

Preach the Word

Recovering the Medium and Message of the Power of God

2 Timothy 4:1 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:

² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

³ 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,

⁴ and [their ears] will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

⁶ For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

⁸ 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 4:1-8)

Methods, Not the Message?

You arrive at the huge **building** with a main **auditorium**. The ceiling is filled with **lighting tracks** and **loudspeakers**. The padded theater seating is positioned in a semi-circle looking down at a central **stage**, like an old Greek **stadium**. In the back and above are several **jumbotrons** and expensive light and **fog effects** machines. The lights are now turned down very low now. A spotlight begins moving around on the stage, which is elevated by stairs, but is mostly empty save a **drum booth**, several **American flags**, and a **glass podium** in the front.

Based on this description, what kind of a place have you come to? A performing-arts center? A concert hall? Apple's corporate headquarters?

When the mega-church mentality began to go mainstream around 40 years ago, the leaders argued that we need to **change the methods** of doing church, **but not the message**. What I've just described is a very common mega-church to this day. Notice, there's little to nothing even remotely religious here. No steeple. No Spires. No bell-tower. No Arches. No chancel. Stairs, not risers. No Lord's Table. No baptismal. A podium, not a pulpit. No common

transition from one thing to the next. It must be exciting, enticing, entertaining. Almost every aspect of it is so completely secular in its physical nature that were we not in church right now, you probably would not have guessed I was describing one. They did not change the message. Only the methods. **Or did they?**

Two decades before Willow Creek hit the big-time, communication theorist **Marshall McLuhan** coined the phrase, “**The medium is the message.**”¹ What he meant by this was that methods communicate just as much (for him, *more*) of a message as any spoken verbal words do. The naivety of thinking they don’t has just been demonstrated to be false by how the megachurch was described.

Let’s now enter **a typical megachurch service**. We’ll skip past the professional band, the front and center worship team, and therefore the first hour of the service. We’ll go to the part that comes next and usually lasts 10-30 minutes. The band exits the stage. The lights go dark. Then suddenly, standing at the podium is a cool head-shaven guy wearing hip clothes. He tells the “audience” we’re going to have a chat for the next few minutes. The subject is topical. It’s also

¹ **Marshall McLuhan**, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1964), ch. 1.

lit up on the screen behind him in big neon letters. He's in the fifth week of a six-part series titled "Exhaustion."

He uses Elijah as your **role model**. God told Elijah he needed to take a break. "Go lay down by the brook Cherith, drink some water, and the ravens will bring you food" (kinda 1Kgs 17:4). The rest of the time is spent talking about how we are all in a burned-out culture and how we really need to rest. We work too hard. This 15-minute chat really hits people hard and now the audience is *really* ready for the band to come back so they can "worship" for another half-hour.

From the way he **entered**, to how he **presented** himself, this is a continuation of that *method* idea. But the most important thing here is that you were not exposed to a "sermon." That must never be. That's too religious. They've spent too much money ensuring that people won't feel "preached to." But strangely, the new method called the "chat" seems to have gutted anything more than a superficial mentioning of the Bible and God's word. The audience comes away *feeling* (the experience was great) they've just been taught it, but there's this emptiness and they aren't sure why.

2 Timothy 4:1-8 – Context and Structure

Heading into the last chapter of 2 Timothy, we have in the KJV a “therefore” (*οὖν*). This is the first of two things I want to point out that I wish the ESV would have let you see. This word does not appear in many of the early manuscripts (which is why the ESV and many other translations do not have it), but it is found in enough to have been published in Stephen’s 1550 *Textus Receptus* and again in a 2005 critical edition of the Byzantine text.² It was probably “inserted here to clarify the connection between the source of Scripture and the necessity of Timothy’s proclamation.”³ I bring this up here because what I’m about to say to begin the discussion of our passage is not disputed even by those who don’t see the “therefore” as original. I let Calvin, who was working with a text that had it, to explain the importance of where I want to begin. “It is proper to observe carefully the word *therefore*, by means of which he appropriately connects Scripture with preaching. This also refutes certain fanatics, who haughtily boast that they no longer need the aid of teachers, because the reading of Scripture is

² *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform 2005, with Morphology.* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 2 Ti 4:1.

³ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 553 note *k*.

abundantly sufficient.”⁴ This is the heart of what I want to talk about today, and what I believe Paul is telling Timothy to do. It fits right into the opening of the sermon.

We have just come out of a section of 2 Timothy that explained why Paul acted and taught the way he did. It had everything to do with **the Scripture being utterly sufficient** for all that we need for faith in Christ and proper obedience to God. Nothing else is needed. He learned it all from God. Timothy also knew this because he had the Scripture since he was an **infant**, had seen Paul’s own living **example** of it, including his teaching. But this is such an important thing for all the people in the church to learn, that he is now going to charge the young preacher under oath (**2Tim 4:1**; cf. **1Tim 6:13**) to “**preach the word**” (**2Tim 4:2**). In this way, through the “therefore,” *preaching is directly connected to the Scripture*—God’s holy word.

The **oath** Paul places upon Timothy is the key to unlocking the content of the preaching, at least in the immediate context. For he places him before “**the judge [of] the living and the dead**” who is also one day going to “**appear**,” and Timothy will have to give an account (**1**). This is clearly part of the content of the preaching. But for now,

⁴ **John Calvin** and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 251–252.

both “the righteous Judge” and “his appearing” show up again in vs. 8.⁵ This is evidence of a chiasm. And, sure enough, we find one clearly defined.

With the Judge as the bookend, “preach” (2) and “evangelist” (5) become the subject of the oath. Timothy must make sure under all circumstances that he does not fail in this duty. Why? Because a time is coming when “people will not endure sound teaching” (3). Rather, they will “turn away from” the truth (4). They will have “itching ears” [*akoēn*]. Ears is the second thing I want to point out in the ESV. The Greek word also appears in vs. 4. It is the same exact word as “ears” (acc, fem, sing noun) in vs. 3, but the ESV translates it as “listening” (a gerund or participle), a bad translation in my view, because it destroys our ability to see the chiasm.⁶

At the structural center of the passage is the end of vs. 3. “They will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,” a thought that takes us back to many places in both 1 and 2 Timothy, but most nearly to the beginning of ch. 3 and the long list of attributes that exemplify those false teachers.

⁵ “Lord” (*Kurios*) is found in vs.8, and is also found in vs. 1 in the *Textus Receptus* and Byzantine Family. Like “therefore,” it drops out in most other manuscripts.

⁶ The structure is preserved in the Greek with “not enduring sound teaching” coming before “ears” in vs. 3 and “ears” coming before “turning away from” in vs. 4.

- A. “[Lord],”⁷ “judge,” “his appearing” (4:1)
- B. “preach” (2)
- C. “Will not endure sound teaching” (3)
- D. “ears” (3b)
- E. **“They will accumulate for themselves teaches to suit their own passions” (3c)**
- D’. “ears” (4a)
- C’. “will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (4b)
- B’. “evangelist” (5)
- A’. “Lord,” “the righteous judge,” “his appearing” (8)⁸

Vv. 6-7 seems to be a brief **parenthesis** in the thought, where Paul remembers his immanent situation in Rome where he knows he is likely to die. In it, he references **his own ministry**, just like he did in the previous section. Here, he likens it to an acceptable **sacrifice** (“**a drink offering;**” **6a**) and to **a race** that he has finished (**7**). In the middle he realizes he truly is about to meet the righteous Judge in person (**6b**).

Timothy: Preach!

Let’s think about **preaching** first, since it is the context of the oath. **What does it mean to preach?** A lot of people think it means **“to holler at, esp. in a Southern Babbbtist**

⁷ See n. 5.

