

ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

WHEN THE CHURCH BECOMES
LIKE THE WORLD

THIRD EDITION

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Appendix 4, “Carnal vs. Spiritual Wisdom,” is an excerpt from “A Soliloquy on the Art of Man-Fishing” by Thomas Boston, adapted for modern readers. This version, © 1993 by Phil Johnson, is used by permission.

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CHRISTIANITY ON THE DOWN-GRADE

Doth that man love his Lord who would be willing to see Jesus wearing a crown of thorns, while for himself he craves a chaplet of laurel? Shall Jesus ascend to his throne by the cross, and do we expect to be carried there on the shoulders of applauding crowds? Be not so vain in your imagination. Count you the cost, and if you are not willing to bear Christ's cross, go away to your farm and to your merchandise, and make the most of them; only let me whisper this in your ear, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON¹

If you're familiar with the life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, you have probably heard of "the Down-Grade Controversy." Spurgeon spent the final four years of his life at war against the trends of early modernism, which he rightly saw as a threat to biblical Christianity.

The name by which history remembers the controversy comes from the title of a series of articles Spurgeon published in his monthly magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*. (See Appendix 1 for an overview of the "Down-Grade" articles and a fuller account of the ensuing controversy.) Spurgeon wanted to admonish his flock about the dangers of moving away from the historic positions of biblical Christianity. Biblical truth is like the pinnacle of a steep, slippery mountain, Spurgeon suggested. One step away, and you find yourself on the down-grade. Once a church or individual Christian starts moving down the precipitous incline, Spurgeon said, momentum

¹"Holding Fast the Faith," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 34 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1888), 78. This sermon was preached February 5, 1888, at the outset of the Down-Grade Controversy, just after Spurgeon's censure by the Baptist Union (see Appendix 1).

takes over. Recovery is unusual and occurs only when Christians get on the “Up-line” through spiritual revival.

In the controversy that transpired, Spurgeon resigned from the Baptist Union. Later he was the subject of an official censure by the Union. Within a few years the Baptist Union was hopelessly lost to the new theology and Spurgeon was dead. In 1900, Spurgeon’s wife, Susannah, wrote,

So far as the Baptist Union was concerned, little was accomplished by Mr. Spurgeon’s witness-bearing and withdrawal. . . . But, in other respects, I have had abundant proofs that the protest was not in vain. Many, who were far gone on the ‘Down-grade,’ were stopped in their perilous descent, and, by God’s grace, were brought back to the ‘Up-line’; others, who were unconsciously slipping, were made to stand firmly on the Rock; while, at least for a time, in all the churches, Evangelical doctrines were preached with a clearness and emphasis which had long been lacking.²

She believed the Lord would ultimately make clear how right her husband had been in his “protest against false doctrine and worldliness.”³

To this day, church historians debate whether Spurgeon was right to withdraw from the Union. Many believe he should have stayed and fought to keep it orthodox. He considered that option but concluded it would have been futile. I am inclined to believe Spurgeon was right to withdraw. But whether we agree with his course of action or not, we have no choice but to acknowledge that history *has* vindicated Spurgeon’s warnings about the deadly dangers of the down-grade. In the early part of the twentieth century, the spreading “false doctrine and worldliness”—theological liberalism and modernism—ravaged denominational Christianity. Most of the main-line denominations were violently if not fatally altered by these influences. The result in Spurgeon’s own England was particularly devastating. A hundred years after Spurgeon sounded the alarm, most theological education in England is rank liberal. Church attendance is a small fraction of what it was then. Evangelicals are a tiny minority, true biblical preaching is uncommon even in supposedly Bible-believing churches, and the evangelical movement has been dangerously susceptible to almost every theological fad exported from America. In short, evangelicalism in England never recovered from the modernist/liberal assault that began a century ago.

A hundred years later, history is repeating itself. The church has

²*The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon*, 4 vols. (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897), 4:255.

³*Ibid.*, 4:257.

become worldly—and not just worldly, but studiously so. Winds of doctrinal compromise are beginning to stir.

“False doctrine and worldliness”—the same two influences Spurgeon attacked—*always* go hand in hand, with worldliness leading the way. Christians today tend to forget that modernism did not come on the scene with a theological agenda but a methodological one. Early modernists were not trying to hit at the core of biblical faith; they were simply trying to make Christianity more palatable to a cynical world.

The same spirit is abroad in the church today. I am convinced that most of those behind it would not deliberately undermine biblical Christianity. Nevertheless, they have introduced into the church a philosophy of pragmatism and a spirit of worldliness that if left unchecked will eventually reap the same bitter harvest as the modernism of a hundred years ago.

MARKET-DRIVEN MINISTRY?

The new philosophy is straightforward: The church is in competition against the world, and the world is very good at capturing people’s attention and affections. The church, on the other hand, tends to be very poor at “selling” its product. Evangelism should therefore be viewed as a marketing challenge, and the church should market the gospel in the same way all modern businesses sell their products. That calls for some fundamental changes. The goal in all marketing is “to make both the producer and consumer satisfied.”⁴ So anything that tends to leave the “consumer” unsatisfied must be jettisoned. Preaching—particularly preaching about sin, righteousness, and judgment—is too confrontive to be truly satisfying. The church must learn to couch the truth in ways that amuse and entertain.

