

Reformed by the Word for the Word

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 (NIV)

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. ¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Are you a perfectionist? Do you look at something you've done, and then starting thinking of how you could have done it better? I am not good at art. I remember this one project that I did back in eighth grade where you had to make a personal banner, pennant type thing. The idea was to incorporate your hobbies, your pastimes, your favorite things into your name. My favorite interest: Star Wars. I was going to draw an X-wing on my pennant. So, I sat down with a pencil and a ruler and my model X-wing. I spent a whole afternoon drawing it, and I was proud of it. My classmates knew me well enough and my artistic ability that when they saw it, they all said I traced it. Instead of defending myself, I examined my drawing more closely, and I saw the imperfections. I saw that my drawing was not symmetrical like it should have been. An area here was too large and an area there was too small. The lines weren't exactly straight. I found out later that even though I was extremely proud of my drawing – imperfections and all - I hadn't done the project right. I didn't even get a good grade on what I still consider my best drawing. It needed to be changed for the better. It needed to be reformed.

The Bible is a history of reforms, of changing things for the better. After Adam and Eve destroyed God's perfect world, God immediately enacted a reform for the people of the earth. He said that an offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, the devil. Adam and Eve had destroyed their relationship with God, but God would reform that relationship, bring them back to him and away from Satan. When the whole world was filled with wickedness and violence and there were only 8 believers, God reformed the world with the waters of the flood. When God's people, the Israelites, forgot about God, God reformed them with foreign armies. When true and proper worship of God went by the wayside, God used the Israelite kings like Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah to reform the people back to God's Word, back to a right relationship with him. When the people continued to reject God and his Word, he reformed them by destroying Jerusalem and his Holy Temple, and reformed them again in 70 years by bringing them back to rebuild everything as they themselves were being reformed in their relationship with God through people like Haggai, Ezra, Zechariah, Nehemiah, and Malachi. Jesus worked to reform the Pharisees and their relationship with God by condemning their man-made traditions for superseding the Word of God. Jesus reformed those sinners and tax collectors that he ate with by telling them to leave their lives of sin and to follow him instead, to make having a relationship with God based on what God taught them, not based on following the pleasures of the world. When the Apostle Peter separated himself from the Gentiles, the non-Jews, even though Peter taught that the Gentiles were equal in relationship status with God, Paul had to reform Peter by publicly correcting him.

The Church went through this cycle again and again, always returning to God's Word to reform God's people. Martin Luther did the same in his time. The Catholic Church was teaching that a person's relationship with God needed to be formed based on what they did. Luther's relationship with God was reformed by what God said that he had done for Luther and for all people of the world, that he was saved by grace alone, faith alone, found only in God's Holy Scripture alone. Every generation of the Church needs to examine itself to the Word of God and reform its relationship to God based on what he says.

Our generation is no different than the rest of history. "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." (verses 3-5) Sure, we can point to all sorts of world religions and the myths being taught there. We can even look at Christian denominations and shake our heads in disgust at the fairy tales they teach that make our salvation based on our works, that make Jesus nothing more than a role model, that teaches that we can contribute something, even if it's just a little bit, to being considered right before God. But I'm not preaching to them. I'm preaching to you.

How does your relationship with God need to be reformed? What myths tempt you to turn away from sound doctrine? What things about God's Word do you cast aside because it's not what you want to hear? Think of Paul's charge to Timothy: "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." (verse 2)

Does that command, "Preach the word," make you cringe a little. Do you immediately write it off as, "That's something the pastor does? That's what we pay him for. And besides, Paul is writing to a pastor, not me." It's a myth that only the pastor is charged with preaching God's Word. God has called you his royal priesthood that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. God didn't call only pastors to preach his Word. He called all of his followers to proclaim it.

Paul says we are to preach God's Word "in season and out of season." These words carry with them the meaning that this preaching of God's Holy Scriptures is done both when it is convenient to do so and when its inconvenient. Really? I don't want to bring this up to my atheist family member. It's so much easier not to rock the boat so that family get togethers aren't super awkward and uncomfortable. I don't want to bring up Jesus to my coworker when they say that they don't need a religion or that they don't need a church. To my gay friend, I don't want to tell them that their lifestyle is against God's Word. To the couple living together, I don't want to tell them how to live their lives. Besides, who am I to judge?

What we really want to hear Paul say is, "It's okay. I didn't really mean for you to preach God's Word when it can cause strife for relationships within the family or among friends. It's okay to not say anything to these people; you have enough hardships already." Our ears itch to hear that we are off the hook on this duty, that we can hide what we believe out of fear of rejection, fear of persecution.

This generation of the Church needs to be reformed. We need to be reformed. The only way that happens is by the Word of God, what he says about my relationship with him. God's Word rebukes me, shows me that he disapproves of how I have failed to preach his Word. But it also corrects me, reforms me, changes me. His Word tells me, reminds me that all my shortcomings as a pastor, as a person, are paid for by Christ. He tells me, reminds me that I am adopted into the family of God through my baptism. His Word tells me, reminds me that my baptism, your baptism, was a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. His Word tells me that baptism now saves me, has made me a new creation, has reformed me. His Holy Scriptures have reformed as they made me wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Through these Holy Scriptures God has reformed you. His Word has won out in the conviction of your heart, that his sound doctrine is what you continue in as you return to his Word over and over again and are reformed. That's why Paul wrote, "As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of." (verse 14) Continue in it because his Word continues to correct us, instruct us, forgive us, train us. It gives us the words to speak, the words to live by. By his Holy Scriptures, God thoroughly equips you and me for every good work, to preach his Word in season and out of season, to correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction.

We do this when we expose someone's sin in order to correct them. We rebuke the family member, the friend in order to warn them, that what they are doing is pushing themselves away from God. We encourage them with the message of what God has done for them in spite of their sins, how he has forgiven them with nothing owed back to him. God's Holy Scripture teaches us his patience with us that in turn makes us patience in our instruction of others. His Word helps us fight our anger back, to keep from attacking people with our faith and instead to take the time with them to carefully guide them to our God who makes people wise for salvation. This is how God's Word reforms us.

My best drawing didn't get a good grade because I didn't follow the instructions. I needed to be reformed to pay better attention to the assignment details so that I could do better in the future. And so it is with our spiritual life. Our lives in relationship to God constantly need to be reformed. God reformed you by his Word to have a right relationship with him. By your baptism, you wake up each morning as a new creation, ready to do God's will. His Holy Scriptures have made you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. He will continue to reform you day by day as you continue in what you have learned and have become convinced based on his Word. So he instructs you, charges you, to preach that same Word that reforms a person's relationship with God. "But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (verse 5) because you have been reformed by God's Holy Word. Amen.