

The Pulpit Rebuke:  
What is it? When is it appropriate?  
What makes it effective?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

The injunction, “preach the word” in 2 Tim. 4:2 urges the preacher to reprove and rebuke as well as exhort. Despite this clear directive, pulpit rebukes are rare. This essay notes the words in the semantic domain “rebuke” and then surveys biblical rebukes to clarify who is authorized to rebuke, and under what circumstances. Next, by observing how rebukes function in the New Testament, this paper affirms some criteria for pulpit rebukes and concludes with practical guidelines for administering them.

**Introduction**

The Apostle Paul solemnly directed Timothy,

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

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<sup>1</sup> This article was the co-winner of the Wilhite Award of the Evangelical Homiletics Society and is published here by kind permission of the EHS, after appearing the online Journal of the EHS (March, 2015).

He told Titus to “rebuke [the lying, evil, lazy, gluttonous Cretans] sharply, that they may be sound in the faith” (1:13). More generally, he said, “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you” (2:15). This mandate is not restricted to apostolic delegates Timothy or Titus. Titus is to appoint elders for whom the capacity to rebuke is at the core of their qualifications: “He [i.e., each elder in every town] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

Rebuking, evidently, is integral to preaching the word both publicly and privately. Despite that, the rebuke is seldom listed in the subject index of homiletics texts. Tim Chester and Marcus Honeysett, citing Titus 2:15, use the word “challenge” as a synonym for rebuke. “Ensure your preaching includes both comfort and challenge” (Chester and Honeysett 2014, 106). Dever and Gilbert offer wise counsel on how to rebuke under the heading, “Giving Godly Criticism” (Dever and Gilbert, 2012, 133-135). These are exceptions that prove the rule. The rebuke’s comparative rarity as a subject matches its paucity as a practice. Preachers that I hear seldom if ever rebuke their listeners. They may steer clear of rebukes out of the fear of scolding the congregation, or even appearing to do so. As Alec Motyer says, “Between ourselves, I have heard some preachers who, to tell you the truth, I would as soon go twelve rounds with Muhammad Ali as be battered around the ears again by them. Our calling is not to bruise but to heal the Lord’s people!” (Motyer, 2013, 96). Those who practice consecutive exposition of Scripture may get stuck in the original setting and not be adept at contextualizing its claims from the first hearers to contemporary ones. Another plausible reason preachers neglect the rebuke is that in large congregations, multi-site churches, or venues where sermons are broadcast or posted to the web, the preacher may not know the congregation well enough to rebuke them or reckon that the listeners do not know him (or her) well enough to *receive* the rebuke. Moreover, rebukes may have been supplanted by generalized cultural critiques of the kind so masterfully offered by Billy Graham whose influence as a model is incalculable. Whatever the root of this sin of omission, preachers who seldom faithfully apply an apt rebuke need to explore ways to realign their practice with the apostolic mandates. A valid starting point in that reformation is a working definition of the rebuke, one that helps us survey the biblical data. From

there, we may usefully note biblical examples of rebukes. Finally, we will let this clarified definition of the rebuke and our review of Scripture suggest some biblically defensible criteria for the pulpit rebuke and move us to a renewed commitment to practice it in ways that are both appropriate and effective.

### What is a rebuke?

Not surprisingly, more than one New Testament word underlies the English word “rebuke.” Louw and Nida include six words in their semantic domain “rebuke”: ἐλέγχω [1. bring to light, expose, set forth, 2. convict, convince, point out 3. reprove, correct; discipline, punish] νουθετέω, [admonish, warn, instruct], ἐπιτιμάω [rebuke, censure, warn], ἐπιπλήσσω [strike at, reprove, rebuke], ἐμβριμάομαι [scold, censure, warn sternly], and ὀνειδίζω [to reproach, revile, heap insults upon, or to reproach justifiably] (Louw and Nida 1988, 1989, 436-437; definitions from BDAG via BibleWorks). Forms of two of these words, ἐλέγχω and ἐπιτιμάω, occur in 2 Tim 4:2 cited above, the former appearing also in 2 Tim 3:16 where it describes one of four ways Scripture is profitable in equipping the person of God for every good work. Büschel says of ἐλέγχω, “with accusative of person it means ‘to show people their sins and summon them to repentance,’ either privately (Matt 18:15) or congregationally (1 Tim 5:20) . . .” (Kittel 1985, 222, emphasis added). What distinguishes the words in this semantic domain is that they address existing sins, not merely potential ones. This is a good working definition of the preached rebuke precisely because it is linked to preaching both contextually and linguistically. What the apostle affirms to be the nature and purpose of Scripture—it reproves or rebukes and corrects—should inform how biblical preachers expound it—to “reprove, rebuke and exhort” in the words of 2 Tim. 4:2. Stated this way, most evangelical preachers would acknowledge both the necessity and appropriateness of the pulpit rebuke. Listeners need rebukes because sin is deceitful, the devil is a liar, and left to themselves people tend to suppress the truth in unrighteousness. As we will see, not all rebukes should be administered from the pulpit, but some should be for reasons which will become clearer when we survey the Old and New Testament phenomena that the text describes with the word “rebuke.” That survey will enable us to develop a more complete definition and point to best

practices by drawing attention to who does the rebuking and who deserves to receive it.

