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The Evangelist's Message is Bible-based

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Our second topic this morning is a fine statement or affirmation, namely 'The evangelist's message is Bible-based'. Indeed the Bible is the only base on which the authentic evangelist builds his ministry and message. The Bible is indispensable to all true evangelism. Without the Bible evangelists would have nothing to say, nothing worth listening to, and no hope of success.

If, however, it is based on the Bible,

the evangelist's message is radically different. First, it has rich gospel content, for it is God's good news for sinners. It is concentrated on the atoning death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Secondly, it breathes an authority which compels attention and even assent. It rings true. Thirdly, it has liberating and transforming power. It sets people free. These three features of the gospel (its content, its authority and its power) all come from the Bible, which is the Word of God.

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1. The Bible gives the evangelist's message its content

Biblical content is essential to true evangelism. For evangelism (at its simplest) is the communication of the gospel, and the gospel has God-given content. Since 'The Content of the Gospel' was Dr. J. I. Packer's topic yesterday morning I will not trespass into his territory. But I am anxious to underline two points.

a) *The gospel comes from God.*

The gospel is God's good news. It is not a human invention or a human speculation; it is a divine revelation. If God had not taken the initiative to make himself known, he would have remained for ever unknown. And all the altars in the world (like the one Paul found outside Athens) would be inscribed 'to an unknown God'.

The fact is that we cannot even read each other's minds, let alone God's. If I were to stand here silent, could you know what I was thinking about? Try! (silence). What was I thinking about? You don't know! We could never know what other people are thinking if they remain silent. If, then, we cannot read each other's minds, how much less can we read the mind of God? Let me remind you of what is written in Isaiah 55:8-9: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways', declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.' Thus God's thoughts are as much higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth—which is infinity.

How then can we know God's mind? We cannot. It is altogether above and beyond us. There is no ladder by which we can climb up into the infinite mind of God. There is no way to bridge the chasm between us. So if God had not spoken, we could never have understood his mind or his saving purpose in the gospel. But God has spoken! His word has come down to us. Consider Isaiah 55, verses 10-11: 'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.'

Thus God has clothed his thoughts in words. Just as at this moment you know what I am thinking because I am speaking, so we know God's thoughts because he has put them into words. He has communicated the thoughts of his mind by the words of his mouth, supremely in his incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, but also in his written word, which bears witness to Christ.

Thank God for the Bible! It is rightly called 'the Word of God' in and through which God has disclosed his mind and revealed to us his message for the world.

b) The gospel focuses on Christ.

You remember what Paul wrote to Timothy: 'You know...how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3:14,15).

That is, the Bible is essentially a book of salvation. Its chief purpose is to teach us the way of salvation. And since salvation is by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone, Scripture focuses on Christ crucified, risen and reigning, and urges us to put our trust in him as our Saviour.

Jesus was himself quite clear about this. 'The Scriptures bear witness to me', he said. Again, 'Moses wrote about me.' And 'he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27,44). So then, as we read the Scriptures, we must look for Christ. As the great 5th century church father Jerome wrote, 'ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ'. Conversely, knowledge of Scripture is knowledge of Christ.

This explains why we love the

Bible. Evangelical believers are sometimes accused of being 'bibliolaters', 'Bible-worshippers'; but this is slander! We do not worship the Bible. We worship the Christ of the Bible, and we love it because it focuses on him. For example, there may well be a man in this assembly who is in love. In consequence, you carry with you in your wallet a picture of your beloved. And sometimes, when no-one is looking, you take her picture out of your pocket and give it a surreptitious kiss. But kissing the picture is a poor substitute for the real thing! Just as you love the picture because it speaks to you of her, so we love the Bible because it speaks to us of him, of Christ!

But if we love the Bible because we love Christ, others love neither. On the contrary, they are hostile to Christ. So if in our evangelism we focus faithfully on Christ, on the authentic Christ of the biblical witness, we are bound to suffer for our testimony. What is it, then, about the gospel of Christ which arouses people's hostility? There seem to be three main causes.