⁸ Smith, Jeon, and the Biblical Chiasm Exchange all see this chiasm in one way or another.

church.” Hollering and yelling might be a *style* some preachers have, but it is not preaching. In the Bible, preaching (*kērussō*) is a herald, a proclamation. Proclamation would be its *method*, like a lecture or a debate or an inspirational talk. What is being proclaimed? Here, it is preaching “*the word*.”

What is *the content* of this word? In **Matthew 4:17** it is “*repentance, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand*.” In **4:23** it is “*the good news of the kingdom*.” In **Luke 4:18**, citing Isaiah 61, it is Jesus’ own coming to give *good news* to the poor, *liberty* to the captives, *sight* to the blind, *freedom* to the oppressed. In **Acts 9:20** it is that Jesus is the “*Son of God*.”

In **Col 1:23** it is called “*the gospel*.” In **1Cor 1:23** it is “*Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and follow to Gentiles*.” In **15:12** it is Christ “*raised from the dead*.” In **2 Cor 4:5** it is “*Jesus Christ as Lord*.” In **1Tim 3:16** it is Christ “*manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up into glory*.” Curiously, in **Acts 10:42** it is that Christ is the one “*appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead*.” That’s the immediate context of the oath Paul gives to Timothy. In **Acts 8:5** it is simply “*Christ*.” Thus, it

should not surprise you to hear that some copies add **in our verse**, “the word *of God*.” And Gill tells us that Ethiopian version renders is, “**His word,**’ **that is, the word of Christ.**”⁹ I’ll just be blunt about this then. If the content of the sermon is not about this, it is not Christian preaching.

Now, some people think that **preaching** is totally **distinguished from teaching**. That is, if you feel like you are taught a lot in a sermon, it must not be preaching. You should be at a school, not a church. They *can be* distinct, but preaching always includes teaching. We see this in the next part. In what Gregory the Great called, “**Different aids for preaching,**”¹⁰ Paul tells Timothy to “**reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.**” Many commentators talk about these as their own separate activities from preaching, and they can be. However, it is also clear that preaching involves each of them.

Reproving is convicting, that is revealing sin by proclaiming the law of God and bringing the hearer to the point of awareness and acknowledgement.¹¹ Matthew Poole calls it

⁹ **John Gill**, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, vol. 3, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 339.

¹⁰ Gregory the Great, The Book of Pastoral Rule XVI.17.

¹¹ **Philip H. Towner**, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 601.

convincing those who gainsay the truth.¹² Those who have sinned, need to be reprovved in order to bring them back onto the right track. This is a main function of biblical preaching.

Rebuking takes reprovving a step further. It is an often a public activity where one is openly charged with error or sin. Paul does this on many occasions in the letters of Timothy alone, letters which are a kind of preaching. Poole goes after false preachers in a fascinating comparison of “those effeminate preachers, against whom Ezekiel denounced the woe, that *sew pillows to armholes* (Ezek 13:18 “sew magic bands upon all wrist” ESV);¹³ that prophesy smooth things instead of the right things of the word.” The prophets rebuked false prophets and teachers and preachers.

Exhorting is the opposite of the previous two words; it is encouraging. This is obviously a function of preaching, as Jesus citing Isaiah 61 (above) teaches. Sometimes people need to be brought low. Sometimes the lowly need to be raised up. This could refer to the “in season and out of season” (see Poole) that comes before it. As such, the whole thing could easily refer to preaching to the same people *at*

¹² Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 798.

¹³ The word “effeminate” makes me think he had in mind male preachers. The context in the Hebrew and LXX are women prophets. But it is an interesting take and one that hits the mark of what I’ll say later.

different times. Or, it may be slightly different in that Timothy must always be ready to proclaim Christ. Chrysostom has a good word on this.