### **A Preliminary Survey of biblical rebukes**

In this section, all the verses where the word “rebuke” occurs in the ESV are quoted in full so that Scripture can speak for itself and readers can experience the impact of these utterances without having to look up the passages cited. Initial underlined side headings capture the conclusions drawn from the texts cited while words in italics describe how individual verses lead to those conclusions.

#### **The LORD God himself rebukes.**

*The LORD rebukes Satan.* In a vision, Zechariah sees Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, “and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?” (Zechariah 3:1-2) “But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, “The LORD rebuke you” (Jude 1:9).

*The LORD is said to rebuke nature,* a figure of speech that conveys his authority over all creation. “Then the channels of the sea were seen; the foundations of the world were laid bare, at the rebuke of the LORD, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils” (2 Samuel 22:16). “The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke” (Job 26:11). “Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils” (Psalm 18:15). “He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they fled; at the sound

of your thunder they took to flight” (Psalm 104:5-7). “He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers” (Nahum 1:4).

*Sometimes these rebukes are integral to God saving his people.* “He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry, and he led them through the deep as through a desert” (Psalm 106:9). God wants his people to know that he can save. “Why, when I came, was there no man; why, when I called, was there no one to answer? Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert; their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst” (Isaiah 50:2). *Sometimes God’s rebukes of nature are pure mercy toward his covenant people.* “I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 3:11).

*God rebukes the nations.* Speaking to God, the psalmist writes, “You have rebuked the nations; you have made the wicked perish; you have blotted out their name forever and ever” (Psalm 9:5). Sometimes the nations are personified as beasts. “Rebuke the beasts that dwell among the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples. Trample underfoot those who lust after tribute; scatter the peoples who delight in war” (Psalm 68:30). God is not intimidated by them. “The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm” (Isaiah 17:13).

*Even when rebuking the nations, God’s purposes are redemptive.* “He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke? He who teaches man knowledge—the Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath” (Psalm 94:10). Even his wrath is educational. “Thus says the LORD God: ‘Because the Philistines acted revengefully and took vengeance with malice of soul to destroy in never-ending enmity, therefore thus says the LORD God, Behold, I will stretch out my hand against the Philistines, and I will cut off the Cherethites and destroy the rest of the seacoast. I will execute great vengeance on them with wrathful rebukes. Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I lay my vengeance upon them’” (Ezekiel 25:15-17). He often rebukes the nations

for the sake of his people. "When they were few in number, of little account, and sojourners in it, wandering from nation to nation from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying "Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!" (Psalm 105:14) Sometimes it works the other way around: he rebukes his people as a way of making them an object lesson for the nations. "You shall be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and a horror, to the nations all around you, when I execute judgments on you in anger and fury, and with furious rebukes—I am the LORD; I have spoken" (Ezekiel 5:15).

*He also rebukes his own wayward covenant people.* "Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me" . . . "These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you" (Psalm 50:8, 21). These rebukes too are redemptive. Consider Isaiah 51:20-22. "Your sons have fainted; they lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net; they are full of the wrath of the LORD, the rebuke of your God. Therefore hear this, you who are afflicted, who are drunk, but not with wine: Thus says your Lord, the LORD your God who pleads the cause of his people: 'Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more; and I will put it into the hand of your tormenters, who have said to you, "Bow down, that we may pass over"; and you have made your back like the ground and like the street for them to pass over.'" "This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you" (Isaiah 54:9).

*God rebukes in words, and in actions.* God is understood to be the source of rebukes mentioned passively or not directly attributed to another cause. "Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. It may be that the LORD your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the LORD our God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left" (2 Kings 19:3-4. Cf., Is. 37:3-4). "If the God of my father, the God of

Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night” (Genesis 31:42). “David went out to meet [the men of Benjamin and Judah] and said to them, “If you have come to me in friendship to help me, my heart will be joined to you; but if to betray me to my adversaries, although there is no wrong in my hands, then may the God of our fathers see and rebuke you” (1 Chronicles 12:17). [The LORD our God] “allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account” (1 Chronicles 16:21).

