

“Preach The Word”: What Does it Really Mean?

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The force of the five imperatives in 2 Tim.4:2 – “**preach,**” “**be ready,**” “**reprove,**” “**rebuke,**” and “**exhort**”ⁱ define the scope of preaching the Bible. The preaching endeavor is summarized in these imperatives. Four of these imperatives (“preach,” “reprove,” “rebuke,” and “exhort”) can be paralleled with the four avenues of the profitability of Scripture mentioned in 2 Tim.3:16 – “for teaching,” “for reproof,” “for correction,” “for training in righteousness.”

Paul has moved from exhorting Timothy to live by the Book (2 Tim.3) to charging Timothy to preach the Book (2 Tim.4:1-5). What does Paul really mean by the charge, “preach the Word!” Does that describe a one-time preaching engagement of a solitary sermon to a congregation? Or was Paul charging Timothy to his shepherding responsibility as a leader, and as an apostolic delegate to faithful, consistent, and consecutive preaching of the Word with a view to the growth and maturity of the congregation?

While we accept “preach the Word” as a rallying cry for all preaching, I believe Paul’s charge to Timothy is more *specific* to an ongoing expository ministry of a faithful shepherd-leader to his congregation (pastoral preaching). This passage is NOT a general instruction on preachingⁱⁱ, though the principles and guidelines are applicable to all faithful preaching of the Word. There is ample evidence in the text and in the overall context of the Pastoral Epistles to justify this conclusion.

The Setting of Paul’s Charge

Consider the following textual and contextual observations that validate my conclusion that Paul’s charge to Timothy to “preach the word” is not about simply preaching a sermon, but specific to Timothy’s pastoral responsibility in the local church – “the equipping of the saints for the work of service” (Eph.4:11-12).

1. Timothy was mentored by Paul to be his most trusted apostolic delegate. Throughout his letter, Paul kept Timothy’s eye focused on his **leadership responsibilities**. The Pastoral Epistles provide clear instruction for **church leaders** that are of abiding value and authority.
2. Paul’s instructions to Timothy on preaching are **given to a “preacher” with a view to the needs of his shepherding and leadership role**. Timothy must be diligent in handling accurately the Word of truth” (2 Tim.2:15); he must “preach the Word” (2 Tim.4:2). Timothy in his capacity as a spiritual leader is to keep on prescribing (commanding) and teaching with authority the moral and spiritual principles based on sound doctrine (1 Tim.4:11). “Therefore, a fundamental element in his ministry is the continued teaching of the Word of God in order to safeguard his people from false teachers and their doctrine.”ⁱⁱⁱ Timothy was to devote himself “to the public reading of

Scripture, to exhortation and teaching” (1 Tim.4:13). **All these specific instructions** to Timothy cannot be about a one-time or occasional “hit and run” sermon.

3. There are at least thirteen references in the Pastoral Epistles to “sound doctrine.” It is primarily a call upon **Timothy and Titus as spiritual leaders** to remain faithful to the Word in the ministry entrusted to them.
4. Paul continues by warning of a time ahead “when they will not endure sound doctrine” (2 Tim.4:3). Does he speak generically of all people, or did he have in mind the people of Ephesus where Timothy served? The latter best fits the context^{iv}.
5. Why the need for “great patience and instruction” (2 Tim.4:2) in Timothy’s preaching ministry? Because Timothy was involved in a **continual expositional ministry to a particular people**, and it requires humility and patience in bringing them along to a firm grasp and application of God’s Word. His task was to give them a steady diet of the Word which includes reproof, rebuke, exhortation and instruction or doctrine (*didache*). Doctrine/teaching/instruction “is foundational to preaching, reproof, rebuking, and exhortation. It is only through careful teaching of the Word that those tasks can be successfully carried out by a pastor.”^v **Doctrinal teaching (instruction) demands the regular, systematic and consecutive ministry of the Word.**
6. “Fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim.4:5). Timothy should not give up what has been entrusted to him. Timothy was to **fulfill the unique ministry** given to him by the Lord. By faithfully shepherding the assembly at Ephesus through the Word, Timothy will bring his ministry to its full measure.

