

A Solemn Charge To Preach The Word

By Richard Owen Roberts

The following is edited from a message given at the Heart-Cry for Revival Conference in November 2009 at The Cove, Asheville, North Carolina U.S.A.

In a tremendously significant way we are all profoundly impacted by preaching. The passage the Lord has put upon my heart for this message is from Second Timothy chapter 4, where the Apostle Paul writes on the matter of preaching. Every Lord's Day millions of people are injured by preaching which is not up to the standard which the Apostle Paul sets forth in Second Timothy. This passage impacts all of us, and certainly the day in which we live clearly indicates that we are in incredible trouble.

I have been thinking lately about these words from Amos 8:11, *"Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord God, 'when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord.*" We have to ask, "Has that day of which Amos spoke come?" It may get worse, but it is much worse already than it used to be.

I am not implying that things are now as bad as they can be, but they are bad enough to alarm us. We are faced in a very significant way with a famine of the Word of the Lord.

Let us read the passage from Second Timothy 4:1-8, *I solemnly 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, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.*

But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 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 course, I have kept the faith; in the future 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."

Basic Types of Revival

Over the years in speaking on the subject of revival I have often said that when you are thinking about revival you need to face the fact that there are two basic types of revival: 1) Word-centered revivals and 2) experience-oriented revivals.

If you think in terms of history, the great Protestant Reformation was clearly a Word-centered movement. The First Great Awakening that affected so powerfully our country from roughly 1732-1770 was a Word-centered movement. The Second Great Awakening, which for all practical purposes began at Yale College in 1792, continued in various ways affecting all of New England most profoundly and also coming here to the southern states. In the northern states, it was a Word-centered movement, but in many places in the South it was an experience-oriented movement. What is described as the Third Great Awakening affecting this country (1857-1859) was essentially an experience-oriented movement.

When I say "Word-centered" or "Word-oriented" I do not mean that it is exclusively the "Word," but the focus – the center – the heart of it is the preaching of the Word of God. When I say "experience-centered" I do not mean there is a total absence of preaching, only that the center is not preaching, but experience.

Many among us are saying "We have had plenty of preaching. Now what we need is experience." I do not believe that is true. We have not had plenty of preaching. We have had plenty of talk. But talk and preaching are not one and the same, and furthermore, the dead are not good listeners. So they have been around the talk, but until their hearts are awakened, until the deafness is removed from their ears and the blindness from their eyes, they do not hear even when there is powerful preaching. There is a great dearth of preaching, but I want to say to you, dear friends, that when God burdens our hearts to be concerned and to be earnestly in prayer for a matter we would be wise to pray for the best. I want to give you a few reasons why a Word-centered revival is much better than an experience-centered revival.

1. The converts of experience-centered movements fall away at a far greater rate than the converts of Word-centered movements.
2. Experience-centered movements are almost always brief. Word-centered movements are lengthy. Look at the dates I have shared with you already: The First Great Awakening (1732-1770) – Word-centered; The Third Great Awakening (1857-1859) – experience-centered.
3. The impact of an experience-centered movement upon society is slight in comparison with the impact of a movement that is Word-centered.

We obviously live in a time when there are tremendous social evils that need to be changed, where there are immense problems such as drunkenness and addiction in various forms, etc. The movement that simply flashes through and does not impact society is vastly less than what we need. My own conviction is that what we really need is a reformation revival whereby there is powerful preaching of the Word of God under the influence and administration of the Holy Spirit, and a deep, enduring, and thorough work of God transpires. With those thoughts in mind, come back now to the passage in Second Timothy which is the focus.

God's Charge to Timothy

Verse one sets forth the solemnity of the charge that God is going to lay on Timothy through the Apostle Paul. Notice the structure of verse one, *I solemnly 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....* "I do not know how you can make a charge more solemn than that, when you have both God the Father and God the Son standing by and serving as witnesses to the solemnity of the matter, and when the eternal judgment itself is called forward as a further witness to the solemnity of the issues that Paul is going to be addressing to his son in the Lord, Timothy.

Paul, himself, is fond of the phrase *I solemnly charge you.* "He uses it numerous times. In First Timothy 5:21 he says, *I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.*" And again in Second Timothy 2:14, *Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers.* "I believe it appropriate for me to say to you, "I solemnly charge you to heed what the Spirit of God says on this urgent issue of the preaching of the Word of the Lord."

