

ROGER SPRADLIN'S CONVENTION MESSAGE**CONVENTION MESSAGE**

Roger Spradlin

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In 2 Timothy 4, Paul is writing to Timothy. He says, *"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry"* (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

There is a lot of talk today in the SBC about declining baptisms, a shrinking missionary force, and churches that are plateauing or even closing. We know that there are titanic changes taking place all around us and our culture. Sociologists call the culture we've been living in a post modern culture. Many are even saying that America is a post Christian culture. It seems like the cultural changes have now become a constant, and if anything, they are accelerating. Most of us don't like many of the changes that we see. It was Mark Twain that said, "Nobody likes change except a wet baby." In many ways, however, leadership is about seeking to manage change. There are obviously huge changes on the horizon for the Southern Baptist Convention, but I don't want to talk about what should change in the SBC; I want to talk about what should never change.

If we could be transported fifty or one hundred years into the future (if Jesus has not yet returned), I'm sure we would hardly recognize the SBC or our churches. The cars people drive would be different, if they even still drove cars. The way people dress or communicate would be different. Our corporate worship may even seem strange and unfamiliar to us. There's one thing that should never change, however, and that is the proclamation of God's Word. At the end of his life, Paul gives Timothy some important instruction and all of us by extension. He writes to Timothy to help focus his priorities as both a pastor and Christian leader. The end of 2 Timothy is packed with emotion – the Apostle Paul is in jail, not under house arrest, but in a prison. It's not a modern prison with three square meals a day, an exercise yard, and a television to watch; the prison is described as a dark, dank dungeon – a filthy hole in the ground – and Paul is soon to be executed, when someone brings him a scroll or a parchment.

If you had but days to live, to whom would you write and what would you say? As far as we know, the Apostle Paul had no wife or children to write, so he writes to a young pastor that he's invested in and by extension, he writes to all pastors to come. In his letter, Paul declares to Timothy, *"I have finished my course"* (2 Timothy 4:7). He has finished the race. It's as if Paul is saying that we are in this great relay race of the gospel and he's now handing Timothy the baton of the preaching the gospel – which you and I both hold today.

As Paul faced death, his letter could have been laced with bitterness and even despair, but instead Paul writes to Timothy about his responsibility as a pastor. In fact, this passage and book can be seen as a pastor's job description. The Apostle Paul's mind is on the future of the gospel, but his message is not just for pastors. This passage in 2 Timothy is relevant for all of us as Christians because all of us have people whom we influence.

In 2 Timothy 4:1, Paul says, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.” He says, “therefore;” anytime you see the word “therefore,” you should ask “why is it there for?” This word is referring back to everything that he had previously said – there will be persecution and evil men that come into the world, but we have a sure Word from God. Paul also reminds Timothy that this business of being a Christian is serious. He says that we are all going to give an account to Jesus for every moment of life – the good, the bad, and even the ugly – and that all of life will be judged by Jesus.

2 Timothy 4:2 says, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” Here is the first principle: **our primary responsibility is to preach God’s word, not our opinion.** The main task of a preacher and a Christian is to declare God’s message, and yet it seems that preaching has fallen on hard times. Now many people want dialogue instead of monologue. Our culture says “don’t preach at me!” Preachers depicted on television or movies many times appear over melodramatic or completely irrelevant. People say some things are as dry as a sermon. In some churches, preaching has even become somewhat antiquated and replaced by a multimedia presentation or a series of video clips from movies; but God’s plan has always involved preaching.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church and said, “For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21). God has always used preaching – the declaration of his Word – to save the lost. The word “preacher” (*kerusso* in Greek) is the herald of a king. A herald was someone who would enter a village or town with a trumpet in one hand to gather attention and then declare the message of the king. They didn’t make up or edit the message. They simply declared the message and that’s what we are to do. The message of the gospel is not one of good advice or about self help, it is the message of the King. We are God’s mailmen and we simply carry God’s mail to the world.

