

THE GOSPEL AND THE MAN IN THE STREET (2)

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Yes, but which street? which man, and what gospel? Paradise Street or Park Lane, peer or postman, Paul's or Pavlov's? Although the human factor is not so hopelessly complicated as might appear at first sight, it will be better to begin with the message rather than the man, for we are here upon sure ground.

1. THE MESSAGE

The Christian Gospel is good news from God, addressed to men as sinners. This news was foreshadowed and foretold in the history, religion and prophecy of Israel. The Old Testament is not a gallant failure to be discarded; it is there to prepare men's minds to understand, and their hearts to be moved by, the New Testament message. This message was announced, heralded, by the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles. Our business is to hear and obey it, to prove and to learn it, that we in turn may become its heralds. Experience must give life to understanding, and understanding throws light upon experience. We are put in trust with the gospel. We are not at liberty to tamper with it or to alter it, or to water it down to make it acceptable to our own or any other generation. As Paul told the Galatians: "A different gospel is not another gospel" and no words are too strong to be hurled against the preacher of it. James Denney's words are worth much thought:

"The first commandment is 'Thou shalt have none other gods beside Me', and that is the foundation of the true religion. As there is only one God, so there can only be one gospel. If God has really done something in Christ on which the salvation of the world depends, and if He has made it known, then it is a Christian duty to be intolerant of everything which ignores, denies, or explains it away. The man who perverts it is the worst enemy of God and men;... If the evangelist has not something to preach of which he can say: 'If any man makes it his business to subvert this, let him be anathema', he has no gospel at all. Intolerance in this sense has its counterpart in comprehension; it is when we have the only gospel, and not till then, that we have the gospel at all." (The Death of Christ' chapter III.)

The content of this good news is Jesus Christ Himself; the Christ of the Scriptures, His birth and life leading to His atoning death, and proceeding from that death, His resurrection, ascension, mediation and return. By means of this is God's glory shown in His righteously saving the repentant, believing sinner. Let us freely admit that there are those who would speak of this as a 19th century evangel unsuited to and unintelligible to the 20th century. The Jews and Greeks still cry

"stumbling-block" and "foolishness". -

"To say that Paul is unintelligible, or that he presents Christianity in a way which does it every kind of injustice and is finally unacceptable to us, is to fly in the face of history and experience. There have always been people who have found Paul intelligible and accepted the gospel as he preached it. There are such people still, if not in theological classrooms, then in mission halls, at street corners, in lonely rooms. It is not historical scholarship that is wanted for the understanding of him; and neither is it the insight of genius: it is despair. Paul did not preach for scholars, nor even for philosophers; he preached for sinners. He had no gospel except for men whose mouths were stopped, and who were standing condemned at the bar of God. They understood him and they find him eminently intelligible still." (James Denney: 'The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation.' chap.III).

So this good news from God concerning Jesus Christ is addressed to sinners. Sin is basically a question of relationship. I am a sinner because I have failed in my relationship to God and to others. I do not love God as I am commanded to do, nor my neighbour as myself; and now that God has intervened in Christ, for my salvation, a further wrong relationship is seen - "of sin, because they believe not in Me." This we must keep closely before ourselves, and our hearers, for whatever fruit has sprung from the root, the basic offer of the gospel is that by a right relationship to Christ I may be brought into a right relationship to God and my fellow men. We hear much of 'feelings of guilt', but this is not conviction of sin. David's deed was a crime against Bathsheba, Uriah, his family and his realm, but David cries: "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned..." The crime against man was a sin against God. The gospel is good news precisely because it, and it alone, has any message for me here.

We go out into the street, then entrusted with good news from God, good news which we must proclaim as it was given to us; good news which is addressed to and understood by sinners. In the street we find the man with his sinful heart and his relationship to God perverted by sin.

2. THE MAN

This being a paper and not a book, we must be content to generalise somewhat, and will therefore consider the three principal reactions met with in gospel work today, that of the ignorant, the indolent, and the intellectual.

The ignorant - Less than one tenth of the population go to any sort or religious service at all. Many of these never hear the essential gospel, only a variety of religious ideas. With the great majority, the nine-tenths, the smattering of vague ideas gained from day or Sunday School, the popular press and television, serves only to emphasise their almost total ignorance.

In the course of a recent conversation a thoughtful fifteen year old technical schoolboy told how, after attending a meeting and reading the booklet given to him, he had tried to pray. "I said 'Sir' because that was the word I was used to. When I said 'God' or 'Jesus' there was no picture in my mind to go with it." In this situation we must learn from the Lord Jesus how to use the incidents and accidents of daily life as parables of spiritual truth. In the last event our target is the conscience, bearing in mind the fact that many are willingly ignorant; but we have to teach Christ as well as preach Him. We must begin where our hearers are, with what they know and understand, and proceed from there - "precept upon precept, line upon line." Much disappointment would be avoided if we realised how much of this patient teaching is needed before there can be any intelligent faith. So in our personal witness and our public preaching there must be much provision for teaching the ignorant, aiming at the conscience by way of the mind.

