

WHAT IS GOSPEL PREACHING

I realize that many who read this article will not be preachers, but this is nevertheless relevant to all believers. Whether we are preachers or hearers, we need to re-examine what we would expect from the ministry of the word. What should we look for? What do we need to hear from the pulpits of our churches? True gospel preaching will not only fulfil the preacher's ministry, but will revive the desire of every believer to make Christ known.

Passion for souls

The gospel preacher must have a passion for the souls of men and women. He's not preaching to teach them, but to save them. Every gospel sermon has this glorious aim. He must also love the people. The eighteenth-century English preacher Richard Cecil said:-

“To love to preach is one thing; to love those to whom we preach is quite another. If you lack this element of compassion for the people, you will also lack the pathos which is a very vital element of true preaching.”

It is this love and pathos that brings into gospel preaching what Dr D.M. Lloyd-Jones called a 'melting quality'. What a phrase that is! It's possible to be too harsh in our gospel preaching, even to the point of delighting to tell sinners they are going to hell. We must preach about hell, but, oh, to be able to do so with this melting quality!

Plain speech

The gospel preacher must preach to where the people are, not where he would like them to be. Today most people are biblically illiterate, so preachers must preach to that condition. This means preaching simply, clearly and keeping free of jargon. George Whitefield said, 'I use market language' and Spurgeon said, 'The multitudes will never be benefited by preaching which requires them to bring a dictionary to church'.

Using plain speech doesn't mean using slang but language and concepts that people can understand, and illustrations they can relate to.

An impossible task?

The people we're seeking to save are spiritually dead; they are incapable of understanding spiritual truths because the devil has blinded their minds. We are just like Ezekiel before the valley of dry bones. Written right across the situation is the word 'impossible'. Spurgeon said:-

“No minister living can save a soul; nor can all of us together, nor all the saints in heaven or in earth. We cannot work the regeneration of a single person. The whole business on our part is the height of absurdity.”

Then why try? We do this because of two reasons.

1. We ourselves were once spiritually dead, and the impossible happened to us. We were saved.
2. The impossible is possible because of God. It is God alone who saves, but he has chosen to use the means of preaching to accomplish salvation, and, therefore, preaching the gospel is crucial.

All this requires that the gospel preacher must have an unwavering trust in God and an unshakeable confidence in the message he is preaching. It is this alone that keeps us going. If our confidence is in anything else, sooner or later it will let us down, and we will become demoralized and disillusioned.

Should we expect success?

The task of the gospel preacher is the salvation of souls, and he should be satisfied with nothing less. We must be faithful, but even that is not enough. We must want success. The gospel is meant by God to save souls, and, therefore, it ought to save. I wonder if we think the word 'success' is unspiritual? Richard Baxter said:-

“If you would prosper in your work be sure to keep up earnest desires and expectations of success. God seldom blesses any man’s work so much as his whose heart is set on success. Let all that preach Christ and man’s salvation be unsatisfied until they have the things they preach for.”

Reaching the heart, not the emotions

The task of the preacher is to reach the heart of the sinner. Spurgeon said:-

“A sinner has a heart as well as a head; a sinner has emotions as well as thoughts, and we must appeal to both. A sinner will never be converted until his emotions are stirred.”

For most preachers the easy part is to preach the truth, to give a faithful exposition of Scripture. The difficult thing is to preach in such a way that we stir the hearts and prick the consciences of sinners. An easy way out is to say that only the Holy Spirit can do that. But is that a right attitude? Isn't that giving up our responsibilities as preachers and reducing preaching to mere lecturing?

How do we then preach so that sinners' hearts and emotions are stirred? It's not by filling the sermon with sentimental stories of dying children. That may well stir the emotions, but it won't lead to salvation. That's the work of an actor, not a preacher. Neither can we achieve it by packing the service with gimmicks and working up an atmosphere.

What a privilege

So how do we do it? By preaching to them, and for them. That means we must have plenty of application all the way through the sermon; pointing out truths, pushing them home, showing their relevance to everyday affairs of life. In this way we will guard against being heavy and boring. What a privilege the gospel preacher has in standing before people who are dead in sin and telling them that God loves them. What a privilege it is to prove it by telling them of Jesus; to tell them of the glories of the incarnation, of Calvary, of prophecies fulfilled, of divine justice satisfied, of the resurrection; to tell them that God demands the response of repentance and faith. What a privilege to preach the gospel! What a joy to see the Holy Spirit begin to work in sinners – to see indifference turning to concern, concern to conviction, conviction to salvation.

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