The Preacher's Task

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Introduction

1 Timothy 4:16 (EHV):

> *Pay close attention to yourself and to the doctrine. Persevere in them, because by doing this you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.*

These words were penned by the apostle Paul to a young evangelist, Timothy, whom Paul had mentored and whom he regarded as his spiritual "child" (1Tim 1:2, 18; 2Tim 1:2; 2:1; Php 2:22).
They reveal Paul's high view of the work of gospel preachers, which can be summarized thus:
An evangelist (or minister) who sets a godly example and whose preaching is sound will, by God's grace, ensure his own salvation and the salvation of those who come under his ministry.[1]

In both of his letters to Timothy, Paul emphasizes the preacher's role:

- *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.* (1 Timothy 4:13)
- *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth*. (2 Timothy 2:15)
- *preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching*. (2 Timothy 4:2)
- *As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry*. (2 Timothy 4:5)

Why does Paul believe that a gospel preacher has such a profound influence on his hearers?

[1] Paul penned his first epistle to Timothy while the latter oversaw the church in Ephesus (1Tim 1:3). Paul wrote to urge Timothy to (among other things) refute false teaching in the church, to supervise the worship, and to appoint suitable leaders (1 Timothy 1 – 3). Titus was another such evangelist, whom Paul had assigned to oversee the churches on the island of Crete (Tit 1:5).
Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus constitute the three "pastoral letters" — providing instruction on the care of the churches.
In a sense, Timothy and Titus had (delegated) apostolic authority; they represented Paul in their respective spheres. Note, too, how Paul acknowledged Timothy as a co-author of six of his epistles (2Cor 1:1; Php 1:1; Col 1:1; 1Thes 1:1; 2Thes 1:1; Phm 1:1).

Proclaiming God's Word

Insofar as it is faithful to the written word, a minister's preaching is itself the very word of God to his congregation. Note what Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica concerning their response to his preaching:

> *For this reason we thank God without ceasing because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it truly is, the word of God, which effectively works also in you who believe.*
> (1 Thessalonians 2:13, MEV)

The Thessalonians looked beyond the human preacher, regarding the proclaimed message as coming from God himself. And while undoubtedly Paul is referring back to his initial missionary proclamation to the Thessalonians (related in Acts 17:1-9), the principle that preaching is the very word of God applies equally to the regular preaching in an established church.

The gospel faithfully proclaimed is called "the word of God", or "the word of the Lord".
See Acts 6:2; 8:14; 13:5, 44, 46; 15:35-36; 16:32; 17:13; 18:11; 19:10; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2.
It's called such because that's exactly what it is!

As the church's authorized spokesman, a faithful preacher proclaims God's word and speaks on God's behalf. Paul could claim that he and his companions were "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2Cor 5:20).

Salvation through the Word

Salvation comes as people hear God's word proclaimed by authorized preachers.
Paul asserts this in Romans 10:8-15, 17:

> [8] *But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);*
> [9] *because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> [10] *For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*
> [11] *For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."*
> [12] *For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.*
> [13] *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*
>
> [14] *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*
> [15] *And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"*
>
> [17] *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

Here, the "word of Christ" that one must hear (vs. 17) is the word concerning Christ.
For Paul this meant proclaiming the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, his work on behalf of sinners, etc. — with all of this as a fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures (1Cor 15:1-4). We see this same focus in the sermons that Peter and Paul preached, especially to Jewish audiences (see Acts 2:14ff.; 3:12ff.; 13:16ff.).

Recall the Parable of the Sower, where the seed is "the word of God" (Lk 8:11; cf. Mk 4:14) that effects faith and transformation in the one "who hears the word and understands it" (Mt 13:23).
The point is simply this: People enter the kingdom through faithful gospel preaching — through listening intently and comprehending the message.

Why through the Word?

The proclamation of the gospel is God's appointed means to call people to himself.
How does God accomplish this?

A faithful preacher, focusing on God's work in Christ on behalf of sinners, calls his hearers to faith and repentance — to turn from sin and appropriate for themselves God's free offer of forgiveness in his Son.
God commands all to repent (Ac 17:30), and so the preacher urges his hearers to believe in order to be reconciled to God (2Cor 5:20).

