

The Presentation of the Gospel

Can we tell sinners that God loves them?

The days in which we live are serious. In the west the churches are in decline. Christians are reaching out in desperation for any new fad or experience which may elevate them. Doctrinal deviations abound. But above all, the presentation of the Gospel has been debased so much that it is almost unrecognisable from the Biblical norms given in the New Testament.

The key area of concern is that people are being told that they are Christians without any evidence of conviction of sin and repentance. In the past, all streams of doctrinal differences were in agreement on this. Although, no doubt, one can find isolated exceptions, in the main Calvinists, Arminians, Brethren, Pentecostals, Church of England and old Methodists saw the need of clear conviction and repentance in enquirers. This has now gone.

My contention in this paper is that the key reason for this has been the overwhelming emphasis on the love of God to sinners in the Gospel message. Now there is no doubt that God does love sinners or none of us would get saved. But that is different from saying that God loves everyone. This cannot be true since God is said to hate certain types of people and even some individuals. Since he: *'has set apart the godly for himself'* (Ps 4:3), then, of necessity, he must have set apart the ungodly for something else that does not include fellowship with him but is a separation. Notice that this is an action God has decreed from eternity. He has set these people apart before they were born.

At this point I want to look at the matter in a short series of questions. Readers desiring a fuller treatment may peruse my booklet: *Does God Love Everyone?*



1. Do you believe that the book of Acts gives us a clear pattern to follow in the evangelistic message?

If you do, as in fact you must for there is no clearer model to follow, then you may be surprised at the facts.

Acts gives us a specific pattern to follow in witnessing to Jews and a different one for Gentiles.

In talking to Jews, the apostles were addressing people who knew God and his demands in the law. These were religious people with a measure of true knowledge. In these cases, the apostles worked from the law and showed that God's demands could not be met by man and a saviour was required. Jesus is that saviour, the promised Messiah (ie Christ, anointed one), who has died on the cross for our sins and has been raised for our justification (Acts 17:1-3). The good news (Gospel) was presented after conviction of sin was evident (eg Acts 2:37-38).

When facing Gentiles, the apostles realised that there was no prepared ground, there was no knowledge of God, no understanding of his law. Here, they started from the point of God creating the earth and his demands as their maker for worship and thanksgiving (Acts 17:22-25). From this point they moved on to his demand to repent. (Acts 17:30), the certainty of judgment (Acts 17:31) and the provision of a saviour in Christ. Again the good news was applied when it was clear that there was a genuine desire to repent.

In both cases, after the evidence of conviction of sin and repentance, the command was issued to believe in Jesus and follow him as Lord.

Point 1: The initial zero point of the Gospel is conviction of sin and repentance. The comforts of the Gospel cannot be applied until these are evident.

Acts gives no support to using the love of God for all men as the basis of the Gospel message. In fact, the word love is not used in Acts at all.

If we genuinely want to witness in a Biblical manner, then we must follow the precedent used by the apostles and stop telling everyone that: *God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life!* It is just a simple fact that there is no evidence that the early Christians used modern methods of evangelism with reference to God's love for men; yet there is confirmation that they made demands of their hearers. The early Christians were not afraid to step on toes. They told enquirers that God commanded them to repent (Acts 17:30). There was no fear of losing hearers and needing to give soft messages. They were forthright and spoke boldly (Acts 19:8). Paul argued and persuaded (Acts 19:9).

The Gospel message includes God's demands upon man. This is the indisputable basis of the message in Acts; yet in these days we see people present the Gospel in a

way which is founded on the benefits of the message to the sinner, it is almost a pleading to give God a chance to bless, 'try it and see'. R.C. Sproul has recently said that the modern approach is the reverse of that used by the great theologian and revival preacher Jonathan Edwards, whose sermon: *Sinners in the hands of an angry God*, would today have to be: *God in the hands of angry sinners*.

Point 2: We have **no** model in the New Testament to use the love of God as the basis of our presentation of the Gospel. Rather, we are to show the claims of God upon the sinner.

2. Do you believe that the Bible declares that God loves everyone without exception?

Why? The overwhelming testimony is to the contrary.

The Bible states that God hates.¹

- God hates wickedness (Ps 45:7)

The Bible states that God hates every day.