One best-selling author has written, “I believe that developing a marketing 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.”⁵ He adds, “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.”⁶

That all may sound very modern, very shrewd—but it is not biblical. And it has given the church a hard push onto the slippery slope. Marketing principles have become the arbiter of the church’s message and agenda.

⁴George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 41.

⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

⁶*Ibid.*, 23.

Whatever elements of the biblical message don't fit the promotional plan simply must be omitted. Marketing savvy demands that the offense of the cross must be downplayed. Salesmanship requires that negative subjects like divine wrath be avoided. Consumer satisfaction means that the standard of righteousness cannot be raised too high. The seeds of a watered-down gospel are thus sown in the very philosophy that drives many ministries today. And in some churches, the preaching of the gospel has been throttled completely.

Make no mistake: the new philosophy is profoundly altering the message the church conveys to the world, although many who propound these ideas think of themselves as loyal to biblical doctrine.

Evangelical Christianity is on the down-grade again.

TOWARD A BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

How does market-driven ministry compare with the biblical model? How do you think Timothy would have fared under Paul's tutelage if he had followed the advice of twentieth-century marketeers?

We have a thorough answer to that question from the two epistles Paul wrote to Timothy in the New Testament. Paul had personally mentored the young pastor, but Timothy encountered severe trials when he got into a pastorate of his own. He struggled with fear and human weakness. He was evidently tempted to soften his preaching in the face of persecution. At times he seemed ashamed of the gospel. Paul had to remind him to stand up for the faith with boldness, even if it meant suffering: "Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner; but share in suffering for the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:8). The two rich epistles from Paul to Timothy outline a ministry philosophy that challenges the prevailing wisdom of today.

Paul instructed Timothy that he must:

- Correct those teaching false doctrine and call them to a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:3–5).
- Fight for divine truth and for God's purposes, keeping his own faith and a good conscience (1:18–19).
- Pray for the lost and lead the men of the church to do the same (2:1–8).
- Call women in the church to fulfill their God-given role of submission and to raise up godly children, setting an example of faith, love, and sanctity with self-restraint (2:9–15).
- Carefully select spiritual leaders for the church on the basis of their giftedness, godliness, and virtue (3:1–13).

- Recognize the source of error and those who teach it, and point these things out to the brethren (4:1–6).
 - Constantly be nourished on the words of Scripture and its sound teaching, avoiding all myths and false doctrines (4:6).
 - Discipline himself for the purpose of godliness (4:7–11).
 - Boldly command and teach the truth of God’s Word (4:11).
 - Be a model of spiritual virtue that all can follow (4:12).
 - Faithfully read, explain, and apply the Scriptures publicly (4:13–14).
 - Be progressing toward Christlikeness in his own life (4:15–16).
 - Be gracious and gentle in confronting the sin of his people (5:1–2).
 - Give special consideration and care to those who are widows (5:3–16).
 - Honor faithful pastors who work hard (5:17–21).
 - Choose church leaders with great care, seeing to it that they are both mature and proven (5:22).
 - Take care of his physical condition so he is strong to serve (5:23).
 - Teach and preach principles of true godliness, helping his people discern between true godliness and mere hypocrisy (5:24—6:6).
 - Flee the love of money (6:7–11).
 - Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness (6:11).
 - Fight for the faith against all enemies and all attacks (6:12).
 - Keep all the Lord’s commandments (6:13–16).
 - Instruct the rich to do good, to be rich in good works, and to be generous (6:17–19).
 - Guard the Word of God as a sacred trust and a treasure (6:20–21).
- In his second epistle, Paul reminded Timothy that the pastor’s duty is

to:

- Keep the gift of God in him fresh and useful (2 Tim. 1:6).
- Not be timid but powerful (1:7).
- Never be ashamed of Christ or anyone who serves Christ (1:8–11).
- Hold tightly to the truth and guard it (1:12–14).
- Be strong in character (2:1).
- Be a teacher of apostolic truth so that he may reproduce himself in faithful men (2:2).
- Suffer difficulty and persecution willingly while making the maximum effort for Christ (2:3–7).
- Keep his eyes on Christ at all times (2:8–13).
- Lead with authority (2:14).
- Interpret and apply the Scripture accurately (2:15).
- Avoid useless conversation that leads only to ungodliness (2:16).
- Be an instrument of honor, set apart from sin and useful to the Lord (2:20–21).

- Flee youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace (2:22).
- Refuse to be drawn into philosophical and theological wrangling (2:23).
- Not be an arguer but kind, teachable, gentle, and patient even when he is wronged (2:24–26).
- Face dangerous times with a deep knowledge of the Word of God (3:1–17).
- Understand that Scripture is the basis and content of all legitimate ministry (3:16–17).
- Preach the Word—in season and out of season—reproving, rebuking, and exhorting with great patience and instruction (4:1–2).
- Be sober in all things (4:5).
- Endure hardship (4:5).
- Do the work of an evangelist (4:5).