As I was thinking about this subject and praying over it, the obvious was perfectly clear. I cannot speak to others about preaching without first carefully examining my own preaching. What an awful thing it would be for me to solemnly charge you to preach the Word of God if I am not preaching the Word of God myself. What really is meant in the phrase *Preach the Word?* It seemed so clear to me. It is possible to preach *from* the Word without preaching the Word. It is also easy to preach *about* the Word without preaching the Word.

I realize that many of you are not preachers and will never be called to preach, but you are called to hear the Word of God preached. I would like to ask you now, not as a critic, not as one who is preparing a bag of

stones to throw at somebody, but as a burdened believer who longs to see the kingdom of Christ come in great power: Have you been listening to someone who is preaching from the Word, but is not preaching the Word? Or have you been listening to someone who is preaching about the Word, but is not preaching the Word?

How does one determine first concerning themselves? How can I be sure that I am preaching the Word and not merely from or about the Word? I believe that is not really that difficult an issue after all. Let me remind you of a statement found in Jeremiah 23:29, *"Is not My Word like fire?" declares the Lord, 'and like a hammer which shatters a rock?'* For those of you who preach, is it fire? Is it like a hammer?

There is not any question when the fire of God falls. One does not go around saying to himself, "I wonder if the Word was like a hammer today?" When hearts are smashed, you know it is the Word of the Lord.

When you preach the Word, it is like fire. It is like a hammer. For those of you who preach, can you honestly say, "My preaching is like fire from heaven; My preaching is like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces"?

I hear pastors complaining about their congregations, "Oh, these hardhearted people!" What is so unusual about that? The thing that is unusual is that your preaching has not smashed the rock! "Oh, they are so cold! I tell you it is hard to imagine such a coldhearted people as I pastor!" Well, what about the Word like fire? Some of us have got some serious repenting to do because our preaching is not fire, and it is not the hammer.

It is not on my heart to push anybody down. We are all pretty low as it is. But isn't there incredible hope in realizing that the most common, the most average preacher in the crowd can still preach the Word with fire and like a hammer? Why not make that a matter of urgent concern?

The Quick, Powerful Word

Another Scripture I find very helpful is Hebrews 4:12, *For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.* Now that is the Word! If I am preaching the Word, then what that verse described is happening! *The Word of God is quick* according to the King James Version or "living" as some people say. How many people were quickened the last time you preached? The Word is life-giving. The flesh profits nothing, but the Spirit is life (John 6:63).

Let us be honest with ourselves. The biggest problem in America is those of us who preach. Is it any wonder there is this mass exodus of young people who have been listening to preaching that is without fire, preaching that is absolutely not the hammer of the Word of God, preaching that is not quickening? No life is given! What if every preacher were to thoroughly repent of preaching from the Word or about the Word and were to begin to preach the Word which brings life?

Several terms used in Hebrews 4:12 are all worthy of our focus. The Word is *quick*. "The Word is *powerful*." When was the last time someone stepped up to you after you preached, with tears coursing down his or her face saying, "Pastor, the Word was powerful." The most common statements that men hear after they preach are "Oh, that was interesting." "Oh, I have never heard that before." You can hear that a thousand times and it will not make any difference. It is when the Word is quickening and powerful that God is powerfully at work in His own grand and wondrous way.

The Word is *sharper than any two-edged sword*. "Do you find that true in your preaching? Do you see people cut deeply by the Word that you preach? They come into the sanctuary full of themselves, but your preaching is sharper than a two-edged sword and all of that self is leaked out. By the time they leave the service they are brought low. They are emptied by the preaching of the Word. Isn't it time that we began to concern ourselves deeply with this urgent issue of preaching the Word of God?"

It is a discerner or a judge of the thoughts and the intents of the heart. Pastor, let me ask you kindly, "When was the last time after you preached when someone stepped up to you and said, 'How did you know what I was thinking? How did you have all this story of my life? Who has been tattling on me? Who has been informing?'" The nature of the preaching of the Word is that it exposes. It makes bare so that the hidden things are no longer hidden. The covered up matters are brought into the light. The Word is a fire. The Word is a hammer. The Word is quick. The Word is sharp. The Word is piercing and powerful. The Word discerns.

