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# The message and messenger of the Gospel

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## Introduction

We believe the church is the community of God's redeemed people who have a definite purpose and mission. The true church is called out of the world; it is in the world but not of the world. All those who are being redeemed and are so called out have a defined identity in Christ (i.e., who we are) and a well defined purpose in the world (i.e., what we do). We do well to remind ourselves from time to time about these matters of first principle. To borrow from a famous expression of Dr Bill Bright, these matters are 'so simple, we fall over their simplicity' at times. Hence we must remind ourselves according to the biblical injunction—'line upon line, precept upon precept'.

This biblical reflection draws from aspects of two articles of the historic Lausanne Covenant—clause 4 on 'the nature of evangelism' and clause 6 on

'the church and evangelism'. These form the topic of this reflection on 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, and 5:11-15.

The church, the redeemed people of God, has a charge, a trust or a message. It has to do with the task of reconciling a lost humanity to God. All those who are redeemed by grace have been given this charge. Our reflection centres upon some aspects of the nature and purpose of the church in relation to this task.

So come with me to reflect on what the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul the apostle about all the people of God who are messengers or ministers of the Good News, the Evangel.

## The manner of the messenger (2 Cor. 4:1-4)

Three things characterise those who are called to carry the message of reconciliation. The messenger of this Good News realizes that the message is a stewardship. In 1 Timothy 1:4 Paul referred to 'God's work' (NIV) or 'God's plan' or 'God's administration'

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(NAS) (*oikonomia*).

Here in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, that same concept of *oikonomia* implies a stewardship. A stewardship is a trust, and this particular trust is given by grace to the unworthy. Listen to Paul in 1 Timothy 1:12-14: 'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord . . . that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.'

All those who would proclaim this Good News must constantly remember that they hold this ministry in trust from God. We must remember from time to time whence God has brought us. Paul did not lose sight of how much the grace of God was at work in him—a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent or injurious man. He said, 'I was shown mercy'—or to put it literally, he said 'God *merced* me.' So then he who is forgiven much loves much!

But a steward must be prepared sooner or later to give account to the Master of the house. This must be a constant reminder that we hold in trust this glorious ministry or reconciliation. It is in the manner of the messenger of the Good News to realize he/she has a stewardship.

It is also true that the messenger renounces 'secret and shameful ways' (2 Cor. 4:2a) This pertains to the conduct of the messenger—both in private and public life. It concerns the need for personal authenticity of the messenger of the Good News, because, if care is not taken, the messenger's lifestyle may 'speak' against the words of proclamation. The relevant clause (No. 6) of the Lausanne covenant stipulates 'the lack of living faith' is a 'stumbling

block to evangelism'.

Thus the manner of the messengers of the Good News involves authentic lifestyle which does not collide with or undermine the word of proclamation—whether in public or in secret places. Messengers of the Good News are to realize that they have a stewardship, that they renounce secret and shameful ways.

The messenger renounces deceptions and distortions: '... we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the Spirit of God' (2 Cor. 4:2).

In our attempt to win the lost we must not sugar-coat the message to make it palatable and then distort it in the process. We must not play God's love off against God's justice. Hell is a reality—not a myth; people are lost in sin and are hell bound—unpalatable as these old fashioned truths may be!

The authentic messenger of this glorious Good News must 'set forth' (v 2b) the truth plainly—that is, put the truth in full view, for all to see. In 1 Timothy 4:6 Paul used similar expressions, namely the truth is to be laid before the hearers as a waiter places a meal before guests or as a merchant displays his wares before customers. The point is to convey the gospel message in plain language, undistorted before all people. As the faithful steward or messenger does this, consciences will be pierced and pricked. The truth will disturb those who sit in comfort but it will comfort those who are disturbed!

If the truth of the gospel appears veiled after plainly setting it forth (or making it clear) this should be no sur-

prise in light of the machinations of Satan. Paul says in verses 3-4 that Satan blindfolds people 'so that they cannot see the light of the gospel' and thus they follow the path of self deception.

There is the story of a person who claimed to be a 'Christian' but was not saved! When challenged to make a decision leading to salvation, he said, 'My time has not yet come!' When asked when the time might come, then replied, 'I don't know'. Do you see a form of deception?

Now consider a scenario where it is the so-called 'messenger' who deliberately distorts the Good News in an attempt to appear 'presentable', 'fashionable', 'open-minded', 'sensitive', 'accommodating', 'tolerant', and so on. One highly placed church leader a bishop who was once a theology professor who used to caution his students not to call people to be 'saved'. He said that was a 'dangerous game' Instead he taught that all people are saved already, and what the messengers ought to do is just to go to tell them this. Do you see the deception of the 'god of this age'?

But it is in the manner of the authentic messenger of the gospel to realise that it is a stewardship, that it is necessary to renounce secret and shameful ways and to renounce deception and distortions. So now can move to the next point.

