

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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HOW DO WE PREACH THE GOSPEL?

The church had all the appearances of success. More than two thousand people gathered weekly for worship, the music was cutting edge, the landscape was perfectly maintained, everyone loved the pastor's sermons, and the children's programs were creative and engaging. But the pastor suspected something was fundamentally wrong. He asked me to take a look at the church. I asked people who attended to give me their general perceptions of the church. "I love it here." "Things are great." "It's the best church I have attended." What specifically made the church so appealing? "The music rocks!" "The dramas make me laugh and cry." "The pastor's sermons are so relevant to my needs." "My teenager plays the bass in the youth band." "My children meet in rooms with jungle creatures painted on the walls." "Everything here is always high quality." I wondered aloud what would happen if the pastor left or the worship leader resigned or the children's ministry declined in quality. Not one of them batted an eye. Without hesitation, one after the other, the responses flowed: "I would leave." "I'll take my kids wherever I can find the best program!" The members of this church and many others like it were part of a dysfunctional human system. They were "consuming" the church's products without connecting to each other in meaningful relationships or engaging the local community with the transforming power of the Gospel. The "consuming" church springs from the soil of American culture. In contrast, the "transforming" church grows out of the transforming energy of God's creativity." So wrote Kevin Ford, who is the chief visionary officer and managing partner of TAG, a management firm that specializes in Church consulting.¹ Despite his insightful analysis of the problem of consumerism (for example, he says that consumerism is individualism on steroids), his solution to the problem is rooted in the same kind of pragmatic approach which says in effect that simply by adopting a different set of techniques we can solve the problem. Ford's solutions are devoid of *any* theological substance. In fact, his accent on developing a sense of community and the steps necessary to achieve it, could be applied to any group of people, religious or not! D. A. Carson astutely observed over a decade ago that "The truth of the matter is that the consumer mentality authorizes people to judge all matters religious and theological by the simple criterion of whether or not they have been 'helped'—and the only people equipped to assess whether or not they have truly been helped are the people who claim to have been helped. Questions of truth, long-range effects, and purpose are all shunted aside. The pursuit of a feeling of being 'helped' is bound up with the current passion for 'self-esteem.' The importance of self-esteem in order to achieve anything and gain wholeness has so been drummed into us that even Christians who should know better have bought into it."² David Wells, along similar lines, correctly diagnosed this mentality when he wrote, "Given the kind of airy indifference to the place of biblical doctrine in the seeker methodologies, it is probably futile to suggest that there is, in fact, a doctrinal reason for this convergence between the seeker churches and the older liberalism. That explanation lies in the fact that there is a disconnect between the biblical orthodoxy which is professed and the assumptions off which seeker churches are building themselves. Seeker methodology rests upon the Pelagian view that human beings are not inherently sinful, despite creedal affirmations to the contrary, that in their disposition to God and his Word postmoderns are neutral, that they can be seduced into making the purchase of faith even as they can into making any other kind of purchase. A majority of 52% of evangelicals, it was noted earlier, 52%, reject the idea of original sin. It would nevertheless be quite foolish to think that using what was once a dreaded word – Pelagian – to describe all of this would create dismay. It will not. The majority of evangelicals are deliberately nondoctrinal. Their criterion of "truth" by which seeker habits of church building should be tested is simply the pragmatic one. Is this working?"³

Regrettably, this attitude is typical of many Evangelical pastors today. It also explains why Evangelicalism is in its present deplorable state. Either preaching has been totally abandoned in favor of some type of entertainment or else the pulpit has become so enamored with a therapeutic agenda that it ceases to really be called preaching in any meaningful sense of the word. This is seen, for example, in sermon titles like: *How Can I Have a Happier Marriage?*; *How Can I Handle My Money?*; *How Can I Like My Job?*; *How Can I Get More Time for Myself?*. One prominent seeker-sensitive pastor gives this counsel: “Limit your preaching to roughly 20 minutes, because boomers don’t have much time to spare. And don’t forget to keep your messages light and informal, liberally sprinkling them with humor and personal anecdotes.”⁴ Why is this kind of thing happening? In a world which seems either unwilling or unable to listen, how can we be persuaded to faithfully go on preaching (and to do so effectively)? Do we, as so many self-proclaimed Evangelicals do, cave in to the demands of a secular, consumer-oriented culture? “The essential secret,” writes J. R. W. Stott, “is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology.”⁵ When we speak of the importance of *evangelism*, nothing is more important than the actual substance of the Gospel and *how* we proclaim it. In 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1, the Apostle Paul exposes his readers to his own theology of preaching and its importance.

