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# Gospel Preaching

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Gareth Crossley

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In an attempt to fulfil the Great Commission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19) some enthusiastic Christians present the gospel message in the context of entertainment. However, “if the gospel has been presented to people within the context of an evening of Christian entertainment, and the mood of the music rather than the truth of the gospel has been the major factor conditioning the response to the message, we should not be surprised if the result is a number of temporary believers.”<sup>1</sup>

It may be argued that much of modern day evangelism is presenting Christ in terms of human felt wants or needs. “Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you want peace of mind? Do you feel that you have failed? Are you fed up with yourself? Do you want a friend? Then come to Christ; he will meet your every need...” – “as if the Lord Jesus Christ were to be thought of as a fairy godmother, or a super-psychiatrist.”<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that the accounts of the Great Commission say virtually nothing about what men need (cf. Acts 1:8). On the Day of Pentecost Peter did not preach about human need, in fact he only refers to his hearers briefly. He tells them that they are wrong in thinking that the disciples are drunk (v. 15), he refers to some facts they already know (Acts 2:22, 29), and he points out his hearers’ wickedness. But these things are not the burden of his message. The message is Christ. Or, more accurately, God and Christ and the Spirit. “God,” says Peter in effect, “sent Christ. Christ sent the Spirit. That is why you see and hear these things.” It is not that his hearers were unimportant. Peter, no doubt, longed to help them. But something came before that concern. He had to tell of Christ. And his hearers were *not* to ask, “What is there in it for me?” They had to know that Jesus is Lord. And they had to act accordingly! ... They *had not been told* that God had sent his word to them to make them happy. They had been told that they stood before a King whom they had offended. This was God-centred preaching. Peter preached that God was worthy to be known and proclaimed for who he is.<sup>3</sup>

God, in his wisdom, knows how *to choose* his goals. God also knows how *to achieve* his goals. God chooses what he wants to do, and knows how to do it. This is the remarkable wisdom of God. And God is full of wisdom. He has many purposes, many goals, and he knows perfectly well how he will bring them about.<sup>4</sup> The God who knows all things sends us to evangelise the world. Paul and his companions could have been roving troubadours with banjos slung over their shoulders, travelling from town to town as the precursors of the entertainment evangelists – but they were not. God has chosen his way to bring the knowledge of himself to the world. His choice was wise. His choice is still wise. We know that, because he is the only wise God to whom be honour and glory for ever and ever (1 Timothy 1:17). That alone settles the question, How are sinners to be saved? – through what the world regards as – “the foolishness of preaching”!

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached [lit. the proclamation] to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)

God sets down his method for bringing men, women, young people and children to salvation in Christ. “We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23). To the Jews a crucified Saviour looks powerless and weak. To the Greeks a crucified Saviour looks absurd and stupid. “But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). The Cross is the strongest power in the world. The Cross is the highest wisdom in the whole universe.

Gospel preachers are commissioned: “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). The preacher is called a “herald” of the gospel (1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11). He is a messenger, the deliverer of a message. The faithful herald does not *make* the message, *alter* the message, or *try to improve* the message. He just delivers it – intact. As with the house steward, the most important qualification in the herald is “that one be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). When God called Jonah to be a gospel preacher to the people of Nineveh he said, “Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you” (Jonah 3:2). The preacher’s business is simply to take what he finds in the Scriptures, as he finds it, and impress it upon the minds of his hearers. “The Bible is for the people; this is the great principle of Protestants.”<sup>5</sup>

## **I. What is the gospel?**

### **a. The gospel is God’s good news**

The gospel or good news is *God’s* good news. Paul calls it, “the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). This good news originated from heaven. It is a message from the throne. It is a remarkable word from the Creator of all things. Consequently, we have no liberty to sit in judgment on it, or to tamper with its content. It is God’s gospel not ours, and its truth is to be received not criticised, declared not debated. More is at stake in our gospel preaching than is commonly realised. “God’s name, God’s honour, and God’s character are at stake. We dare not misrepresent Him. If we ignore these things we ignore God Himself. What right have we then to call ourselves His servants?”<sup>6</sup>