The indolent - Hand in hand with ignorance go indifference and indolence. This is a situation that others have faced before us. In his Fernley Lectures J.S. Simon describes the England of Wesley's day:

"The overwhelming majority of Englishmen in the 18th century had escaped from the direct control of the Christian religion. They stood aloof from the church, or were antagonistic to it, or they were indifferent to its existence. They were content that Christians should shut themselves up in their several enclosures, and cease from troubling other people about sin and judgment. They asked to be let alone, and to be allowed, without interference, to find the most pleasant paths to destruction." (John S. Simon: 'The Revival of Religion in England in the 18th Century'. Chap.VIII)

Such were the indolent who were aroused by the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley. In our day circumstances may be the means of an arousing. Illness, accident, bereavement, and other things make a breach in the wall of indifference through which the gospel may enter. But it is essential for us to see that the basic question of sin and relationship to God is faced, otherwise when the circumstances pass, the interest passes also. The same caution is needed in dealing with cases of drunken remorse and the like. In other cases interest is quickened and conscience challenged by meeting with the bright reality of a true Christian experience in another. Many cases of this could be cited, and such arousing often leads on to true faith. So far as our witness and preaching are concerned, there is a time for plain and faithful dealing, for hard-hitting on specific sins and the judgment they bring. But such dealing should come from a heart conscious of its own sinfulness and of how much it has been forgiven. Censorious denunciation only serves to harden. We must study to present the blazing holiness of God revealed in His holy law, and exemplified in the Lord Jesus Christ. Above all we must learn to aim at the conscience by way of the imagination. Observe in detail the approach of

Nathan to David after the latter's great sin. Travelling by the road of David's imagination the prophet's words were inside the door of the king's conscience, and all David's defences were pierced - he was the man. Our Lord used this means in His parables. Listening to the parable of the vineyard, His hearers perceived it as spoken against themselves. God has placed this road to the conscience in men's hearts. Let us see to it that we learn to use it.

The Intellectual - It was my privilege in 1961 to meet Professor Finlayson of Edinburgh. Arising from his account of a university sermon he had preached, I was able to seek his advice on presenting the gospel to the intellectual. His answer was "Aim at the conscience every time," and he went on to point out the uselessness of presenting the gospel simply as another intellectual concept to be examined and assessed. The reader is recommended to a detailed study of the first chapter of Professor Hallesby's book 'Religious or Christian?' where the whole question is dealt with in masterly fashion. Having frankly set down the "offensive", paradoxical elements of the gospel, the Professor says:

"This matter of intellectual difficulty is one of those problems which is resolved in life, and not by our thinking... Becoming a Christian never takes place as a result of reasoned thought. It is an experience of God that makes us Christians. It is in Christ that we meet God. And this meeting has the same effect upon us all, regardless of age, sex, class or station in life... We experience that which the Bible speaks of as sin and guilt... If one has thus met God and had a genuine experience of sin, then there is in all the world... no other consolation and help remaining to a sinner but the paradoxical gospel of the paradoxical Saviour, who was God and became man, and suffered and died as an atonement for our sins."

We must face the fact that

"in the sphere of Christian truth there is no such thing as an argument to which it is impossible for a wilful man to make objections and, even if there were, many would object to it on that very ground." (James Denney: "II Corinthians chap.4"
(Expositors Bible).

We must learn by "manifestation of the truth" to "commend ourselves to everyman's conscience in the sight of God." Having experienced and learned the gospel, we must set it before our intellectual hearers as simply, as plainly, and as clearly as we can, avoiding all desire to score points or impress with our own brilliance. Our aim must be that in simplicity and honesty we present the Christ of the Scriptures, who is the Christ of our experience, counting upon the convicting power of God the Holy Ghost.

3. THE MEANS OF APPROACH

We are now in the street with our message and some little idea of the man. But our problems are not yet over. He is on one side of the street and we on the other, with a considerable gulf between us and him. We are faced with the necessity of building a bridge across which we may go to him, or he come to us. Thought of in this light, the activities of our local church may well become more effective. They will be so carried on, and held at such times as will make them bridges across which he and his wife and children will come. Sunday School and youth work is still the most used bridge and deserves our best workers and resources. No doubt we have a women's meeting, but why not an evening effort for those not free during the day; and why not a "Grandfather's Club" or a mixed "Veteran's Club" - bearing in mind all the time that these are not to be ends in themselves but bridges by which people encounter first us and then our Saviour, and are drawn into the fellowship of our local church, Bible clubs, squashes and study groups held in our homes, may be likened to a seat halfway across the bridge, while in our visitation, literature distribution and open-air work, hospital services and the like, we cross the bridge entirely to their side. Should our district abound in students or nurses, then let our homes and our services seek to reach across to them, while a nearby town centre may well be the site for a "coffee-bar evangelism" bridge. We must build every bridge that a God-guided sanctified imagination can devise, and use it as long as, and no longer than, it proves to be effective.