Nothing in that list hints at a market-driven philosophy. In fact, some of those commands are impossible to harmonize with the theories that are so popular today. To sum it all up in five categories, Paul commanded Timothy 1) to be faithful in his preaching of biblical truth; 2) to be bold in exposing and refuting error; 3) to be an example of godliness to the flock; 4) to be diligent and work hard in the ministry; and 5) to be willing to suffer hardship and persecution in his service for the Lord.

Of course, the practical significance of this goes beyond those who are pastors. *Every* Christian is called to a life of ministry, and Paul’s instructions to Timothy contain principles that apply to every believer in every form of ministry. When the church is on the down-grade, it means that multitudes of individuals are carried along on the spiritual decline. “False doctrine and worldliness” in the church infects every member of the body. Paul’s instructions to Timothy are by no means meant only for the “elite” in Christian leadership or professional ministry. That is to say that ministry philosophy—and the issues we are addressing in this book—should be the concern of every Christian; these matters are by no means the exclusive domain of professional “clergy.”

Recently I spent some time reading a dozen or so of the latest books on ministry and church growth. Most of those books had long sections devoted to defining a philosophy of ministry. *Not one* of them referred to the instructions Paul outlined so carefully for Timothy. In fact, none of them drew any element of their ministry philosophy from the New Testament pastoral epistles! Most drew principles from modern business, marketing techniques, management theory, psychology, and other similar

sources. Some tried to *illustrate* their principles using biblical anecdotes. But not one of them drew their philosophy from Scripture—although much of the New Testament was explicitly written to instruct churches and pastors in these matters!

MINISTERING IN AN AGE OF ITCHING EARS

Unfortunately, the market-driven ministry philosophy appeals to the very worst mood of our age. It caters 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.

Paul foresaw such a time. Near the end of his second epistle to Timothy, after outlining the principles we have listed above, Paul abridged his advice to Timothy in this well-known verse: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). Then the apostle added this prophetic warning: “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” (4:3–4). The King James Version translates the passage like this: “After their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth.”

Clearly there was no room in Paul’s philosophy of ministry for the give-people-what-they-want theory that is so prevalent today. He did not urge Timothy to conduct a survey to find out what his people wanted. He did not suggest that he study demographic data or do research on the “felt needs” of his people. Paul would not have approved in any way if Timothy had catered to the demands of his audience. On the contrary, Paul commanded his protégé to preach the Word—faithfully, reprovably, patiently—and confront the spirit of the age head-on.

HOW DO WE DEFINE SUCCESS?

Notice that Paul said nothing to Timothy about how people might respond. He did not lecture Timothy on how large his church was, how much money it took in, or how influential it was. He did not suggest that the world was supposed to revere, esteem, or even accept Timothy. In fact, Paul said

nothing whatsoever about external success. Paul's emphasis was on *commitment*, not success.

Contemporary ministry philosophy is infatuated with worldly standards of success. The churches most often judged "successful" are the large, rich, megachurches with multimillion-dollar facilities, spas, handball courts, day-care centers, special-effects systems, and so on. But not one church in a thousand falls into that category. That means one of two things: most churches are pitiful failures, or the gauge of success in ministry must be something besides material prosperity.

The answer is obvious to anyone who knows Scripture. External criteria such as affluence, numbers, money, or positive response have never been the biblical measure of success in ministry. Faithfulness, godliness, and spiritual commitment are the virtues God esteems—and such qualities should be the building blocks of any ministry philosophy. That is true in both small and large churches. Size does not signify God's blessing. And popularity is no barometer of success. In fact, it can be a reason for condemnation. God told Jeremiah, "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" (Jer. 5:30–31).

Look again at Paul's instructions to Timothy. Instead of urging Timothy to devise a ministry that would garner accolades from the world, he warned him about suffering and hardship—hardly the stuff of modern church growth experts' aspirations! In Scripture big budgets, affluent members, and large membership rolls are *never* portrayed as valid goals. Paul was not telling Timothy how to be "successful"; he was not instructing him in techniques for increasing attendance figures; he was encouraging him to pursue the divine standard.

That, of course, is what defines true success. Real success is not getting results at any cost. It is not prosperity, power, prominence, popularity, or any of the other worldly notions of success. Real success is doing the will of God regardless of the consequences.

Or, using the terms as the world often employs them, the appropriate goal is not success but excellence.⁷ Paul was encouraging Timothy to be all that God had called and gifted him to be. He was not advising Timothy to seek success; he was urging him to pursue excellence.

⁷A helpful contrast between *success* and *excellence* may be found in Jon Johnston, *Christian Excellence: Alternative to Success* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985).

THE FOUNDATION OF AN EXCELLENT MINISTRY

Let's look a little more closely at these few verses from the beginning of 2 Timothy 4:

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. (vv. 1–5)

That brief passage defines biblical ministry. It includes nine reminders from Paul to Timothy that no minister dare disregard. Those who are derelict in these duties are on the down-grade, whether they realize it or not.