I. THE CENTRAL CONCERN OF PAULS’S PREACHING (1:1-9)

The Apostle was *commissioned*⁶ by Christ to preach the gospel (1:17). Paul has been sent to *preach*, not himself or even his experience of salvation, but to preach Christ and Him crucified.

A. The Supremacy of Christ

Note this emphasis in the first nine verses of Chapter One. *Ten* times he makes reference to the name of Christ. This repeated reference to the person of Christ is one of the ways Paul seeks to exalt the Lord by putting Him before the minds and thoughts of the Corinthians. Note that this is Paul’s *first* approach in addressing a church that is laden with problems.

B. The Nature of the Gospel

It is a gospel that centers on Jesus Christ and what He has done. It is a gospel of grace. Note this emphasis as well in Chapter 1:1-9.

II. THE KIND OF PREACHING THAT PAUL REJECTS (1:10-16)

The Corinthian church was full of division which had as its source a failure to understand the true gospel, as well as a failure on their part to comprehend the true significance in how the gospel is presented. They had been impressed with personalities and with sensational eloquence. The emphasis was on the delivery and form of the message. This was the popular style of the day. If you wanted a large crowd of people to hear your message, it had to conform to this oratorical style.

A. The Gospel Message Does Not Depend on the Wisdom of Human Speech (1:17)

When this happens, people go away impressed with the messenger and not necessarily the message. “Paul fears nothing more than the possibility that he as an instrument of the gospel might mar its powerful presentation by dependence on human ability and strength.”⁷

B. The Gospel Message is the Power of God (1:18)

It will be received in one of two ways: (1) to those who *are perishing*, it is *foolishness* and, therefore, we should not seek to somehow make it appear winsome by dressing it up in what appears to be fashionable by the standards of the day; (2) to those who *are being saved*, it is powerful and does not need to be clothed in worldly fashion.

C. The Gospel Message is Contrary to the Wisdom of This World (1:19-21)

The emphasis is not on the act of preaching, but rather, it is the *content* of the message that is so offensive to the world. Why, then, should we seek to tailor the gospel to the likes and dislikes of the world? Listen to the words of church-growth guru George Barna: “It is...critical that we keep in

mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign. If our advertising is going to stop people in the midst of hectic schedules and cause them to think about what we're saying, *our message has to be adapted* to the needs of the audience. When we produce advertising that is based on the take-it-or-leave-it proposition, rather than on a sensitivity and response to people's needs, people will invariably reject our message."⁸ This is just the *opposite* of what the Apostle Paul is saying to the Corinthians.

D. The Gospel Message is Designed to be Offensive (1:22-23)

Paul specifically mentions two groups of people in this regard. The Greeks sought wisdom in the elegant and persuasive rhetorical forms popular in that culture. The Jews, on the other hand, looked for signs and wonders. This empirical perspective demanded a manifestation of power and majesty.⁹

The gospel message of a crucified Redeemer was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks—but to those whom God calls through the preaching of the gospel, it is the power of God.

III. PAUL'S PREACHING WAS GOD CENTERED (1:26-31)

The Corinthians placed the emphasis on men rather than upon God. Any time the *presentation* of the gospel or *man's response* is made the focus, God is robbed of His glory. Christ and Him crucified is to have the supreme place in the gospel message. Note how this is stressed.

A. God's Sovereignty (1:26-28)

We did not call ourselves. We were *effectually* called by God. The grace of God does not come to men because of who they are or because of what they do (their response). Rather, God saves people on the basis of His grace in Christ and in accordance with His sovereign will.

B. God's Purpose (1:27-28)

The gospel of God's grace is designed to leave the world in shame. God does the choosing and He chose for Himself.¹⁰ What the world values and esteems, God brings to nought. That is, the world is reduced to a condition which is just the opposite of what they think themselves to be.

C. God's Glory (1:29-31)

The gospel is designed to humble men. The Corinthians gloried in men (cf. 1:12ff; 3:21; 4:7; 2 Corinthians 10:17). Their boasting in this regard led them to place great emphasis on worldly wisdom. The gospel, however, strips away all grounds for boasting. Where is there human ability (in any sense of the word) whereby we *cooperate* with God in our salvation? Where is there *any* basis for believing that somehow our *free will* is the determining factor in our salvation?