The whole Bible is God’s good news in all its astonishing relevance. “Bible” and “gospel” are almost interchangeable terms, for the major function of the Bible in all its length and breadth is to bear witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> Paul in his ministry did not declare just a part of the gospel, he gave the whole revelation of God in Christ. To the elders of the church at Ephesus, “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). The gospel is not just the truth concerning the remission of sins and eternal life through faith in the substitutionary offering of Christ on Calvary; it is the whole revelation given to us in the New Testament of the “mysteries” that were previously hidden in the Old Testament but are now made known – salvation through faith, the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit in the believer, the believer’s position as seated with Christ in the heavenlies, the purpose of God to manifest Christ in and through the Church, the pattern given by God for the Church, the gifts of the Spirit for ministry, and the future hope of the believer – all these are the gospel, the Good News.<sup>8</sup>

## **b. The gospel is God's good news about Jesus Christ**

The central subject of gospel preaching is the Lord Jesus Christ (**Romans 1:3**), **We** "do not preach ourselves", writes Paul, "but Christ Jesus the Lord" (**2 Corinthians 4:5**). Like Paul at Corinth we must determine to lay aside all striving for "excellence of speech" or for a show of human "wisdom" and speak only of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (**1 Corinthians 2:2**). Our task is to proclaim Christ. Like John the Baptist we would arrest the attention of the people and point to the Saviour: "Behold! the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (**John 1:29**.) "The need of this Christ is universal; the adequacy of this Christ is inexhaustible; the power of this Christ is immeasurable." "We do not kindle faith by describing it but by describing Christ."<sup>10</sup>

To preach "Jesus Christ and him crucified" does not mean that the preacher will speak constantly on the bare facts of the crucifixion. It means, rather, that "he will use all lines of biblical thought to illuminate the meaning of that fact; and he will never let his exposition of anything in Scripture get detached from, and so appear as unrelated to, Calvary's cross and the redemption that was wrought there; and in this way he will sustain a Christ-centred, cross-oriented preaching ministry year in and year out, with an evangelistic as well as a pastoral thrust."<sup>11</sup>

The preacher is a herald. He has a message to deliver. Christianity is not something vague or mystical. It has a solid, dogmatic core. It centres in a living Person. It builds on historical facts concerning this Person. In this Person is embodied an immense set of vital truths relating to God and humanity, life and death, time and eternity, heaven and hell.

It is a mistake to suppose that gospel sermons are a special brand of sermons, having their own peculiar style and conventions; gospel sermons are just scriptural sermons, the sort of sermons that a man cannot help preaching if he is preaching the Bible biblically. Proper sermons seek to expound and apply what is in the Bible. But what is in the Bible is just the whole counsel of God for man's salvation. All Scripture bears witness in one way or another to Christ, and all biblical themes relate to him. If these things are true, then it follows, as Jim Packer maintains, "All proper sermons... will of necessity declare Christ in some fashion, and so be more or less directly evangelistic."<sup>12</sup>

As with all the New Testament apostles and evangelists, Paul's primary task in evangelism was to teach the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the news about Jesus of Nazareth. It was the news of the incarnation, the atonement, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ the Son of God – his cradle, his cross, and his crown. It was the news of how God "glorified his servant Jesus" (**Acts 3:13**) by making Him Christ, the world's long-awaited "Prince and Saviour" (**Acts 5:31**). It was the news of how God made his Son man; and how, as man, God made him Prophet, Priest, and King. As Prophet, God also made him a Lawgiver to his people. As Priest, God also made him a sacrifice for sins. As King, God also made him Judge of all the world – giving him authority and power to reign till every knee bows before him (**Isaiah 45:22-23**; cf. **Philippians 2:9-11**), and to save all who call on His name (**Joel 2:32**; cf. **Acts 2:21**; **Romans 10:9,13**). There can be no power in preaching that fails to proclaim this Christ and exhort men, women and children to put their trust in him.

God has fulfilled his eternal intention of glorifying his Son as a great Saviour for great sinners.

