

The SHEPHERD
AS
PREACHER

John MacArthur
GENERAL EDITOR



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THE SHEPHERD AS PREACHER

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INTRODUCTION

The first Shepherds' Conference was held on March 19, 1980, at Grace Community Church, where 159 men gathered to focus on the theme of pastoral ministry. From the beginning, the goal was to live out Paul's mandate to Timothy: "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

What started as a small event has, by God's grace, blossomed into an international movement with thousands in attendance each spring. Over the years, pastors from every state and nearly 100 countries have come to the conference to be challenged and encouraged in areas of preaching, theology, leadership, discipleship, and counseling. My own heart has been deeply blessed by the faithful men I've met and fellowshiped with at the conference.

Since its inception, the Shepherds' Conference has featured hundreds of sermons specifically directed at pastors and church leaders. Because the truth of God's Word is timeless, those messages are still as rich and powerful today as when they were first preached. That is why I was so thrilled when Harvest House Publishers approached me about publishing this volume—a collection of the most memorable Shepherds' Conference messages on the topic of preaching. Nothing is more urgently needed in today's church than the faithful proclamation of God's Word, which is why a book on this subject is so timely. In keeping with Paul's instruction

to Timothy, the aim of this volume is to encourage pastors to fulfill their pastoral mandate: to preach the Word in season and out of season (2 Timothy 4:2). The chapters that follow have been edited as minimally as possible so that they reflect the original content of the Shepherd's Conference messages.

This book is for all who preach and teach the Scriptures, whether they have been to the Shepherds' Conference or not. As you read it, my prayer is that your passion for truth will burn brighter and your resolve for Christ's glory will grow stronger as you seek to serve His church through the faithful exposition of His Word.

For the Great Shepherd,
John MacArthur

PREACH THE WORD

“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season,
reprove, rebuke, exhort with great
patience and instruction.”

2 TIMOTHY 4:2

PREACH THE WORD

John MacArthur

Shepherds' Conference 1998

2 Timothy 3:1–4:4

There is a text of Scripture that is beloved by me, and one upon which I have preached numerous times through the years. It is a text that my father wrote inside the flyleaf of a Bible that he gave to me when I told him I felt called to preach. The text is 2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction.”

That brief verse defines biblical ministry in one central command: “Preach the Word.” Along with this command you could add 1 Timothy 3:2, which says pastors, overseers, and elders are to be skilled in teaching and preaching. We are to preach the Word skillfully. That is our calling, and this verse is definitive because it speaks so concisely, calling us to “preach the Word.”

Now you will notice that the apostle Paul addresses the time and the tone of our preaching. The time is “in season and out of season.” We could debate what that means, but if I can lead you to a simple conclusion, the only possibilities are to be in season or out of season; therefore, it means all the time. We are to preach the Word all the time. There is no time when we change that commission, no time when that method of ministry is set aside for something else. Preaching the Word is to be done all the time.

As for the tone, it is twofold: There is the negative aspect of reproving and rebuking, and there is the positive aspect of taking God's truth and exhorting people with great patience and instruction. Negatively we are to confront error and sin. Positively we are to teach sound doctrine and godly living. We are to exhort people to be obedient to the Word, and we are to have great patience and allow them the time to mature in their obedience.

**If every word of God is true and pure,
and every word is food for the believer,
then every word is to be proclaimed.**

This is a simple command: Preach the Word all the time. Jesus said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). That truth calls us to an expository ministry in which we deal with every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. If every word of God is true and pure, and every word is food for the believer, then every word is to be proclaimed.

People are starving for God's Word but they don't know it. They are hungry, they are reaching out, they are grasping. They realize the hollow places in their life, the shallowness, the lack of insight, the lack of understanding. They cannot solve the problems of life. They are starving for God's Word and are being offered substitutes that do not help. God has ordained that His Word be brought to them because it alone can feed them, and the delivery method is preaching. Paul wrote, "How will they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14). Martin Luther said, "The highest worship of God is the preaching of the Word."¹ God is revealed through His Word; therefore, preaching His Word is preaching His character, His will, and all that defines Him in true terms and exalts Him as He is to be exalted.