*Job counted on the LORD’s rebuke.* “He will surely rebuke you if in secret you show partiality” (Job 13:10). To be sure, not all difficulties are validly assigned to God. Elihu connects pain and God’s rebuke in a way the book of Job ultimately does not affirm. “Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones” (Job 33:19). Asaph only belatedly realized that his assessment of his inner turmoil was faulty when he said, “For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning” (Psalm 73:14). Those who grasp that the LORD is rebuking them often plead with him to stay his hand. “O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath” (Psalm 6:1). “O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath!” (Psalm 38:1). There, by poetic parallelism, we learn that rebuke and discipline are closely related; God’s strokes are for our good. We see the same idea in Psalm 39. “When you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume like a moth what is dear to him; surely all mankind is a mere breath!” (Psalm 39:11)

*God rebukes individuals for their sins including tampering with, mishandling, or disregarding his word.* “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar” (Proverbs 30:5-6). To the priests who were charged with speaking for him but failed to do so he said, “Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it” (Malachi 2:3). “You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments” (Psalm 119:21). He could use unconventional means when necessary. “[B]ut [Balaam] was rebuked for his own transgression;

a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness" (2 Peter 2:16).

*Ultimately, God's rebukes redound to his glory.* "Glorious are you, more majestic than the mountains of prey. The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil; they sank into sleep; all the men of war were unable to use their hands. At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, both rider and horse lay stunned" (Psalm 76:6). The same idea is conveyed by Psalm 80:16 when read in its wider context. "They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face!" Notice also Isaiah 66:15-16 that speaks of the final judgment which is as broad as God's authority. "For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many."

### **The Lord Jesus rebukes nature, demons, and people.**

Like his Father, *Jesus sometimes rebukes nature.* "And he said to [his disciples], 'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm" (Matthew 8:26). See parallels in Mark 4:39 and Luke 8:24. "And they went and woke him, saying, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!' And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm." Luke 4:39 adds another example. "And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them."

*Jesus rebuked demons,* sometimes even forbidding them to speak the truth about his identity. "And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly" (Matthew 17:18). "But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'" (Mark 1:25). "And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again'" (Mark 9:25). (See also Luke 4:35, 41.) "And demons also came out of many, crying, 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because



they knew that he was the Christ” (Luke 4:41). See also Luke 9:42: “While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.”

*Jesus rebuked James and John for wanting to call down fire on a Samaritan village whose residents did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem* (Luke 9:55). On the other hand, he declined to rebuke his disciples for praising him as the coming King who comes in the name of the Lord. “And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out’” (Luke 19:39-40).

**People rebuke each other, sometimes appropriately, sometimes not; sometimes privately, sometimes publicly.**

Jacob rebuked Joseph as recorded in Genesis 37:10. “But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, ‘What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?’” Boaz instructed his laborers *not* to rebuke Ruth for gleaning extra sheaves. “And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her” (Ruth 2:16).

God rewards those who issue a deserved rebuke. Proverbs 24:25 says, “. . . but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.”

A withheld rebuke reveals a false prophet’s inconsistency. “Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who is prophesying to you?” (Jeremiah 29:27)

Matthew 16:22 records how when Jesus announced that he would be rejected and killed, amazingly, Peter rebuked the Lord Jesus. “And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’” (See also Mark 8:32.) Jesus then rebuked Peter and clarified why he was in the wrong. “But turning and

seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man'" (Mark 8:33).

On another occasion Jesus' disciples had to be corrected for a misplaced rebuke when children were brought to him. "Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God'" (Matthew 19:13). See also Luke 18:15.

Two blind men who cried out to Jesus for help were rebuked by a crowd. "The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, 'Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!'" Jesus heard their cry and healed them (Matthew 20:31). Mark 10:48 and Luke 18:39 are parallels.

Jesus actually commands his disciples to rebuke one another in Luke 17:3. "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,"

One dying thief rebuked another: "But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?'" (Luke 23:40).

When instructing Timothy how to handle the specific case of older men where a rebuke may seem to be called for, he says, "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father" (1 Timothy 5:1). With regard to elders, he writes, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" (1 Timothy 5:20).

2 Timothy 4:2, as we have already seen, provides the impetus for this essay. There Paul clearly links preaching and rebuking. "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

As we have seen, Titus 1:9 includes the rebuke as an essential practice of elders who must be qualified to do it, and places sound instruction alongside it. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”

Paul instructs Titus with regard to reportedly evil, lying, lazy, gluttonous Cretans, “This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith (Titus 1:13).

Titus 2:15 also links rebuking to authoritative preaching. “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”

**Human willingness to speak rebukes and receive them varies. It is the essence of wisdom to receive valid rebukes.**

Psalm 38:13-14 adds an interesting twist. “But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth. I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.” God’s rebuke fell heavily on the psalmist and reduced him to silence, to the muteness of the deaf. The rebukes in the last line of this couplet may convey the idea of rejoinders, self-vindicating responses to the human enemies who take advantage of David’s vulnerability, smarting as he is under God’s rebuke. David’s turn to God as his only refuge from God’s rebuke is a way of breaking his silence and is an instructive example for God’s people.

The wise receive rebukes from the upright and see their life-giving intent. “Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it” (Psalm 141:5a). The proverbs and Ecclesiastes set forth contrasts related to rebukes. Together they offer wisdom concerning giving and receiving rebukes. “A wise son hears his father’s instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke” (Proverbs 13:1).