Let us then also learn hence to consider all things secondary to the hearing the word of God, and to deem no season unseasonable, and, though a man may even have to go into another person's house, and being a person unknown to make himself known to great men, though it be late in the day, or at any time whatever, never to neglect this traffic. Let food and baths and dinners and the other things of this life have their appointed time; but let the teaching of heavenly philosophy have no separate time, let every season belong to it.

(John Chrysostom, *Homily XVIII* on John 1:35-37)

This is the opposite of a story I once heard from a fellow RB pastor who was on the golf course with a couple of others, along with one or two people they didn't know. On the second or third tee, one of the pastors began talking to these others about Christ, and they sort of blew him off. Then the other pastor said, "Man, you don't need to do that, we are here to play golf." One was ready in and out of season. The other couldn't care less about out-of-season.

To each of these things, Paul says they must be done with *patience* and *teaching*. Just lambasting someone by

hollering at them without patiently explaining what is wrong ... is wrong. Doing the same in front of others is doubly so. Trying to comfort someone with the gospel that they have troubles accepting also takes teaching. And all of this necessitates that the preacher is patient with those whom they are trying to bring to repentance or to resting more in the good news.

Vs. 5 is very much a **parallel** to these things. “**As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.**” One does not enter into these tasks without great **preparation**, fool-heartedly thinking that everyone will just easily accept rebuke or comfort. That’s being **sober-minded**. This is a life-long effort that continues for the preacher who is singled out as an evangelist, because **the gospel is front and center**. This is the most pressing need of the ministry.

This causes Paul to look at himself in a kind of parenthesis in **4:6-7**. He begins thinking about suffering again, which he went into a bit in the previous section (**3:11-13**). He attaches the word “**ministry**” to language of **sacrifice**, which is precisely what a good Jew would have done, knowing books like Leviticus as well as they would have. Christ’s sacrifice was the ultimate act of suffering for

others. Paul uses a different kind of sacrifice. “For I am already being poured out as a *drink offering*” (6). Paul does not say that OT ceremonial law is obliterated in the NT. Rather, he says that the OT types, like the drink offerings made in the temple are fulfilled in the ministry of the gospel through those who preach it. This is holy work.

He returns to that metaphor of *sports*, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (4:7). *Boxers* fight to win, even if they don’t. But they all want to fight well. *Racers* race to finish, even if they don’t win. Sometimes, like in an Ironman, just finishing in time can be the greatest thing in the world. These are likened to *keeping the faith*—faith *in Christ*. This is clearly linked to preaching as Paul says in Romans, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed [had faith]? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone *preaching?*” (Rom 10:13-15).

The sacrifice and sports metaphors are brought up because the Apostle knows, “The time of my departure has come.” He knows it is almost over and that he is about to *meet his Creator*. Whether it is at the hands of Nero or some

other way, his life is nearly at an end. He is using his own life as an example for us today to see how the Christian life is a marathon rather than a sprint.

It is this idea of departing that then causes him to think about what **his reward** will be in the not-too-distant future. “**Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness**” (8). There is no more common picture in the ancient Greek world of a **successful athlete** who was awarded **a crown as his prize**. For instance, the winner at the Olympic games was given a wreath of olive branches.¹⁴ He is looking forward to receiving that great reward for making it to the end—life in righteousness in heaven with Christ.

It is this Christ which he calls “**the Lord**.” We know this because he calls the Lord “**the righteous judge**.” In **vs. 1** he had called Christ Jesus the one “**who is to judge the living and the dead**.” We saw that this was actually a very specific **proclamation of the gospel** in Acts. Throughout the Scripture, OT and NT, it is the Son of God who judges mankind. “**For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son**” (**John 5:22**). This must therefore mean that in the Psalms when they says, “**Before the LORD, for**

¹⁴ **S. M. Baugh**, “2 Timothy,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon.*, vol. 3, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 492–493.

he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness” (Ps 96:13; cf. 98:9) or “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth” (Ps 58:11), that they are looking forward to the coming of Christ—Israel’s God; Israel’s LORD.