The first concerns the uniqueness of the gospel of Christ. In our increasingly pluralistic cultures our insistence on Jesus as the only saving name causes great offence, and I fear that the offence will increase as pluralism spreads.

Secondly, there is the freeness of the gospel of Christ. Proud human beings would give anything to be able to earn their salvation, or at least contribute to it. To be told that it is a non-contributory gift, absolutely free and utterly undeserved, is extremely humiliating to people's arrogant self-confidence. This is the stumbling block of the cross.

Thirdly, the high moral standards of the gospel of Christ are another

stumbling block. People love their sinful ways and want to be left alone in them. They resent the gospel call to holiness and to surrender to Jesus as Lord.

If then we are faithful to Christ in these ways (affirming the uniqueness and the freeness and the high ethical standards of the gospel), we are sure to suffer for it. Indeed, if we compromised less, we would undoubtedly suffer more.

With regard to the content of the gospel, then, we affirm that the gospel comes from God and focuses on Christ. In these ways the Bible gives the evangelist's message its content.

2. The Bible gives the evangelist's message its authority

The word 'authority' is increasingly distasteful to many people today. They are looking for freedom (they say), not authority, and they assume that authority and freedom are mutually incompatible, which they are not. For it is not in discarding the yoke of Christ that we find rest, but in submitting to it.

Ever since the 1960s the world has been in revolt against every authority figure, against the authority of the State, the church, the school, the family, the Bible and the Pope. Yet it is a psychological fact that adults, like adolescents, crave the very authority they resent. Whatever people may say to the contrary, human beings are longing for a word of authority, for a word they can trust. And the only word which is unconditionally trustworthy is not a human word, but the Word of God.

So authentic evangelists are not apologetic about the gospel. On the contrary, they believe it to be truth

from God and they proclaim it with clarity, conviction and courage. In our post-modern era, in which the very possibility of truth is being denied, it is wonderfully refreshing to sense the strong assurance of the biblical authors, and to communicate their message with their authority to the world. Wise evangelists stick to the Bible for their message because there is authority in God's Word.

Yet in saying this, I have made it sound a bit too simple. Honesty compels me to add two important qualifications about the Word of God.

a) The Word of God does not include everything we would like to know.

We human beings are restlessly inquisitive. We demand to have answers to all our questions. But God has not revealed everything to us. In this respect Deuteronomy 29:29 is a very important text for us to know and to remember: 'The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us, and to our children for ever, that we may follow all the words of this law.'

Truth is here divided into two other categories—on the one hand 'the secret things,' which belong to God, and on the other hand 'the revealed things,' which belong to us. In other words, some truths have indeed been revealed (we would not know them otherwise), while other truths have not been revealed, but have been kept secret by God. For this reason Christian believers are an unusual combination of the dogmatic and the agnostic—dogmatic about those truths which have been plainly revealed, and agnostic about those things which have not. About the revealed truths, it is right to say 'we know', and to proclaim them with

authority. About the secret things, however, it is right to say 'we don't know', and to be willing to handle them tentatively.

Indeed, many of our problems arise from a failure to observe this distinction. It is equally foolish to allow our dogmatism to trespass into the secret things and our agnosticism into the revealed things. Among us evangelical Christians, the former is the commoner fault. That is, we tend to be overly dogmatic, more so than Scripture itself permits, and then we cause offence by our arrogance. We need to remember the modesty of the apostles. The apostle John wrote of our future state that 'what we will be has not yet been made known' (1 Jn. 3:2), while the apostle Paul wrote: 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror...Now I know in part...' (1 Cor. 13:12). If two of the leading apostles acknowledged their partial ignorance, it is only right that we should do the same.

I confess that I would love to see among us both more evangelical confidence in what God has revealed and more evangelical humility before what God has kept secret. To maintain this distinction in our evangelism would commend our gospel for its honesty.

b) The Word of God needs to be interpreted.