Remember Your Calling

“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”—thus Paul begins this final section of the last inspired epistle he ever wrote. He was near the end of his own life, anticipating his own execution. He knew he would stand before God to give an account. These thoughts were heavy on his mind. And so he reminded Timothy of the seriousness of the young pastor's own commission.

He counseled Timothy to live and work in light of impending judgment. Timothy needed to concern himself with what *God* thought of his ministry, not what *people* thought. Notice that Paul invoked “the *presence* of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead.” He wanted Timothy to understand that the One who would judge him is the One in whose presence he was then ministering. God is our audience. God judges by His own criteria, not by what people think.

Elsewhere Paul says, “We will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10, 12). That is the point he wants to make with Timothy. He is not ministering to please men, but to please God.

Preach the Word

What kind of ministry pleases God? “Preach the word” (v. 2). Obedience to that simple command *must* be the centerpiece of every truly biblical ministry philosophy. The preacher’s task is to proclaim Scripture and give the sense of it (cf. Neh. 8:8). All other content is extraneous to the message.

My father was a pastor, and when I first told him that I felt God had called me to a life of ministry, he gave me a Bible in which he had written, “Dear Johnny, preach the Word. 2 Timothy 4:2.” That simple statement became the compelling stimulus in my heart. I have never forgotten that simple biblical instruction from my dad—preach the Word. What else is there to preach?

Preaching the Word is not always easy. The message we are required to proclaim is often offensive. Christ Himself is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:8). The message of the cross is a stumbling block to some (1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11), mere foolishness to others (1 Cor. 1:23). “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Why do you suppose Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (Rom. 1:16)? Surely it is because so many Christians *are* ashamed of the very message we are commanded to proclaim.

As we have noted, Timothy evidently struggled with the sin of being ashamed. He was “ashamed of the testimony about our Lord,” and even ashamed of Paul (2 Tim. 1:8). Timothy seems to have been a timid soul, not at all like the strong and courageous apostle Paul. He was young, and some people demeaned him because of that (1 Tim. 4:12). He knew full well that even being associated with Paul was dangerous. Publicly proclaiming God’s truth could land him in prison with Paul. At the very least, he was sure to incur hostility and debates from Jews who were antagonistic to the gospel.

What is more, Timothy apparently struggled with the impulses of youthful lust (2 Tim. 2:22). He may have felt he was not all he should be.

Those were some compelling reasons for Timothy to silence his proclamation. So when Paul commanded him to preach, he was demanding that he go against his own natural inclinations and inhibitions.

What was the Word that Timothy was to preach? Paul had made this clear at the end of chapter 3: “*All Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16, emphasis added). This is the Word to be

preached: “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). In chapter 1 Paul had told Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me” (v. 13). He was speaking of the revealed words of Scripture—all of it. He urged Timothy to “Guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (v. 14). Then in chapter 2 he told him to study the Word and handle it accurately (v. 15). Now he is telling him to proclaim it. So the entire task of the faithful minister revolves around the Word of God—guarding it, studying it, and proclaiming it.

In Colossians 1 the apostle Paul, describing his own ministry philosophy, writes, “I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, *to make the word of God fully known*” (v. 25, emphasis added). In 1 Corinthians he goes a step further: “And 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” (2:1–2). In other words, his goal as a preacher was not to entertain people with his rhetorical style or to amuse them with cleverness, humor, novel insights, or sophisticated methodology—he simply preached Christ crucified.

There have always been men in the pulpit who gather crowds because they are gifted orators, interesting storytellers, entertaining speakers, dynamic personalities, shrewd crowd-manipulators, rousing speech-makers, popular politicians, or erudite scholars. Such preaching may be *popular*, but it is not necessarily *powerful*. No one can preach with power who does not preach the Word. And no faithful preacher will water down or neglect the whole counsel of God. Proclaiming the Word—all of it—is the pastor’s calling.

And so preaching the Word *must* be the very heart of our ministry philosophy. Any other philosophy replaces the voice of God with human wisdom. Philosophy, politics, humor, psychology, homespun advice, and human opinion can never accomplish what the Word of God does. Those things may be interesting, informative, entertaining, and sometimes even helpful—but they are not the business of the church. The preacher’s task is not to be a conduit for human wisdom; he is God’s voice to speak to the congregation. No human message comes with the stamp of divine authority—only the Word of God. I frankly do not understand preachers who are willing to abdicate this solemn privilege. Moral lectures and motivational talks are no substitute for God’s Word. Why should we proclaim the wisdom of men when we have the privilege of preaching the Word of God?

Be Faithful in and out of Season

Paul next reminds Timothy that he is called to a never-ending task. Not only is he to preach the Word, he is to do it regardless of the climate of opinion around him. He is to be faithful when such preaching is tolerated—but also when it is not.