For Paul, *that coming seems to be past*. Christ’s kingdom is associated with his coming in vs. 1, and Christ came with his kingdom (cf. Matt 12:28). 2Tim 4:8 seems similar, because God is not just going to reward Paul, but “all who have loved” (already) “his appearing.” What appearing? His appearing in the flesh, the very heart of the Gospel. And yet, Paul knows that this is a future reward, and that at the Second Coming, when Christ judges all, he will be awarded “on that day” (8).

So we see more parallels between vv. 1 and 8. But vs. 1 has an immediate context of an oath. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead.” “The Greek literally is ‘the one who is about to judge ...’”¹⁵ Jesus is going to judge all people in righteousness. They will be found either guilty or not guilty. Those who long for justice in this world need to

¹⁵ Daniel C. Arichea and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 239.

remember that even if they do not see it in this life, there is no escaping the Judge of all. He will not fail. He cannot fail. He is the King of kings. He sits on the throne of the universe. All will give an account to him.

So **why does Paul put Timothy under oath?** We saw it earlier. Suffering comes from preaching! Many people don't want to hear what they all know deep in their hearts is true. They are too busy suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. This leads to the center of the paragraph. Timothy must faithfully proclaim these things because **"the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching"** (3). We've already seen that this "time" these "last days" **are already upon** the earth. The parallel is that they **"will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths"** (4).

The key here is the word **"ears."** They have *itching* ears. An itch is a pesky and bothersome sensation on the skin that causes a desire to scratch. The people have the itching ears. The *preachers* are the ones who scratch them where they itch. Thus, the very center, **"They will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions"** (4). And what will those teachers do? Let's return to our modern-day fireside mega-church "chat."

Too Much Modern Preaching

Earlier we saw how the idea of the Megachurch was to change the methods, not the message. But we saw that in fact, the message changed through the very methods themselves. Those methods actually communicated a different message and this in turn has seen a drastic change in the actual message.

Calvin saw something here 500 years ago that I think you will find interesting. He is talking about the Corinthian church in its opening first chapter. Commenting on their felt-need for “clever speech” and “persuasive words” he says that the “super-apostles” in Corinth,

... were persons who did not openly take away any thing from the substance of the gospel, but, as they burned with a misdirected eagerness for distinction, I am of the opinion that, with the view of making themselves admired, they contrived *a new method* of teaching, at variance with the simplicity of Christ.¹⁶

An important **caveat** here is necessary. Calvin is **not saying these people were heretics**. This differs to some

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*.

degree from Timothy where clear heresy was present. Calvin might even say their motives were good. So the point of this is not to damn megachurches. It is to call out something that is **concerning** both for motives and for repercussions that this all can have.

For contemporary people, as well as those long gone apparently, preaching is **boring** and does not *work* as well as other things. Hence, we have the “talk,” the “conversation,” the “chat.” Those are much more postmodern and likeable. Don’t get me wrong. God gets what long sermons can do. Remember **Eutychus**? That poor young man was sitting in a window listening to Paul in Philippi, while Paul “**talked on and on**” (NIV). He fell sleep and plunged three stories to his death (**Acts 20:9**). But Paul picked him up and began to speak, thereby **raising him from the dead**.

This is **a picture of preaching!** You must come to understand and believe the mystical nature of preaching. Reflecting on that mysterious story of Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones, Michael Horton says,

Here the Holy Spirit was “upon me,” says the prophet, while God spoke in a vision, asking Ezekiel whether he thought these bones—representing Israel in its exile and, ultimately, the world in its sin—could live. Wisely, the prophet answers,

