

Cut to the Heart
Acts 2:32-41

There are many things that we take for granted daily that were not available for people throughout most of the human history (and in some places are still not available). Clean, running water. Electricity. Instant communication (phones, email). The list is long. It includes having a Bible and the ability to read and understand it.

It is estimated that at least 90% of the Jewish population during the time of Jesus and sometime after could read or write nothing except their own name. And, written materials were rare with no mass production. The people of God in Bible times had little opportunity to possess or read the Word of God for themselves. So, stories like the ones found in 2 Chron. 34 and Neh. 9 make sense.

In 2 Chron. 34, Josiah became king of Judah after his father, Amon, who had worshipped idols. At the beginning of Josiah's rule, a copy of God's Word is found in the temple. When it is read to the king, both he and the people were convicted of their sin and a great revival took place. In Neh. 8, after returning from exile in Babylon and rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, Nehemiah assembled the people and had the Scriptures read to them. The word says, all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. V. 9 says that Nehemiah and the other leaders had to tell the people to stop weeping and mourning, "for all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law."

With those stories as a background, let's read Acts 2:32-41. This is the conclusion of Peter's gospel message at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit 1st came upon the early church (READ Acts 2:32-41).

What is similar in all of these texts is this: When the word of God was spoken and understood, conviction—a sense that some belief or behavior we have is wrong and needs to change—inevitably came about in the souls of those who heard and understood.

Peter's sermon in Acts 2 included multiple references to the written Word. Joel 2:28-32 is the text he used to explain what was happening before their eyes. He used multiple Psalms (16, 89, 110, 132) to show how Jesus fulfilled OT prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. The written word of God was the structure around which his message was constructed and the Living Word of God, Jesus, was the content of the message he preached. Notice the 1st words of Peter's sermon: Jesus of Nazareth.

When the true Word of God was communicated and understood, the Bible records that the hearers were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

The book of Hebrews testifies to this power of the word of God to bring about conviction. **Heb. 4:12** says, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." A true word from God, making us conscious of God's presence, penetrates our souls and brings under judgment the deep things we think and feel. It convicts.

At the risk of exposing too much of myself, one of my recurring dreams is about how it is time for me to preach but I've been mowing the lawn and am still dressed in my sweaty, dirty, mowing clothes. I can't come here dressed like that.

In the same way, a true word from God makes us conscious of the presence of that holy God. I can no more feel comfortable in his presence with all my faults, failures and sins exposed than I can feel comfortable preaching here in my yardwork clothes. Such an awareness convicts me that something has to change.

So, one of the ways we can differentiate a true word from the Lord from a false teaching or prophecy is to ask ourselves, does what I am thinking or feeling or being told is a word from God bring

conviction about a sin of which I need to repent, an attitude I need to adjust, or a behavior in which I need to engage or one I need to suspend. Or does the word simply coddle and cajole me, saying only what I want to hear. A true word from God challenges us to change, to grow, to become more Christlike.

When Paul challenged Timothy to be faithful in preaching the Word, he warned in 2 Tim. 4:2-4, “Preach the word;... 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. Was Paul talking about the 21st century?

Camp Quest West in California is designed for children of agnostics, atheists, freethinkers, and humanists. The weeklong experience includes crafts, campfires, and canoe trips, along with class sessions about evolution, the power of debate, and skepticism. A boy named Andrew said, "It's better than Boy Scout camp. There, whenever we ate, we had to do a prayer. It got rather annoying.” “The camp has ended with what the director calls "a competition for the kids to create their own religion that everyone can believe in and that will be good for all, for all time.”

Your first response may be, “How ridiculous. Create your own religion...really?” People do it all the time. Rather than be attentive to the true written word and Living Word of God, we twist scripture to mean what it doesn't to make it fit our new cultural narratives and socially or politically acceptable truths. We church shop until we find a preacher who tickles our ears with promises of unhindered physical and relational health and tremendous wealth, at the same time turning a deaf ear to any word that calls us to testify boldly or serve sacrificially or give generously to honor the Lord.

You can be sure that every true word from God points you toward Jesus. Just as Peter began with His name, so a true word points to Jesus and brings conviction to change...to repent and be saved or, if

you have, to draw closer in service, love, and Christlikeness. But conviction isn't that same thing as response. The text says, “those who accepted the message.” Some felt bad but did nothing. Feeling bad without choosing to follow Him is of no value. Today, as God's word has come to you, accept the challenge and follow.

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Doug Diehl

Crossroads Baptist Church

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