### **The message of the messenger (2 Cor. 4:5, 6)**

Note these words in 2 Corinthians 4:5-6

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves

as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

What is the essence of this glorious Good News? Many would-be messengers of Christ are distorting the message, deliberately or otherwise. The apostolic teaching, handed down once for all—that old fashioned message—remains unchanged, whatever happens. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

Some would-be messengers tell us Paul has gone beyond Jesus' intentions. They tell us that the 'good news' of Jesus was proclamation to the (materially) poor, those incarcerated in dungeons, the (physically) blind and the socially materially and politically oppressed. They are referring to our Lord's words in Luke 4:18: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed ...'

Yes, Jesus certainly went about doing good on earth—he fed the hungry, he healed the sick, he comforted the sorrowing, he defended the cause of the weak and the disadvantaged. But these acts of compassion which are so necessary and vital are not the

reasons why he died. The gospel of Christ must be accompanied by acts of compassionate service but the two must not be confused. The Lausanne clause No. 6 says, '(I)n the Church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary'.

Part of our 'Christian presence in the world' (as hinted in Clause 4) is also amplified in the Manila Manifesto under the rubric, 'The gospel and social responsibility.' It says, 'As we proclaim the love of God we must be involved in loving service, as we preach the Kingdom of God we must be committed to the demands of justice and peace. ... Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom of God, he also demonstrated its arrival by works of mercy and power.'

Evangelism must not be confused with social responsibility, even though the two must go hand in hand. In 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, Paul says we proclaim 'Jesus Christ as Lord' (*Kyrios Christos*) Again, see Philippians 2:10-11:

... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

How then is the messenger related to the message? While the two are integrally related, they must not be confused. The unassailable message is Jesus Christ—*Kyrios Christos*. Reference is made to 'ourselves' as servants. The messenger is not the message. The Lausanne Covenant # 6 says, 'The church is the community of God's people rather than an institution, and must not be identified with any partic-

ular culture, social or political system, or human ideology.' Just as a messenger is not the message, the church is not what we preach.

When a would-be messenger spends time talking about self or his/her denomination or group, here is already a deviation. But when a messenger talks about Jesus Christ the Lord, he/she cannot go wrong. So when your hearers raise objections, just talk about Jesus! When they point out faults, just talk about Jesus! When doubts are raised, talk about Jesus!

The reference by Paul to 'minister' is not a synonym for a special class of 'clergy' or 'full time workers' or the like. All who have experienced Christ the light, those who have been transformed out of darkness into the light, qualify as 'messengers'. The Lausanne Covenant No. 6 says, 'World evangelization requires the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world.'

### The Measure of the minister (2 Cor. 4:7)

We have reflected on the manner of the messenger and the message, so now we can turn to the measure of the messenger. Notice these words: 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (2 Cor. 4:7).

This is the true measure of an authentic messenger—one who has experienced the 'inner light' or transformation from inside out. Inner transformation is the basic starting point. If this is missing the messenger fails to measure up.

That inner transformation links the

one so transformed to the divine glory. The transformation process begins and continues by degrees from glory to glory.

This is what 2 Corinthians 3:18 says:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Another measure of an authentic messenger of the glorious Good News is a constant realization of fragility—'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (2 Cor. 4:7).

The analogy of the clay pot underscores the fragile constitution of the human messenger. God knows this and yet chose by grace to have his 'all-surpassing power' manifest through jars of clay. This is amazing! But that is how our God works. God makes perfect his strength in our feeble human weakness. This is to keep us humble. We must remember always that is not 'ourselves', but God who is at work in and through us. The moment a 'jar of clay' attempts to take the glory that belongs to God Almighty, it is shattered into a thousand and one pieces. The Lord says, 'My glory I will not share with man' (Isa. 42:8). 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble' (James 4:6). God surely does battle with the proud and shatters to pieces the pretentious 'clay pot'.

There are a number of ways that shattering of such clay pots occur—it could be through loss of credibility and the once effective cutting edge. It could

be the severe blunting of ministry effectiveness due to erosion of personal authenticity. It could be a setting aside of such a 'utensil' due to the weight of sin, and so on.

A measure of an authentic messenger is to be found in the realization and a heeding of the warning that 'he who thinks he stands should take heed lest he falls' (1 Cor. 10:12). But 'I am what I am, by the grace of God' (1 Cor. 15:10). So, if right now you are doing some marvellous service for God, remember—it is God at work in you—clay pot. 'We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (2 Cor 4:7). The authentic messenger of the gospel must constantly realize his/her own fragility. The fragility is in part due to the perils dotted along the pathway of the ministry. It is also inherent in our humanness.

A third measure of an authentic measure of the gospel is a stubborn faith (2 Cor. 4:8) Faith and hope are intertwined in this passage. See 2 Corinthians 4:8-9. 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.'