Yet while this outward call is extended to everyone, it remains ineffective unless accompanied by a powerful internal call from the Holy Spirit. This difference explains why, often, only a few people in a group respond to the proclaimed word. Concerning Lydia we read (Acts 16:14, EHV):
The Lord opened her heart to pay close attention to what Paul was saying.

That there are indeed two distinct "calls" — the one external and general and the other internal and particular and "effectual" (so-called because it infallibly converts) — can be seen from 1 Corinthians 1:23-24:

> [23] *but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,* [24] *but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*.[2]

New birth (or regeneration) is the work of God's Spirit (Jn 3:3, 5; Tit 3:5). His action is vital because people by nature are spiritually dead — wholly unwilling and unable to come to Christ for salvation (Eph 2:1-10; Jn 3:19-20; 5:40; 6:44, 65). People are innately hostile toward God (Rom 8:7; Col 1:21). But with the gift of new birth God makes rebellious people compliant (Dt 30:6; Jer 31:33; Eze 36:26-27).

But the point is this:
The word (whether heard or read) is the means by which the Holy Spirit regenerates people.
The Spirit takes the written word that he himself inspired and shines the light of its truth into people's hearts, granting spiritual illumination and new birth. Christ is revealed as the all-sufficient Savior, which in turn engenders true faith.

[2] Here are further references to God's effectual call of those whom he has chosen: Romans 8:28-30; 9:24; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Galatians 1:15; Ephesians 1:18; 4:1, 4; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 1:10; Jude 1:1; Revelation 17:14.

The agency of the word is affirmed in the following verses:

- *[God] gave give us birth <u>through the word of truth</u> …* (James 1:18, my translation)
- [23] *For you have been born again, not from perishable seed but from imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*

  [25] *… And this is the word that was preached to you.*

  (1 Peter 1:23, 25, EHV)

The Holy Spirit employs the preached word to convert all those whom God has predestined:

> [4] *For we know, brothers loved by God, <u>that he has chosen you</u>,* [5] *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. …*
> (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5)

Faithful preachers can be encouraged by the fact that, through their proclamation, God will irresistibly draw to himself his elect people for whom Jesus died:
Jesus declared: *"All that the Father gives me <u>will</u> come to me …"* (John 6:37)
And to Paul he said:

> [9] *… "Do not be afraid, but keep on speaking, and do not be silent.*
> [10] *For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, because I have many people in this city."*
> (Acts 18:9-10, EHV)[3]

Paul preached and happily endured suffering "for the sake of [God's] elect, that they also [might] obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2Tim 2:10).

The gospel faithfully proclaimed is God's "power" by which he saves (Rom 1:16; 1Cor 1:18).
God's word is "living and active" — it's sharper than any sword and penetrates to our inner recesses (Heb 4:12).
It's a "hammer" that shatters rocks (Jer 23:29).
It accomplishes all that God intends (Isa 55:11).
God's word accompanied by his Spirit supernaturally quickens and converts, paralleling his action both in creation and in raising Jesus from the dead (Eph 2:5; cf. Jn 3:5; Rom 4:17; 2Cor 5:17).

But of course, the role of God's word doesn't end with conversion.
After noting that the new birth comes through the word, Peter urges his readers to be eager to learn and grow:
Like newborn babies, crave the pure <u>mental milk</u>, so that by it you may grow up into salvation.
(1 Peter 2:2, literal translation; cf. 1Pet 1:23, 25)[4]

[3] Though not yet Christians, many people in Corinth already belonged to Jesus because he had died for them.
Through Paul's proclamation these people would be irresistibly drawn to Christ as Savior. God's predestination of individuals unto salvation (Rom 8:30; 9:11-24; Eph 1:4-11; 2Tim 1:9) therefore guaranteed the success of his evangelistic efforts.
Thus encouraged, Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months (Ac 18:11) — longer than he stayed in any other city except Ephesus.
But contrast Jesus' words here with the discouraging commission Isaiah received — the prophet's message would result not in the people's conversion but in their hardening (Isa 6:8-10). Not what a new preacher wants to hear!
[4] 1 Peter 2:2 (Greek text): *to logikon adolon gala* = "the mental [rational, intellectual] pure milk [of the word]".

