

Come Let Us Worship

Expositional Exultation: The Aim of Preaching and Listening

2 Timothy 3:14-4:4

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“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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. 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.” (2 Timothy 3:14–4:4, ESV)

I’m not entirely sure how old I was when I felt “the call.” But I remember very clearly the effect.

I’m referring to the call to ministry, and specifically, the call to the ministry of the Word – the calling to preach the Bible. There was never a specific moment where I surrendered to the call of ministry. Instead there was simply a perpetual interest and heart-based longing for the Bible at a very early age – as young as I can remember. It was always there.

There is one memory that is burned in my mind. I remember sitting in Prairie Edge Christian Reformed Church when I was 7-8 years old. I remember the pastor teaching through a particular passage. I don’t remember what text he was teaching on. But as I heard his words – what he said and how he said them – my heart burned. I felt it. Before I even knew what to call it, define it, or theologically explain it, the Word was laid heavy on my heart. I loved it.

And I wanted more.

Now that experience happened multiple times. And I remember thinking and saying to my parents, “That’s what I’d like to do with my life.” However, I had one suggestion. I remember telling my parents, “Rather than starting with the catechism, I think it would be better just to teach a book of the Bible.”

Seeing Glory

The compelling weight of the Word, combined with its glory, was something I felt. And it drew me to give my life to the cause of rightly dividing the Word of truth. I was not just drawn to the Bible. I was drawn to the power of God’s Word speaking to me and to others.

It wasn't until I was in seminary that I had a category for what was happening in my heart. My pastoral hero, Martin Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), called it "theology on fire." Stephen Olford (1918-2004) called it "unction." And John Piper calls it "expositional exultation."

This is referring to the powerful moment when you know that God is speaking to you through the Word and you are compelled to worship. It is when the Bible becomes a window for you to see the glory of God. It is when words on a page become an internal witness that changes your heart. It is the supernatural encounter with God through His Word.

Now this can happen whenever the Bible is read or taught. I've witnessed this in counseling when something "clicks" inside a person's heart as they see the hope of life change. I've experienced it personally when I'm reading the Bible on my own, and the Bible speaks directly to a need in my life. And part of the joy of preaching is immersing myself in the Bible two days per week.

But as glorious as the moments are, there is something unique about the gathering of God's people to hear the Word. A podcast, download, or live stream of a sermon is simply not the same. There is something special as the Word of God is both read and preached in the context of corporate worship.

I know many of you know what I mean. You were sitting in church service. The Word was explained and taught in such a way that you were not just moved – you were changed. You saw and felt the glory of God through the Word of God.

Preaching and Listening

My aim this week is to help you understand how this happens and why this happens. This is our final week of a three-week series on corporate worship. We've looked at the purpose of our gatherings and how we should think about singing together. I think this has been a helpful and fruitful series. Last Sunday was one of my favorite services – ever.

Today I want to help you appreciate the importance of preaching the Bible and how to make the most of the opportunity every Sunday.

Our text is 2 Timothy 3:14-4:4. Let's see what we can learn about the Bible, its role in worship, and its role in our lives.

What the Word Is

As we consider the role of the Bible in our lives and in the church, we have to start with understanding what the Word is. As I said last week, singing starts with the heart in order to reach your head. But preaching starts with your mind. Definitions and categories are important.

There are some words and phrases that are foundational.

Sacred Writings / Scripture

We find these two words in verse 15, and they are used in reference to Timothy's upbringing. The book of 2 Timothy was written by Paul to his protégé. This is Paul's last letter before his martyrdom, and his aim is to encourage his best disciple to be faithful in his ministry.

When Paul talks about sacred writings, he's referring to the Old Testament because that was the only part of the Bible accessible or written at the time. This term means that the Bible available to Timothy was more than just a book or a collection of writings. Truth, learning, belief, and understanding salvation were all connected to these sacred writings.

In verse 16 Paul uses another phrase – "all Scripture." This is a more specific term for individual passages. Sacred writings refer to the entire Bible, while this phrase is pointing toward the specific verses, passages, chapters, etc. Paul is moving from whole to part.

As Paul encourages Timothy to persevere, he reminds him about the holy nature and the spiritual value of the Bible. The Bible is not just a book. It is the collection of sacred writings. All of it – down to the verses and passages – is spiritually helpful.

But it is the next phrase that is critical and central.

Breathed out by God

You may have heard this phrase also translated as "inspired." Many of the older translations used that word. But the newer translations do not because of our tendency to confuse "inspiring" and "inspired." You might be tempted to even view my opening story through this lens. The preaching that I heard was personally inspiring, but that is not what is meant here. It is true that the Bible is inspiring – it was designed by God to be that way! But the meaning here is different than that.

Paul is ascribing a particular quality to the Bible which is why instead of "inspired," the text says "breathed out by God." It connects the passages of the Bible to the authority of God. It affirms that these words are the words of God. Receiving instruction from the Scriptures is how we receive instruction from God.

