

WHERE HAS ALL THE GOSPEL PREACHING GONE?

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INTRODUCTION

A friend attended a university Christian Union carol service. There were over eight-hundred people present. When I asked him how it went, he replied that it was a great opportunity, but then added of the speaker, ‘A great communicator, but no gospel. He simply did not preach the cross.’ Warren Wiersbe in an article entitled ‘No News Is Bad News’ wrote: ‘We have heard well-outlined sermons, based on careful exegesis, that did not proclaim the gospel or even mention the name of Jesus! And they were preached not in liberal churches but in evangelical churches.’

We know that it is only the body of Christ who will faithfully proclaim the good news of the gospel. There is no other group or organisation committed to doing that, but sadly much of the church is failing to do so. Whatever size of congregation, the listeners are likely to be educated, shrewd people, who want to hear pertinent truth. We will always want to be preachers of the word. We are to be evangelistic expositors of the infallible word of God. The Bible is our authority, and though there are many ways of proclaiming the word, we will never want to depart from simply unfolding its truths. Billy Graham was noted for repeatedly saying, ‘The Bible says ...’ as he quoted verse after verse in his messages.

Yet somehow, we are in a situation where we may give careful expositions, cerebral insights and doctrinal feasts, yet we are failing to proclaim ‘Christ and Him crucified’. There

is a danger with both doctrinal preaching and consecutive expository preaching that gospel preaching is neglected. Everything has its place and value, but if something is done in an unbalanced way it becomes a problem. I wonder if we, as evangelical preachers, are guilty of overestimating the quality of our preaching. Christ alone, not wise and eloquent words, or even erudite exegesis, can save, feed and bless the soul. Of course there is an offence to the cross, but it is the most wonderful and urgent message.

The gospel is not a philosophy to be debated or an idea to be discussed; according to Romans 1:16 (‘I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation’), the gospel is a power to be unleashed. So why are we so reluctant to preach the straightforward gospel? The good news did not fit Jesus’ times or His world, nor ours, but let it slip and our irrelevance and

impotence will be increasingly evident. It has rightly been said that, 'If the Church marries the spirit of the age, she will soon become a widow.' We are to proclaim Christ and Him crucified.

I would have loved to have heard the Apostle Paul preach. He can at least mentor us through his letters. To the Corinthians he wrote: 'For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2:2). He deliberately sought to exclude from his preaching and the enthusiasms of his mind everything but that great central truth. Note that Paul, great theologian that he was, did not think that the gospel was too basic to move on from. The crucifixion and resurrection are the heart of the gospel. If we have the choice of great eloquence or true faithfulness, then our pride ought to be laid on the Lord's altar as we depend on His truth to do its eternal work.

A DEFINITE CHRIST

There is a real Christ, who was born, lived, died and rose again. And as a Puritan expressed it, 'He who rose from the clods, we expect from the clouds.' Jesus is God incarnate, the Saviour of the world, who came to seek and to save the lost. He is the beginning, middle and end of our salvation. All the blessings of God come to us through Christ. As Christians, we love Him. So let us fearlessly proclaim Him. I have found that when I focus on Christ, a quiet stillness often descends on the listeners. I believe that

the Holy Spirit delights to honour the Lord Jesus. And, even in this secular age, I am sure that there is still something very appealing about Christ.

The twentieth-century American preacher, Vance Havner, told the story of two boats which were passing each other on the Mississippi River when an old man said to a passenger as he pointed to the other boat, 'Look, yonder's the captain!' When asked for an explanation, he said, 'Years ago, we were goin' along like this and I fell overboard and the captain rescued me. And since then, I just love to point him out!' Surely we feel this way about Jesus. Since trusting in Him, He has won our hearts, and we want to speak of Him. Let us do so with fresh vigour. He has been lifted up on the cross, so He will draw people to Himself.

One of the most memorable sermons I have heard ended with the words, 'Preach

Christ. He is preachable.'¹ There is nothing about Jesus of which to be ashamed. There is no teaching of His to brush under the carpet. He is the most loving, gracious, kind, generous, honest, holy, pure person. He is altogether lovely in every way. His teachings, His parables, His miracles, His life, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His ascension, His exaltation and His Second Coming have each left us with a rich array of themes about which to preach. I have found that when Jesus is preached, people listen. Jesus instructed us that all Scripture is about Him so there are infinite Christ-centred treasures in the Old Testament as well as the New to mine and to present to anyone who will listen.² Preaching is a divine work, and so the content of the message is the Lord's to decide, and He has

¹ Preached by Ed Hill at the Conference for Itinerant Evangelists in Amsterdam, 1983

² Luke 24:25-27; Acts 17:2-3

told us to preach the gospel to every creature. God has set the agenda for our ministry.

The Scottish preacher, Alexander Whyte, wrote ‘In every epistle of his the apostle’s immediate, supreme and alone subject is Jesus Christ. Paul has not a moment of time, nor a corner of his mind, nor a beat of his heart, nor a stroke of his pen for any other person, great or small, but Jesus Christ.’³ Jesus came that there might be a gospel to preach, but He also preached the gospel. Trevor Knight wrote that Jesus ‘claimed of Himself: “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” The first recording of Him reading the Scripture in the synagogue is from the passage which says: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel ...”

³ Whyte, Alexander, *Bible Characters*, (Christian Focus Publications, 1970) p.19

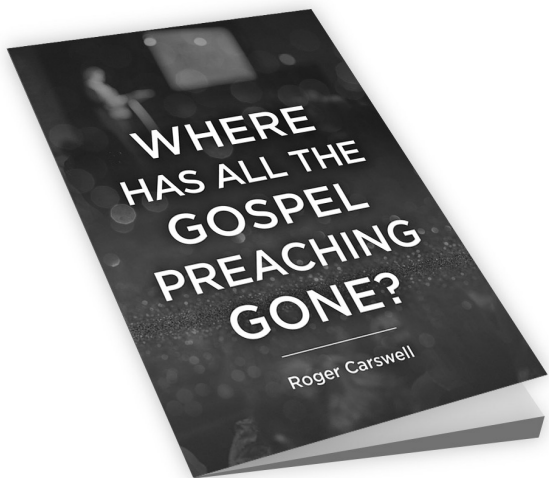
Jesus was the Divine Evangelist!’⁴ If that was Jesus’ message, do we really think we can do better or be cleverer?

To heed C.H. Spurgeon is a wise thing to do:

Leave Christ out of the preaching and you shall do nothing. Only advertise it all over London, Mr. Baker, that you are making bread without flour; put it in every paper, ‘Bread without flour’ and you may soon shut up your shop, for your customers will hurry off to other tradesmen ...

A sermon without Christ as its beginning, middle, and end is a mistake in conception and a crime in execution. However grand the language it will be merely much-ado-about-nothing if Christ be not there. And I

⁴ Knight, Trevor F., *God’s Early Evangelists* (Young Life, 1996) p.127



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