- God is continually angry (Ps 7:11, implication of the Hebrew is angry with the wicked)

The Bible states that God hates types of people.

- God's wrath is upon natural man (Eph 2:3)
- God's wrath is expressed upon certain people made to receive destruction from eternity (Rm 9:22)

The Bible states that God hates specific people.

- God hates Esau (Mal 1:2-3)
- Repeated in the New Testament, therefore, it is important (Rm 9:13)

The Bible states that God hates sinners.

- God hates workers of iniquity (Ps 5:4-5)
- God hates wicked men (Ps 11:5-6)
- God destroys liars (Ps 5:6)
- God condemns the wicked (Ps 34:21)
- God curses the house of the wicked (Prov 3:33)
- Sinners do not have God's love (Jn 5:42)
- Sinners are condemned (Jn 3:18,36; 2 Cor 4:3)
- Sinners are cast out (Jn 6:37)
- Sinners do not know God (Jn 7:28, 8:19)

¹ The Biblical evidence for this is huge. To look at just one OT book, in Nahum we have the verse about preaching the Gospel quoted by Paul in Rm 10:15 (1:15) it is not all about judgment; yet it is full of words about God's anger towards sinners eg: 'the Lord is avenging and wrathful', 'he keeps wrath for his enemies', 'who can endure the heat of his anger', 'his wrath is poured out like fire', etc. God's anger is consistent with his love expressed in the Gospel.

Point 3: The God of the Bible cannot, therefore, love everyone.

The Bible states that Jesus condemned certain people.

- Hypocrites (Mk 7:6)
- Scribes (Mk 12:38-40)
- Scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:13-15)
- Evildoers (Matt 7:22-23)
- Israelites without faith (Matt 8:12)

The Bible states that Jesus said some people were of the Devil.

(Jn 8:44-47)

The Bible states that Jesus was angry with certain people.

- With hard hearted people (Mk 3:5)
- With fools (Matt 23:17)
- With false prophets (Matt 7:15)

Point 4: Jesus, therefore, cannot love everyone.

3. Do you believe that we determine our own fate by our decisions and actions, or is God in control?

The Bible is unequivocal in affirming that God is sovereign in salvation and predestines all things.

There is a division in mankind. As well as those God has passed by, he has elected others to salvation from eternity out of his own good pleasure.

- He has prepared a people to receive mercy for his glory (Rm 9:23)
- He has mercy on whom he will, it is not dependent upon their actions (Rm 9:15-16,18)
- Pharaoh did not receive mercy (Rm 9:17)

We are all responsible to repent and believe, but only those whom God gives grace can respond.

- We come to Christ because God draws us (Jn 6:37,44,65)
- Only what the Spirit births is genuinely saved (Jn 3:6)
- Only those ordained to life can believe (Acts 13:48)
- Only those chosen from eternity are God's sons (Eph 1:4-5)
- Only those called from eternity are saved (2 Tim 1:9)
- Only those given by God to Christ as a bride are converted (Jn 17: 2,6,9,10)
- Only those whose heart God opens can respond to the Gospel (Acts 16:14)

God's wrath is upon sinners now.

- They are ordained for condemnation (Jude 4)
- They are condemned already (Jn 3:18, 36)

God's love is on the elect in Christ alone.

- God's love is for those whom Jesus died for, the elect (1 Jn 5:10)
- God's love is for those placed in Christ before time (Eph 1:3-5)
- God's love is tied in with the indwelling Christ (Jn 17:23)
- God's love is eternal, those in Christ have always been loved by God (Jer 31:3; 1 Jn 4:9)

Point 5: Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9; Ps 3:8). God dispenses salvation to whom he will. Those chosen in Christ are eternally loved by God. Responsibility to repent does not imply ability. Only God can draw a person to Christ. There are two types of people, elect in Christ and those passed by. The Gospel presentation must honour God who is in control. It must not suggest that man can be converted when he wants to by his own strength or faith.

4. Do you believe that the methods and catch-phrases you use in evangelism are Biblical?

What are the sorts of statements used?