In similar vein, James urges his readers to turn from sin and "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Jas 1:21; cf. 1:18).
Spiritual growth comes through imbibing the "pure mental milk" of the word — reading it, hearing it explained, meditating upon it (Ps 1:2), obeying it (Jas 1:22-25).

Paul wrote the following concerning the word's ongoing role in our lives:
Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom …
(Colossians 3:16)
Here, the "word of Christ" is his teaching and commands.

Jesus instructed his apostles to teach new disciples "to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20).
There are no apostles today, but we have their inspired writings to instruct us.

Of course, Christians must continue to grow, progressing beyond milk to solid food.
Indeed, we see Paul criticizing the Corinthians for their lack of spiritual growth:
I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready.
(1 Corinthians 3:2)

The author of Hebrews was similarly critical:

> [11] *About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*
> [12] *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food,* [13] *for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.*
> [14] *But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*
> (Hebrews 5:11-14)

The Preacher's privilege and responsibility

Paul, like Jeremiah, was set apart from birth for proclaiming God's word (Gal 1:15-16; cf. Jer 1:5).
In principle this is true of every faithful preacher.
Paul received his commission directly from the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).
To this commission he was fully obedient (Ac 26:19).
Paul felt an urgency and compulsion to preach:
For <u>necessity</u> is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16)[5]
Disobedience to his commission would have had serious consequences.[6]
And consider what he told the Ephesian elders:

> *But I do not count my life as dear to me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, <u>to fully testify to the gospel of God's grace</u>.*
> (Acts 20:24, my translation)

Just as Paul was called, so also are ministers called by God and entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (1Cor 4:1-2; 9:17; 2Cor 5:18-20; Gal 2:7; 1Thes 2:4; 1Tim 1:11; 6:20; 2Tim 1:14; Tit 1:3).
The gospel message is a "treasure" that they are to carefully guard (2Cor 4:7; 1Tim 6:20; 2Tim 1:14).[7]
Faithfulness requires that they do not distort God's word, but plainly set forth its truth (2Cor 4:2).
They must not change it, dilute it, or shun parts of it; God's "whole counsel" must be proclaimed (Ac 20:27).

The ministry's importance means that a new minister ought to be ordained and formally recognized by the existing church leadership (1Tim 4:14; 2Tim 1:6; cf. Ac 6:6).
For any church office, a man should be examined as to his character and doctrine (1Tim 3:1-12, Tit 1:5-9).
Ordination is never to be done lightly (1Tim 5:22).

The preacher's task is a serious one. With his fellow elders he must shepherd the flock — feed, protect, and lead by example those whom God has entrusted to him (Jn 21:15-17; Ac 20:28; 1Pet 5:2-3).
As noted earlier, his careful attention to teaching and godly living will (by God's grace) result in eternal salvation for himself and his flock (1Tim 4:16). Given this profound influence — for life or death — James urges his readers to be cautious in seeking a teaching role, for with privilege comes greater accountability (Jas 3:1-2; cf. Heb 13:17; Mt 23:13-33; Lk 20:46-47).

The preacher's role is related to that of the Old Testament priests. The priests, and their Levite assistants, had two main tasks: to teach God's law, and to oversee the service of the tabernacle (Dt 33:10; cf. 31:9-13).
These descendants of Levi received no tribal allotment of land in Canaan (Dt 18:1). Instead, 48 separate towns, along with surrounding pastureland, were assigned for their use (Num 35:1-8; Jos 21:41).
Their dispersal throughout the land was related to their task of teaching God's law to those Israelites who might reside some distance from the tabernacle. The Old Testament relates some instances of this teaching role, and reveals God's anger when this duty was neglected.

