

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

EVANGELISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

It will probably not be denied that the Church has at present to a large extent lost its power to evangelise. Lands to which the Gospel has been introduced in comparatively recent times are the brightest spots on the landscape of our Christian enterprise, but even there evangelism is not the mighty force which is commensurate with the powers inherent in the Gospel. This article, however, is concerned mainly with the record of evangelism in those countries where the Bible and the Church are within the reach of all. There, it must be confessed, the life of the Church, so far as evangelisation is concerned, is at a low ebb. This surely means that the whole life of the Church lacks something which is vital, for weakness in evangelisation spells weakness all round.

The Church was brought into existence for the glory of God. That is the Church's chief end within which there are two proximate ends by whose furtherance God wills to be glorified. One is the fellowship, the *κοινωνία*, of the Church itself and the other is the winning of those who are without to Christ and the fellowship of His Church. These two belong inseparably together. The *κοινωνία* is called of God to be, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the one centre in human society of heavenly light and love and life, so that if, for any reason, these things are allowed to languish the world as well as the Church suffers. The true worship of God and successful evangelism stand or fall together. We are thus forced to conclude that our comparative failure in evangelism indicates a comparative failure in Church fellowship.

To this sombre view of the modern Church there is, of course, another side which it would be unfair and even ungrateful to leave out of the reckoning. The Church is not wholly responsible for the ebb of its evangelistic success. The world's strongholds are more numerous and more stubborn than ever before in history. It caters for the souls of men with maximum solicitation. It provides entertainment or diversion of some kind for every moment of the people's leisure, so that they need never remember that there is an eternal side to their lives. The idea behind these invitations to perpetual pre-occupation with external things, the idea behind even the worship of mammon

which is the immediate interest of the majority of those who issue the invitations, is that it is better never to think about yourself as a soul made for eternity and never to have God in all your thoughts. Many of the most popular leaders in literature and in science are working of set purpose to produce this irresponsibility in human beings. It must be remembered that the longer mankind ignores or rejects the offer of the Gospel the more obdurate grows the opposition to everything for which the Church stands. The view might therefore be justified that the Church is doing a faithful and noble work in standing like a rock in the midst of the storm. In any case we greatly err if we are not thankful to God for those choice souls within the Church who have not bowed the knee to Baal and who are, in point of fact, the salt of the earth.

Let it be admitted that there is much which must be put to the credit of our modern Church. Let it also be admitted that the modern mind is from many causes more hardened against the appeal of the Gospel than in many previous generations. Still, we are obliged to confess that the Church itself bears a large share of the responsibility for the state of things prevailing in the world to-day, and we must concern ourselves specially with that share. Though the Church has at least as many members as ever it had, it may be boldly stated that there is less of the fear of God before men's eyes than ever, with a consequent self-complacency greater and more widespread than any which history has to show. Some may ask whether the old paganism was not worse. Well, that was bad enough in all conscience. A world corrupted by sin has never been in good health. But deep down in the old paganism there was a fear of the gods which kept the people from titanic pride and even prompted them to give earnest heed to any message which offered them deliverance from the bondage of fear. Those who had no fear of the gods were deemed abnormal. But the new paganism knows no such fear. Of course it has abundance of fears, such as unemployment or insecurity, but these are all of the mundane order and it is believed, rightly or wrongly, that they can all be exorcised by mundane means. The Gospel, it is felt, cannot touch them. The troubles of modern man, which are many and grievous, do not relate themselves to any power above him but only to forces which he regards himself as capable of controlling. This is as true of the average man as of the scientist. The fear

of God is not before his eyes. Towards God he is entirely self-complacent. This makes modern paganism a far more serious foe to the Christian faith than ancient paganism was, even if we include within the ancient type the kind of paganism which was common within civilisation a century ago or less. We have further to face the fact that modern paganism has infected the life of the Church to an extraordinary degree. The sense of God is weak in the Church to-day.