Well, the most common would probably be:

- Accept Jesus into your Life.
- Accept Christ into your heart.
- Invite Christ into your life
- Give your heart to God.
- God loves you.
- God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.
- Make a decision now for Christ.
- Pray this prayer after me.
- Stand up to show you've decided for Christ.
- Raise your hand to show you've believed this message.

Hang on to your hat - **none of these are used in Biblical witnessing at all.**²

They all have a basis of man being able to contribute to his salvation, or worse, some even make man the determining factor in his salvation, portraying God as some helpless bystander in all this with his arms outstretched to bless but unable to do anything at all. **This is not the God of the Bible!**

We have seen that the basis of modern evangelism is not sound, now we observe that many of the very words and phrases used to accompany the message are unbiblical as

² In Prov 23:26 we see the phrase: 'My son give me your heart'. It is the only phrase in the list which has any Biblical pedigree but we should note: it's context has nothing to do with witnessing, it is not God who is the speaker but Solomon, and even if the king is here taken as a type of God as Father, the connection is to the obedience of sons, not the conversion of aliens. 'God loves you' is obviously a Biblical sentiment but its variations are clearly addressed to believers in all it's appearances.

well! Should we not be starting to worry at this point?

These phrases largely arise from a man-centred gospel, which in itself stems from the false idea that God loves everyone. 'Since God is all love, all he wants you to do is respond, accept Jesus.' Just what does that mean anyway? The closest Biblical idea to this is to receive Christ as Lord (Jn 1:12), but the very same verse makes it clear this means to believe on Jesus, (a concept explained throughout the New Testament) and the next verse states that this was not done by man's will but by God's power!

We must never make the Gospel an easier experience than God intends. That is not to say that we must not make the Gospel simple, it *is* simple, even young children can respond to God and be converted. Yet often, God has long dealings with people and he wants reality - a deep rooted awareness of personal sin, a true repentance and turning away from selfishness towards Christ and a sound believing in the Lord Jesus Christ as saviour. To reduce the evangel to a simple formula of words able to be said by anyone at any time is totally erroneous.

Furthermore, the idea of praying for someone else is crazy as well as unbiblical. God sees the heart and longs for people to commune with him, praying someone else's words is as ridiculous as Cyrano de Bergerac providing the love poems for his friend to woo Roxanne. Conversion is between an individual and God without intermediary.

As well as concern for the message, should we not fear about the methods used which accompany it? The idea that a person can be converted by raising a hand or standing up in a meeting is dangerous. It is based upon a conception of salvation being attained by a decision.

Although people are sometimes converted instantaneously without preparation in the Bible (eg the thief on the cross), it is not the norm. Although a decision is involved, it is the fruit of that inner disposition which reveals a true conversion: ie repentance and faith resulting from godly conviction of sin. The great danger is that a person may respond emotionally to a message from a platform, perhaps as much affected by music, singing, drama, atmosphere and peer pressure as anything else. The preacher has no idea what is really going on in that person's life. This decision must be tested before any pronouncement of salvation is made. In the case of large scale crusade evangelism the hazard is even worse as the individual is even more isolated from those telling the message.

Point 6: Our methods and phraseology should be Biblical if we are concerned about representing God in evangelism. Any suggestion that man is in control of salvation is wrong.

Conclusion

The root idea that God loves everyone has given rise to a number of unsound practices and statements in the Gospel presentation. It has led to a weakness in evangelism which has resulted in the admission of many into church life who are potentially not genuinely converted. This explains why churches that gain numbers

quickly, using these methods, often have a long trail of shepherding/counselling problems that seem to never end. It explains why many young people converted in recent years find it so easy to closely associate with the world and its fashions and feel no qualms about questionable actions which the Bible would call sin. Without genuine repentance there is no growth in holiness. If the root is wrong, the fruit will be also.

I suspect it is also the reason why evangelism in the west is floundering. On all sides we hear grave concerns about the abortive campaigns, ineffective efforts and decline in overall church growth, especially in the UK. If God loves everyone and all are told this, why should a sinner bother to repent or even consider the Gospel message? If God loves him, surely he will ultimately be safe. Sadly, this is a lie, and a lie which will lead many to an everlasting condemnation.

Final Point: We dare not tell sinners that God loves them until there is clear evidence of conversion.

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