

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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SAVED: FROM WHAT? (Part IV)

I received *another* flyer this past week announcing the start of another church in the East Valley that will be “friendly and fun” and definitely *not* your *traditional* church. As might be expected (and typical of all churches that promote themselves this way), the sermon titles were all geared around the therapeutic (i.e., dealing with damaged emotions, your hurts, life’s lows). The question has to be asked: does this kind of preaching (which always claims to be “Biblical”) confront people with the Word of God or simply reinforce culture trends that further enable self-centered people to become even more preoccupied with “felt needs?” Douglas Webster, in a penetrating critique of much that passes for church growth, remarks, “Ironically, popular preachers in the market-driven church lament their audience’s biblical ignorance and joke about biblical literacy. Yet they are the ones reacting to cultural pressure by scaling down serious biblical reflection. They would sooner entertain their audiences than risk being criticized for being too serious, abstract, and boring. Apparently, evangelical preaching must no longer engage the intellect in order to be effective. It can now bypass the mind and focus directly on feelings. As one pastor said, ‘A good sermon should make us laugh and cry.’ He did not say, ‘A good sermon should make us think and act.’”¹ 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 council: “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.”² Listen to the drivel of the most popular ‘preacher’ in America (according to ‘60 Minutes’ program that aired just recently) Joel Osteen. His ‘sermons’ are completely devoid of any Biblical or distinctively theological content. He openly admitted on the ‘Larry King Show’ that he saw himself as a ‘motivational speaker’ and as such saw no need to accent Biblical doctrine (he also admitted to King “that just not my calling” !!!). Why is this kind of thing happening? In a world which seems to be 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.”³ Regrettably, we are likewise presently witnessing from within the ranks of professing Evangelicals a massive attempt to re-define the doctrine of God.⁴ The classical or traditional understanding of God as absolutely sovereign over the affairs of this world is now considered not only passé, but psychologically disturbing. According to these self-professed “post-modern” evangelicals (they also go by the name “open-view theists”), God is powerful but not all-powerful. He can still deal with new situations as they arise—but He doesn’t know when they will occur. The new and improved deity of postmodern evangelicals does not know the future. The future for God is open and not completely certain. In other words, God is often as surprised as you and I are when unexpected things happen. The deity of the new and improved postmodern evangelicalism has voluntarily

forfeited control over earthly affairs. According to these new theological guides, love is the most important quality we attribute to God and love, as they define it, is more than care and commitment, it involves being sensitive and responsive as well.⁵ The old concept of a holy and awesome, almighty God has become something of an embarrassment in this enlightened age in which we live. Since we must rub shoulders with people who do not share our evangelical heritage, we desperately need (so we are told) to rearrange God's image for public display if we expect postmoderns to pay us the least bit of attention.

It seems to me, at least, that large numbers of Evangelicals, who on the surface would be aghast at such proposals, end up basically advocating the same kind of thing. In the mad rush to be relevant and practical, the distinctive features of God's character are often blurred in the message Evangelicals display before a watching world. "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" has become the essence of the gospel in the hearts and minds of most evangelicals.⁶ Jesus, the sweet and lovely Jesus, is portrayed in Boy Scout fashion as gentle and kind, so much so that it is a wonder He ever got crucified. The message Isaiah was commissioned to proclaim would not have gained him an invitation to speak at any of the Church Growth Seminars that are so popular across the Evangelical landscape.

I. THE PROPHET'S MISSION: GO AND TELL (6:9)

The messengers of God are, in the strictest sense of the word, divinely dispatched and sent in order to speak. He therefore speaks not on his own authority, but is clothed with God's authority.⁷ The messenger does not shape the message to his own liking. It was not left up to Isaiah to decide what he would say. He is given a specific message and it is not going to be a popular one designed to meet felt-needs. Please note that this goes contrary to the claims of the Church Growth crowd and their contention that the audience, not the message, is sovereign.⁸ According to their reasoning, preaching has to be non-threatening and light-hearted; otherwise, we will not be able to reach people with the Gospel. So we have to shape our message in a way that is acceptable to those we wish to reach. But what gets lost in the shuffle to communicate the Gospel are the distinctives that define it!

II. THE PROPHET'S MESSAGE: A MISSION OF HARDENING (6:10)

Isaiah's ministry would not be popular. On the contrary, he is expected to be ignored, scorned and rejected by his own people. He knows by revelation that the results of his preaching will be negative. This verse contains a Chiastic arrangement. This refers to the parallel members of a verse to form an A-B-B-A (the first line corresponds to the fourth and the second to the third) arrangement. In this case we have HEART-EARS-EYES-EYES-EARS-HEART. The Bible over and over again links true understanding to the heart.