“O Lord, God, you know.” God commands Ezekiel to preach to the bones: “Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD’” (v. 4). But Ezekiel’s words are not merely his own. He is to speak as God to the bones: “Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live ... and you shall know that I am the LORD” (vv. 5-6). As Ezekiel preaches, the bones grow flesh and breath of life enters them, until they are standing as ‘a vast multitude’ (vv. 7-10). As interpreted by the New Testament, this was not fulfilled in any subsequent era of Israel’s history until Pentecost. After that postresurrection event, however, the apostles, deputed by the Son and empowered by the Spirit, became witnesses whose preaching did exactly what was prophesied by Ezekiel. By preaching—and not just by preaching anything, but by the preaching of the gospel—the dead were raised.¹⁷

You simply must understand **the power of God’s word**. Hebrews says that the word is “*living and active*.” It is “*sharper than any two-edged sword*.” It pierces and discerns “*the thoughts and intentions of the heart*” (**Heb 4:12**). How can the word be alive? Well, first of all, that’s the way God makes words. Words create, mold, and shape reality, for

¹⁷ **Michael S. Horton**, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 267.

better or for worse. Look at how words have been used the change an entire world in just the last two years alone. Lies. Deceptions. Slanders. Misrepresentations. These have led to uncounted numbers of suffering. They kinds of things have shaken civilization to the core. And they all begin with words.

But God's word is living and active for a different reason. First, that Hebrews passage says that the word is a "him." How can an inanimate sound "discern" something? Because the next verse says of the word, "No creature is hidden from *his* sight." The word of God is alive, because it is Christ's word, and he is the Word of God (John 1:1, 14), raised from the dead. Second, the word is "breathed-out" as we saw last time. That is, it is inspired by the Living Spirit of God. Breath itself is life. It is the inhaling and exhaling of living things. The Spirit breathes out the power of God as it is spoken by Christ. Thus, the word of God, and by a mysterious sacramental union, the preached word is alive and powerful.

This is why the Psalmist says, "By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the *breath* of his mouth all their host" (Ps 33:6). This is why Hebrew said it is sharp as a sword and able to cut to the soul. This is why Jeremiah says

the word is like a *fire* and like a *hammer* that breaks the rock in pieces (**Jer 23:29**). This is why Isaiah says that God's word goes out from God's mouth, "It shall not return to me empty, but *it shall accomplish* that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (**Isa 55:11**). And this is why one of the great high points of Handel's Messiah, which is entirely, 100% biblical Scripture has the choir sing, "Great was the company of the preachers" (**Ps 68:11**).

But, like the Corinthians, and like those certain people, those "fanatics" in Calvin's day, much of the church of our own simply *doesn't believe this*. They just don't. That's proven by the felt-need to prop up the word with better methods or to change the way the word is given or to even change the word itself. If they trusted it, they wouldn't feel the need to do these things. But they don't. Why?

Paul is very *specific about the answer* to that question. Listen to the method the Corinthians would rather have than preaching. "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the *debater* of this age?" (**1Cor 1:20**). We might say, "Where is the celebrity? Where is the truly important minister, the one everyone looks up to, the one everyone wants to go hear at a conference? Where are the

chatters? Where are the talkers? Where are the motivational speakers?”

He continues, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” To rephrase again, “Has not God made foolish the clever means and methods of the world?” Preaching is a foolish means. It is too common. Too boring. Too long-winded. It’s just a proclamation. There’s nothing to debate. And, you have to keep hearing the same kind of thing each week? Week after week after week? Why not at least add an on-point Hollywood movie clip? Why not have something more exciting, something more engaging, something more two-way? Why not at least prop it up with some good background music?

Why would God want to use such a foolish method? Calvin said so that the method would be *in alignment with the message*. Method and message go together. That way, you can’t pull a bait and switch on people. Notice what Paul says about the message in this same place. “For since, in *the wisdom of God*, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through *the folly of what we preach* to save those who believe” (1Cor 1:21). There is folly and it is contained in preaching.