“A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool”

(Proverbs 17:10). “Better is open rebuke than hidden love” (Proverbs 27:5).

“Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue” (Proverbs 28:23). “It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:5).

### **Summary of the data so far**

A few warranted conclusions emerge from this preliminary survey of the lexical data. God is free to rebuke anything or anyone in his creation. He does so for the glory of his name and the good of his people and no one can find fault with his words or works of rebuke. His rebukes of sins of commission are also, implicitly, rebukes of the sin of unbelief, a sin of omission. Jesus, God’s unique Son, shares these prerogatives. The rest of us, God’s other, imperfect, image-bearers including those called to speak on God’s behalf as preachers, must sometimes rebuke fellow humans even publicly when to do so reflects God’s love, mind, and will and guards or affirms his truth, holiness, and glory. Not all human-to-human rebukes are justified, and some that are deserved are ill timed or are delivered imperfectly.

### **Affirmations concerning rebukes rooted in a closer look at the practice in Scripture**

Clearly, there are rebukes in Scripture that are not labeled as such, so our survey of the data must now extend to include some of those. The natural question that we now pursue is how we who speak for God in the congregation can rebuke others in ways that are not only obedient to our calling as preachers, but also justified, appropriate, and fruitful. To answer that question, we offer the following assertions with scriptural examples to support them. In what follows, I assume that the examples provided by the Lord Jesus and apostles, unless their respective roles plainly state or imply otherwise, are included in the canon at least in part because they are exemplary. I also assume that dictates given by the biblical writers to Timothy, Titus, and others are directly applicable to us. When referring to examples from the epistles, I agree with James W.

Thompson who, following Ricoeur, argues that Paul's epistles may validly be treated as "a legitimate model for our own preaching" (Thompson 2001, 16). Even though we do not replicate the precise cultural forms the ministry of the word took in the first century, what is true of biblically recorded rebukes—both public and private—needs to inform our contemporary practice.

**Rebukes are to be an expression of love.**

This truism is grounded in the very nature of God. "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:11). Ephesians 5:1-21 reaffirms this by both precept and example. Beginning with the exhortation to "be imitators of God," Paul exhorts his listeners to walk in love, following Christ's example. He then spells out several ethical accompaniments of love and their opposites. These ungodly traits and practices he says are to be *exposed*. "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them" (5:11). Exposing sin is the work of the rebuke. Paul goes on to practice what he preaches, calling attention to the debauchery of drunkenness and enjoining its alternative, being filled with the Holy Spirit (5:15-21). He explains in 2 Cor. 2:4 that the painful letter he had to write earlier was written "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." Nor did he want his letters to frighten his listeners (2 Cor. 10:9).

**Rebukes, broadly speaking, address two kinds of waywardness: faulty beliefs and unacceptable behavior.**

There are multiple strategies for rooting them out, as we will see, but there is value at the outset in noting that zeal of God's glory and love for his people move apostolic and pastoral leaders to address both maladies because they are often intertwined. For instance, in 1 Tim. 6:2c-5 Paul instructs Timothy,

Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

Paul instructs Timothy to address heresy and patently unbiblical behavior, because both are contrary to the truth as it is in Jesus and therefore are harmful not merely to the individuals who believe the false doctrine or live in ways they could not have learned from Christ (Eph. 4:17-20), but also, when allowed to continue, they injure the church, the Body of Christ. When such rebukes are administered publicly, they function not merely to turn some from these sins, but also to help others to avoid them in the first place.

### **Rebukes are not the only kind of corrective speech in the Bible.**

This is where the range of words used and variety of biblical examples help us nuance our preliminary observations. For instance, Paul says, “I *appeal* to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you” 1 Cor. 1:10. The sin of divisiveness is met with an appeal for agreement. He confessedly prefers the appeal to the command in his efforts to reconcile Onesimus and Philemon (Philemon 1:8-10). Even in his shame-based culture, Paul could write “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to *admonish* you as my beloved children” (1 Cor. 4:14; cf. Acts 20:31). To be sure, he was not unwilling to evoke shame when necessary (1 Cor. 6:5; 15:34). He could also *urge* listeners (1 Cor. 4:16; 16:15; Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 4:11), *reason* with them (1 Cor. 10:14-15), *plead* with them, *offer himself as a counter example* of their unacceptable behavior (1 Cor. 10:31-33), *ask searching questions* (1 Cor. 6:5-7; Gal. 3:1-6; 5:7), *express astonishment* (1 Cor. 6:8; Gal. 1:6), *exhort* (1 Cor. 6:18), *charge* (1 Cor. 7:10), *remind* (1 Cor. 15:1). These last two practices are explicitly