Our mandate then comes not from the culture, it comes from heaven. It is the God of heaven who has mandated us through the pages of Scripture

to preach the Word, to preach every word, and to bring to starving souls the only food that feeds—the truth of God. The Bible is the inerrant and infallible Word of the living God. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, and every word in it is pure and true. We are to preach God’s Word in its entirety and to unfold all its truth. That is the command.

This concise, clear, and unequivocal command to preach the Word is supported by five potent realities that motivate us in this endeavor. Even though these five realities are potent enough individually to motivate a man to preach the Word of God, together they provide a formidable set of motivations like no other text of Scripture.

Preach the Word Because of the Danger of the Seasons (3:1-9)

First, we are to preach the Word because of the danger of the seasons. In 2 Timothy 3:1 Paul prefaced his instruction by telling Timothy, “Realize this, that in the last days...” The last days began when the Messiah came the first time. The apostle John said, “Children, it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). Paul wrote, “...in the last days difficult times will come” (2 Timothy 3:1). The phrase “difficult times” can be translated “seasons” rather than “times.” It is not a reference to clock time or calendar time. The word used here in the original Greek text is *kairos*, which means seasons, epochs, or movements. The word translated “difficult” could have been translated “dangerous,” or even “savage.” Dangerous, perilous times will come. These times will threaten the truth, the gospel, and the church. According to 2 Timothy 3:13, they will increase in severity because “evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” From the beginning of the last days until Jesus comes, there will be an escalating severity and frequency of these dangerous epochs.

We are talking about movements and epochs that began when Jesus came and started the church, and they have continued cumulatively. They do not come and go; rather, they come and stay, and increase in frequency, so that there is greater danger now than there has ever been. These epochs define for us the danger that threatens the life of the church and the truth. Let’s look at some of them, suggested by J.W. Montgomery in his book *Damned Through the Church*.²

The Dangerous Epochs

Sacramentalism

The first and most prominent epoch of danger thrust upon the church began in the fourth century—sacramentalism. This began with the development of the Holy Roman Empire and Constantine, which blossomed into the Roman Catholic system of salvation by ritual. The church became a surrogate Christ—that is, people were connected to the church and to the system rather than to Christ through a personal relationship with Him. Sacramentalism became the enemy of the true gospel, the enemy of grace and faith, and led to the persecution and execution of true believers. It was not until the Reformation in the sixteenth century that sacramentalism began to weaken.

Rationalism

Not long after the Reformation came the second epoch of danger—rationalism. As people came out of the Reformation and entered the Renaissance and Industrial Revolution, they broke away from the monolithic institution of Roman Catholicism and got their own identity back and began to think for themselves. They began to discover, invent, and develop things and feel their freedom. They began to worship their own minds, and human reason became god. Thomas Paine wrote *The Age of Reason*, in which he debunked the Bible and affirmed that the human mind is god, and the Bible became a slave to rationalism. Rationalists assaulted Scripture and denied its miracles, its inspiration, the deity of Christ, and the gospel of grace—all in the name of scholarship and human reason.

These epochs have not disappeared. We still have sacramental religions all around the world, and we still have rationalism. Rationalism has destroyed every seminary in Europe. I will never forget visiting St. Salvador's Chapel at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and standing in the pulpit where John Knox launched the Scottish Reformation. At a time when Rome was in power, John Knox came and preached the gospel of grace and faith in the midst of a works-based system. He took his stand against this massive and powerful system that held people in religious bondage.

Outside that little chapel, on one of the cobblestone streets nearby, there are three sets of initials. These initials represent the names of three young students who, in their late teens, heard the preaching of John Knox, believed the gospel, and turned to Jesus Christ by faith. Consequently, they were burned at the stake by the Catholic authorities. As a tribute to these students, their initials were inscribed on the street at the spot where they were burned. Right across the street is the theological college at the University of St. Andrews. Every day, the faculty of that school walks to the pub across the street, stepping on the initials of the martyrs who died for the truth that these rationalist theologians reject. They worship the god of human intellect and deny the veracity of Scripture.