To be sure, we believe in what the 16th century Reformers called the 'perspicuity' of Scripture, namely that Scripture has a transparent or see-through quality. But they were referring to the way of salvation through Christ by faith. That is as plain as day in Scripture. Even the uneducated, even little children, can understand and believe the gospel. But not everything in Scripture is

equally perspicuous. Peter confessed that some things in Paul's letters were 'hard to understand' (2 Pet. 3:16). So if one apostle could not always understand another apostle, it would hardly be modest for us to claim that we can!

The main reason why some parts of Scripture may be obscure concerns the problem of culture. God did not shout culture-free truths out of a clear blue sky. On the contrary, he revealed himself within the particular cultures of the human authors, and these may be alien to us in ours. Indeed, one of the glories of divine revelation is that God condescended to speak through human languages and cultures. No word of God was spoken in a cultural vacuum. Every word of God was spoken in a cultural context.

In consequence, we cannot evade the task of building bridges between the ancient world in its cultures and the cultures of the modern world. I beg you not to resist this task, this sweat of interpretation and application. We need to repent of our tendency to evangelical laziness, behaving as if Scripture would yield up its treasures to those who do not dig for them. We need both to explore the Word of God and to cry to the Holy Spirit for his illumination. As God said to Daniel, 'Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard...' (Dan. 10:12). Humility and industry, prayer and study, go together.

So then, although not everything has been revealed, and although what has been revealed is not always easy to grasp, yet Scripture has a unique authority in evangelism. We come to it with confidence. We study it with painstaking care. We humble

ourselves before it and pray for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. We determine to proclaim its sacred teaching with conviction. I sometimes wonder if anything is more necessary for the health and growth of the church in our day than a recovery of conscientious biblical preaching, by both evangelists and pastors.

3. The Bible gives the evangelist's message its power

It is important to distinguish between authority and power. In the context of evangelism 'authority' is largely subjective (the conviction with which we preach), whereas 'power' is objective (the effect which God's Word has on those who hear it). And true gospel preaching combines authority and power. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, 'our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction' (1 Thess. 1:5). Thus it is the Holy Spirit who gives us both conviction and power in our evangelism. We long that our message, which is often spoken in great human weakness, should be carried home with divine power to the mind, heart, conscience and will of the hearers. There is power in the gospel. I trust we can all echo Paul's resounding affirmation: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...' (Rom. 1:16).

Scripture itself emphasizes the power of God's Word by the use of rich imagery. The Word of God is like fire; it burns up rubbish. It is like a hammer; it breaks the rock in pieces. It is like seed; it germinates and bears fruit. It is like food; it nourishes us. It is like good pasture in which the sheep may safely graze.

And above all it is like a sword, for 'the sword of the Spirit...is the Word of God' (Eph. 6:17).

Never, then, should we separate the Word and the Spirit. Some Christians have great confidence in the Holy Spirit, but neither study nor expound the Word of God. Others are great students of the Word (our desk is piled high with study books!), but we seldom if ever fall on our knees, crying to God for the light and power of the Holy Spirit. Why must we always polarize? Why separate what God has joined?

Because the Bible is the Word of God, we should read it as we read no other book, on our knees, in prayerful humility before God, looking to him for light. But because the Bible is the Word of God through the words of the human authors, we

should also read it as we read every other book, paying careful attention to both text and context. The double authorship of the Bible demands this double approach to the Bible.

Our topic has been that 'the evangelist's message is Bible-based'. Evangelism without the Bible is inconceivable, even impossible. For without the Bible the evangelist's message lacks content, authority and power. It is the Bible which gives our message its content (Christ crucified and risen), its authority (so that we proclaim it with deep conviction) and its power (as the Spirit reinforces the Word).

This is the Trinitarian shape of all authentic evangelism. In it the Word of God focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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