So what is it that we are to preach? You said “Preach the word.” I chose many years ago to preach expository messages. I know that not every preacher makes this decision, but it seems to me that much of our preaching is backwards today or at least it starts that way. Sometimes, preaching starts with felt needs, and then it goes to Scripture in search of a text. In our preaching, it seems that “need” used to be primarily a verb; many times now, however, it is only used as a noun. The reality is that man is not even aware of his greatest need. Our greatest need is for God and yet the spiritual eyes and heart of man is blind to the truth until it is heard and quickened by God. That’s why I think it’s best to start with the Scripture and then seek to apply it; to read, study, and declare God’s Word in context as it was meant to be read.

I have been preaching in the same church for 34 years and I still have not quite preached every single verse in the Old or New Testament. I’m closing in on it. I’m very close, but I certainly haven’t preached every verse. I’m not running out of Bible. I’m running out of time. Our culture, however, works against preaching. If you watch a movie or television, the camera changes every three to four seconds. If it’s an action movie, it changes up to 70 times in a minute. We are conditioned so that our attention is held by change instead of content.

It was Chuck Swindoll that said, “There’s a subtle difference between teaching and preaching.” I suppose we could certainly debate that, but he went on to say that “teaching feeds the mind; [but] preaching challenges the will.” Preaching compels us to change and is about God’s Word. It’s not about psychology, self help, therapy, current events, or world or domestic politics.

Why would anyone preach anything except God’s Word? I think it’s because many churches and pastors have simply lost confidence in the power of the gospel to change people’s lives. We think that instead of happening through the transformation of knowing Jesus that change is going to happen by political action, human effort, therapy, or by understanding our own psyche and tweaking our life. The reality is that Jesus is the answer. He’s the answer to the turmoil of our world. Jesus unites believers in one family. We are so diverse today – economically, ethnically, and politically; some say that there are so many diverse groups in the culture that churches have to target a narrow demographic and become a homogenous group. It’s kind of a “birds of a feather flock together” mentality where churches are virtually an all-builder generation and are dying out. Other churches are made up of all baby boomers or all millennials and the church has been reduced to niche marketing. The reality, though, is that the church is not about erecting barriers, it’s about tearing down barriers! What could be more diverse than a Jewish legalist sitting beside a Greek pagan in the first century church, both of them reconciled to God? Or a slave sitting alongside a Roman free man? You see the message of the gospel takes a rich man and a poor man and a white man and a black man and puts them in the same family, singing “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus!” That’s what the gospel can do! That’s what the gospel will do if we simply proclaim it!

The second principle is that **we should preach at every opportunity, not just when it’s convenient.** Paul says to Timothy, “Preach the word ... in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). Always be ready. There should be urgency in our preaching. I’m convinced that some pastors are hesitant to preach through books of the Bible because they know if they do so, they will be forced to deal with some tough subjects. The reality is that this is God’s Word and there must be a fearlessness in preaching it. At times, we won’t feel like preaching it whether physically, psychologically, or even spiritually. We may be dealing with something within our own life and feel unworthy, but we are not to lower our preaching to our living. We are to seek to raise our living to our preaching because it is not just a privilege, it is our duty. It is our calling to declare the Word of God as believers.

In Acts 21, Paul went to the temple precincts in Jerusalem and took a young, Greek, Gentile convert with him. The people thought wrongfully that Paul had taken the convert past the court of the Gentiles and had somehow disrespected the temple. This caused a riot and the crowd began to beat Paul. Soldiers came and rescued him, but then arrested him and put him in chains. As the soldiers took Paul up the steps of the Antonia Fortress, he asked to speak to the crowd. What did he say? Talk about a tough crowd – they had just beaten him up! He’s still bruised and bleeding, in chains, and many of the crowd had taken a vow that they would not eat again until Paul was dead! He stood up there, however, and spoke to the crowd about Jesus. He said, “I was on the open road to Damascus one day and I saw a bright light! I met Jesus and He changed my life!” There must be that kind of fearlessness in preaching God’s Word!

