

## A Famine of Hearing

By **T.M. Moore**

Where the Word is truly being heard, it will bear fruit in the lives of those who are hearing it. The prophet Amos foresaw a day in which the absence of any hearing of the Word of God would wreak tragic effects:

"Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord God, "When I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. And people will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; They will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it. In that day the beautiful virgins and the young men will faint from thirst." Amos 8:11-14 NASB

In this grim scenario, people weary and spent stagger in every direction, looking for some sure word to which they might cling, yet without success. The best and the brightest of them are at the point of wasting away. All around, the false gods of pagan nations abound, yet without producing any lasting satisfaction or hope. It is a vision of utter desperation, hopelessness, and despair. The cause of this tragic condition, as Amos foresaw it, was that there was no hearing of the Word of the Lord in the land.

We hardly need persuading as to the relevance of this dour vision for our times. The characteristic features of Amos' prophecy are visible on every hand. Our youth are being wasted in the prime of their years. The gods of comfort, convenience, and success abound, along with the demons of New Age religion, continually mutating themselves into new forms attracting faithful adherents devoted to their peculiar idol for the promise of happiness it holds. Yet there is little in the way of lasting happiness in the land, and on every hand a sad and lonely people looks for someone to blame for their misery, and someone or something to deliver them from their hopeless condition.

In one sense we might think this the most biblically enlightened of times. After all, there is no shortage of Scripture or Scripture versions; the Bible remains the best-selling book, year after year. Churches by the scores of thousands dot the landscape, and, week-in and week-out, ministers of the Gospel proclaim the biblical truth to millions of attendants. Throughout the week supplemental opportunities for additional exposure to the Word of God are available through Bible study groups, radio and television, and individual study. We are, it would seem, awash in the Bible, in opportunities for hearing it, and in people who regularly avail themselves of such opportunities.

Historically, Protestants have identified as first among the marks of a true church the faithful preaching of the Word of God. By this standard, it would seem, we in the contemporary evangelical Church may rejoice and give thanks for the opportunities for the hearing of the Word of God that we presently enjoy. But surely there is a difference between opportunities for hearing the Bible and actually hearing it.

Calvin described this most important mark of a true church in this way: "From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard . . ." (emphasis added). For Calvin, the mere availability of the Word, even "purely preached," was no guarantee of a faithful church. Mere opportunities for hearing provided no assurance that real hearing of the Word would actually occur. The Word had to be truly heard, that is, received in such a way as that it would bear fruit in the lives of those who actually heard it. Where the Word was truly being heard it would bear fruit in the lives of those who were hearing it, and where that was happening a true church could be rightly discerned.

But what kind of fruit? What does the Bible expect of those who actually hear the Word of God? For what kinds of responses should we be looking? And where do we in our generation stand in relation to those responses?

### The Fruit of Hearing

We may identify several, first among them, repentance. Even the prophet Daniel, who stands out among the giants of biblical characters with respect to personal piety, fell to profound and passionate expressions of repentance for himself and his nation upon reading in the Book of Jeremiah concerning the end of Israel's captivity in Babylon (Dan. 9:1-5).

We evangelicals have established a place of prominence for ourselves in this society by declaiming loudly against the sins of others. We have denounced the secular humanists, chastised the evolutionist, decried the postmodernists, and raged against the blatantly immoral practices of the people of our day. Yet we hear little such passion in the acknowledgment of our own sins before the God of judgment and mercy. This absence of repentance suggests to me that a famine of the hearing of God's Word has set in upon us, that, for all our reading and study, the clean, pure, true, and uncompromising Word of God is not breaking through to our sinful hearts.

A second fruit that Scripture identifies as following from the hearing of God's Word is freedom from sinful practices. "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Here is promised the life of sanctification, which Jesus prayed that God's Word might effect in us (John 17:17), the life of in-creasing holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Scripture draws back the veil of eternity, allowing the glory of the uncreated God to shine with transforming power upon our sinful hearts, souls, minds, and ways (2 Cor. 3:17-18). Where that glory penetrates to the heart--where, that is, the Word is truly heard--it burns away the dross of wickedness, cauterizing the wound of sin with searing grace, and setting in place a healing power that obliterates the past and progressively makes all things new (Ps. 103:13; 2 Cor. 5:17).

By its transforming power the Word of God calls into being a new people, "a royal priesthood, a chosen generation, a people for God's own possession," who walk no longer in the darkness of unbelief but in the newness of life in Christ (1 Pet. 2:9; 1 John 1:5-7), a people who are a city set on a hill, the salt of the earth and light of the world, the leaven of grace and truth in a world of sin and despair.