Here then is the preacher's task to stagger people with the truth of the incarnation, to

hold up in a hundred ways the wonder of the atonement, to tell of the work of the Holy Spirit, to preach about God, to show human beings their true nature, to expose sin, to proclaim the way of salvation, to declare all the marvellous aspects of the grace of God.

When the doctor abandons hope, when a dear one is certified insane, when a child bent on wickedness breaks your heart, when some awful, natural disaster seems to deny the existence of a good God, when the coffin is standing beside the bed, graceful little essays about nothing in particular are no good, and the poor souls which have been fed upon them in place of robust preaching have nothing to rest on. (WE Sangster)<sup>13</sup>

If we desire Jesus to be seen as wonderful we preachers must humble ourselves and abase ourselves and let Christ have the centre stage that all eyes may behold him and all ears hear him. We must not hunger for praise, nor hanker for admiration and congratulations when the preaching is over. We want sinners converted. We want them to be enthralled with the Lord Jesus Christ. We want them to respond to the preaching by praising and glorifying God.

“The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). God has revealed, and continues to reveal, his eternal power and godhead in his creation (Romans 1:20). The Jews received the Law of God through Moses (Romans 2:17-18; John 1:17); Gentiles have “the law written in their hearts” (Romans 2:15); but no one can know the gospel, the Good News of God’s free grace in Jesus Christ, without a special revelation. The preacher is the herald delivering God’s message from God’s book in God’s way. He speaks from the Scriptures. He brings a word from the Word – a preached word from the written Word, concerning the Incarnate Word – the Word made flesh!

## **2. Why preach the gospel?**

### **a. We preach the gospel to honour God**

The gospel “is the power of God to salvation” (Romans 1:16). Gospel preaching is God’s method, God’s means, to achieve his purpose to save sinners. When Paul speaks of “the foolishness of preaching” (1 Corinthians 1:21) he is making a concession because that is precisely how the “wise of this world” regard it. The doctrine of the cross is foolishness in the estimation of men and women of the world. But God puts all human wisdom to shame. He makes something which the wise of this world regard as absurd into the glorious means of salvation. What could appear more ridiculous to human intelligence than to announce as the Saviour of the world One who died the vile death of a criminal on a cross? And to expect that this announcement will do what the world with all its mighty efforts and combined wisdom fails to do – to actually lift human beings: men, women and children, into full relationship and harmony with the only true God – why the thought is preposterous – to the world!

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)

This verse, in its context clearly teaches two great truths: (i) that the cross, or the doctrine of Christ crucified, is the substance of the gospel. This is the gospel’s power

and vitality; and (ii) that the preaching, or public proclamation of this doctrine is the great means of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ is in grave danger of losing all its confidence in the power of preaching. This is God's appointed *method*. This is God's ordained way for communicating the *message*. From the days of Enoch who prophesied (Jude 14), and of Noah who was "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), even to our present day, God has employed "the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Nothing but the truth of the gospel can be instrumental for the conversion of souls. Any wilful suppression – or any compromising statement of truth, dishonours the Holy Spirit in his own special office, and therefore restrains his quickening influence. Charles Bridges maintains that many serious-minded, warm-hearted, and diligent ministers, are bemoaning the obvious unfruitfulness of their work without suspecting for one moment, "that the root of the evil lies within themselves".<sup>15</sup> They are not preaching the gospel!

Political speeches will not save souls; social discourses will not save souls; philosophical speculation will not save souls. We must be resolved to preach, and to preach Jesus Christ, and to preach nothing except Jesus Christ, and to preach nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Theological Colleges and Bible Institutes are turning out men who are conversant with other religions, well versed in differing cultures, knowledgeable concerning the history of the Puritans. They can lecture. They can teach the faithful. But where are the preachers who can preach to save souls? The great preacher, CH Spurgeon, declared: "I would sooner bring one sinner to Christ than unpick all the mysteries of the Divine Word, for salvation is the one thing we are to live for".<sup>16</sup>