The next principle from 2 Timothy 4:2 is that **our preaching should be Biblically balanced.** The Apostle Paul says, “Preach the word ... in season and out of season.” Then he says, “Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” The declaration of God’s Word makes us aware of sin. It dethrones self and exalts God. If someone feels worse after a sermon, that’s not always bad. The truth can convict us if it’s not done in a condemning way, but in a loving way. There’s an element of preaching that shows us our sin and rebukes us. Preaching must be tough, but it also should be tender. Paul says that to exhort is the idea of encouraging – that always, even in sin, there is the hope of forgiveness and the hope of Jesus. If we rebuke and do not encourage, we add to people’s burden. If we encourage and never rebuke, we become complicit in our culture’s sin. There must always be a balance between the toughness of truth

and the tenderness of grace and Paul tells Timothy to do this with a sense of longsuffering or patience. We must understand that God is at work over a person's lifetime. One sermon may have very little effect, but there is a tremendous effect of cumulative preaching week after week, month after month, and year after year. This is why I think a pastor should stay put where they are at until they hear a very clear calling otherwise. You should not move unless you hear a voice deeper than Adrian Rogers. There is such a cumulative effect of declaring the Word of God.

Sometimes, I ask my grandchildren after school, "What did you learn today?" Their answer is always the same – "nothing." I will ask them the question again. Nothing. Isn't it amazing that days filled with nothing equals a public education in the United States? Actually, though, learning is subtle. Isaiah 28:10 says we teach "*precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little;*" that's the cumulative effect of declaring the Word of God verse by verse, week by week, and year by year.

In 2 Timothy 4:3, Paul says that "*the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*" Here's the principle: **we should preach to please God, rather than men.** There is a natural resistance to God's Word. The time is coming – and I think we are there – where people will not endure sound doctrine or teaching. It is the word for hygienic or healthy. Some people do not want the truth; they want someone to make them feel good or to stroke their ego and sense of self worth. That's why preachers today can fill sports arenas by telling people exactly what they want to hear. Some say, "I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay!" Really? We're not all okay! Without Jesus, we are alienated from God! There's enmity. We are the very enemies of God! We are sinners that offended a holy God. The tendency in our culture, however, is that people want to be entertained all the time, even at church. I'm not saying that we can't use humor or be dramatic in preaching the gospel, but it must all be for the truth. There is an economic principle of supply and demand – that where there is a demand, there is a supply that follows it. Why are there so many shallow sermons in America? It is because there is a demand. There are those that have itching ears. They don't want to hear the truth. Preachers are not to be like politicians representing the majority – taking polls, surveying the community, and telling people what they want to hear. Often people don't even know that they want to hear the truth until they hear it. Some who are preachers or Sunday School teachers and teach the Bible are simply people and don't want to be disliked. This makes it easy to fall into the trap of telling people what they want to hear – that sin doesn't really matter, that everyone is going to heaven, that there is no hell, or that Jesus wants you to be rich. We must be careful that we don't just listen to preachers that validate our current lifestyle. What we need is a preacher to tell us the truth of this book.

2 Timothy 4:5 says, "*But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*" Here's the principle: **our preaching should focus on the gospel.** Paul says, "*endure afflictions*" – whoa, wait a minute! I thought if I was a follower of Christ, I would be healthy and wealthy and would be exempt somehow from adversity. I thought that if I follow Christ, every day of my life is going to be like Disneyland?! Take it from someone that lives in California and that has ten very small grandchildren, Disneyland is not all it's cracked up to be. It is not the happiest place on earth for grandparents, I can tell you that.

The prosperity gospel has taken a toll on evangelicals. We now live in a culture (even in our churches) where most people would rather be envied for what they have instead of admired

for who they are. We know that theologically, the prosperity gospel is wrong and there is no exemption from adversity. We know that missionaries can be killed, small children can die, and that preachers can contract cancer. Theologically, we know these things, but we think that somehow if we love Jesus, we will be exempt. No, we will not. What changes is that we have a new resource as a believer; that no matter how dark the night and no matter how difficult the path – whatever adversity or hardship we face, we are not alone. God said, "*I will never leave you. I will never forsake you*" (Deuteronomy 31:6). I don't know what you are going through today, but I can tell you this – you are not alone! God uses the hardships and adversity within our life to deepen our faith and create within us an utter dependence on Him. There is no shortcut to a holy life and everyone wants a shortcut. That's why there are hundreds of diet books, but it's still hard to lose the weight. It takes discipline to eat a healthy diet. It also takes time to be holy – a lifetime of following God's Word.