Orthodoxism

Rationalism was followed by orthodoxism—a cold, dead, and indifferent orthodoxy. Although in the nineteenth century huge strides in printing technology allowed for mass production of Bibles, many people were indifferent to it because their orthodoxy was dead and cold. Their spirituality was either shallow or nonexistent.

Politicism

Then came politicism. The church became preoccupied with gaining political power. It developed the social gospel, reconstruction, and liberation theology all in an attempt to bring change through human means rather than through salvation in Christ.

Ecumenism

Ecumenism was the fifth dangerous epoch, and it erupted during the 1950s. Everyone was talking about unity and setting aside dogma to prevent divisions over doctrinal issues. This produced sentimentalism, and along came a new hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture called “the Jesus Ethic.” Jesus was defined as a nice guy who would have never said anything harsh, so the proponents of ecumenism took judgment and retribution out of the Bible. Evil was tolerated and doctrine was disdained, which led to a lack of discernment.

Experientialism

The sixth epoch was experientialism, which characterized the 1960s. Truth was defined as a feeling that originated in intuition, visions, prophecies, or special revelations. One no longer looked to the objective Word of God to determine truth, but rather, to some subjective intuition. This perspective posed an immense danger to the church and drew people away from the Word of God.

Subjectivism

The seventh epoch was subjectivism. In the 1980s, psychology captured the church and many believers got into narcissistic navel gazing. They were concerned about whether they could bump themselves up the comfort ladder a little bit and become more successful and make more money. They developed man-centered and needs-based theology. As a result, personal comfort became the ultimate goal.

Mysticism

Mysticism was the eighth epoch, developing in the 1990s and permitting people to believe in whatever they wanted. Concurrently, pragmatism allowed people to define ministry. The church was said to exist to serve people. A minister determined his plan of ministry by distributing a survey to find out what people wanted. Truth became the servant of what works. Expository preaching was viewed as a pony-express method of delivery in a computer age to a lot of folks who did not want it in the first place. The key to effective ministry was said to be image or style rather than content.

Syncretism

The ninth epoch was syncretism—the belief that all monotheistic religions worship the same God, and all monotheists are going to heaven. Our culture likes to suppose that heaven will be occupied by followers of Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, orthodox Jews, and even atheists because they all sought the truth. That's syncretism.

As you can see, the church has faced one dangerous epoch after another and they never go away. Rather, they stay and accumulate so that the church is dealing with all of them. As a shepherd, you are facing

a formidable set of fortresses (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). They are strong and well-designed ideological fortifications that must be countered skillfully with God's truth. This requires that you be effective in your handling of the Word. It is not easy to be discerning, to understand the issues that face us, and to bring the appropriate portion of Scripture to bear upon the imminent dangers all around us. Most of Christianity does not care, but we who bear the responsibility as shepherds of God's flock do. These dangers are accumulating and worsening, resulting in a lack of discernment and a growing disdain for doctrine.

The Guilty and the Gullible

Starting in 2 Timothy 3:2, Paul further defines these dangerous seasons by describing the people who are behind them. They are "lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (3:2-4). Now if you applied that list to anyone today, would it not be politically incorrect? Can you imagine someone confronting another individual in error and going through that list? It reminds me of Jesus' approach. He went up to the religious leaders of His day who were in error and said, "You snakes, you vipers, you dogs, you filthy, stinking, wretched tombs painted white." How well would that work today?

In 2 Timothy 3:5, Paul reveals that false teachers have a form of godliness. The face that they want to portray is of godliness, but power is absent. They do not have the power of God because they do not know God. Second Timothy 3:6 goes on to say they "enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses." Today they enter homes through the media as well as in person, and they target women, whom God designed to be protected by faithful men. They captivate weak women who are weighed down with sins and teach them error. Just like Jannes and Jambres, the two magicians in Egypt who opposed Moses, these men oppose the truth. These false teachers have depraved minds, and they should be rejected.