transferable. He urges Timothy to remind and charge those in his care at Ephesus (2 Tim. 2:14). He could *cajole*, saying “I speak as to children” (2 Cor. 6:13). He could *entreat* by the meekness and gentleness of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1; Gal. 4:12). He could *play the fool* to make others look foolish (2 Cor. 11-12). He expresses fatherly concern that he might have to mourn over unrepentant sin (2 Cor. 12:21), and threatens disciplinary action (13:2), and makes his spiritual children’s behavior a matter of prayer (13:7-9). Indeed reporting the content of his prayers at some length was an effective way of communicating the beliefs and behavior he sought to foster (Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-13). He could *warn* his spiritual children of possible dangers (Phil. 3:2; Col. 2:8, 16, 18-19; 1 Thess. 4:6-8; 2 Thess. 2:3) and made it his stated objective to do so in the context of proclamation (Col. 1:28). Paul does not hesitate to *threaten* (Gal. 5:1) or even *anathematize* (1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9) when the grievance threatens the essence of the gospel. He expected the Lord to repay the great harm done him by Alexander the coppersmith who opposed the gospel, and whom he apparently deemed beyond reclamation by a rebuke (2 Tim. 4:14). He even used the visual aid of shaking out his garments as he said to those who opposed and reviled him, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent” (Acts 18:6). Characteristically, Paul explains things thoroughly, placing a solid gospel foundation under godly living, and points toward righteous alternatives to the ideas or behaviors he considers to be out of step with the Spirit. *Ephesians* models this strategy well. Often, his words *affirm* his listeners’ obedience as a starting point for further obedience (1 Thess. 4:1-2, 10; 2 Thess. 5:11).

In his incomplete testimony before the Jerusalem mob as recorded in Acts 21:37—22:21 Paul could even describe himself before his conversion as “being zealous for God as all of you are this day” (22:3). [This is not unlike Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 that began with affirming language before becoming more confrontational.] Paul skillfully lets Scripture itself indirectly rebuke his listeners by quoting Is. 6:9-10 in Acts 28:26-27. He affirms that in Isaiah’s words the Holy Spirit is speaking directly to his listeners’ fathers whose unwillingness to hear God’s word freed Paul to turn to the Gentiles. In effect, Paul is inviting his listeners to consider whether these words also describe them. So, Paul clearly had a range of tools in his toolbox to move beloved friends toward right doctrine and godly living. He used the ones best tailored to the needs of those addressed. He not only used the tools but urged others to use them

thoughtfully too. "And we urge you brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thess. 5:14).

Rebukes in the New Testament reflect this bias toward gracious speech, but sometimes a sharp rebuke is the most gracious approach. For instance, in the context of correcting faulty ideas about the resurrection, the Apostle Paul does not hesitate to utter as stinging rebuke: "Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame" (1 Cor. 15:34). As always, the apostle is alert to the corrosive impact of sin not merely on the stupefied sinner but also upon others who may be watching. Inflicting emotional pain on the one rebuked is justified when it produces the godly grief that leads to repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-13).

James skillfully develops his exhortation to "show no partiality" by means of a hypothetical situation where two worshippers, very differently clothed, are also treated differently. The rhetorical questions that follow the scenario are increasingly direct and address listeners to effect repentance (James 2:1-7). This comparatively soft touch appears elsewhere in his letter. For instance, James 3:10 says "From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." Once again, rhetorical questions follow to drive home the point. The rebuke of worldliness in James 4: 1-10 contains the same elements but is significantly more forceful, calling his listeners "You adulteress people!" The diatribe against the rich in James 5:1-6 employs vivid images to dramatize the seriousness of the offense and the wholeheartedness of the repentance it calls for.

Perhaps the most fruitful rebukes in the New Testament come from the mouth of Peter. Twice in the Pentecost sermon Peter unambiguously lays blame for Jesus' crucifixion squarely at the feet of his listeners, even though in one of the two instances he says they did it "through the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23, 36). His hearers were cut to the heart and asked what they could do. Peter invited them to repent and be baptized and three thousand did so. Peter's words in Acts 3:13-15, 19 similarly blame those present for killing the Author of life and offer them the forgiveness that comes with repentance. Those who repented on that occasion brought the total to some five thousand men (Acts 4:4). When on trial for the healing recorded in Acts 3, Peter levels the same charges of rejecting and crucifying Jesus (Acts 4:10-11). The



same pattern reappears in Acts 5:30-31. (Stephen, who begins his recitation of Israel's history in a conciliatory way, addressing his listeners as "brothers and fathers," ends much as Peter did, holding his hearers accountable for betraying and murdering Jesus [Acts 7:52]. Like Peter he feels free to do so because underlying their actions was a clear rejection of God's mediated word [7:53]). When Ananias and Sapphira conspired to lie to the Holy Spirit, Peter levels his charge at Ananias in the form of questions, followed by a clear rebuke, "You have not lied to man but to God" (Acts 5:3-4). Sapphira had a similar opportunity to repent and failed the test as spectacularly as did her husband.