For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring Word of God(1 Pet. 1:23). I want to ask those of you who preach, "When was the last time you watched someone come alive sitting in the pew?" The service began and there was perhaps something like a dark cloud over him, but as you preached the Word the Holy Spirit brought life to that individual. We do not have much reliance in our day upon the Word of God as a life-giving agency. We have much more confidence in the altar call and in our appeal than we have in the Word of God itself. Just think of what the nation would be like if over the next several Lord's Days every preacher was preaching the Word of God, and life was given to the thousands, to the tens of thousands, even to the millions of spiritually dead who pack our churches.

The command that Paul gives to Timothy is to *preach the Word*. I have tried to help you to see there is a very great difference between preaching from the Word and preaching about the Word and preaching the Word. We are not asked to subjectively examine ourselves and others. We have got the mighty objective truths in three passages I have referred you to and plenty more could be found if there were need of any additional.

Reprove, Rebuke, Exhort

Look at verse two, *Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season...*"— not just ready to drop a sermon at a moment's notice, but ready to preach the Word. You should be so full of the Word that there is always a Word from the Lord waiting to burst out of you. What an incredible thing it is when a man is so full of the Word of God that every time he speaks it is the Word of God that he is setting forth because he is ready *in season and out of season*."

There comes a short series of words that help us further to examine whether what we are doing or what we are listening to is the real thing. Notice the words that are utilized in verse two: 1) reprove; 2) rebuke; 3) exhort; and all with great patience and instruction. Let us look at these one at a time.

Do you reprove when you preach? When you leave church as a listener, do you go away feeling the reproof that you have received? Reproof focuses upon error. Is it not an amazing thing the multitudes of errors that are springing up in our day? We have all kinds of wild teaching. Every week some new novelty doctrine seems to occur. Where is the reproof? Where is the rebuke? Where is the exhortation?

In Second Timothy 3:16 Paul said, *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.*" In Titus 1:13 the apostle said, *This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith.*" Pastors who preach, I want to ask you, "Is every message a message of reproof?" The only justifiable reason for saying no to that would be there is no one needing reproof. I would love to visit your church to just sit among people who need no reproof. That would be a treat! You are not really preaching the Word unless you are reproofing. You can preach from the Word. You can preach about the Word. But when you preach the Word, there is the issue of reproof. Those of you who are listeners, how often do you feel reproofed? Would there not be great wisdom in setting your heart to pray for a reformation revival that will bring about the preaching of the Word of God that includes reproof, but also rebuke?

One scarcely even hears of a church, let alone attends one, where there is not someone in some flagrant

sin, often the pastor himself, more often perhaps the deacons or even the elders. There is the incredible need of rebuke that can be done publicly. But it must also be done privately. I am aware of pastors who do not dare rebuke anybody.

They will say to me, "We have this awful problem in our church."

"Well, what have you done about it?" I ask.

"Oh, that is too hot to handle. I am not going to get myself in that one," they reply.

If you are not willing to rebuke, if you are not faithfully rebuking, then stop kidding yourself when you say you preach the Word. Let us be honest. Is not the desperate need of the hour honesty in the church, honesty among those of us who preach, honesty among all who hear what is said to be the preaching of the Word of the Lord?

Reprove, yes. Rebuke, yes. Exhort. In earlier years churches had exhorters. The Methodist movement was famous for its exhorters. Men who went around the country exhorting people: "You have heard it. Now live up to it! You know what is right. Repent of what is wrong." Repentance after all is not merely negative turning from sin. Repentance is positive turning to righteousness. We repent of that which is evil and return to that which is good. Many of our people have not turned to good. Their lives are so full of that which has no consequence. Somebody needs to exhort them: "Get busy now in filling your life with the good things that are pleasing to Christ."

Reprove, rebuke, and exhort. Behind all of this there lies a matter of great concern. *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths*(vv. 3-4). When I was going over this I had to ask, "Is it possible that what I am really doing is entertaining people, tickling their ears, catering to the evil that exists within the church pretending to be a spokesman of God, but in actual fact just contributing to the evil?" Sure, we all recognize what the times are like. It is urgent to ask, "What impact am I making upon the times?"