We have considered the message, the man and the means of approach. There remains the most important factor of all, -

4. THE MESSENGER

Having sought to apply the resources of our mind and experience to the matter in hand, there is something that must be said and honestly faced. Our scientific age is apt to assert that by its chemistry and conditioned reflexes, materials and men may be manipulated to achieve the desired result. Here is an aspect of "this present evil age" from which we need to be delivered. It is painfully easy to concentrate on new techniques and methods and all the time avoid the Divine demand for wholly yielded lives. By all means let us bring to bear on the situation every resource of intellect and experience, but we must do it remembering that nothing, absolutely nothing, of spiritual value will be accomplished apart from the operation of God the Holy Ghost. Apart from Him the most brilliant and up-to-date method will achieve nothing; directed by Him the yielded believer will discover the Holy Spirit sovereignly at work, graciously using his efforts. The Lord the Spirit is to obeyed, not regimented or directed by our ingenuity and intellect. It amounts to this: when we say "I believe in the Holy Ghost" do we "believe our beliefs?" In the same way do our constant pilgrimages of remembrance cause us to believe what the Gospel has to say as to the holiness of God,

the incurable sinfulness of sin, the alone saviourhood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal issues involved? We visit the Cross Sunday by Sunday, but have we really learned to glory in nothing else? Is there a case for remaining silent until I can say "I believe, therefore have I spoken"? This much is certain: little will be accomplished until the Lord has all there is of me by an act of surrender worked out in a life of obedience; but five thousand can be fed with five loaves and two fishes that are unreservedly handed over to the Lord Jesus.

Having faced these spiritual issues we may consider some of the lessons life and experience have to teach us. It is not possible to do more than outline. Space does not permit development in detail, but some guiding principles can be indicated. We must learn to think and speak in terms of "us sinners" and not "you sinners". The greatest safeguard against giving the impression of placing oneself upon a pedestal is to allow God the Holy Spirit to teach me the incurable wickedness and deceitfulness of my own heart. There are many benefits gained from learning this lesson and true humility is one, a humility that enables me in all sincerity to sit down with any man, confident that the Saviour who saved me can save him. There is a world of difference between the profession of this truth as a matter of correct doctrine and the stating of it out of a real conviction of my own innate and ineradicable sinfulness. Allied to this is the principle of sympathy, a genuine interest in others for their own sake, and for the sake of God's interests in their life. This is something more than regarding them as spiritual "cases", and can only be sustained by the constraint of the love of Christ. It involves an attitude of consideration and helpful kindness as well as direct Christian witness. There must be a genuine effort to understand others and their point of view, and their problems. I must be "all things to all men in order that I might save some." Then in humble sympathy I must learn to be "concrete" and "real-life" in my approach and preaching. In personal work it is essential to get the other person talking so that my counsel is addressed to the real situation in his life; this is equally essential in public preaching. I must learn to assess the situation and needs of my congregation so that the truth I preach will not be a mere abstraction, but will come directly to the personal situation. It is to be feared that much gospel preaching fails here. I must be "concrete", direct and specific. Long ago Joseph Alleine said "Let us come to particulars. It is in the hand fight that the execution is done." Then I must be on the alert for God's 'moment' in a person's life. Experience seems to show that there are points in life when God draws near to heart and conscience, and, if such 'moments' are not used, then much time may elapse before God can or will draw so near again. One final word for those who have responsibility and leadership in the church or assembly. It must be their care to see that the corporate witness is properly guided and led, and then the next generation is being led and trained to follow on.

Finally for our comfort let us remember that great as our responsibility is, it is limited. The watchman who does his job properly "delivers his soul". The test of our work is the impact it makes. Wesley's criterion is the correct one: "Were any saved - were any offended?" It is when men can safely ignore us that we need to be concerned. A clear understanding of this saves us from needless self-reproach.

Remember that we serve a sovereign God, and that "omnipotence hath servants everywhere." God has purposed to "build His church" and to "fill His house". We may confidently count upon this, depend on the power and working of God's Holy Word and Holy Spirit, and rejoice in the privilege that is ours in having a share in the accomplishing of the eternal gracious purposes of the Triune God.

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

Mr. Galyer has offered to deal with any questions or requests for help on the subject of this paper, which might be sent to him. His address is :-

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It is sheer slackness to fling at your people great slabs of religious phraseology derived from a bygone age, and leave them the task of retranslation into terms of their own experience; that is your task, not theirs.

James Stewart.

Discipleship does not afford us a point of vantage from which to attack others; we come to them with an unconditional offer of fellowship, with the sincerity of the love of Jesus.

D.Bonhoeffer.

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