We need godly men who can go into the fray, men who understand the Word of God clearly. Satan's deceptions are not without subtlety. It is

not always obvious on the surface what is actually going on. That's why we need formidable men who understand God's Word. We need men who understand the issues of their time, who have a holy courage, and who are willing to step into the battle so they can assault the enemy graciously and relentlessly with the truth.

In 2 Corinthians 10:4, Paul says our job as shepherds is to smash ideological fortresses and bring everyone who is captive into obedience to Christ. We want to set free those who are held captive in the fortresses that these dangerous epochs have erected. We are called to guard the truth and preach the truth. We cannot do either if we do not understand the truth. It takes well-trained men to stand against the subtleties and nuances of Satan's devices.

Preach the Word Because of the Devotion of the Saints (3:10-14)

The second reason we must preach the Word is because of the devotion of the saints. In 2 Timothy 3:10-11, Paul charged Timothy, "Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings." In other words, "Timothy, you followed me, you were my disciple and I went through the patterns of ministry for you. You saw my purpose and my ministry duty—teaching and living—so proclaim and live the truth in Jesus' name. You saw how I taught it and I lived it; that is my integrity." Paul was relentlessly focused on the responsibility he had to proclaim the truth. And Timothy saw Paul's faithfulness to this purpose. He persevered in his love for people and God even in the face of persecution and suffering.

In summary, Paul said, "You saw how I ministered. You saw the way I did it. I did it with love. I did it with focus. I did it relentlessly. I did it patiently. I did it lovingly. I took the flack. I took the pain. I took the suffering. I took the imprisonments. I took the beatings, the whippings, and the stonings. You were with me at Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra; you saw all that."

Paul then challenged Timothy to "continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Timothy 3:14). He said, "Timothy, you just do exactly what I

told you to do.” Many people today want to reinvent ministry, have you noticed? But Paul said, “Do it exactly the way I told you to do it.”

In 2 Timothy 3:17 Paul went on to call Timothy the “man of God.” That is a technical term used only twice in the New Testament, both times in Timothy. It is used over 70 times in the Old Testament, and every time it refers to a preacher. Paul was saying, “Timothy, you are just another man of God. There is a long line of these men of God—men called by God and gifted by Him to proclaim His truth. You cannot get out of step. You cannot go your way or invent your own approach. You are one man in a long line of men who are called to preach the Word. That is what you are to do.”

That is how I look at my own life, and it brings to mind a childhood memory about my grandfather. He was a faithful preacher of the Word of God all through his ministry right up until his death. While he was on his deathbed at home, my father and I were there, and my father asked him, “Dad, is there anything you want?” My grandfather responded, “Yes, I want to preach one more time.” While dying from cancer, he wanted just one thing: to preach one more time. He had prepared a sermon he had not preached. That is hard for a preacher to handle; that is fire in his bones. He needs to get it out.

My grandfather had prepared a sermon on heaven and died without ever being able to preach it. So my dad took his notes, printed them, and passed them out to everybody at the funeral. In that way, my grandfather preached on heaven from heaven. That incident had a tremendous effect on me as a young boy. What a faithful man—right down to the last breath, all my grandfather wanted to do was preach the Word one more time.

The same was true about my father. All throughout his ministry he was diligent to preach the Word. As I mentioned earlier, he gave me a Bible in which he wrote on the flyleaf, “Preach the Word.” Eventually I went to Talbot Seminary because I wanted to study under Dr. Charles Feinberg. Dr. Feinberg was the most brilliant Bible scholar I knew. For example, he taught himself Dutch in two weeks so he could read a Dutch theology. He studied 14 years to be a rabbi and ended up being converted to Christ. He then attended Dallas Theological Seminary, where he earned his PhD. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, who was the president of Dallas Theological

Seminary at that time, said of Dr. Feinberg that he was the only student who came to the seminary knowing more when he arrived than when he left.

