able to stand before him and make excuses on that day, but until that day, God works mainly through our hearing, not seeing.
 - iii. This does not mean Paul actually fears Timothy might betray his office and become a false teacher. It is simply to give him a sense of how weighty this responsibility truly is and to remind him how important it is to guard God’s people from bad influences. God does not take the abuse or neglect of his sheep lightly.²

¹ Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship*, 36.

² It’s very likely that Paul has Old Testament passages like Ezekiel 34 in mind, where God pronounces a scathing judgment on shepherds who starve his sheep while feeding themselves. “Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my

- b. Verse 2 - Paul focuses on preaching the Word of God as the centerpiece of Timothy's ministry. This is his highest and holiest responsibility. If he gets this wrong, everything else will be in vain.
 - i. To see just how important the Scriptures are to Paul, we only have to recall the famous passage just a few verses back in 3:16-17.³
 - ii. Paul instructs that preaching is to be done consistently throughout the year, not off and on again, but in season and out of season. This is why we consider public worship incomplete without preaching: there are countless obstacles to the Gospel inside and outside of ourselves, so we need it constantly hammered home to us.
 - iii. By "reprove, rebuke, and exhort," Paul means the preacher must have a real sense of urgency in his preaching. He must impress upon the congregation how the Word moves and shapes them, not merely receiving it as some nice thoughts or interesting ideas. Furthermore, although these words overlap in their meaning, there are shades of differences between them. Paul is giving here a range of different ways to address the congregation, which are appropriate at different times, depending on the text that is being preached.⁴
 - iv. When Paul says "with complete patience and teaching," he is adding two important guardrails to the character of a preacher's speech.⁵ The reminder to be patient is vital, because preachers can be carried away by zeal to forget the real needs and trials his people are already bearing. A preacher who berates his congregation without holding out the Gospel to them will tie up unbearable burdens on their backs and do great harm to the faith of genuine believers. On the other hand, a preacher who rebukes God's people on the basis of his own opinions and intuitions is just feeding them hot air. Therefore his words ought to be restrained both by patience and sound teaching that does not come from his own mind.
- c. Verses 3-4 - Paul ominously predicts that there will soon be many who reject Timothy's message and chase after superstition instead.
 - i. It is likely that Paul means this will happen in Timothy's experience, and in the experience of every minister. We know there was never a golden age where the church was truly pure, since Paul mentions several who fell away from his own ministry just a few verses later.⁶ This is also why drawing large crowds can never be proof of a preacher's power: the true Gospel is usually *not* popular.

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 34:10

³ "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." - 2 Timothy 3:16-17

⁴ "The fact that the words rendered "rebuke, correct, and encourage" are all partially overlapping in meaning suggests that Paul is concerned here to convey the spectrum of functions a person such as Timothy will be called to exercise in the local congregation, ranging from encouragement and affirmation to mild correction or even strong rebuke. To know what is needed in a particular situation calls for considerable wisdom and discernment." - Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, 273.

⁵ As Calvin puts it, "In short, Paul means that reproofs are founded on doctrine, in order that they may not be justly despised as frivolous. Secondly, he means that keenness is moderated by gentleness; for nothing is more difficult than to set a limit to our zeal when we have once become warm. Now when we are carried away by impatience, our exertions are altogether fruitless. Our harshness not only exposes us to ridicule, but also irritates the minds of the people. Besides, keen and violent men seem generally unable to endure the obstinacy of those with whom they are brought into intercourse, and cannot submit to many annoyances and insults, which nevertheless must be digested, if we are desirous to be useful. Let severity be therefore mingled with this seasoning of gentleness, that it may be known to proceed from a peaceful heart." - Calvin's Commentary on 2 Timothy 4:2.

⁶ Paul says both that "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (4:10) and "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message" (4:14-15).

- ii. Paul's earlier exhortation to preach in season and out of season prepared Timothy for this warning. Preaching the truth even when many are leaving the faith to chase after superstitious nonsense certainly feels like preaching "out of season," but that is no reason to stop. Paul is preparing him so he will not be shocked or crushed when it happens.
 - iii. The choice of the word "endure" is interesting, because it is another reminder that hearing the Word preached is often going to sting. For hypocrites in our midst, it is especially painful, because they have not really embraced Christ and received the healing of the Gospel. So they can only bear the severity of the Law for a time and then feel forced out.
 - iv. Paul's reference to "itching ears" describes people who do not want to hear anything that cuts too deeply.⁷ They want to hear words that please them without really changing or challenging them. This could mean amusing stories, or rants about other people that you cannot stand, or just seeking a beautiful and artful speaking style. The classic example of this from Paul's own ministry would be the men of the Areopagus, who "would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."⁸
 - v. "Myths" here is a very broad term that doesn't just mean pagan stories about their gods. Paul means all kinds of superstitious notions that are not well-founded on God's clear revelation. So pagan beliefs like astrology would count, but so would apocryphal stories told by the Jews,⁹ as well as speculation based on numerology or genealogies.¹⁰ Once again we see how concerned Paul is to make sure Timothy sticks to the solid and substantial truth of God's Word and avoids all harmful distractions.
- d. Verse 5 - Paul's description of a minister's character here is brief, but covers a lot of ground.
- i. "Sober-minded" means that a pastor should be consistently clear-thinking, and not affected by any habits that impair his judgment. Drunkenness would be the most obvious example, but other vicious habits could also disqualify him on this point, such as gluttony, pornography, or even being short-tempered.
 - ii. "Endure suffering" is a reminder that trials and tribulations are *normal* for believers, and particularly for those in ministry. This is a large part of the point of Christ's Beatitudes, which promise blessings for those who suffer as Christ did, in order to follow him.¹¹ We experience humiliation now, before we experience the exaltation of our reward.¹²