What Should We Teach in Our Assemblies?

We have already endeavored to understand the meaning of Paul’s instruction to Timothy to “preach the Word” in its context. We have further Scriptural guidelines in answering the question raised here.

Jesus set the example for us. Beginning with Moses and the prophets, Jesus explained to His disciples the things concerning Himself in **ALL** the Scriptures (Lk. 24:27 emphasis added). In teaching the Word, we must focus on the **whole** Bible’s revelation of Jesus Christ. “You search the Scriptures...and it is these that bear witness of Me” (Jn.5:39; see also Lk. 24:44-45).

As a faithful and responsible shepherd, the **Apostle Paul** had been thorough in his teaching. “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). **Peter** charged his fellow-elders “to shepherd the flock of God among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). “The flock of God among you” is a reference to the congregation committed to their care. As God’s sheep, people need to be fed God’s Word. This is the primary responsibility of the elders/shepherds. There is no lone “pastor” in the NT church, only “pastors.” These elders are the ones Peter charges “to shepherd the flock of God among you.” Prayer and the ministry of the Word was the priority of the apostles in the early church (Acts 6:4). That is always the model for pastoral ministry.

How Do You Preach the Word?

As a shepherd or teacher, have you ever asked this question to yourself or discussed it in an elders' meeting? Most of our assemblies still follow their traditional model of "hit and run" and "equal opportunity to all" when it comes to the ministry of the Word of God. Sad to say, many consider this to be the NT pattern!! Sometimes the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" is wrongly interpreted to mean "preacherhood of all believers."

Paul's instruction to Timothy "to preach the Word" (2 Tim.4:2) is not about a solitary sermon, or simply preaching a one-time message. It is not about "hit and run" ministry of the Word. It is a charge about laboring to preach the Word regularly, systematically and consecutively as a faithful shepherd and teacher until Christ is formed in the congregation (Gal.4:19). **It is about the most important pastoral responsibility of elders.**

An Urgent Call to Action

"Preach the Word" is about pastoral preaching - preaching the Word of God regularly and consistently in consecutive exposition to a given people in a congregation by the elders and shepherding leaders. It is not about preaching generically or a solitary sermon (I call it "hit and run" sermons which is the normal practice in most assemblies). Pastoral preaching expounds the Word with eyes on the flock, directing to them words of instruction, exhortation, admonition and consolation. *The call to faithfulness in opening and expounding the Scriptures regularly cannot be clearer. I consider this as the most important need of the assemblies.* Apart from this Scriptural practice, a congregation will lack the biblical foundation and knowledge to handle life's realities.

It is time for action and implementation, setting aside our traditions, patterns, and silly excuses. What will you choose – patterns^{vi} and traditions set by man or the authoritative guidelines of the Word?

ⁱ Emphasis added. All Scripture quotations are taken from the NASB.

ⁱⁱ The verb "preach" (*kerusso*) means "to be a herald", "to proclaim." It describes the preaching ministry of John the Baptist, preaching of Jesus, and the apostolic proclamation of the gospel. Heralding or preaching is "generally the divinely authorized proclamation of the message of God to men. It is the exercise of ambassadorship" (William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957], 309). Paul called himself a *keryx* (2Tim.1:11, a herald), and now he passes that role to Timothy in his ministry in Ephesus. For a succinct but excellent discussion on the word "preach" in this context, see J.R. Baker, 2 Timothy, *What The Bible Teaches*, Ritchie New Testament Commentaries (Kilmarnock, Scotland: John Ritchie LTD, 1983), 377-378.

ⁱⁱⁱ Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 155.

^{iv} Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, BTCP (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017), 273.

^v John MacArthur, 2 Timothy, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 179.

^{vi} Everyone creates their own patterns, based on traditions, precedents, and preferences and calls it New Testament pattern. How ironic!