Let's face it—right now preaching the Word is out of season. Humanity is experiencing God's wrath as He gives people over to the consequences of sinful choices (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28), "the due penalty for their error" (v. 27). Society may be feeling this divine abandonment in our age more than ever before. And the decline of preaching in the church can actually contribute to people's sense of helplessness. Martyn Lloyd-Jones argued that "in many ways it is the departure of the Church from preaching that is responsible in a large measure for the state of modern society. . . . The Church, having abandoned her real task, has left humanity more or less to its own devices."⁸

This is certainly no time for weak men, weak messages, and weak ministries. What is needed is moral strength and courage and uncompromising proclamation of the truth that can set people free. "So far from saying that we must have less preaching and turn more and more to other devices and expedients, I say that we have a heaven-sent opportunity for preaching."⁹

The market-driven philosophy currently in vogue says that plainly declaring biblical truth is outmoded. Biblical exposition and theology are seen as antiquated and irrelevant. This philosophy is rooted in the belief that contemporary churchgoers will not tolerate being preached to. People today won't just sit in the pew while someone up front preaches. They are products of a media-driven culture, and they need a church experience that will satisfy them on their own terms. "Preaching is broken," we're told. And the subsequent rationale for abandoning preaching is more high-sounding, philosophical mumbo-jumbo about the church's need to give people what they demand: "The church has failed to take the cultural shifts of postmodernity seriously. In today's culture . . . people are increasingly distrustful of authority figures, especially preachers, with overarching explanations of how the world works."¹⁰

But Paul says the excellent minister must be faithful to preach the Word even when it is not in fashion. The expression he uses is "be ready." The Greek term (*ephistēmi*) literally means "to stand beside." It has the idea of

⁸Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 35.

⁹*Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰Tom Allen, "Younger Pastors Ask: Is Preaching out of Touch?" Associated Baptist Press release, February 20, 2004.

eagerness. It was often used to describe a military guard, always at his post, prepared for duty. Paul was speaking of an explosive eagerness to preach, like that of Jeremiah, who said that the Word of God was a fire in his bones. That's what he was demanding of Timothy. Not reluctance but readiness. Not hesitation but fearlessness. Not cool talk but the Word of God.

Reprove, Rebuke, and Exhort

Paul also gives Timothy instructions about the *tone* of his preaching. He uses two words that carry negative connotations and one that is positive: reprove, rebuke, and exhort (2 Tim. 4:2). All valid ministry must have a balance of positive *and* negative. The preacher who fails to reprove and rebuke is not fulfilling his commission.

I recently listened to a radio interview with a preacher well-known for his emphasis on positive thinking. This man had stated in print that he assiduously avoids any mention of sin in his preaching because he feels people are burdened with too much guilt anyway. The interviewer asked how he could justify such a policy. The pastor replied that he had made the decision early in his ministry to focus on meeting people's *needs*, not attacking their *sin*.

But people's deepest need is to confess and overcome their sin. So preaching that fails to confront and correct sin through the Word of God does *not* meet people's need. It may make them feel good, and they may respond enthusiastically to the preacher, but that is not the same as meeting real needs.

Reproving, rebuking, and exhorting is the same as preaching the Word, for those are the very same ministries Scripture accomplishes: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Notice the same balance of positive and negative admonition. Reproof and correction are negative; teaching and training are positive.

Although the reproofs of God's Word are essential and must never be neglected, the positive part of instruction is, for obvious reasons, where the majority of our energies ought to be invested. The word "exhort" is *parakaleō*, a word that means "encourage." The excellent preacher confronts sin and then encourages repentant sinners to behave righteously. He is to do this "with complete patience and teaching" (4:2). In 1 Thessalonians 2:11–12, Paul talks about how, "like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner

worthy of God.” This often requires great patience and much instruction. But the excellent minister cannot neglect these aspects of his calling.

Don't Compromise in Difficult Times

There is an urgency in Paul's charge to young Timothy: “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” (2 Tim. 4:3). That is a prophecy reminiscent of those found in 2 Timothy 3:1 (“understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty”) and 1 Timothy 4:1 (“the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith”). This, then, is Paul's third prophetic warning to Timothy about the difficult times that were to come. Note the progression: The first one said that the time would come when people will depart from the faith. The second one warned Timothy that dangerous times were coming for the church. Now the third one suggests that the time would come when those *in the church* would not endure sound doctrine but desire instead to have their ears tickled.

Fearless preaching is all the more necessary in such dangerous times. When people will not tolerate the truth, that's when courageous, outspoken preachers are most desperately needed to speak it.

Why are people unwilling to endure sound teaching? Their love of sin. Sound preaching, as we have seen, confronts and rebukes sin, and people in love with sinful lifestyles will not tolerate such teaching. They want to have their ears tickled (v. 3).

Paul employs the expression “sound teaching” in 1 Timothy 1 as well. In verses 9 and 10 of that chapter, he speaks of the law as being “for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and *whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine*” (emphasis added). A society filled with and influenced by liars, perjurers, murderers, and homosexuals is by no means tolerant of sound teaching.