As the Bible was written, it carried with it divine authority through the work of the Holy Spirit. God wrote a book.

"knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20–21, ESV)

As the New Testament was written, it carried the same authority as the Old Testament. Peter ascribed biblical authority to Paul's letters.

"... just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures." (2 Peter 3:15–16, ESV)

Our view of what the Bible is will determine how we approach preaching sermons and listening to sermons. It affects preaching because if I believe that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God, then my task is to help you understand what it says. The closer I get to the actual meaning of the text, the more opportunity for life change there is. And the more authority there is.

One of our core values is the authority of the Word. It is critical to the life of the church. It means that our understanding of the world, the basis for ministry, and the hope we offer people is directly connected to something beyond ourselves. More than personality, style, programs, or even the people, the Word of God brings life to the people of God.

That is one reason that our normal preaching diet is expositional. That's a big word. It simply means that we allow the text to drive the sermon. We don't use the Bible as illustrative material for principles we develop. Rather, we allow the Bible to say what it says. We may illustrate what the Bible is saying, but not the other way around.

This also impacts listening. If this book is the breath of God, if it contains what we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4), if it is authoritative – we should listen.

The dynamics of our present culture are hard on preachers. Never have so many Christians had so much access to so much teaching and sermons. You can hear the best and most talented communicators in the world at any moment. And that can cause us to ask certain questions in the wrong order.

We can ask: "Was the sermon engaging, interesting, funny, heart-felt or applicable?" Those questions should be asked, but not before: "Was it true, and faithful, and clear?"

Oh, church! Let's not approach sermons like a TED-talk, a podcast, a lecture, or a pep-rally. Let's come on Sundays with humble hearts ready to receive the Bible for what is: the authoritative and inspired Word of God.

What the Word is For

If we go back to verse 14-15, we find a number of things listed there which had a significant impact on Timothy's life as it relates to the Word. Paul pulls from that heritage, and we can see some of the Word's purpose in one person's life. Timothy had the benefit of being in a home where the Word was a vital part of his upbringing. Paul draws upon that, saying "from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings" (v. 15).

After seeing what the Word is, we can now look at its purpose. Why should you listen to preaching? How is the Word useful?

- **Learning and belief** – The Word is to be learned and to be studied because it is connected to belief. You cannot believe what you do not know. The more you know, the more you know what to believe.
- **Discipleship and mentoring** – One of the ways that the Word is helpful is the way it shapes people's lives, especially people we know and trust. The Word lived out in the life of another

believer increases the faith of others. If you had someone who taught you the Bible when you were young in years or young in the faith, you should thank God regularly for them.

- **Wisdom for Salvation** – The Bible is able to help us understand salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. As we hear the Word, it has the power to break into our lives, to show us who we really are, and to point us to Christ. It tells us the truth about the problem of our sin and gives us hope through a personal relationship with Christ. That hope is available today. Right now.

It never ceases to amaze me the way that God uses His Word to bring people to Christ. Sometimes it is a friend, sometimes a sermon on the radio, sometimes a book, sometimes another piece of literature. But the consistent substance of them all is the Word. Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

I try in every sermon to connect what I'm saying to the gospel. I never want you to wonder when you invite someone to church if the message will include some aspect or nugget of truth connected to the gospel message. You need to know that we don't design our services or our sermons with lost people as the focus, but we certainly want to be aware that there are non-Christians who come.

Can I ask you to do something? Would you pray about inviting someone to come with you to church in the next 6-8 weeks? Let's work together to see people come to faith in Jesus. I'll do my part. You do yours. You invite, I'll explain the gospel, and you talk with them about it. If you didn't invite anyone, why don't you say a quick prayer when I make the gospel clear. Pray: "Holy Spirit, open someone's heart with the truth of what Mark just said." Imagine the Word going forth and being helped by your prayers every Sunday.

But there is more here regarding what the Word is for. Look at verse 16. Paul tells Timothy that the inspired Word is "profitable" or useful. The God-breathed words have divine authority in them, and therefore they are helpful in the following ways:

- **Teaching** – The Word is able to instruct people in who God is and in their need for the gospel. The Bible teaches what is right.
- **Reproof** – The Word of God shines a light on the wrong path and on doctrinal error. The Bible tells you what is wrong.
- **Correction** - The Word of God is about to redirect people in what they think and how they act. Do you know how much hope there is in this? You can change! As I preach the word, your life can be different right now.
- **Training** – The Word of God is able to help people keep growing and moving along in their godliness and shows us how to change and how to help others to do the same.
- **Complete equipping** – The Word of God provides the spiritual resources that we need for everything that God calls us to do.

This is a powerful Word, church!

Our Elders were singing together on Monday night at our Elders' meeting. One of the songs we sang was "A Mighty Fortress." I tweeted a video of it if you'd like to hear part of it. That familiar song has an

important couple of lines in it that fit with what we are talking about this morning: “That word above all earthly powers ...” What is that word? It is *this* Word. And it is so powerful that “one little word shall fell him.”