Later in the New Testament, when Peter urges wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to live with their wives according to knowledge (1 Peter 3:1-7), it is not clear whether he is supplying positive teaching on marital interactions because he imagines that marriages in Asia Minor fell radically short of the Christian ideal, or if he had received a report that this was a known problem in the churches that needed to be addressed. The same could be said of his exhortation to elders and others in chapter 5. So when we come to his second letter—which I take to be Petrine also—the rebuke of false teachers that occupies the whole of chapter two shows us how Peter feels when he is certain that false teachers will appear (2:2) even if they have not done so yet. His language is vivid and forceful employing multiple biblical examples and allusions, and rich word pictures. He describes false teachers as bold, willful, irrational animals, ignorant blasphemers who revel in their deceptions, insatiable for sin, lovers of gain from wrongdoing, waterless springs, slaves of corruptions, culpably worse off than before conversion, dogs returning to their own vomit, and sows wallowing in the mire. Clearly the dangers to the church that Peter excoriates are both ethical and doctrinal and the two are inseparable as are sins of commission and omission. Those he rebukes profess faith but do not demonstrate its fruit. In my judgment, this counts as a pulpit rebuke, public as it is. Like other public rebukes, it has value for those who are not—or are not yet—guilty as charged. They see the seriousness of sin and ideally are moved to avoid it at all costs. Jude alerts his readers to these dangers with similarly rich language. His letter ends with a redemptive entreaty: "And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh" (Jude 1:22-23).

The Apostle John also takes the pre-emptive approach: “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin” (1 John 2:1). He writes to those who know the truth (2:20-21), “about those who are trying to deceive you” (2:26). 3 John 1:9-10 rebukes Diotrephes for his self-advancing stance, for speaking against John, for his unwillingness to acknowledge apostolic authority, and his unwarranted acceptance of the heterodox as opposed to true brothers. The latter he expels from the church for their practice of hospitality. Not only does John detail Diotrephes’s shortcomings in this letter, he promises to do so *in person* if and when he has the opportunity. Once again, we see the focused rebuke as providing a wider benefit to the church.

The letters to the churches recorded in Rev. 2-3, coming as they do from the risen and ascended Lord Jesus, provide exemplary rebukes. Jesus declares his motivation: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19). The letters usually begin with some expressed or tacit acknowledgement of the circumstances of the church being addressed. This may be followed by a word of encouragement for faithfulness manifested. In the case of Sardis and Laodicea, Christ professes to know their works which, in the case of Sardis, do not match the church’s reputation, and, in the case of Laodicea, are lukewarm. In the letters to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, a phrase like “but I have this against you” is followed by a warning of judgment for that sin, and a call to repentance together with a promise to those who persevere and obey. Significantly, in three churches—Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis—Jesus distinguishes between the faithful and unfaithful who will hear this letter. He goes out of his way not to rebuke the innocent with the guilty, saying “I do not lay on you any other burden” (Rev. 2:24).

**Some rebukes should be administered privately; others publicly.**

According to Matthew 18:15-20, a sinned-against individual should privately bring his or her grievance to the attention of the alleged offender. If the person so accused does not listen to the complaint, one or two others should be enlisted to determine the facts of the matter. Only then, if necessary, does the case go before the church. The text leaves unstated when the alleged sinner is actually rebuked, but the

implication seems to be that the whole undertaking is aimed at repentance and restoration. When the apostle Paul entreats members of the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree in the Lord (Phil. 4:2), and enlists his true yokefellow to help them obey the injunction, his implied rebuke of their *disagreement* could scarcely have been more public. Elders, having met the qualification of being above reproach (Titus 1:6, 7), are to be honored if they rule well, and those elders who labor in the word and teaching are to be accorded double honor. That honor is presumably public. Correspondingly, accusations against them must be substantiated by additional witnesses. Those who are judged to be guilty of sin and persist in it are to be rebuked very publicly so that “the rest may have fear” (1 Tim. 5:17-22). The function of the rebuke thus includes deterrence as well as correction. These rebukes do not seem to be part of the regular ministry of the word, despite the fact that they occur when the whole congregation is present. Although the text is silent concerning precisely how and when these rebukes should be administered, it seems likely that this disciplinary function is separate from the ministry of the word.

The letter to the Galatians is an example of a very public rebuke of an entire congregation who are “so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (1:6). Paul not only rebukes and seeks to correct the whole church, he reports that he rebuked Peter “to his face” (2:11). He did this “before them all” (2:14). His rebukes are forceful and make the most of rhetorical questions. “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (2:14) “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1) See also questions in 1:10, 2:17, 3:2-6, 3:19, 21, 4:15, 16, 21, 30, 5:7, 11 that expose the folly of this opponents’ position or advance the logic of Paul’s. [This technique reflects the Lord Jesus’ use of convicting questions that simultaneously teach the truth (Matt.15:2; 26:40)]. Paul reasons with the Galatians as a father might with a wayward child, and like such a father is aware that in the medium of writing his tone may sound too harsh. “I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you” (Gal. 4:20).