If the above diagnosis of our modern situation is even approximately accurate, we who have undertaken the task of preaching are obliged to ask ourselves whether there is anything amiss in our proclamation of the Word of God. In particular, is there something lacking from our message? Have we a message at all for our contemporaries? The anthropology of Blaise Pascal was dominated by two facts which are as true now as when he lived and wrote: man's greatness and man's misery. In his day the Jesuits were encouraging self-complacency. They were healing the hurt of the people lightly, teaching that if one conformed to a certain ritual he would be right towards God. In point of fact they did produce much self-complacency in this way, comparable with that of to-day but not nearly so widespread. Pascal struck hard against this, urging two tasks upon all teachers and preachers of Christianity. The first was to arouse the people to a sense of their direct responsibility to God; the second was to heal them with the good news of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord. Pascal's prescription suits our condition. Multitudes of people, even among those whose names are on our Communion Rolls, are either fast asleep towards God or are scarcely half awake. What they require is a loud reveille which will wake them out of sleep, for until they are awake our preaching will only send them into a deeper sleep. But the reveille is an organic part of the apostolic Gospel, which is the only Gospel. Is our message calculated to arouse and then bring peace? That is the question to be discussed in the remainder of this article.

The call to repentance has become in many quarters a lifeless formula. A presupposition of repentance unto life is that we know what we are to repent of. This involves, for preachers first of all, that we address two questions to ourselves, humbly and seriously in the presence of God and His Word. Are we sure that we are declaring the whole counsel of God? And are

we declaring that counsel with an urgency which answers to the passion of the Cross of Christ?

I. THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

The heart of the counsel of God is in the Cross of Christ. There we have the summit of Revelation, the flash-point of the Word of God. God has willed that we should gain our understanding of Him and of ourselves in the Cross of His Son. He has revealed Himself to us and us to ourselves by sending His own Son into this world and giving Him up to death for us men and for our salvation. Our question thus comes to be: What has God taught us about Himself and about ourselves in the Cross of Christ?

To stand before that wondrous Cross is to stand before the pure and majestic Word of God. It is to stand before God Himself in a sense in which we cannot stand before Him elsewhere on earth. Not until we appear before His Judgment Seat can our souls be so solitary and naked as they are when in the presence of His Word in the Cross of His Son. That determines our attitude. We must come to it not as its judges but as being judged by it. We must silence all the voices with which the world speaks to us and with which we speak to ourselves, in order that we may suffer God to speak to us. We must be keenly sensible that we have come to listen to Him with whom we have to do and to whom we are finally responsible for all that we have and are and do.

Coming thus, what do we hear? "God so loved the world." That is what the humble sin-laden soul hears first. He who created us not only *in* love but *for* love loved us still when we fell away from our Origin in Him, and in the fulness of time gave us His Son to rescue us and bring us back to the home we had forsaken. There God revealed Himself as Love. St. John, in his First Epistle, seems to be pointing to the Cross when he writes: "Herein is love," which is the same as saying: "If you would know what the Love of God is, you can learn it only by standing before the Cross of His Son." Divine Love must be interpreted from the supreme Divine Act.

This means, surely, that in order to know and receive the Love of God we must at the same time know what that Love delivers us *from*. When we genuinely stand before the Cross,

allowing its piercing beams to break in upon us, we feel the shame of our sin, our tragic need of deliverance from it and the utter impossibility of finding any deliverance save in the Love of God. The costliness of the remedy is the measure both of the depth of our disease and of the depth of the love which has suffered that we might be healed. No man understands himself who has not learned to stand before the Cross.

These are the great commonplaces of the Gospel and it is impossible to declare them too often and too earnestly. They are as healing balm to the humble-minded who know that they cannot be right until they are right with God. But what of the self-complacent and the proud? What of the man who has neither troubles nor comforts beyond the horizon of this present world? To this type of person the gentler voice of the Cross, speaking of forgiveness and reconciliation, means nothing. He feels no need of such things. He is self-sufficient. The Love of God is only an old-fashioned phrase to him, or if he takes it with any seriousness at all he interprets it as something which is meant to confirm him in his comfort and self-complacency. That is why so many people murmur at God's dealings with them when some calamity overtakes them. "What have I done to deserve this?" is a very common question. We often hear that their trouble has destroyed their faith. But what kind of faith was it? They had no right understanding either of God or of themselves. They were building upon the sand and when the storm came their house collapsed. They have never really stood before the Cross of Christ to hear what God speaks to them.