Notice that Paul does *not* suggest that the way to reach such a society is to soften or adapt the message so that such people will be comfortable with it. Just the opposite is true. Such ear-tickling is abominable. Paul urges Timothy to be willing to suffer for the truth's sake and to keep preaching the Word boldly and faithfully. That's the only way intolerant people can be exposed to the truth, which alone can soften their hearts.

Incidentally, the interpretive question raised by this passage hinges on the words “they” in verse 3. To whom does the word refer? To the world? Or to the church? Surely this statement is true of the world’s attitude—unregenerate people seldom are willing to tolerate sound teaching. But here Paul is speaking specifically of the people to whom Timothy preaches. This seems to refer primarily to people in the church. It suggests that a time would come when professing Christians in Ephesus would not stand for sound preaching.

Isn’t that precisely the state of the church in our society today? In fact, this is the very thing marketing experts are pointing out to church leaders. The whole basis of their philosophy is that people don’t want to hear the truth proclaimed; they want to be entertained. The marketing plan says give them what they want. Scripture says otherwise.

There are thousands of supposedly evangelical churches worldwide that cannot stomach sound doctrine. They would not tolerate for two weeks strong biblical teaching that refutes their doctrinal error, confronts their sin, convicts them, and calls them to obey the truth. They don’t want to hear healthy teaching. Why? Because people in the church want to own God without giving up sinful lifestyles, and they will not endure someone telling them what God’s Word says about it.

What *do* they want to hear? “Having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (v. 3). Ironically, they seek out *teachers*. In fact, they *heap to themselves* teachers—but not sound ones. They choose the teachers who tell them what they want to hear. They want what tickles their ears and feeds their lusts. They want what makes them feel good about themselves. Preachers who offend them, they reject. They accumulate a mass of teachers who feed their insatiable selfish appetites. And the preacher who brings the message they most need to hear is the one they least like to hear.

Unfortunately, preachers with ear-tickling messages are all too abundantly available. “In periods of unsettled faith, scepticism, and mere curious speculation in matters of religion, teachers of all kinds swarm like the flies in Egypt. The demand creates the supply. The hearers invite and shape their own preachers. If the people desire a calf to worship, a ministerial calf-maker is readily found.”¹¹

This appetite for ear-tickling preaching has a terrible end. Verse 4 says these people will ultimately “turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” They become the victims of their own refusal to hear

¹¹Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1900), 4:321.

the truth. “They will turn away” is in the active voice. The people willfully choose this action. “Will be turned aside to myths” is in the passive voice. It describes what happens to them. Having turned from the truth, they become victims of deception. As soon as they turn away from the truth, they become pawns of Satan.

That is happening on a very wide scale in the church today. Evangelicalism has lost its tolerance for confrontive preaching. Now the floodgates have opened for serious doctrinal error. Christians madly pursue extrabiblical revelation in the form of prophecies and dreams. Preachers deny or ignore the reality of hell. The modern gospel promises heaven apart from holiness. Churches ignore the biblical teaching on women’s roles, homosexuality, and other politically charged issues. The human medium has overtaken the divine message. The result has been serious doctrinal compromise on a far-reaching scale. If the church does not repent and return to the up-line (as Spurgeon would say), these errors and others like them will become epidemic.

Look again at the key phrase in verse 3: “having itching ears.” Why will not they endure sound doctrine? Why do they heap to themselves teachers? Why do they turn away from the truth? Because down deep inside they simply want to have their ears tickled. They don’t want to be confronted. They don’t want to be convicted. They want to be entertained. They want preaching that produces pleasant sensations. They want to feel good. They want their ears to be amused and electrified with anecdotes, humor, psychology, motivational lectures, reassurance, positive thinking, self-congratulation, ego-massaging sermonettes, and agreeable small talk. Biblical reproof, rebuke, and exhortation are unacceptable.

But the truth of God does not tickle our ears, it boxes them. It burns them. It *first* reproveth, rebukes, convicts—*then* exhorts and encourages. Preachers of the Word must be careful to maintain that balance.

In John 6, after Jesus had delivered a particularly hard message, Scripture tells us, “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (v. 66). As the crowds left, our Lord turned to His disciples and asked, “Do you want to go away as well?” (v. 67). Peter’s reply on behalf of the Twelve is significant: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (v. 68). That was the right response. It revealed the difference between true disciples and hangers-on: their hunger for *the Word*. Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31). People seeking to be entertained or fed, curiosity-seekers, and people who just follow the crowd are by no means true disciples. Those

who love the Word are the true followers of Christ. They will not desire preachers who tickle their ears.

Be Sober in All Things

The attitude of the excellent minister must be one of thoughtful sobriety. “Always be sober-minded” (v. 5) is not merely a warning against drunkenness. Nor is Paul suggesting that Timothy should be somber, joyless, gloomy, morose, or angry all the time. *Sober* means self-controlled, steady, attentive. It describes a state of mental alertness and control of one’s faculties.

