

The Flaws of a Fad-Driven Church, Part 6

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Piercing the Soul

As we saw in yesterday's post, the first characteristic of the Word of God is that it is powerful. Here's characteristic number 2:

2. The Word of God is penetrating.

Notice how vividly the writer of Hebrews portrays this idea: "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow."

The Word is like a sword—"a two-edged sword." It has no blunt side. It cuts no matter which way you swing it. Not only that, but it also has a penetrating point. It is "piercing." You can swing it like a saber or thrust with it like a rapier. You don't have to be highly skilled to use it with effect. In the hands of an amateur, it will still work. And there's nothing so hard or so deeply concealed that it can't penetrate.

In fact, look at the verse again: the Word of God is "sharper than any twoedged sword." No human instrument or worldly technique or psychological therapy is more effective than the Word of God to penetrate the human heart. It lays bare the true thoughts and intents of every heart.

I had a friend in college who was describing his efforts to evangelize a fellow student. My friend was convinced—quite incorrectly—that stealth evangelism is the best way to win people to Christ. So he was trying to be as subtle as possible and as delicate and indirect as possible while waiting for an opening to tell this non-Christian student about Christ.

He kept telling me about conversations he had with this guy, and how he was looking for some kind of "opening" to work the gospel in. This went on for months. And it seemed to me that he had already wasted several good "openings," but he just lacked the boldness to bring up the subject of Christ. It seemed to me that he was waiting for the guy to be like the Philippian jailer and ask, "Sir, what must I do to be saved?" And I could see it wasn't going to happen. So I said, "Why don't you just bring up the subject, and tell him in the plainest possible language what the Bible says about Christ?"

And he said, “I just don’t think he’s really open yet.”

But you know what? We don’t have to be “open” for the Word of God to penetrate. It is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” and quite capable of opening even the hardest heart.

We need to have more confidence in the ability of the Word of God to penetrate people’s hearts. This is one of the real deficiencies in this generation of evangelicals. We don’t have enough faith in the power of God’s Word to penetrate a hardened heart. And so some Christians—and even lots of churches—actually back away from proclaiming the simple Word of God to unbelievers in plain language. They think it’s necessary to have music and drama and other forms of entertainment to soften people up and prepare them to receive the Word. And in many cases they never do get around to declaring the Word of God with any kind of boldness.

You hear people today talking about “pre-evangelism.” I don’t know what that is supposed to mean, but usually it refers to some activity or technique that entertains people and tries to make them friendly to Christianity while carefully avoiding the risk of confronting them with the truth of Scripture—as if something besides the Word of God might be *more* effective than Scripture at penetrating their hearts. That is sheer folly, and it is a waste of time. *Nothing* is more penetrating and more effective in reaching sin-hardened hearts than the pure and unadulterated Word of God. All our human techniques and ingenuity are like dull plastic butter knives compared to the Word of God, which is “sharper than any two-edged sword.”

There’s a story in the biography of George Whitefield about a man named Thorpe, who was a bitter opponent of everything that is holy. He and a group of his friends—all of them young, rebellious thugs—conspired together to mock and oppose George Whitefield’s evangelistic ministry while Whitefield was preaching in Bristol, England.

George Whitefield had severely crossed eyes, if you have ever seen a realistic likeness of him. And these guys used to refer to him as “Dr. Squintum.” They called their little gang “The Hell-Fire Club,” and they disrupted meetings, mocked Whitefield on the streets and in public places, and generally tried to make his ministry a reproach in their community. Whitefield’s preaching had already made a deep and lasting impact in Bristol, and these young ruffians hated him for it. So this guy Thorpe got one of Whitefield’s published sermons and took it to the local pub, where the “Hell-Fire Club” was gathered to drink together while they make a burlesque of Whitefield.

Thorpe was apparently pretty good at doing impressions, and he had all Whitefield’s mannerisms and gestures down pat. So he stood in the center of this pub and crossed his eyes and began to deliver a derisive rendition of Whitefield’s sermon. But in the middle of the sermon, the Word of God pierced his heart, and he suddenly stopped and sat down, trembling and broken-hearted. Right then and

there, he confessed the truth of the gospel and gave his heart to Christ. His aim was to taunt and ridicule, but he accidentally converted himself! Or rather, the power of the Word of God penetrated his soul and cut him to the heart. He became a preacher himself and quite an effective evangelist, because he knew so well the power of the Word of God to penetrate hardened hearts.

Notice that the Word of God pierces to the very depths, “even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” It probes to the deepest recesses of the heart, no matter how hardened or how closed the heart might be. In fact, *only* Scripture can do that.

Notice how militant this language is. It sounds like the language of armed conflict—swords and cutting, and dividing asunder of the joints and marrow. It’s vivid, destructive-sounding language—the language of warfare and devastation. And it is true that sometimes the Word of God pierces hearts as a judgment, without remedy and without any healing.

But I don’t think that’s primarily what the writer of Hebrews has in mind. In this context, he is urging his readers to examine themselves, lest they fall away from Christ before they have truly embraced Him with saving faith. He is warning them that it is possible to come close to Christ and yet fall away without entering into His rest—the rest that comes with redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

Verse 11: “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” And our verse comes immediately after that admonition: “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword.” He *wants* them to allow the Word of God to cut through their pretensions and their false professions and reveal the true thoughts and intents of their hearts.

And this is a reminder that there’s a painful process involved in regeneration. In Ezekiel 11:19, the Lord describes what is involved in this process, “I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh.” Spiritual open-heart surgery.

This is the very thing that was pictured in the act of circumcision. According to Deuteronomy 10:16, it pictured the cutting away of the foreskin of the heart. Jeremiah 4:4 speaks of it too: “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart.” That’s why the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 2:28–29, “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit.”

That’s the very imagery our verse in Hebrews 4 calls to mind. It’s the cutting away of that which defiles. Circumcision of the heart. The Word of God is the instrument that makes this possible.

Painful cutting is often the necessary prerequisite for true and thorough healing. That's what surgery is all about. And that is precisely the ministry the Word of God has in the lives of those who genuinely know Christ. If you have never experienced that painful piercing of the two-edged sword, then you ought to examine yourself to see whether you are really in the faith. Because you cannot possibly know Christ in a true and saving way unless the Word of God has rebuked your sin and cut into your fallen heart and convicted and convinced you of your own desperate need of cleansing and spiritual heart surgery to deal with your sin.

And that, I believe, is the very thing the writer of Hebrews is speaking about here. It's a wholly beneficial thing. Although the Word of God is like a sword that cuts deeply and penetrates to the very depths, it is a necessary and beneficial incision that ultimately is designed for our own good. And for those who submit to the Word of God rather than resisting it, the cutting and probing of the two-edged sword always results in salvation, rather than destruction.

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