⁷ "They don't want to grow spiritually but only to satisfy their curiosity (cf. Acts 17:20–21). Thus they turn aside from the truth (Hymenaeus and Philetus: 2:18; cf. 2:25; 3:7–8; "turn aside" need not imply that the false teachers once confessed the truth themselves) to myths (μῦθος; 1 Tim 1:4; 4:7; cf. Titus 1:14), that is, fabrications of their own that aren't rooted in actual fact (a contrast accentuated by the μέν ... δέ construction)." - Köstenberger, 274.

⁸ Acts 17:21

⁹ Consider Paul's similar exhortation to Titus: "This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth." - Titus 1:13-14

¹⁰ "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith." - 1 Timothy 1:3-4

¹¹ This is most obvious in the last couple of beatitudes, which summarize the others in a sense: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." - Matthew 5:10-12

¹² Compare this with Philippians 2:4-16, where Paul teaches that believers should see their lives as following the same basic pattern as Christ's life: humility now, glory later.

2. 4:6-8 - The Apostle's Inheritance

- a. Does Paul comparing himself to an offering imply some competition with Jesus's sacrifice? Not if we keep in mind that there were many kinds of offerings in the Old Testament system. Presumably Paul means he is giving up his life as a freewill offering, or an offering of thanksgiving,¹³ *not* atonement.
- b. Paul's self-description may seem like boasting, at first, but really all it amounts to is saying, "I survived and did not abandon my post." He is not even claiming to have done his job particularly well, just that he did do it, which is obviously true. Otherwise his letters would not have survived and Christianity would not have spread as quickly as it did.
- c. These words may well be the last that Paul ever wrote before going to his death by martyrdom. They are, at the very least, the last words of his that have survived until today. This ought to give us extra pause as we consider what Paul wanted to leave as his final and most important charge to Timothy.
- d. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox often point to "apostolic succession" as a compelling proof of their churches' authenticity. By this they mean that they can point to traditional records of successive ordinations going back to the apostles themselves. Many Americans who have not really thought this issue through may be susceptible to this argument. Yet some basic familiarity with Scripture and the history of Reformation can equip you to answer their claims very effectively.
- e. If we want to know how the apostles provided for their "successors," 2 Timothy 4 is the clearest example we have of an apostle doing just that. And it is plain to see that the "baton" that Paul is passing on here is not a special anointing or even his office, *per se*, but *his message*. His top priority is that Timothy preach the *same message* that Paul carried on all his missionary journeys. This tells us that the measure of apostolic succession is not a direct chain of ordinations,¹⁴ but whether a preacher consistently delivers the Gospel as the apostles understood it. If he preaches a different "gospel," which would be no true gospel at all, he is *anathema*, accursed and cast out.¹⁵
- f. The substance of this inheritance, and of the message that Timothy was supposed to preach as his life's work, is nothing other than Jesus Christ. The Good News of the Gospel can be stated so simply: God sent his only-begotten Son to live and die for our sins, and raised him from the dead to rule and intercede for us in glory at his right hand. And yet to teach all the Gospel's profound significance takes much more than any one pastor's lifetime. This is why Paul could say to the Corinthians, "I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in

¹³ These are the kind of offerings David had in mind when he sang, "With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies." - Psalm 54:6-7

¹⁴ Ordination is a biblical idea (1 Timothy 5:22 shows that it continues from the Old and into the New Testament period), and it is valuable for keeping teachers accountable within the church on earth. But that does not mean that it is the means we use to tell which churches are true churches. The Reformers instead focused on three marks of a true church: 1) Preaching, 2) The Two Sacraments, and 3) Church Discipline. The Belgic Confession, for example, says in article 29, "The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself."

¹⁵ "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." - Galatians 1:8-9

the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”¹⁶ All the power of God for salvation flows out of the proclamation of Christ crucified. If a preacher has something to say that has nothing to do with Christ, it does not belong in the pulpit. Everything must be brought back and tied to him as the beating heart of our whole faith.

- g. Remember again Michael Horton’s insight that Christianity is a religion of *hearing*, not *seeing*. For now, in this life, we are called to walk by faith, not by sight.¹⁷ But a day is coming when we will no longer just hear our Lord. We will see him. That is the day that every qualified pastor is aiming to prepare you for, when you will behold your Savior’s face in glory, and if you have held fast to the faith taught in Scripture, you will not be ashamed.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

¹⁷ “So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight.” - 2 Corinthians 5:6-7