**Rebukes are not *aimed at the world, the culture, or the church in general, but are directed toward those present who are or might be***

**guilty of sin that can be repented of or doctrinal deviations that can be renounced.**

To be sure, John the Baptist could level corporate rebukes, calling his unbelieving contemporaries a brood of vipers (Matt. 3:7). He also courageously and repeatedly rebuked the powerful Herod (Matt. 14:14). Both of these recipients, it should be noted, were spoken to as part of the Jewish household of faith. Paul is realistically alert to toxic doctrinal and behavioral environments within and around the church (2 Tim. 3:1-9, 13). Yet, in that case, instead of rebuking the perpetrators, he counsels the godly to avoid them. In a statement apparently intended to clarify who he was rebuking, Paul writes, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you" (1 Cor. 5:12-13). Elsewhere, he clearly expresses his antipathy to enemies of the gospel in 1 Thess. 2:14-16, but in Philippians 1:15, he is less agitated when the gospel itself is not compromised but only others' motives for preaching the truth are questionable. He tells Titus that certain doctrinal deceivers should be silenced (Titus 1:10-11). His prescribed antidote in Crete is the sharp rebuke to be administered by Titus (Titus 1:13). In these and many other cases, the New Testament writers warn the faithful but do not directly rebuke the wayward. Perhaps, this is the apostolic application of Proverbs 9:8-9: "Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you; reprove a wise man and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning." Hebrews 5:11-14 is a good example of a general rebuke, applicable to all the hearers of this letter. Here the author says of them that they had become dull of hearing. By this time they should have become teachers but instead need remedial instruction. This was the case despite his listeners' commendable track record of serving the saints (6:10). There are apparently some occasions where a generalized assessment is warranted and for which the way of repentance can be spelled out. That fact leads to our next assertion.

**Rebukes, when necessary, are more likely to be received when expressed in the context of a preacher's positive aspirations for listeners that reflect God's ambitions for them.**

Paul's stated aim in sending Timothy to Thessalonica was "to establish and exhort you in your faith" (1 Thess. 3:2). Paul himself longed to come in person to "supply what is lacking in your faith" (1 Thess. 3:10). Paul told the church in Ephesus through Timothy that he wanted them to know how to behave in the household of God (1 Tim. 3: 15). He even described his aim in visiting the Corinthians again as affording "a second experience of grace" (2 Cor. 1:15). It is clear that his exasperation with the Galatians notwithstanding, Paul wanted them to experience the freedom that was theirs in Christ and to be able to manifest the fruit of the Spirit against which there is no law.

**Rebukes spoken by church leaders carry more weight than those of others and are intended to do so.**

Paul exhorted Titus, "Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you" (Titus 2:15; cf. 1 Tim. 4:11). This fact underscores the importance of neither claiming authority for pulpit rebukes that are not warranted by Scripture, nor being reticent to rebuke sin and heresy where they clearly exist.

**Intentional pulpit rebukes: follow the examples of biblical writers**

How, then should we improve the ways we administer justified pulpit rebukes? Given all these biblical injunctions and examples, it should not surprise us that pulpit rebukes are one of the ways we serve the word by letting it do the transforming work God designed it to do. These New Testament practices and directives provide the starting place for practical guidelines. The Westminster divines advised,

In dehortation, reprehension, and publick admonition (which require special wisdom), let him [that is, the preacher], as there shall be cause, not only discover the nature and greatness of the sin, with the misery attending it, but also show the danger his hearers are in to be overtaken and surprised by it, together with

the remedies and best way to avoid it (Dever and Gilbert, 2012, p. 51).

*Take seriously the biblical injunction to rebuke false teaching and ungodly behavior.* What the apostles did and instructed others to do should neither be neglected nor disregarded by contemporary preachers. If our preaching is to effect transformation, rebukes are not optional extras but integral to serving the word and serving our listeners. For good to overcome evil in the lives of our hearers they must be recognize what is evil and turn from it. We who preach should examine our own preaching to assess whether we neglect clear rebukes in the text and seek discernment concerning the root of this deficit.

*Rebuke privately first whenever you can; rebuke publicly only—and always—when you must.* In some cases, the pulpit rebuke is the last resort. If you have reason to suspect unrepentant sin, go to the individual privately to discover the unshakable facts of the case and implore the sinner to repent. If that fails, take it to the church. In other cases, where the sin is more widespread and less well recognized, address it from the pulpit in the confidence that the Holy Spirit can shine a light into the hearts of your hearers and dispel the darkness there. Sinners can repent and the tempted will be warned. Micah's searing rebuke of both rulers and prophets recorded in Micah 3:1-12 is worth careful meditation for it exemplifies the courage, vividness, specificity and logic of the pulpit rebuke. Especially searching for those called to speak for God is the warning that those who persist in the besetting sins listed can expect no further word from God.