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[5] The Greek noun translated "necessity" (*anagkē*, Strong's G318) denotes a "compulsion" or "constraint" or "absolute necessity". For other examples of such compulsion to preach, see Jeremiah 6:11; 20:9; Amos 3:8; Acts 4:20.
[6] But note how Jonah was graciously recommissioned to preach to Nineveh despite his initial disobedience (Jnh 3:1-2).
[7] 2 Corinthians 4:7: *But we have this [gospel] treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us*. Preachers are "jars of clay" — of little intrinsic value or beauty, so that attention will be directed not to them but to their message. The unworthiness of gospel preachers means that any success from their labors can only be ascribed to God's power.

King Jehoshaphat, early in his reign (ca. 870 BC), sought the spiritual reformation of his realm.
To that end he sent officials, accompanied by priests and Levites, to teach throughout all the towns:

They taught in Judah. They took the Book of the Law of the LORD with them and traveled around through all the cities of Judah, teaching among the people.
(2 Chronicles 17:9, EHV)

Ezra "was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses" who "had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, … and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:6, 10).
Seeking the spiritual renewal of the post-exilic community, Ezra with the Levites (ca. 444 BC) instructed the people from the Book of the Law:

[3] *And [Ezra] read from it … from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. …*
[7] *Also [the Levites] helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.*
[8] *They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading*.[8]
(Nehemiah 8:3, 7-8)

In his final Old Covenant word to Israel (ca. 430 BC), God arraigned the nation's priests as follows:

[6] *True instruction was in Levi's mouth, and nothing false was found on his lips.*
He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and <u>he turned many people back from iniquity</u>.
[7] *For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of Hosts.*
[8] *But you, you have turned aside from the way. <u>You have caused many to stumble by your instruction</u>. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of Hosts.*
(Malachi 2:6-8, my translation)

Just prior to Israel's dismemberment at the hands of the Assyrians (in 733-722 BC), God through the prophet Hosea complained about the nation's spiritual ignorance, placing the blame squarely on the priests who had failed to teach his law:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you [priests] have rejected knowledge, I will reject you from being My priest.
And because you have forgotten the law of your God …
(Hosea 4:6, MEV)

Through Jeremiah, also, God complained about priestly ignorance and their mishandling of his law (Jer 2:8; 8:8).

[8] Ezra on this occasion probably read out from the Law in manageable sections. Whenever he paused, the Levites moving about among the assembled worshippers would interpret and explain to them what had been read out.

The Old Testament prophet's role was similar to that of a priest. Thus, we read of God commissioning Ezekiel to be a "watchman" responsible for warning the people to repent (Eze 3:17-21; 33:1-9).
In ancient times a watchman stationed on the city walls would sound an alarm to warn the inhabitants of impending danger. Any failure to warn on Ezekiel's part would make him personally responsible for the blood of those who perished.

Some 100 years prior to Ezekiel, Isaiah had reproached Israel's watchmen — the prophets — for their behaving like silent watchdogs asleep on the job, thereby rendering the flock vulnerable to enemies (Isa 56:9-11).

A prime characteristic of Israel's false prophets was the vain hope they gave to the sinful nation.
Claiming to speak for God, they promised peace and safety; no harm or judgment would befall the people!
But had these prophets truly known Yahweh — had they "stood in [his] council" — they would have faithfully proclaimed his word, including the need to turn from evil (Jer 23:16-22; cf. 8:11; 14:13-14; Eze 13:22).

In contrast to Israel's priests and prophets, the apostle Paul was exceptionally diligent (1Cor 15:10; 2Cor 11:23).
He had "fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum" (Rom 15:19, EHV).[9]
During the two to three years he spent in Ephesus "all who lived in the province of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord" (Ac 19:10, EHV).

Indeed, Paul could claim in his later farewell to the Ephesian elders:

> 26 *"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.*
> 27 *For I did not keep from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."*
> (Acts 20:26-27, MEV)

In claiming to be "innocent of the blood of all men" Paul likely had in mind Ezekiel's role as a watchman.
So diligently had he proclaimed the gospel that any who continued in unbelief had only themselves to blame.
Earlier, to the Jews in Corinth who opposed his preaching Paul had declared:
"Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." (Acts 18:6)

[9] The Roman province of Illyricum was located northwest of Macedonia.