Gospel preaching is preaching Jesus Christ to sinners. Gospel preaching addresses the mind. Gospel preaching makes sinners think, and think hard, and think hard about God, and think hard about themselves in relation to God. The message must be faithful and clear, true and plain. Paul boldly declares:

Since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation [or "open statements"] of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:1-2)

Corruption of the Christian message indicates a lack of confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit, a lack of respect for the condition of humanity, and a lack of recognition of the true character of the Gospel. Christian preachers are guilty of worldliness whenever they are so concerned to ensure a response to the gospel, that they compromise its message, manipulate their hearers through pressure techniques, or become preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in their use of them.

## **b. We preach the gospel to make personal contact**

How is the Lord Jesus Christ to be announced? Is the way in which he is presented likely to promote or to hinder the work of the Gospel in the minds of sinners? Is it going to clarify the meaning of the message, or to leave it enigmatic and obscure, locked up

in pious jargon? In praising God for the conversion of the believers at Rome, Paul writes:

God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:17-18)

“They had obeyed, yes; but how?” inquires Dr Lloyd-Jones, why “from the heart”.

What was it made them do this, what was it moved their hearts? It was this “form of teaching” that had been delivered to them. What had been delivered or preached to them was the Truth, and Truth is addressed primarily to the mind. As the mind grasps it, and understands it, the affections are kindled and moved, and so in turn the will is persuaded and obedience is the outcome. In other words the obedience is not the result of direct pressure on the will, it is the result of an enlightened mind and a softened heart.<sup>17</sup>

### **c. We preach the gospel to change lives**

We are engaged in the great task of influencing people. Our goal is change. We desire to motivate, to arouse, to mobilise, to excite, to move, to inspire, to stir and to impel men, women, young people and children, “not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”. We do not want their faith to rest “in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). But we are, by God’s grace and by God’s power, *persuaders*. “Knowing therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11).

Say to them: “As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11)

Have some preachers lost their confidence in the gospel and therefore no longer preach it with fervour? “One great reason why we meet with so little success,” writes Thornwell to ministerial brethren of his day, “is that we do not expect success. Often it would surprise us to be told that sinners were cut to the heart under our ministry.”<sup>18</sup>

Words from God must not be read or quoted as though we are reading the BBC News. There must be passion, passion for the glory of God, passion for the cause of Christ, passion for the souls of men, women and children. But, as John Stott, insists there are some things forbidden to those who preach the gospel – “all deliberate contriving of effect, all artificiality, hypocrisy and play acting, all standing in front of the mirror in order self-consciously to plan our gestures and grimaces, all self-advertisement and self-reliance. More positively we are to be ourselves, to be natural, to develop and exercise the gifts which God has given us, and at the same time to rest our confidence not in ourselves but in the Holy Spirit who deigns to work through us.”<sup>19</sup>

Who could doubt the apostle Paul’s passion for souls? About his own race he wrote:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Romans 9:1-3)

Gospel preaching requires a response – a response to God. “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). We want our hearers to know that what they hear from us is not “the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 1:13). The gospel preacher is not content with mere agreement. We look for “faith in God who speaks the promise, obedience to the God who commands, faithfulness to the God who has made his covenant plain, return to the God who warns, and hope in the God who foretells the future. To respond to God’s words is to respond to *God*.”<sup>20</sup>

The Word of God is the means through which sinners are born again (1 Peter 1:23, 25). The Word of God is the means through which all the twice-born are being changed into the likeness of Christ “from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Conversion is simply deciding to live by personal trust in a personal Saviour and commitment to a life of personal obedience to a wonderful Lord. Why preach the gospel? Because “one encounter in a lifetime with a true tongue of fire is all that is needed for the converting work of God to be done in a human soul. Having had that encounter,” a man, woman, young person or child, “will never be the same again”.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

What is the gospel message? It is the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified. It is the message of human sin and God’s grace, of human guilt and divine forgiveness, of new birth and new life through the power of the Holy Spirit. These are issues of life and death. How can these things be preached *without* passion? Do you care about the glory of God? Do you love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength? Then preach the glorious gospel of God’s grace. Nothing more glorifies God than sinners saved by grace. Do you love your neighbour as yourself? Do you care about the eternal destiny of sinners? Then preach the glorious gospel of God’s grace. You cannot show greater love for your neighbour. “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). The Son of God laid down his life for his friends. Our commission is to find those friends and tell them!