The Cross speaks to all men, even to the self-complacent, and the question which it is the main design of this article to raise is whether we are so preaching the Cross of Christ that the self-satisfied may have the opportunity of hearing what it has to say to *them*. Our failure here is the chief factor in our failure in evangelism. It need not be denied that there are other factors. It is highly popular to-day to affirm that the main cause of modern indifference to the Gospel is the Church's lack of concern over the social and economic conditions of the people. No doubt it is one of the many sins of the Church that so many of its members have had so little social conscience, though it is folly to forget that Christian sentiment has been the driving-power behind all our modern concern for the poor and unprivileged. But one may maintain with conviction that what unconcern

there is over social inequalities is no more than one symptom of the real disease. The root mal-adjustment of society, whether in the Church or in the world, is indifference to God. It ought to go without saying that the God-given task of the Church is to strike at the root of the disease.

To be more precise, our failure in evangelism is due to this, that we who have undertaken to proclaim the Word of God have been tempted, and too often yielded to the temptation, to hide something which is blazoned forth in the Bible and especially in the New Testament. We have not been using plainness of speech in declaring the Great Alternative, the "Either—Or", of the Word of God. *Either* we accept Christ as He is freely offered to us in the Gospel, in which case we have entered upon the road to inconceivable bliss; *or* we reject Him and are on the way to inconceivable loss. No one can deny that this is the one distinction among men in which the New Testament is interested. The question put to us by the Word of God is not whether we are rich or poor, learned or unlearned, respectable or the reverse, but whether or not we are obeying the Gospel. Do our pulpits ring with this alternative? Few of them do. But the Apostolic Gospel rings with it. To those who have been influenced by that freak in New Testament criticism which tried to drive a wedge between the Apostolic Gospel and the Teaching of Jesus it is sufficient to point out that the Teaching of Jesus rings with the Great Alternative even more loudly and solemnly than the teaching of the Apostles. It is in the Sermon on the Mount, that refuge of so many who would fain escape from the Apostolic Gospel, that Jesus spoke the word of unparalleled plainness on the Great Divide, in the parable of the two and only two kinds of builder, the one who builds his house upon the rock and the other who builds his house upon the sand. It is also in the Sermon on the Mount that He spoke of the two and only two gates and the two and only two ways. And elsewhere, wherever He spoke of the blessedness of finding life or entering the Kingdom of Heaven, He invariably followed that up by issuing a solemn warning to those who scorned or for any reason rejected God's offer of the gift of life eternal. Jesus in His teaching kept the sin of self-complacency constantly in view and no one has ever warned men against it so solemnly as He.

Many people think that in this age of tolerance we have

done well to get past all that. We should respect the opinions of those who do not believe in Revelation, they say, and should look only for what is good in them. All that need be said about this attitude to the Truth of God is that, if it is tolerance, then the Gospel knows nothing of such tolerance. Others confess that the Word of God is justifiably stern against those who will not obey it, but they add that modern man has attained to so much independence of spirit that he will not listen to any warning from preachers. But this independence of spirit is only a polite phrase for rebellion against God. It is another name for the sleep from which the modern man needs to be aroused. Besides, the failure of a preacher to declare something in the Word of God to which people are reluctant to listen is denounced unsparingly in the Bible as one of the worst of sins.

Our modern blurring of the Great Alternative may be illustrated in another way. The Gospel is a gracious invitation. No other invitation is half so tender or so winsome. We have not failed in our desire to present the Gospel in that light. But that is not its whole light. The Gospel is not only a gracious invitation; it is also an imperious command, none more so. It is even more imperious than any moral law. How could it be otherwise, since the Cross of Christ is the glowing point of the Word of God? "This is my beloved Son; hear ye him." That is the definition of the first great commandment to love the Lord our God with all that is in us. We cannot love God if we do not obey Him, and His most imperative command is to obey the Gospel. We may find it hard, in our philosophy, to identify a loving entreaty with a positive command. But what philosophy cannot do by thought, the Gospel does in fact. The synthesis is accomplished by the Word of God. If God's Word were not a command as well as an invitation, it would mean the abdication of His sovereignty. "He cannot deny Himself." In these days we are all very fond of the still small voice. It is true that Elijah needed to learn the gentler aspect of the Divine Revelation, for he was a son of thunder. But we are not sons of thunder and what we need to hear is not so much the still small voice as the sound of many waters. Ah, the deep diapason of the many waters is sadly lacking from most of our theology and most of our preaching. The still small voice does not appeal to heart or conscience except in the setting of its own majestic undertone.

