

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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We hear a lot of talk these days about methods of communicating the gospel. The reason is because the Christian churches make so slight an impact on the community and so few people find any relevance in its message, so that many of its spokesmen urge an overhaul of the methods of communication, that is, of getting the message across. And so we have chaplains appointed for this or for that; we have expensive programmes for the mass medium of television and we have radical rewriting of the gospel in such books as 'Honest to God'.

It is, of course, right to be constantly reflecting on our methods; but the trouble may not be in the old methods, or in the message. It may be that the hearers don't want to hear. The problem of communication, so much talked about to-day in certain Christian circles, is not in my judgment the real problem. We don't have to re-interpret the

Christian gospel but to re-assert the gospel, clearly and truly, believing it fully ourselves. This may not, of course, bring the results hoped for, because the hearers may not want to accept the gospel, and this is a problem which we can only take to God in prayer.

Much modern talk about the problems of communication and presenting the Gospel in a way acceptable to the modern man loses sight of the stubborn fact of the hardness of the human heart. It is natural that people do not see any relevance in the gospel even when preached with clarity and persuasiveness, because their minds are spiritually blind.

Let me remind you of the experience of Jesus as recorded in the eleventh chapter of St. Matthew. Jesus was a most able teacher, He knew the mind of God perfectly and He was at one with His audience. His personality was winsome, His

character perfect in its attractiveness. He spoke with authority, and His message was accompanied with signs and miracles. In other words Jesus was the ideal communicator; He had no need to overhaul His methods or His message - and yet what was the result? An almost complete failure to communicate the message in the sense of getting any response from His hearers. It was not that there was any fault with the message or any fault with the teacher or His methods. The fault lay exclusively in the hardness of the hearts of the hearers. Chapter 11 of Matthew records the failure. Jesus upbraided the communities in which He had spent His ministry because they took no notice. Their community life was quite unaffected by His message or by His life lived amongst them, and so He warned these communities of their impending judgment. Naming the towns in which He worked He warned, Woe unto thee Chorazin! Woe unto thee

Chorazin! Woe unto thee
Bethsaida! and Capernaum. And
the reason? because they did
not repent or take any notice
of His ministry, even though
it was accompanied by signs
and miracles in the mighty
works that He performed.

In verse 25 we find
recorded our Lord's reaction
to this indifference of those
who heard; and it contains an
interesting lesson for us
because Christians to-day are
in a similar situation. We
cannot claim, of course, to
exercise the perfect ministry
that Jesus exercised, but we
are faced with the same dis-
appointing indifference of
those around us. Jesus would
have experienced the same
disappointment, for in His
human life He underwent all
our experiences. It is there-
fore worth noting our Lord's
reaction to the situation. His
reaction was three-fold: First
He brought the matter to God
in prayer. He recognised that
God was sovereign in the situ-
ation, and so He was able to

thank God even in the presence of disappointment and apparent lack of success. His words are: "I thank Thee Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, that Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes; yea Father for so it was well pleasing in Thy sight".

It remains true that God is Lord of Heaven and earth. Nothing takes place apart from Him. The success of our ministry does not depend on new methods of communication but on God's power, granting or withholding according to His wisdom a knowledge of Himself. Because God is sovereign, and loving, and wise, and righteous, we are able to follow our Lord in giving God thanks always for everything, and not just sometimes for some things. The basic doctrine in Christianity is God's complete sovereignty, and we must keep this in the front of our thoughts.

The second point in our Lord's reaction to the situat-

ion was a re-affirmation of the fundamental gospel facts, the very facts which had been rejected by His hearers. He said: "All things have been delivered to me of my Father ...and no man knows the Father save the Son and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him". Notice how Jesus makes Himself central in the history of humanity. He is central because in Jesus God has come into a new and permanent relationship to His creation. He has taken our nature and so given purpose and direction for the history of humanity. God's purpose for man is fellowship with Him, fellowship based on forgiveness made possible by Christ's death on the cross. That purpose will be fulfilled when Christ returns and all men will see that all power has been given to Him. In the meanwhile the Christian service is to proclaim God's saving actions in Christ. You will see that this gives a super-natural view of human life - a dimension that is missing in most of our thinking

to-day - and Christians are called upon not to find new methods of communication so much as simply to insist once more on the reality of the super-natural, on God, His sovereignty, His coming into relationship with us in Christ, and His purposes, still to be worked out in the future for the human race when Christ will reign and all that opposes itself to Him will be judged and abolished.

Not only is Christ central in human history but He is central in our relationships with God. We cannot know God unless Christ reveals Him to us. We cannot have fellowship with God apart from Christ. This is what Jesus affirmed in this verse, No man knows the Father save him to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. We cannot by pass Christ in worshipping God. The reason is simple: all our relationships with God must be based on forgiveness, they cannot be based on our own worthiness, although we persist in think-

ing this to be so. Forgiveness comes to us through the death of Christ for sins on Calvary and we may enter into fellowship with God now on the basis of forgiveness in Christ. This is the Christian gospel. It is easily understood. It is not a question of finding new methods of communicating this gospel so much as needing the power of God to touch the hearts of the hearers so that they accept the very remarkable statements which they at present regard as untrue. It is not that the hearers cannot understand these statements but that they don't believe them, and in this situation the Christian church must follow the example of Jesus and simply repeat them, reaffirm them, and believe them itself. We Christians must believe these supernatural facts of God, His judgment, forgiveness, the resurrection and the coming of Christ. For if we do not believe them, if we do not make them central in our own thinking and live by them, we won't get our hearers

to believe them merely by changing our methods of communication. Unbelief is our problem: not faulty methods of communication. Unbelief and sickly faith in our own minds and hearts, and in our fellow church members. The problem of unbelief is not merely in secular society outside the church. Unbelief can only be taken away and faith strengthened by God, in response to prayer. We ought to pray for one another that God will increase our faith in the facts of the Gospel.

We come to the third point of our Lord's reaction, which was simply to repeat the gospel invitation "Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest". There is no other way. Jesus pointed out that the yoke of obedience which He invited men to accept was a yoke suited to their nature - "My yoke is easy and my burden is light". It is suited to our nature because we are made by God to conform to His image and character, and as

we accept the yoke of Christ, that is, as we take Him as our Lord and follow Him as our example (or to put it in another way, obey Him rather than ourselves) we will find that the life which He leads us to live is one which brings rest to our souls because it conforms with God's purposes for us. The life of disobedience is the unhappy awkward life; the life of obedience to Christ is the happy restful life, the easy yoke.

So then, as we Christians find ourselves in a similar position to that which our Lord faced at the end of His ministry, in a general disregard of the Gospel, and the community indifferent to it, we must follow His example in our response to the situation; refreshing our minds in the sovereignty of God, and so have recourse to Him in prayer with thanksgiving, then reaffirming the great supernatural truths of God's relationship to us in which Jesus Christ is central in history

and religion, and re-issuing His invitation "Come unto me take my yoke upon you". In inviting others, be sure that we have responded ourselves and accepted His Lordship for our own lives.

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