That we in the contemporary evangelical church are not such a people is clear, not only to us but to everyone else as well. Studies persistently reveal very little difference between our way of

life--our cultural preferences, avocations, work ethic, conversational manner, and so forth--and that of our unbelieving neighbors and associates. In the workday world, where men and women buy and sell, trade and invest, maintain their homes and pursue their hobbies, evangelical churches evidence little to distinguish us from our contemporaries. Only in our peculiar habit of assembling together for this and that do we stand out from this unbelieving generation.

One can only believe that, if we were more adept at hearing the Scriptures--if, that is, we were not blighted with this famine of hearing the Word of God--we might shine more brilliantly with the radiance of their glorious, liberating truth.

A third fruit of the hearing of the Word of God is the proliferation of good works of ministry to touch the weary, searching lives of others with the grace of God (2 Tim. 3:15-17). God's Word is given so that men and women of God might be perfected in divine grace, "thoroughly equipped for every good work."

We are ever seeking someone to heal our hurts and bolster our bruised egos, someone to reach out and minister to us rather than we to them.

We are created anew in Christ Jesus to be, as it were, sponges of grace. In the tight spots, the hard squeezes of life, amid the misery and grime of sin, we emit not a squeal of fear nor a wail of complaint but the warmth of grace to heal and bless, renew and revive, encourage and edify those around us. Having drunk our fill at the fountain of grace and truth (Ps. 36:8), we go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, rivers of living water flowing out from us to bathe the unclean, refresh the thirsty, and buoy the sinking with the message of forgiveness and eternal hope.

But this is not the image of the Christian that characterizes the evangelical community today. We are instead a people ever seeking in the first instance someone to heal our hurts and bolster our bruised egos, some-one to reach out and minister to us rather than we to them. The Word that was meant to equip us for every good work is resorted to instead only as a momentary thirst-quencher, a pick-me-up to temporarily assuage our deeper hunger, as we show by this means as well the depths of the famine of hearing God's Word that has descended upon us.

A fourth fruit of the hearing of God's Word is ready witness for Him. The prophet Habakkuk was instructed to write God's Word on tablets of stone, so that all who read it could run to proclaim it joyfully, urgently to the people of the land (Hab. 2:2).

When the apostles and believers in Jerusalem finally heard the message of the Gospel in the Word of God, they spilled into the streets and, ultimately, spread out to every nation proclaiming the Good News to everyone they met (Acts 2:1-11; 8:1-4). Persecution could not stop them, nor could cultural differences, geographic distance, lack of resources, or the duties and distractions of daily life. In one generation they turned their world upside-down for Jesus Christ. In little more than two centuries they established the banner of the Gospel as supreme over the civilized world. What they heard they lived and declared to others with such compelling power that multiplied thousands streamed into the churches to give thanks and praise to God.

And what of our day? What John Stott once described as "our guilty silence" afflicts us still. We prefer to leave the work of evangelism to highly skilled professionals--worship teams,

seeker-friendly preachers, parachurch leaders, missionaries, and evangelists--while the average Christian seems to have nothing of eternal significance to say to his neighbors, friends, or colleagues. This can only be because we have not heard the Word of God as He intends.

David Wells summarizes the condition of our contemporary evangelical generation. Where we should expect, for all the opportunities for God's Word, a vibrantly repentant, gloriously sanctified, humbly serving, boldly outspoken, and energetically activist community, instead we find a religious people stretched out on the therapist's couch, endlessly fixating on their personal needs and hurts. Ours, Wells writes, is a "Christian faith that is conceived in the womb of the self" rather than in the forge of God's truth.

World-weary, truth-deprived, idol-laden evangelicals wander the contemporary landscape, desperately in need of spiritual nutrition, but starving in a famine of the hearing of God's truth. Meanwhile, our sad world suffers in confusion, uncertainty, moral and spiritual poverty, and growing hopelessness.

#### The Meaning of Hearing

But what does it mean to hear the Word of God? We have examined the fruit of hearing, and we can identify a sore lack of such fruit in our day. What is it to hear the truth in such a way that it yields the fruit for which it is intended?

The Westminster Larger Catechism concisely answers this question. Question 160 asks, "What is required of those that hear the word preached?" The answer is a devastating indictment of our junk-food approach to the Word of God:

It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts; and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

Here, truly, is guidance for every student of the Word of God: diligent and prayerful preparation for hearing the Word; careful examination of what is heard by comparison of Scripture with Scripture; trust in God's Word, love for Him, humility before His mercy and grace; a mind ready to be shaped and to respond; deep pondering and questioning of the Word; heartfelt embrace of its teachings; and faithful obedience to its every demand. Such hearing of the Word of God is the very thing that we lack, and the only thing that can get us back on the path of renewal and reformation once again.