*Rebuke publicly whatever genuinely threatens the purity of the gospel.* This will not only affirm the seriousness of guarding the gospel but will also warn the congregation of doctrinal dangers and denounce those who hold and teach errant doctrines. The frequency and fervor of doctrinal correction in the New Testament should light a fire under us who preach, kindling our zeal to guard the gospel. Conferring with godly, praying elders before you issue a pulpit rebuke can help you avoid merely riding theological hobbyhorses or taking up popular culture war causes.

*When possible, affirm good behavior before you rebuke sin* (1 Cor. 11:2, 17; 1 Thess. 4). This is not merely psychologically wise; it affirms that God is at work in those to whom you must now offer correction. This fosters faith, from which all gospel obedience flows (Rom. 1:5, 16:26).

*Use the full range of rhetorical devices Scripture employs when it records public rebukes.* For instance, Paul could create a hypothetical opponent and then sternly call that person a fool (1 Cor. 15:35-36). For some preachers seemingly everything in Scripture can be turned into a rebuke or a command. Instead, our preaching should reflect what the expounded pericope is doing and so reflect the balance of Scripture. Spell out the consequences of sustained disobedience or false teaching and the benefits or repentance (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:27-32). Scripture itself supplies ways to move people toward Christlikeness. Paint a clear picture of the two paths and where each leads (Psalm 1; Deuteronomy 27-28).

*Tailor your corrective speech to the circumstances of your listeners.* “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:1). This directive, initially written to Timothy, a comparatively young man, should encourage younger preachers who feel they have no business rebuking their elders. It would be more accurate to say that none of us—whatever our age—have any business being haughty or self-righteous when we rebuke anyone and special care must be taken when we feel compelled to point out the sins or errors of our elders. The very fact that Paul includes instructions concerning *how* to rebuke older people implies *that* Timothy was to do so. It seems that the sort of rebuke envisioned here is individual and private. Timothy may not yet have had a fellow elder to accompany him; hopefully we do.

*Model grace, wisdom, and love when you rebuke.* Accusation is the devil’s work; rebuking is what we do lovingly to turn people from their sins. Anger at sin is not the same thing as being indignant when someone else’s sin puts them on a collision course with your own desires (Matt. 20:24). Distinguish carefully between what annoys you and what God himself finds offensive; bearing with the former and rebuking the latter. Preachers are sometimes tempted to abuse their status and its privileges

to promote their own agendas and give vent to their personal and professional frustrations. Pre-test pulpit rebukes with your spouse, a trusted friend or wise elders. Invite the Lord to wash you with his word and examine your own heart. Put yourself in the shoes of both guilty and not-guilty listeners to feel how they might receive such a rebuke. Let the tone and wording of your rebuke reflect the text you are preaching. If we inappropriately soften a rebuke by a thousand qualifications, when the text itself is forthright, we do our listeners no service. If we harshly scold them when our text entreats them gently, we fail to reflect our heavenly Father's tender mercies.

*When you rebuke others, watch yourself.* Administer rebukes with a spirit of gentleness and caution, lest you be tempted either to fall into the same snare or to feel superior to the one ensnared, or even to make yourself look better by comparison (Gal. 6:1). Imitate Christ in simultaneously being above reproach and bearing the reproach of others. David bore the reproach that sinners directed toward the Lord (Ps. 69:9). Paul attributes to Christ this posture of not pleasing oneself (Rom. 15:3) and exhorts believers to take up the same attitude (Rom. 15:1). A good reputation with outsiders is to be the elder's protection against disgrace and the devil's trap (1 Tim 3:7). The only reproach or disgrace we should experience is the reproach we experience for identification with Christ (Heb. 10:33; 11:26; 13:13).

*Rely on God himself to work the sanctifying changes needed* (2 Thess. 1:11-12; 3:16; 1 Thess. 3:11-12; 5: 23-24; Matt. 11:25-27). Your skill as a preacher in crafting and delivering a pulpit rebuke will never carry the day, but God has committed himself to go to work in believers when we speak his word on his behalf to them (1 Thess. 2:13).

## **Conclusion**

Biblical preachers speak for God and are called therefore to do so in ways that reflect his speech. That speech includes lovingly and therefore firmly rebuking those who sin or stray. The transforming work of God's word, by his Spirit through preachers, will be less transformative than God intends when those who speak for God neglect to rebuke their listeners



for their good. How preachers do this effectively need not be a mystery since we have multiple examples to follow, beginning with God himself. Those who learn from these rebukes in Scripture and prayerfully restore this practice to its proper place will move toward greater faithfulness as preachers and do more good to their listeners and churches.

### Possible future research

An empirical study of representative sermons coded by NVivo or some other means could track pulpit rebukes historically and culturally to discern to what extent they are missing or muted and explore possible reasons why this is the case.

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