Some of us are so concerned for our own respectability, our own acceptance that we are willing to compromise. We know what the times are like. Sure, these are wicked days. Yes, people do not like to hear the truth. But God can make them like it. The nature of a revival is that God gives people a desire for that which they hate. You preach the Word of God. You reprove. You rebuke. You exhort. You will discover that more people are hungry for it than you ever guessed. So do not let the times turn you aside from the call of God.

Be Sober; Endure Hardship

Be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry(v. 5). There is a great deal of spiritual drunkenness around us, maybe a good bit within us. Some of us look perhaps more like a drunkard than like a godly man. Be sober! The times are such. The urgency is so great that incredible sobriety is in order. So I say to myself, "All right, if I go to that church and preach what I know they need to hear, then they will stone me to death. Well, so what? What I preach is what God says. This is what they need to hear. This is what I speak." To what extent is that your spirit, your attitude – that you are on the frontlines? You know what the battle is, but you are watchful. You are alert. You are controlled. You are well-balanced. "Lord, I am going in among the enemy now. I am going to fire the Gospel gun. I am coming under attack. But if You want me to keep on, You protect me against their assaults." And God does in a truly wonderful way. Be sober. Endure hardship.

In a conversation with one of the dear brethren, we were sharing our own hearts about the cost of

maintaining a concern for revival. A number of years ago I felt prompted to take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the center. I listed the names of ten men with whom I was very intimate. In the second column I listed what I knew they were suffering. These were men that were close to my heart. These were men who shared my burden for revival. When I got through I could hardly believe what I had written. I said to myself, "I doubt seriously if under any other kind of circumstances one could draw up a list of ten men they were close to and discover the deep level of suffering of all ten."

I will mention just one. Shortly before I had drawn the list, he had asked me to lead a solemn assembly in his church. While I was there I heard people say, "Who is that guy the pastor has got here? What is this business of a solemn assembly? That is not something we do in our church." Three days after the solemn assembly, the pastor suffered a heart attack and died. His wife told me that he died of a broken heart. It was because of the hardheartedness of those people. I did not have any doubt that was true. Be sober. Endure hardship. We are involved in an incredible cause. Ours is the King who is going to triumph! Why should we play the role of the sissy when the Lord God is commanding us to preach the Word, the fire, the hammer!

Do the work of an evangelist... (v. 5). It is interesting to me to know that the great burden on the heart of the Reformers of the 1500s was evangelism. They longed to see the kingdom of Jesus Christ progress vigorously. The great burden on the heart of the Puritans in that incredible era where those mighty men of God served was evangelism. The great burden of all the great revivalists in America has been evangelism.

Charles Spurgeon was asked about his position on evangelism. He said, "Evangelistic preaching is a choice every pastor truly called of God makes. If a man does not have an evangelist heart, he should leave the ministry. He is obviously not called." I believe he is right. *Do the work of an evangelist*, says Paul to Timothy. That is the work every one of us has. There is a world that needs Christ. We are called upon to bring the message to them, but to do it through the use of the Word.

Paul closes this brief passage with a personal statement. I believe the statement adds urgency to the whole matter. *I am already being poured out, he says, as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.* Paul had done what he was called to do. Many people that I see cannot say that. I am deeply moved every time the matter comes to my mind. Moses, 120 years of age, was commanded to speak to the rock. In a moment of anger, he took the rod and struck the rock. God said in effect, "Because you did not maintain My holiness before the people, I must maintain it at your expense." And so Moses died without ever finishing his work. Moses was not called to lead the people into the wilderness. He was called to lead them into the land of promise, but he did not finish because he lost his temper.

All of us have a task that has been assigned us. By the grace of God we all have opportunity to finish as the Apostle Paul did, and by God's grace may we do so with power and grace and glory. Preach the Word. If you are in a church where the Word is not preached begin to pray in a whole new way that the preacher in your midst will discover the heart of God.

Oh, Lord, we all need You. We feel at least something of the famine of the Word of God. We see people abandoning Your church in large numbers. We almost feel in a sense that they are justified because their hunger for You and Your Word is not met. But I pray that You will bring a reformation revival where the preaching of the Word of God covers the land and where the kingdom of God makes a giant step forward to the eternal praise of King Jesus. Amen.

Used by permission. Richard Owen Roberts is the president and a founding director of International Awakening Ministries.

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