Subsequently, Dr. Feinberg attended Johns Hopkins University to earn a PhD in archaeology. He had an immense and brilliant mind and he loved the Word of God. He read through the Bible four times a year and he was absolutely committed to the fact that every word of Scripture is inerrant, inspired, and true. He was the man I wanted to influence my life.

During my first year in seminary, my first class under Dr. Feinberg was Old Testament introduction. It was a demanding course that included a lot of tedious material which was hard to absorb for a college athlete who was suddenly exposed to academia. The first day a student asked a question, Dr. Feinberg dropped his head, never looked up, and said, "If you do not have a more intelligent question than that, do not ask any more questions. You are taking up valuable time." There were no more questions that semester! He had all the time to himself. He was dead serious about the things of God and Scripture.

That same year, I was assigned by Dr. Feinberg to preach a text before the student body and the faculty. I worked countless hours on this sermon. The faculty would sit behind you and write notes while you were preaching and then afterward they gave you their criticisms. I preached the message and thought I had done fine. When I was done, Dr. Feinberg handed me a sheet of paper with red writing across the front: "You missed the whole point of the passage."

How could I do that? How could I miss the whole point? That was the greatest lesson I ever had in seminary. Dr. Feinberg was upset and called me into his office because he wanted to make an investment in me and he did not appreciate what I had done. After all, handling God's Word correctly is the whole point of ministry. That day, I received a lecture I have never forgotten. Ever since, Dr. Feinberg has sat on my shoulder and whispered, "Do not miss the point of the passage, MacArthur!"

On graduation day, Dr. Feinberg called me into his office and said, "I have a gift for you." He picked up a big box, and in it were all 35 volumes of Keil and Delitzsch, a Hebrew Old Testament commentary set. He said, "This is the set I have used for years and years. I have all my notes in the

margins; I want to give it to you as a gift.” This was an expression of his love for me, but it was also another way of saying, “Now you have no excuse for missing the point of an Old Testament passage.”

One of the highlights of my life was when Dr. Feinberg’s family asked me to speak at his funeral. Somewhere along the line he must have told them that he thought I had finally gotten to the place where I could figure out the point of a passage. He is with the Lord now, but I do not want to do anything differently. I just want to continue doing what faithful prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, pastors, and missionaries have done through the ages. I am astonished at the boldness of people in ministry today who are quick to discard the God-ordained, scripturally mandated pattern of preaching and invent their own. What audacity! Who do they think they are?

So, preach the Word because of the devotion of the saints who came before you. Get in line, take the baton, and run your lap.

Preach the Word Because of the Dynamic of Scripture (3:15-17)

The third reason we preach the Word is because of the dynamic of Scripture. Paul wrote to Timothy, “From childhood you have known the sacred writings” (2 Timothy 3:15). From the time Timothy was a baby in his mother’s arms, he was introduced to “the sacred writings.” That is a Greek-Jewish term referring to the Old Testament, *hiera grammata*. Paul said, “You have known the [Old Testament, which is] able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

Although Timothy’s parents were Jewish and Gentile, he still had the influence of the Old Testament law in his family. Paul was saying that since Timothy was a child, the law had been preparing him for the gospel. The Jews used to claim that their children “drank in” the law of God with their mother’s milk and it was so imprinted on their hearts and minds that they would sooner forget their names than forget God’s law.

The law was the tutor that led to Christ, and Timothy had been raised on the sacred writings of the Old Testament. He had been given the wisdom he needed so that when the gospel was preached, he apprehended it because his understanding of the Old Testament law prepared him for it. Ultimately, Paul was saying, “You know that the Word of God has the

power to lead you to salvation. What else would you preach?” For it is sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). Peter declared, “You have been born again...through the living and enduring Word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). It is the power of the Word that converts the soul and produces salvation.

You commit to preaching the Word when you understand that it is the power that converts the soul. If you do not preach the Word, then it’s because you do not believe it is the only source of salvation and sanctification, no matter what you might claim otherwise. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we read, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God [and everyone who follows His pattern] may be adequate [or complete], equipped for every good work.” It is the power of the Word that saves and sanctifies. It provides doctrine, it reproves error and sin, it sets upright, and it trains in the path of righteousness. That’s the sequence.