Sound Doctrine, and Truth that sets one free

While bare knowledge without love and obedience are useless (1Cor 8:1; 13:2; Jas 2:19), Scripture nevertheless emphasizes the importance of understanding and knowing truth.
The knowledge and fear of God imparts wisdom (Ps 111:10; Pr 9:10); lack of knowledge results in folly (Jer 4:22). Salvation is itself dependent on a knowledge of God — of his "name" and character,[10] his word and promises, what he has accomplished for us in Christ, what he requires of us, etc.

Here are just a few references to the importance of understanding biblical truth:

- … *"If you abide in my word, … you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8:31-32)
- *"This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent."* (John 17:3, MEV)
- *Those who know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You.* (Psalm 9:10, MEV)
- *"Let him who boasts boast about this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for in these things I delight," declares the LORD.* (Jeremiah 9:24, my translation)
- The seed on the good soil represents "the one who hears the word and understands it." (Matthew 13:23)
- *Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.* (Titus 1:1)
- *Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.* (Psalm 119:11, MEV)

Paul constantly sought to impress upon Timothy and Titus the need for "sound" doctrine and teaching — so that the church members might in turn be sound in their faith.
See 1 Timothy 1:10; 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1-2.
The Greek words translated "sound" in these verses all derive from the verb *hygiainō* (Strong's G5198), which means "to be in good health", "to be free from any disability". Our English term *hygiene* derives from this root. While the verb primarily means to be in good physical health, Paul used the term to emphasize the importance of doctrinal purity and spiritual well-being within the early church communities. His metaphorical use conveyed the urgent need to maintain the integrity of the faith amidst false teachings and heresies.[11]

[10] God's "name" refers to that which is known about him — his reputation or fame based on the revelation of his attributes and character. These are revealed in his word, and supremely in Jesus, but also in his providential actions in the world.
[11] Adapted from the Bible Hub entry for Strong's G5198 (*hygiainō*): https://biblehub.com/greek/5198.htm.

Content of Preaching

A preacher's primary task as God's "worker" is to rightly handle and proclaim the word (2Tim 2:15).
Generally, preaching should focus on a particular passage of Scripture.
The preacher's first task is exegesis:
Seeking to understand what the passage says by studying its language, biblical context, and historical background. What did the author intend to convey to his original readers?
An examination of the underlying Greek or Hebrew text should prove helpful.
Then follows the task of exposition:
Seeking to make the passage understandable and relevant.

A preacher should not just relate facts, but press home the passage's relevance as the word of God to his congregation — correcting, rebuking, and encouraging where needed (2Tim 4:2).
Of course, he must work hard to ascertain that what he proclaims is God's truth and not his own opinion.
To be truly God's word to the congregation, the proclaimed word must be faithful to the written word.

As God's ambassador, a preacher must have a clear grasp of the gospel and be able to articulate it.
Mindful of his own failings, he should preach and appeal to his fellow sinners as one who has himself been plucked from the fire, pointing to God's amazing grace and provision in Christ.

A preacher ought to be sensitive to his congregation's needs. Ongoing pastoral visitation will ensure his acquaintance with the spiritual state of the members. A minister and his elders are under-shepherds responsible for the spiritual health and welfare of the members (Ac 20:28; 1Pet 5:2).
An Anglican curate used to be someone entrusted with the "cure of souls" within a parish.
And that's correct: Ministers are (under Christ) physicians of souls.

A preacher will at times find it necessary to refute error (2Tim 4:2-3; cf. Tit 1:9) — a task that requires a good grasp of theology. A reasonable knowledge of Church history, including the major issues and challenges faced by the Christian Church over the centuries, should also prove useful.

Lastly, a preacher should be a perpetual student, forever learning and acquiring knowledge — an avid reader of Scripture, of Christian books, and of other ministers' sermons.
Constant reading will provide fresh material and stimulus for preaching. "Iron sharpens iron" (Pr 27:17).
The English-speaking world is blessed with an abundance of biblical resources: books, commentaries, online articles, etc. There is no excuse for contentless preaching!

Conclusion

Dear reader, if you at all value your salvation, place yourself under the ministry of a faithful gospel preacher.
Do not put up with a minister who decries doctrinal preaching!