CONCLUSION: This passage is cited five times in the New Testament (Matthew 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10, John 12:40 and Acts 28:25). The Gospel writers unite in affirming that Isaiah's words (and experience) find their ultimate fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus. This hardening was, in fact, the *purpose* of Isaiah's commission, "Indeed, this outcome of the divine Word is also a part of God's plan and a just judgment on the sin of the people."⁹ In order for people to *understand* their true condition they need their heart, eyes and ears opened. If there is to be any spiritual understanding there must be a change of heart. Unless there is a sovereign God who actually operates in sovereign grace to convert sinners, people will never be converted. Like Isaiah, we need to be faithful to the One who has called us to be His witnesses in a lost world. Much of what passes for Evangelicalism today, not only has adopted a "seeker-sensitive" approach to doing church, but they have also adopted a "seeker-sensitive, user friendly" picture of God! We dare not decide that certain parts of the message are to be avoided because people might find them offensive. We must seek to portray the God who has revealed Himself to us as the Holy One of Eternity. He is the Sovereign Lord and He has not changed.

ENDNOTES

¹ D. Webster, Selling Jesus: What's Wrong With Marketing The Church (IVP, 1992) p. 85.

² Doug Murren, The Baby Boomerang (Regal Books, 1990) p. 103.

³ J. R. W. Stott, Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching In the Twentieth Century (Eerdmans, 1982) p. 92.

⁴ The book that serves as the definitive work from this new perspective is The Openness of God, ed. By Clark Pinnock (IVP, 1994).

⁵ Gene Edward Veith, Jr. in his trenchant critique of this mind-set writes: "Whereas classical Christianity stresses the transcendence of God and His immutability, omnipotence, and omniscience, the new model stresses the immanence of God, who is dynamic, capable of change, and in partnership with His creation. Classical Christianity teaches that our problem is our condemnation, that we all stand under the wrath of God. The new model teaches that our problem is essentially ignorance—we do not know how much God loves us." Postmodern Times (Crossway, 1994), p. 214.

⁶ Commenting on this, Douglas Webster writes: "For years thousands of American Christians have felt that the simplest evangelistic line they could use was, 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.' Given the fact that most people do not know who Jesus is, do not understand the meaning of God's love and have no idea of the significance of the phrase 'a wonderful plan for your life,' this line, which appears so understandable, can be totally misunderstood." Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church (IVP, 1992), p. 107.

Michael Horton picks up this same point when he writes: "Making a decision causes the intimacy of a personal relationship with God to commence. The new birth, especially if one judges by the testimonies of converts, is not so much the result of hearing with human ears, in human words, a declaration of things that happened in human history. It is not so much the preaching of the cross, but the preaching of 'my personal relationship with Jesus,' the day when 'Jesus came into my heart.' The story we love to tell is really a story about ourselves, how we found the Lord, and how we are different people since the day we asked Jesus into our hearts." In the Face of God (Word, 1996), p. 33.

⁷ "True preaching," as the late D. Martin Lloyd-Jones has said, "is God acting. It is not just a man uttering words; it is God using him. He is being used of God." Preaching & Preachers (Zondervan, 1971), p. 95.

⁸ The most influential in this group is George Barna's Marketing the Church (Nav Press, 1988) and User Friendly Churches (Regal, 1991). But Barna has undergone a radical change. First, after admitting that things weren't going the way he had imagined, he authored the book Revolution (Tyndale, 2006) in which he boldly predicted the demise of the institutional church. In its place he urges Christians to adopt a "Lone-Ranger" mentality. Do "church" on your own. Barna believes a Revolution has begun which is "an unprecedented reengineering of America's faith dimension that is likely to be the most significant transition in the religious landscape that you will ever experience" (p. viii). He sees this Revolution as a "viable alternative" to the local church (p. ix). And he considers himself a participant in the Revolution (p. x). As a matter of fact as the book progresses, the reader begins to realize that Barna is the Revolution's head cheerleader and chief source (he lists his organization as the only resource regarding the Revolution) (p. 141). What Barna proposes is nothing more than a reflection of our culture's infatuation with individualism. In this case, what we have amounts to spiritualized narcissism or solipsism. To further advance this agenda, Barna recently co-authored a book with Frank Viola entitled Pagan Christianity (Tyndale 2008), which puts forth the thesis that the Church as it has been understood for centuries is a rat infested form of Paganism – especially the way churches have defined themselves with creeds and confessions. Ron Gleason, who co-edited with me the book Reforming or Conforming? Postconservatives and the Emergent Church (Crossway, Sept. 2008), and Gary Gilley, who wrote one of the chapters, have two excellent critiques. cf.

<http://www.rongleason.blogspot.com/6/18/2008>, and http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/BookReviews/book_reviews.asp?ID=292.

⁹ J. Ridderbos, Bible Student's Commentary on Isaiah (Zondervan, 1984), p. 78.