Through preaching the Word you lay a foundation of doctrine and it reproves error and sin. In the original Greek text, this speaks of setting upright someone who has fallen down. You pick him back up, correct his error and his iniquity, and then put him on the path of righteousness. You train him to live an obedient life. It’s the Word that makes the man of God and everybody who follows His pattern complete. It prepares them spiritually. This is what we call the sufficiency of Scripture—God’s Word completely saves and completely sanctifies. What else would you use? I cannot fathom why anyone would use anything other than the Word that saves and sanctifies.

Preach the Word Because of the Demand of the Sovereign (4:1-2)

Next, we preach the Word because of the demand of the Sovereign. 2 Timothy 4:1 is a frightening verse that strikes me with holy fear. It should terrify every preacher. This verse helps us to understand why John Knox, before he ascended the pulpit to preach, fell on his face and burst forth in tears of fear. He was reverently afraid of misrepresenting the truth and knew he was under divine scrutiny. Paul wrote, “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.” The command “I solemnly charge you” is dead serious. Paul was commanding Timothy—and all preachers—with all solemnity and all seriousness.

“My friend,” Paul said, “you are under the scrutiny of God, the one who will judge all who are alive and all who have died.” The Greek construction here can be rendered “in the presence of God, even Jesus Christ,” since He is introduced as the judge in the verse. We are preaching under the scrutiny of the omniscient and holy judge. I agree with what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4: “It is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court... the one who examines me is the Lord.” A preacher cannot build his sense of faithfulness on whether his listeners like his sermon. He can appreciate his listeners’ commendations and hear their criticisms, but in the end, he should preach to honor the One who is the judge. It is Christ who will reveal the secret things of the heart. He will give a reward to those who are worthy of it, and only His judgment matters.

A reporter once asked me, “For whom do you prepare your sermons?” I said, “To be truthful with you, I prepare them for God. He is the judge whom I have to stand before. He is the one who really matters. I want to get the message right before Him. I do not want to take the Word of the living God and somehow corrupt it, or replace it with foolish musings of my own.”

Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.” Every minister will have to give an account someday before the Lord. I want to give my best to the Lord and build on the foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Corinthians 3:12). I want to receive that reward that evidences my love for Him, a reward I can cast at His feet in honor and praise. Someday we will all stand before that judgment seat for that time of reward for our labors.

It is a very serious thing for me, this matter of preaching. Sometimes people say to me, “You spend so much time in preparation. Why?” Because God’s Word deserves it! We could probably get by with doing less because our listeners don’t have high expectations. Frankly, with most listeners a few good stories will do it. But with God, the task of preaching is

a different matter. When we preach, we must have Him in mind and the honor of His truth.

Preach the Word Because of the Deceptiveness of the Sensual (4:3-4)

Yet another reason we are to preach the Word is because of the deceptiveness of the sensual. The great enemy of the Word of God is anything outside the Word of God—the word of Satan, the word of demons, and the word of man. We are living in dangerous seasons concocted by seducing spirits and hypocritical liars. In 2 Timothy 4:3, Paul identifies for us that which makes it possible for false teachers to be successful: “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine.” People will not want to hear healthy, wholesome teaching. They will not want the sound, solid teachings of the Word. They will just want their ears tickled. They will be driven by the sensual and not the cognitive. They won’t be interested in truth or theology. Instead, they will want ear-tickling sensations rather than the great truths that save and sanctify. According to 2 Timothy 2:16, people will want to hear worldly and empty chatter that produces ungodliness and spreads like gangrene.

We are in such a season now. People say that teaching doctrine and being clear about the Word of God is divisive, unloving, and prideful. The prevailing mood in postmodern Western culture is that everyone determines truth for himself and everyone’s opinion is as valid as everyone else’s. There is no room for absolute, authoritative doctrine. That is one other “ism” you can add to the list of dangerous seasons—relativism.