CONCLUSION: Since this is Paul's theology of preaching, how can we possibly think we could improve upon it by gearing our presentation to the fickle whims of our own culture? How could we think of sugar-coating it to make it *less* offensive than God intended it to be? How could we possibly present this gospel in any way, shape, form or fashion that is inconsistent with its central message: Christ Jesus came into this sin laden world to seek and to save lost and miserable sinners by becoming their substitute and bearing the wrath of God on the cross. How can we possibly do anything in light of this gospel but to bow in humility and reverence before the God of all grace and worship Him with all our being? The problem confronting us today is identified this way by David Wells.

“In these churches, Christian orthodoxy is not jettisoned, but it is tailored for the new consumer audience, which is one much given to spirituality shorn of theology, one stripped of much of its cognitive structure. Messages are preached with civility and they are more user-friendly than they used to be. Their effectiveness is judged by their ‘market value’ (that is, their practical usefulness). God is much friendlier, too. Gone are the notes of judgment, though these are more displaced than denied, and they are replaced by those of love and acceptance, God, in one such message, was presented as the one ‘who loves you, is proud of you, believes in you, and will give you strength to

stand up to the forces of evil in the world.’ Sin is preached but is presented more in terms of how it ‘harms the individual, rather than how it offends a holy God. Sin, in short, prevents us from realizing *our* full potential.’ Conversion is insisted upon but then, paradoxically, it is the this-worldly benefits that are accentuated, the practical benefits of knowing Christ receiving all the attention with scarcely a look at what happens if we turn away from him. To turn away from him, Bill Hybels (of Willowcreek fame) says, leaves that person not so much under God’s judgment as unfulfilled. Thus the exclusive message of classical evangelicalism is maintained but parts of it are de-emphasized and parts are transformed to make the adjustment to this consumer-driven and therapeutically-defined culture. Evangelicalism is now presented ‘in the friendly guise of an egalitarian, fulfillment-enhancing, fun, religious encounter with God.’ And is this not sailing dangerously close to adapting the gospel to the postmodern disposition for the sake of success, adapting it to those yearning for the sacred without addressing what stands in the way to knowing God? When Paul wrote to the Galatians, whom he had to rebuke, he was painfully aware of the temptation to soften the gospel. He firmly rejected the desire to ‘please men’ because, he said, if ‘I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ’ (Gal. 1:10).”¹¹

May God grant that we be not seduced by the spirit of the age in the preaching of the gospel.

Endnotes

¹ “The Corrosion of Consumerism” in *Your Church: Trusted Solutions For Church Leaders* (Jan/Feb. 2008), p. 64.

² D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 467.

³ D. F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 299.

⁴ This citation is from John Armstrong’s article “The Mad Rush to Seeker Sensitive Worship” in *Modern Reformation* (Jan/Feb, 1995), p. 23. As many of you know Armstrong has undergone a major theological overhaul and now proudly identifies with the Emergent church which has invaded mega churches like Hybel’s Willowcreek.

⁵ J. R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching In the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 92.

⁶ The NIV Bible translates this “send me.” The word is APOSTELLŌ from which the word *apostle* is derived. It means to commission someone to a special and a specific task and to enable that person to accomplish that task.

⁷ R. P. Belcher, *Preaching the Gospel: A Theological Perspective* (Columbia: Richbarry Press, 1986), p. 15. I am indebted to this book for the substance of my analysis.

⁸ George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), p. 145.

⁹ The signs and wonders movement, also known as the Third Wave of the Holy Spirit (the first two being Pentecostalism that traces its origin to the turn of the Twentieth Century and the charismatic movement which began in the 1960’s) is linked with John Wimber and the Vineyard Churches. In his book *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), the late Wimber insisted that proclaiming the gospel is not enough, it must be accompanied by spectacular miracles. Unless people see signs and wonders, our efforts at evangelism will be stunted (pp. 39-41). Note how this perspective is diametrically the opposite of what Paul is saying to the Corinthian church, a church by the way that had a preoccupation with such things.

¹⁰ The word translated “chose” is EXELEXATO. It is in the middle voice of the aorist tense and means that God chose for Himself.

¹¹ Wells, op. cit. p. 305.