Paul tells Timothy to "*do the work of an evangelist*" (2 Timothy 4:5). An evangelist is someone that declares the Good News. What is the Good News? We all know that the word "gospel" means Good News. What is the gospel about? The gospel is about Jesus. Jesus said "*If I be lifted up, I will draw all men into myself*" (John 12:32). Churches that lift up Jesus grow and those that don't lift Him up, don't grow. I don't just mean growing numerically, as sometimes that's dependent upon context; I'm also talking about growing in depth in the Kingdom. Spurgeon said, "In preaching always be a path to the cross." Our preaching is about pointing people to Jesus. It's that simple. Look how he lived; look how he loved; look how he died; look how he rose. However, people want the pastor to address all kinds of topics: "What about my finances?" "What about my marriage?" "What about my children?" "Pastor, I need help with my stress!" Paul is saying, "Listen! There's one thing that fixes everything and that is the Word of God."

The mark of Biblical preaching is not simply information. We can fall into the trap of thinking that we are downloading data and it's not so that when people walk away they think of how smart the preacher is or what knowledge they have gained. The Gnostics said that simple faith in Jesus is not enough, that you need a secret, superior knowledge. There are some that seem to think that discipleship is primarily about knowledge. No. Being a follower of Jesus is not primarily about knowledge, it is about obedience. Knowledge can make us like the Gnostics where we start feeling superior and even smug. Paul said that sometimes knowledge puffs up, but God's grace in our life always makes us gracious. Grace will never make anyone arrogant. The goal of preaching is not information, but spiritual transformation. "*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God*" (Romans 10:17). The effectiveness of the gospel is not in the ability of the preacher, but in the power of the message. The gospel is not a self help program where people listen to it and then tweak their life. The gospel is not about making bad men better. It's about making spiritually dead men alive! That's what the gospel does!

Evangelism is not just the pastor's job – it involves all of us. The Good News should not be hard to share, should it? If you have a child or grandchild born in your family, you want to share that news. The gospel is not just good news, it is the best news – that God loves us, even though we are alienated from Him without Christ where there's enmity between us and Him, but that He loves us and sent his Son to die for us! That's the best news! Doing the work of an evangelist, though, is not just sharing the gospel. Our mission is to make disciples. Making disciples involves more than the initial step of sharing faith or regeneration. We know from the Great Commission that making disciples involves the obedience of baptism. Making disciples is also about investing in someone's life so that they become a faithful follower of Christ who then, in turn, lives missionally as they make disciples. We make disciples who make disciples – that is our mission.

Paul then says, “*fulfill your ministry*” (2 Timothy 4:5). The Greek word for “ministry” (we get our word “deacon” from it) is about being a servant. Throughout the New Testament, believers are described on many occasions as being the very sons and daughters of God, “*to as many as receive them, He gave them the power to become the children of God*” (John 1:12). Being the sons of God speaks of tremendous privilege that God is our Father and that we can approach and speak to Him and call Him Abba Father. Being the sons of God does speak a privilege, but we are also called the servants of God and that speaks of responsibility. Ministry is not something we pay the pastor to do. It is something the pastor trains and equips all of us to do. We must all be willing to dirty our hands in the mess of other people’s lives so that as we share the gospel, we make disciples.

He said, “*Preach the word*” – the Word of God that reveals God to us. We might be able to look at creation and intellectually say there must be a first cause and supreme being, but we wouldn’t know if he was malevolent or benevolent. It is the Word of God that reveals God to us. We know nothing about God apart from his revelation. And then we have Jesus – the Living Revelation of God. Jesus said, “*He that has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9). The focus of the Bible is Jesus and He is the only one that can change anyone’s life and forgive sin. Neither you nor I can do that, but Jesus can – and He will!

Many times at a fancy restaurant, the lights are down low or are lit by candlelight. Sometimes it is so dark that someone has to lead you to your table. I have noticed that there is a direct correlation between how low the lights are and how high the bill is and also that how high the bill is signifies a smaller portion of food. This type of atmosphere is called ambience. However, if you are really hungry, you don’t go somewhere for the ambience. You go to a little hole in the wall barbecue joint or, if you are in Southern California, to a taco truck.