The charge of wish-thinking has often been brought against the Christian Faith in our time. The charge is justified in relation to the conception of God which most modern theology has done so much to encourage. A God without severity, who makes no inexorable demand on men, who will never execute judgment on the disobedient and to whom all men are not only potential but actual children whether they obey the Gospel or not—such a God resembles the mother who spoils her children with what is mis-named love, and the natural man *wishes* that God were like that. The Ritschlian theology which has been so powerful an influence for three generations actually encouraged the natural man to believe that God *is* like that. But there is no such God. It is only an idol, a figment of man's disordered imagination, and it is entirely intelligible that when such a conception of God is so widely entertained in Christian circles honest men should charge us all roundly with wish-thinking. That accusation can never be brought against the faith which is enshrined in the Bible. For the God of the Bible is the only living and true God whose name is Love but whose wrath is terrible.

Without embarking on a theory of the Atonement, we must consider another aspect of the Cross which is a vital part of what God has spoken for all men to hear in the Death of His Son. The meaning of the Cross is not exhausted in the benefits which it has brought to men. The Cross was a divine necessity, not only for man's sake, but for God's own sake. Whether we call it the revelation of divine righteousness or the satisfaction of divine justice, it was something which the nature of God demanded because of our sin. The divine necessity and the free sovereign grace of God which are both manifested in the Cross create a paradox for thought, but here again we have a paradox which God Himself has resolved in act. When we are declaring the Word of the Cross, if we harp on man's good and never on God's glory, there is a subtle danger that we encourage the notion of God existing for us instead of our existing for God. Man appears in the centre of the picture in place of God. The widespread humanism of our day provides a fertile soil for the growth of this noxious plant. The Cross of Christ is the last theme in the world to come to terms with humanism. It is the theme which, above all others, glorifies God. In the Death of His Son, God exalts His own righteousness and in so doing

saves us from sin and death. God's glory is always supreme and we are meant to see that most clearly in the Cross.

II. THE URGENCY OF THE MESSAGE

Our second question was: are we declaring the Word of God with the full conviction of faith and therefore with an urgency which is in harmony with the passion of the Cross? Our answer here must be very brief.

In the New Testament the activity of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer takes in the main two forms. On the one hand, He acts as the Spirit of *Truth*, taking of the things of Christ and revealing them to us. He teaches us, in conformity with the Revelation recorded in the Bible, the whole counsel of God, so that we, who are called to the ministry of the Word, may be able to declare it in its fulness. On the other hand, He acts as the Spirit of *Life*. Of course, it is the same Spirit in both cases, for Truth and Life belong together. If we do not receive the whole Truth which God has revealed so plainly in the Cross of His Son, we cannot expect to receive the Life which answers to it. The magnitude of the Life comes with the magnitude of the Truth. This is the point of the second last verse of the First Epistle of St. John. "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." The understanding and the life have come in Christ.

Further, the Life which is the gift of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit has two aspects which again belong together. It is Light and Fire. Both of these figures are scriptural. The Light chases away all darkness from the heart. The power of sin is broken. As happens sometimes when you unearth a stone which has long lain embedded in the ground, an army of weird creatures scamper off at the incursion of the light to such hiding-places as they can find, so it is with the evil brood which infest the human heart. They cannot endure the Light of Life. But the Holy Spirit brings also into the heart the Fire of Life and it is with this that we draw this article to a close.

We need fire in the pulpit to-day, not the kind which is worked up artificially, for that is only painted fire which any intelligent hearer can detect, but the fire which only the Holy

Spirit can give. It has actually been the deliberate fashion in certain circles to avoid all emotion in preaching. That is one of the many things which go to prove that the devil is not only very real, but that he is also very clever and very busy. Coldness in the preacher means the loss of many souls.

The Gospel is aglow as it streams from the Cross of Christ. The cleansing fire of love is in it for all who receive Him who suffered for us and rose again. It can only be proclaimed by one whose heart is aglow with the experience of it. What if the preacher's heart is a refrigerator from which lukewarm or even ice-cold words go forth to the people? Such words may be true and beautiful but they cannot be the Word of God. The Fire of the Spirit is not in them and the people are not stirred in heart or conscience. Rather the reverse. They are only lulled to a deeper sleep. To miss the passion which breathes through the message of the New Testament is to miss half its truth and all its power. Surely the Church's central task is importunate prayer for a fresh baptism by the Spirit of Light and Fire.

University of Edinburgh.

DANIEL LAMONT.