This is a solid person, a stable person, like an athlete who has brought all his passions and appetites and nerves under complete control to perform at a maximum level. To put it in the negative, a preacher is not to be flaky, not to be trendy, not to be a pursuer of whims. In the face of a changing world, in the midst of a vacillating church, in the context of a rocking and reeling society, ministers had better be rooted, steadfast, stable—rock-solid. We cannot compromise when the pressure is on.

The church has had enough erratic, trendy, whimsical preachers who flip-flop depending on the tide of the mob. What is most needed now are spiritual men who remain totally steadfast in an unstable world and who know their priorities. We need ministers whose heads are clear of deceit, false teaching, and unorthodox notions. We need preachers who will courageously declare the whole counsel of God. How wearisome it must be to God to hear insipid, innocuous pabulum dribbled out of pulpits instead of His Word!

The noble preacher is balanced, consistent, solid. He is unmoved by the cries of those who beg to have their ears tickled.

Endure Hardship

Obviously, excellent ministers cannot be those who yearn for earthly applause. Neither can they be lovers of earthly comfort. The life of ministry is not a life of leisure. Timothy needed to be willing to endure hardship (v. 5). He could not have the kind of ministry God desired of him unless he was willing to go through some suffering.

No ministry of any value ever comes without pain. I often encounter young men headed for ministry who are looking for a church without problems, a ministry without challenges, a congregation that will make life easy. There is no such place for the faithful preacher of the Word. The notion that ministry can be both effective and painless is a lie. You *will* encoun-

ter hardship if you preach the unadulterated Word. And when adversity strikes, you have two choices. You can endure and remain steadfast, or you can compromise. The faithful minister holds the line for the truth. You cannot do that and escape suffering. “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Thus faithfulness and hardship go hand in hand.

This is a repeated theme in Paul’s epistles to his young protégé. In 2 Timothy 2:1–3, he wrote, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. . . . Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” Now he reminds Timothy again that suffering is as much a part of the faithful minister’s duty as any other aspect of the work.

Did Timothy follow Paul’s counsel? Evidently he did. Hebrews 13:23, an obscure little verse, says, “You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon.” The writer of Hebrews obviously knew Timothy well and loved him. He tells the Hebrews that Timothy had been “released.” Released from what? The Greek word used there suggests that Timothy had been released from prison. We can assume that when the suffering came, Timothy endured it. He did not compromise. He remained faithful, even though it evidently meant imprisonment. He did not try to find a cheap way out.

Do the Work of an Evangelist

At first glance it might seem that the command “do the work of an evangelist” is an abrupt change of direction. But it is not. Paul was encouraging Timothy to reach out beyond the comfort level of his own flock and boldly proclaim the Word to unbelievers. Paul was not suggesting that Timothy’s *office* was that of an evangelist. He was telling him that part of his duty as a pastor was to evangelize unbelievers.

Again, Paul was commanding Timothy to declare the truth boldly. Timothy may have been tempted to seek a haven in the comfort of the flock. Paul was urging him to minister instead on the front line. He wanted Timothy to face the world courageously and preach Christ crucified. He wanted him to proclaim sin, righteousness, judgment, and God’s law. He wanted him to declare the depravity, not the dignity, of mankind. He wanted him to herald the Second Coming and warn of eternal judgment. He wanted him to magnify the cross, the resurrection, the atonement, grace, and faith. He was urging Timothy to be solemn and persuasive in confronting unbelief.

Fulfill Your Ministry

This brief charge to Timothy ends with a final imperative: “Fulfill your ministry” (v. 5). “Fulfill” means “accomplish, fill it up, do it all.” He might have said, “Don’t serve God halfheartedly; do it with all your might.” Paul was coming to the end of his own life, and he was able to say, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6–8). He wanted Timothy to reach the same point someday.

Remember, this charge from Paul to Timothy has implications for every Christian. We are all to be ministers in whatever sphere of service divine providence places us. Whether you are a mother ministering to her own children or the pastor of a 15,000-member congregation, these principles apply to you. There is no room for compromise. There is no place for timidity. There is no time for delay. There is no need for fear. Fill up your service to the Lord; accomplish it all. That is possible only if the ministry is done right.

HOLDING FAST THE FAITH

At the height of the Down-Grade Controversy, two weeks after he was censured by the Baptist Union, Charles Spurgeon preached a message entitled “Holding Fast the Faith,” in which he said:

We must never hide our colours. There are times when we must dash to the front and court the encounter, when we see that our Captain’s honour demands it. Let us never be either ashamed or afraid. Our Lord Jesus deserves that we should yield ourselves as willing sacrifices in defence of his faith. Ease, reputation, life itself, must go for the name and faith of Jesus. If in the heat of the battle our good name or our life must be risked to win the victory, then let us say, “In this battle some of us must fall; why should not I? I will take part and lot with my Master, and bear reproach for his sake.” Only brave soldiers are worthy of our great Lord. Those who sneak into the rear, that they may be comfortable, are *not* worthy of the kingdom. . . .