If we are not careful as churches or pastors, we can spend all of our time and energy on the ambience. We think we have to have the right lighting, chairs, sound, coffee, band, or songs; and often what’s emphasized in the modern church are programs or forums, instead of the function of declaring Jesus. It is not programs or forums, but it is function of the declaration of the gospel that changes people’s lives; and because we emphasize forums, churches are known for different things. Maybe a church over here is known for their traditional worship and another for their contemporary worship. One church is known for its beautiful buildings and campus, another for its children’s ministry, and another for its youth ministry. Changing forums of ministry may seem to bring success, but it will never bring succession. The SBC cannot get hung in the traditions or programs of the past so that the focus becomes perpetuating the status quo. There is one thing that must never change, and it is not the forum or the program of ministry, it is the function of declaring the gospel!

If someone is starving for water, they do not care if you serve it to them in a fancy goblet or a Dixie cup. What we have is Living Water that will slake the spiritual thirst of our culture. We don’t spin the message of it ourselves. It’s not one of speculation, but revelation. It is not about philosophy or pop psychology, we simply point people to Jesus. If preaching were merely about establishing a set of theological principles, then we would seek to win intellectual assent by argumentation. If the gospel was about exemplary morality, we would point to the Commandments and say, “There! Keep them!” But we proclaim a living person, a historical fact – the death and the resurrection of our Lord – and we don’t have to prop up Jesus with latest cultural fad or the newest psychology that we tried to Christianize. We simply point to Jesus. We should do it and always be aware of our own spiritual impotence to save anyone. Even with all the great resources of the SBC, we cannot save the smallest child, put a marriage back

together, or make a man a better dad – but Jesus in a moment can change a person’s life. He can break an addiction, heal a marriage, and transform someone on their way to hell to be on their way to heaven. Jesus is the only unique message we have. The secular world can outspend us, out-build us, out-advertise us, and out-organize us, but the uniqueness that we have is Jesus and the gospel. If I could talk you into following Christ, someone else could talk you out of it. The preacher is not a salesman, he is a herald in the marketplace with the trumpet in one hand and the message of the King – pointing to Jesus. As we point to Jesus, we are like the man at an art auction that holds up the painting as people bid upon it, careful not to wrap his hands around the frame to obscure anything. We must be careful that nothing in our character or conduct distracts from the message of Jesus.

The message and anchor of our churches must be Jesus in the gospel. We should talk about Him in eternity past, co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. We should speak of Him out of Colossians as the Creator when there was nothing – He stood upon nothing and nothing became everything. He shoved up the mountains and scooped out the oceans and laid the course of the rivers. We should speak of Him as the Great Healer, remembering when He touched the lepers. No prophet or person in human history had ever healed anyone from congenital blindness, but Jesus opened the eyes of the blind so that the very first thing they saw was the face of the Son of God. We should talk about Him as a Great Teacher. Even His critics said no man ever spoke like Him. Neither darkness nor distance could diminish the multitudes that came to hear the very voice of the Son of God. We should speak about His hands that were never clenched in a fist against anyone and that never touched an unclean thing. We should share about His feet that carried Him on missions of mercy; His beard that was plucked for us; His face that was beaten and spit upon; His back that was ripped and torn; His lips that spoke Words of life; and His eyes that filled with tears and felt the sting of the lostness of the world. We should emphasize his birth in Bethlehem. Before he ever spoke or wrought a miracle, the sky filled with angels announcing the birth of the Son of God, the shepherds came and bowed, and the Magi brought their gifts.

But it is not just his birth in Bethlehem, his boyhood in Nazareth, his baptism in the Jordan, his temptation in the desert, his teaching on the seashore, his transfiguration on the mountain, or his trial in Jerusalem – from the incarnation to the intercession, from His agony to His ascension, from the womb to the tomb, from the cradle to our cross – our message is Jesus!

Jesus is our hope! Preach the Word! Preach the gospel! Preach Jesus! Preach Jesus!

— as preached by Roger Spradlin, June 14, 2017
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