This is a catalogue of hardships and adversary, which will confront the authentic messenger of the Good News. The hardships are a measure of the quality of the messenger. The hardships cater for inner strengths and inner spirit, even though buffeting continues on the outside. All of these are placed in the context of the fragility of the 'jars of clay'. Although weak and fragile, pummelled from all sides, yet they never give up and are never defeated.

Does this not fly in the face of today's 'prosperity gossellers'? They measure success by worldly standards and outward appearance. They fail to see that the Lord of the ministry himself was a 'man of sorrows, acquainted with grief' (Is. 53:3). The Son of Man who had 'nowhere to lay his head' (Mt. 8:20). Clause 6 of the Lausanne Covenant points out that 'a church which preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross.' Clause 4 tell us that 'in issuing the gospel invitation, we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship'. We are called not only to believe on him but to suffer from him (Philp. 1:29-30).

There is a sharp difference between a church that rests at ease and the suffering church. We must take comfort in the fact that 'we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that his all surpassing power is from God and not from us' (2 Cor. 4:7).

We have reflected on the manner of the messenger of this glorious gospel, the message and on the measure of the minister. We now conclude by looking at another aspect of our topic.

### **The motivation of the messenger (2 Cor. 5:11, 14, 15)**

Two essential motivators are mentioned in chapter 5. The first is the 'fear of the Lord'—see verse 11: 'Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.' The Authorised Version renders the phrase, 'the terror of the Lord'. This concerns the stark reality of an impending judgement, whether it is fashionable to preach or not. This same

matter is alluded to in the previous verse as well: 'for we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ....' This is in reference to believers' appearing at the '*bema*' or judgement seat of Christ. But there is also the coming judgement of the wicked who miss the grace of God in salvation. This fear ought to motivate the authentic ministers of the gospel to seek to persuade people to repent—to turn from sin and self to the living God.

This is apostolic preaching—whether it is palatable or not. So an authentic messenger of this glorious Good News should cultivate the art of persuasion. It will involve pleas, warnings, even tears! Nothing is to be spared in order to persuade the lost to turn to God.

There is a story of a prisoner in England to whom the Good News was proclaimed many years ago. After the message was clearly laid out, and having understood it, the prisoner turned to the messenger and asked, 'Do you really believe what you've just shared with me?' The reply was 'Of course I do, and that is why I have come to share the Good News with you!' Whereupon the prisoner responded, saying, 'If what you have shared with me is true, I will not hesitate to crawl over broken glass all over this country to make it known!'

That man understood the gravity of the matter. He realized that no sacrifice would be too great to make the message known to a dying world. The dire consequences, the gravity of eternity without Christ, should motivate all genuine messengers of God to plead with the dying world of the need to avoid the 'terror of the Lord'—on that day when 'every knee shall bow and

every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord' (Phil. 2:11).

The Lausanne Covenant clause No. 4 acknowledges the vital need for 'persuading people to come to him personally and so to be reconciled to God'. We must never lose sight of this element in the task of evangelization—no matter how unpopular it might become.

But there is another motivator! It is the love of Christ—'for Christ's love compels us' (2 Cor. 5:14). We know the famous text: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ...' (Jn. 3:16)—he gave the one and only, that is, everything!

This love has implications. First, it compels us to tell others about it, and then it compels us to give ourselves to others in the service of God. Finally, it induces us to love others too — 'we love because he first loved us' (1 John 5:19).

This then is the punch line—if I understand the depth and ramifications of God's love for me, I will no longer live to self—'And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again' (2 Cor. 5:15). I now become an eternal debtor to him who loved me enough to die for me.

In mid-2004, there came to California an old Vietnamese sailor who many years before had risked his career to save some boat people. They were at sea trying to escape to freedom but, as is often the case, turbulence soon changed the course of events. The sailors decided to force the refugees overboard to their death. But this captain refused to go along with the idea. Lives were saved physically, but this man paid the price—he lost his job! It

is now more than twenty years later. The survivors had gone on to settle in the United States to restart their lives. They knew of this man's whereabouts so they arranged a reunion. The Vietnamese captain was flown to California to meet once again the people whose lives he had saved. As I saw this reported on television, I will not forget one of the survivors, a gentleman who ran to meet the old sailor—overcome by emotion, he hugged him and said with tears streaming down his cheek, 'I owe my life to you!'

This is on the natural, physical and mundane level—but it pales into insignificance in comparison with the eternal ramifications of our subject here. If we as the redeemed messengers realize we are no longer our own masters, then the love of Christ will be a strong motivator to seek by all means to persuade the lost and the dying. We must take caution, though, not to play 'the terror of the Lord' against the love of God. God's love stands side by side with God's judgement—both truths must be held together.

## Conclusion

It is a privilege to serve the Lord in whatever life vocation he has called us, and according to the spiritual gifts with which he had endowed everyone of us. It is required that we be found faithful. May the Lord of the ministry renew our vision, our heart and our calling.