**There will be no church left to fight anything
if we do not preserve the truth.**

Even the evangelical Christian church has fallen victim to this agenda. Many Christians are willing to speak up against abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia. They are willing to fight for religious freedoms in America and, among other things, to preserve prayer in the schools. But the worst

form of wickedness is the perversion of God's truth—that is, wrong doctrine and false teaching. The church today treats spiritual error with indifference as if it was harmless, as if a right interpretation of Scripture was unnecessary. While many Christians are fighting peripheral issues, they are giving away the essential truths that define our faith. That is suicide. There will be no church left to fight anything if we do not preserve the truth.

The ability to distinguish between truth and error is absolutely critical. You cannot speak truth or guard it if you do not understand it. That's why at our church we started The Master's Seminary—to train up men who can do that. These men do not worry about figuring out what is culturally relevant. They go all over the world with the Word of God, sort through the issues, and bring God's truth to bear upon the society in which they live. No matter what language you speak or where you live, everyone around you is in the same needy condition, spiritually destitute before God. And the truth of God transcends all cultures.

We live in a time when false teachers do not want to tell people the truth. They do not want to call error “error”; they do not want to confront sin because “they love you.” But false teachers do not love their listeners. If they did, they would seek everyone's best and highest good and proclaim the truth of God's Word.

If I say, “I do not think it is loving to confront,” then I do not love people. Rather, I am loving myself—I am more concerned about people liking me than about speaking the truth. It's more loving to confront people's error and show them the truth that can lead them to the blessings and well-being that produces God's greatest good in their lives. Instead we have a loss of truth, loss of conviction, loss of discernment, loss of holiness, loss of divine power, and loss of blessing—all because people want to get their ears tickled. “Tell me a little about success. Tell me a little about prosperity. Give me some excitement. Elevate my feelings of well-being, self-esteem, and give me emotional thrills.” Second Timothy 4:3 says these people “will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires.” The market creates the demand.

As Marvin Vincent said in *Word Studies in the New Testament*, “In periods of unsettled faith, skepticism and curious speculation in matters of religion, teachers of all kinds swarm like 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 can always be found.”³

I was in Florida back when people were being rocked by the craziness that was going on in the name of revival and people were flipping and flopping around and diving on the floor and gyrating and speaking in bizarre and unintelligible ways. They kept saying, “This is all a work of God.” Can I be straightforward with you? Such behavior is an offense to our rational, truth-revealing God. It is an offense to the true work of His Son. It is an offense to the true work of the Holy Spirit to use the names of God or of Christ or of the Holy Spirit in any mindless, emotional orgy marked by irrational, sensual, and fleshly behavior produced by altered states of consciousness, peer pressure, heightened expectation, or suggestibility. That is socio-psycho manipulation and mesmerism, and it is a prostitution of the glorious revelation of God taught clearly and powerfully to an eager, attentive, and controlled mind.

That which feeds sensual desires pragmatically or ecstatically cannot honor God. You have to preach the truth to the mind. That is where the real battle is fought. So we who are preachers are to bring God to people through His Word. That is the only way we can do it. People are starving for the knowledge of God—they just do not know it. But when we start delivering the truth, they find out. It was said of Bible expositor Martyn Lloyd-Jones, by J.I. Packer, “He brought more of the sense of God than any other man.”⁴ What a commendation!

PRAYER

Father, we thank You that we do not need to wander in some fog about the direction of life in ministry. We thank You that You have clarified it to us. We thank You that You are raising up men who will proclaim the truth. We thank You, Father, for their devotion and commitment to the fulfillment of this command.

O Lord, grant them power and faithfulness and integrity of life and effectiveness as they endeavor to serve You and carry out this commission. We thank You for men who will face the dangerous seasons, who maintain the devotion to the saints who went before them and were faithful, who will express the dynamic of the Word, who will discharge their responsibility before You as their Sovereign, and who will confront the desires of the sensual world with the powerful and rational truth of Scripture. Father, continue to raise them up, and we give You all the glory in Christ's name. Amen.