Brethren, we must be willing to bear ridicule for Christ’s sake, even that peculiarly envenomed ridicule which “the cultured” are so apt to pour upon us. We must be willing to be thought great fools for Jesus’

sake. . . . For my part, I am willing to be ten thousand fools in one for my dear Lord and Master, and count it to be the highest honour that can be put upon me to be stripped of every honour, and loaded with every censure for the sake of the grand old truth which is written on my very heart. . . .

Before I could quit my faith . . . I should have to be ground to powder, and every separate atom transformed.¹²

Spurgeon closed with these words:

Everybody admires Luther! Yes, yes; but you do not want any one else to do the same to-day. When you go to the Zoological Gardens you all admire the bear; but how would you like a bear at home, or a bear wandering loose about the street? You tell me that it would be unbearable, and no doubt you are right.

So, we admire a man who was firm in the faith, say four hundred years ago; the past ages are a sort of bear-pit or iron cage for him; but such a man to-day is a nuisance, and must be put down. Call him a narrow-minded bigot, or give him a worse name if you can think of one. Yet imagine that in those ages past, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and their compeers had said, "The world is out of order; but if we try to set it right we shall only make a great row, and get ourselves into disgrace. Let us go to our chambers, put on our night-caps, and sleep over the bad times, and perhaps when we wake up things will have grown better."

Such conduct on their part would have entailed upon us a heritage of error. Age after age would have gone down into the infernal deeps, and the pestiferous bogs of error would have swallowed all. These men loved the faith and the name of Jesus too well to see them trampled on. Note what we owe them, and let us pay to our sons the debt we owe our fathers.

It is to-day as it was in the Reformers' days. Decision is needed. Here is the day for the man, where is the man for the day? We who have had the gospel passed to us by martyr hands dare not trifle with it, nor sit by and hear it denied by traitors, who pretend to love it, but inwardly abhor every line of it. The faith I hold bears upon it marks of the blood of my ancestors. Shall I deny their faith, for which they left their native land to sojourn here? Shall we cast away the treasure which was handed to us through the bars of prisons, or came to us charred with the flames of Smithfield?

Personally, when my bones have been tortured with rheumatism, I have remembered Job Spurgeon, doubtless of my own stock, who in

¹²"Holding Fast the Faith," 78, 83.

Chelmsford Jail was allowed a chair, because he could not lie down by reason of rheumatic pain. That Quaker's broad-brim overshadows my brow. Perhaps I inherit his rheumatism; but that I do not regret if I have his stubborn faith, which will not let me yield a syllable of the truth of God.

When I think of how others have suffered for the faith, a little scorn or unkindness seems a mere trifle, not worthy of mention. An ancestry of lovers of the faith ought to be a great plea with us to abide by the Lord God of our fathers, and the faith in which they lived. As for me, I must hold the old gospel: I can do no other. God helping me, I will endure the consequences of what men think obstinacy.

Look you, sirs, *there are ages yet to come*. If the Lord does not speedily appear, there will come another generation, and another, and all these generations will be tainted and injured if we are not faithful to God and to his truth to-day. We have come to a turning-point in the road. If we turn to the right, mayhap our children and our children's children will go that way; but if we turn to the left, generations yet unborn will curse our names for having been unfaithful to God and to his Word. I charge you, not only by your ancestry, but by your posterity, that you seek to win the commendation of your Master, that though you dwell where Satan's seat is, you yet hold fast his name, and do not deny his faith. God grant us faithfulness, for the sake of the souls around us! How is the world to be saved if the church is false to her Lord? How are we to lift the masses if our fulcrum is removed? If our gospel is uncertain, what remains but increasing misery and despair? Stand fast, my beloved, in the name of God! I, your brother in Christ, entreat you to abide in the truth. Quit yourselves like men, be strong. The Lord sustain you for Jesus' sake. Amen.¹³

Spurgeon did his part. He passed the baton to another generation, and they passed it to another. They finished their course having kept the faith, and now it is our turn. Will we keep the faith? Will we fulfill our ministry? Are we willing to suffer hardship for being faithful? Are we committed to a biblical ministry of preaching the Word without shame?

We who love the Lord and His church must not sit by while the church gains momentum on the down-grade of worldliness and compromise. Men and women before us have paid with their blood to deliver the faith intact to us. Now it is our turn to guard the truth. It is a task that calls for courage, not compromise. And it is a responsibility that demands unwavering devotion to a very narrow purpose.

¹³Ibid., 83-84.

In the same sermon I have been quoting from, Spurgeon included this reminder:

Dear friends, this name, this faith, these are our *message*. Our only business here below is to cry, “Behold the Lamb.” Are any of you sent of God with any other message? It cannot be. The one message which God has given to his people to proclaim is salvation through the Lamb—salvation by the blood of Jesus. . . . To tell of Jesus is our occupation, we have nothing to say which is not comprised in the revelation made to us by God in Jesus Christ. He who is our comfort is our one theme.¹⁴

That echoes Paul’s words to Timothy. “Preach the Word.” We have nothing else worth saying. There is no other message. There is no other valid ministry. Until the church recovers that truth and that single-minded commitment to our calling, evangelicalism will continue to be pulled relentlessly further into the down-grade.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 81.