May the Lord grant to his Church a renewed confidence in gospel preaching. May he raise up and enable men who will once more “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) by God-honouring, Holy Spirit-empowering, Christ-exalting, gospel preaching to the saving of many many sinners.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> JI Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1961), p. 61
- <sup>3</sup> Tom Wells, *A Vision for Mission* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 116
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55
- <sup>5</sup> Robert L Dabney, “The Gospel Idea of Preaching”, in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological vol 1* [1890] (Edinburgh: Banner, 1967), p. 596
- <sup>6</sup> Tom Wells, *A Vision for Mission* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 36
- <sup>7</sup> John RW Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: what the church should be doing now!* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1975), p. 43
- <sup>8</sup> Alex. Rattray Hay, *New Testament Order for Church and Missionary* (Wirral, Cheshire: New Testament Missionary Union, 1947), pp. 226ff.

- <sup>9</sup> JI Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1961), p. 26.
- <sup>10</sup> Edmund P Clowney, "Preaching Christ From All the Scriptures", in: Samuel T. Logan Jr. (ed.) *Preaching: The preacher and preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1986), p. 190.
- <sup>11</sup> JI Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- <sup>12</sup> JI Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Leicester: IVP, 1961), p. 54-55.
- <sup>13</sup> WE Sangster, *Power in Preaching* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), p. 43
- <sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), pp. 21-22.
- <sup>15</sup> Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry: with an inquiry into the causes of its inefficiency*. [1830] (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1959), p. 243.
- <sup>16</sup> Charles H Spurgeon, cited in PO Ruoff. *Personal Work* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1946), p. 49.
- <sup>17</sup> D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), p. 271.
- <sup>18</sup> James H Thornwell, "The Gospel Ministry", in: *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, Vol 4: Ecclesiastical*. [1875] (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 569.
- <sup>19</sup> John RW Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: what the church should be doing now!* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1975), p. 128.
- <sup>20</sup> Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: a practical theology of preaching* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), p. 20.
- <sup>21</sup> Glen C. Knecht, "Sermon Structure and Flow", in Samuel T Logan Jr (ed) *Preaching: The preacher and preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1986), p. 275.

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### **Editor's Notes continued from page 1**

speakers intended? The sermon was sure to be pleasantly congratulatory and pleasantly short: even if it began by describing graphically the landscape of Sinai or of Galilee – for the Rev. Mr Hart had travelled – it would soon return to matters of living interest, would praise the virtues and flatter the vanity of the congregation, only slightly heightening the picture by contrast with the sad vices and errors of former times or of other nations. After church Mr Alden could enjoy the midday sunshine as he walked home to his Sunday roast beef and apple dumpling, confirmed in all his previous ways of thinking.

Preachers need to keep up with trends in our wider culture. There are two journals that I have found helpful recently. The first is from the United States called *First Things*. It is edited by Richard John Neuhaus and contains a wide range of articles analysing what is happening in our culture from a theologically conservative perspective. Neuhaus is a Roman Catholic priest (a former Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor) and there is a strong RC influence, but it has a number of evangelicals such as Carl Henry, Mark Noll and George Marsden contributing. Neuhaus' survey of religion and public life is invaluable. The journal can be reached at PO Box 3000, Dept. FT First Things, Denville, New Jersey 07834-9847, USA. Overseas subscriptions are US\$42 per annum for 10 issues. Closer to home is the political and cultural magazine *Prospect*. This has been going for several years now and is a very stimulating journal of ideas. If you want to identify what is happening in British culture I would recommend this journal. It draws its contributors from across the political spectrum and often has articles that take up positions that run contrary to conventional wisdom. *Prospect* can be purchased at most newsagents.

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