Why? He goes on, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.” People want the exciting, the engaging, the entertaining, the extraordinary. They want to be able to debate, to question, to not have to listen to some authority [it is precisely that they are in authority that Paul is so full of warning about making sure you do it properly and biblically and godly!]. Jesus fed the 5,000 with the miracle food and they all left him. He then turned to his disciples and essentially said, “You’ve had your stomach filled, now are you going to go away with the masses too?” (see the context of **John 6:67**). What did they respond? “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (**68-69**).

But Paul said there is folly here. What folly? Again, he said, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, *but we preach Christ crucified.*” This is the folly. For he says it is, “... a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (**1Cor 1:22-23**). *A man dying on a cross? It’s happened a thousand times, Paul. You say this is the victory that overcomes the world? That’s ridiculous. He was cursed on a tree as a petty criminal.* People have come up with every manner of excuse why the message of the Gospel is foolish. They include the blasphemous (he

wasn't really God), the **apathetic** (I don't have time for that), the **ridiculous** (he never really existed), and so many more.

It just isn't **exciting**. Nor is it about them, and oh how we want it to be about us! It is God doing the improbable in an unthinkable place with an unlikely people in unheard of way to do the impossible. And that's why I say, people just don't believe it. Now, many *say* they believe this message (and many of them do), and yet the methods employed contradict this belief. Preaching is just as improbably, unthinkable, unlikely, and impossible to win over seekers and pagans and others who really need to hear, which we can make happen, at least a little better, through our own methods.

And yet, we know the truth. For the word says, “**But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men ... But *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God*” (1:24, 26-29).**

This is the power of the word that many people refuse to see. Indeed, many can't see it. Israel was always prone to this same thing, in the form of idolatry. They wanted something they could see. Something tangible. Something they could manipulate. Something they would manage. Something they could have a little of their own say towards. Something they could incant and make do their bidding. So Moses said, “The LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully ... beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, *in the form of any figure*” (Deut 4:14-16), which he goes on to say is in fact raising “your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, those[NAS] that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven” (19).

They did not accept the foolishness of his coming to them. But God backed it all up, as he always does, with his word saying, “The LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. *You heard the sound of words*, but saw no form; there was only a voice ... Since you saw no form on the day that

the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly...” (12, 15-16).

All of this is therefore what lays behind Paul’s instructions to Timothy. He is to use God’s means of proclamation and not forsake the message it contains, even if he suffers for it, because people have itching ears that hear what they want to hear and how they want to hear it, and there are plenty of false people who will take them up on their offer, all while justifying their mistaken foolish disobedience in it, as they burn for notoriety, distinction, money, and end up in the list of vices in 2Tim 3.

In that passage from Ezekiel that Matthew Pool referenced, the context is interesting. The word of the LORD came to the prophet and told him to preach against the prophets of Israel (Ezek 13:1). But “woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing” (3). Their message was not Christ the Judge, but rather “peace, peace,” when there is no peace (10). They spoke their own word, as did the false prophets surrounding nearly all the true prophets of God. They gave the people what they wanted to hear. We give the people how they want to hear it, and in return end up telling them exactly what they want to hear, because the medium is the message.

It is time for churches to hold their preachers **accountable** again to God's word on these matters. We need preachers who will hold the people accountable as well. It seems this was so serious a matter that Paul felt he had to place Timothy under and **oath**. We've taken an oath today in our worship service, confessing that we love this God and have trusted in his word by faith, this very gospel for our salvation.

We've been reprov'd. We've been exhort'd. We've been taught. Most of all, we've seen the glories of Jesus proclaimed in many ways. And this is the power of God. As the Orthodox Catechism teaches, this is how we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits, as the Holy Spirit "works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel."¹⁸ We have especially seen that Jesus is coming to judge the living and the dead and that there is a reward for those who make it to the end. Will the Son of Man find faith on the earth when he returns? Will there be anyone left who will endure sound teaching and not wander off from the truth? Will you be among them?

¹⁸ **Hercules Collins**, *An Orthodox Catechism*, Q. 64. This is Q. 65 in the Heidelberg Catechism.

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