Before we leave this point, let me highlight one more thing. Verse 17 says the Word equips us for **every good work**. That’s really important. The aim of preaching and teaching the Bible is not just for you to have more Bible information; it is to produce obedience in you! Belief is meant to lead to obedience, which then leads to more obedience. If you don’t believe, you won’t obey. And if you don’t obey, you will fall into unbelief.

I’m sure you’ve seen it happen. I have – way too many times. Ligon Duncan quotes Mark Dever who has said “Ungodliness leads to heresy.” And then he writes:

We may think, “I’ll never stop believing in the inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy and authority of the Scriptures. But if we let our hearts start loving something or someone more than the God of Scripture, start loving something more than the promises of the Word, we’re only one step away from denying the Scriptures and walking away from the faith.”¹

The Word of God is for equipping, training, correction, reproof, teaching, salvation, discipleship, belief, and obedience. It can do all of that as we gather together.

No wonder we should listen and listen carefully.

What’s at Stake

Our passage ends with a sober warning. Paul wanted Timothy to understand the seriousness of what was at stake here. Listen to, responding to, and preaching the Word are all critical to the life and health of the church because we live in perilous times. Paul’s warning in verses 1-4 applies as much today as it did when he said them.

Verse one includes a hefty charge. Notice how Paul loads it up with important, substantive statements: “in the presence of God ... of Jesus who is to judge the living and dead ... by his appearing ... by his kingdom.” He is appealing to other-worldly realities because preaching the Word is the momentary intersection between heaven and earth.

With that backdrop, he commands Timothy to preach the Word. The word for *preach* here means “one who heralds,” “a person who make announcements.” Preaching is announcing the Good News of the Gospel and also the danger of coming judgment. It involves both hope and warning.

And pastors, especially preaching pastors, are to do this “in season and out of season.” That means when it is popular and when it’s not. It means a consistency of message and effort and faithfulness to the text. The regular gathering of God’s people is where this heralding takes place. Week after week, the people are lovingly reprovved, rebuked, and exhorted. What’s more, this must be done with

¹ Ligon Duncan, “The Nature and Benefits of Scripture,” in *The Inerrant Word*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 100.

complete or great patience along with teaching. Why? Because God is always doing less than you'd like and more than you'll ever know.

Now listen to this sober 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." (2 Timothy 4:3–4, ESV)

There are two contrasts. First, rather than listening to sound teaching, they will find teaching that fits with their own desires. Second, rather than listening to the truth, they will turn aside into myths. In other words, there is a warning here about finding people who merely affirm what we want to hear or wander into things that are new, speculative, and unanchored from the truth of the Word.

The warning is to be careful that our passions do not pull us away from the centrality of the Word. Be careful that we are not more taken by personality than we are by accuracy to the text. Be careful that we are not more enamored by good stories and not by good explanation of the text. Be careful that we are not more interested in "what it means to me" and neglect what this tells me about God. Be careful that we are not so moved by style and creativity that we are not broken over the content of the Word.

We must come to the Word as if heaven and hell are on the line, because they are. And we must remember that our goal is not just to hear – it is to really, truly listen.

Recommendations for Listening

Christopher Ash literally wrote the book on listening to sermons.² Let me conclude with his 7 Ways to Become a Better Sermon Listener.³

1. **Expect God to Speak** - Come with an expectant heart and ready to listen to the Words of the Living God.
2. **Admit God Knows Better Than You Do** – We need to sit humbly *under* the Word, not in judgment over it.
3. **Make Sure the Preacher Says What the Passage Says** – Every sermon should simply expose what is already there. Ask yourself if you see what is there.
4. **Hear the Sermon in Church** – A sermon is how God shapes a community together.
5. **Be There Week by Week** – Be on site and not distracted. Be ready to listen and be fully present.
6. **Do What the Bible Says** – Consider every week what God is calling you to do.
7. **Rejoice** – Be thankful that God granted you grace to know Him and to know about Him.

Ash continues: *"Be glad God caused the Bible to be written exactly as he wanted. Be glad for the good news of all he's given us in Christ. If you are a believer, be glad your name is written in heaven. Let each time you*

² <https://www.amazon.com/Listen-up-Christopher-Ash/dp/1906334676/?tag=thegospcoal-20>

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/7-ways-to-become-a-better-sermon-listener/>

sit with your covenant family in Christ listening to a sermon be a time of fresh repentance, fresh reliance, and fresh obedience to your King.”

Preaching is the powerful mingling of gravity and gladness.

When we gather together in worship, and as we listen to the Bible, we are affirming what we believe. But we are also longing for more. More of what? More of God.

When you come with a ready heart, in the assembly of people hungry to hear, and when you come and hear the Word of God explained with clarity and power – something happens.

You see a glimpse of glory. You feel the power of the Spirit. And you know “surely God is in this place.”

So, let us come to worship to see the glory of God through the preaching of the Word.

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