

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Isaiah 30:10: *“Speak Unto Us Smooth Things”*

By Donnie V. Rader

Introduction

Paul warned that *“the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lust shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables”* (2 Tim. 4:3-4). I’m wondering if that time has already come among “conservative” (non-institutional) churches of Christ. I have become concerned in recent days about the type of preaching I’m hearing and the type that receives favorable reaction among brethren. It doesn’t seem to have the ring of the “old Jerusalem gospel.”

I’m not so much bothered by what I hear as I am by what I don’t hear. It is not a particular style or mannerism that disturbs me. Rather, I’m seeing more and more “positive” or “motivational” preaching that doesn’t have any more to it than some “devotional” material found in a denominational bookstore. Don’t misunderstand. We need “positive” and “motivational” material. We need to be encouraged and uplifted. I do not object to the gospel being presented in an enthusiastic manner. We also need that. What concerns me is preaching that has no distinctive message.

I approach this problem with much caution realizing that I could easily be misunderstood. I’ll probably be accused of being envious or jealous of other preachers. Yet, if I know my heart, such is not the case. I do not take any criticism of the point I am making as a personal thing, but as a reflection on the plan of God. I fear that J.D. Tant’s warning *“Brethren, we’re drifting!”* is as true now as it has ever been.

Either Extreme Is Bad

Some of our problem is due to our tendency to over react. Because some seem to be all “negative,” we think the need is to be all “positive” and vice versa. We must not be extreme either way. We must realize our need for motivational and uplifting material as well as that which calls attention to the commands of God and warns against sin and error.

I know of no one who is opposed to being enthusiastic and positive. We need that, especially in view of so much pessimism about the Lord’s work. But, if we are not careful, we could leave the impression that only those who constantly deal with sin or denominational error and whose presentation is as dry as powder are sound in the faith. We have some among us whose preaching is always “negative” with little or no enthusiasm. But, why should we over react and eliminate all “negative” and controversial material from our preaching?

The truth is that either extreme is bad. A balance is greatly needed.

Not Distinctive

Much of the preaching I hear doesn’t demand anything from its hearers. No changes are required from anyone, including sinners and denominationalists. It’s not that what is said is in error. The problem is that it is all motivational or generalized to the point that there is no distinctive message heard.

A visitor from the community could attend some of our meetings every night (even if one lasted three or four weeks) and never learn what he must do to be saved, that the Lord has but one church, the identifying characteristics of the one true church, that denominationalism is wrong or that sin is not tolerated by God.

Mike Willis said it well, *“In the preaching which I have heard and in the many bulletins and periodicals which I read, I see a trend away from teaching doctrinal lessons which distinguish the Lord’s church from denominationalism (the organization, work, worship, and names of the church; the plan of salvation; the action, purpose and subject of baptism, etc.). I have noticed that bulletins and sermons rarely expose denominational error and many of the respectable sins of our day (such as ‘once in grace, always in grace,’ infant baptism, sabbath observance, observance of holy days, gambling, dancing, immodesty, social drinking, etc.). Under the guise of ‘balance’ in preaching, some pulpits and bulletins have completely eliminat-*

ed any distinctive preaching - preaching which would lead a man out of denominational error or worldly habits and into the Lord's church" (*Guardian Of Truth*, May 7, 1987).

Brother A. C. Grider tells a story about moving to a place where the previous preacher had been on the radio seven days a week for three and a half years. After brother Grider had been on the radio for two weeks the church asked the other preacher to fill in for brother Grider. The station announcer asked the man if he believed like Grider that one must be a member of the church of Christ in order to be saved. The preacher responded that he believed that, but that he approached the subject differently than Grider. The announcer observed, "No, you don't approach it at all. I've listened to you for three and a half years and didn't know you believed that. I've listened to A.C. Grider for two weeks and I know that's what he believes." Indeed, some of us are distinctive and some are not.

The lessons I'm hearing could be preached in any denomination, without any objections. There is nothing in many of the sermons that would indicate that these men are members of the church of Christ. The same could be preached by Billy Graham, Jimmy Swaggart or Jerry Falwell. I am afraid that some of our brethren would have no problem with one of these or other false teachers preaching their messages in the pulpits where they worship.

Preaching Jesus Christ involves more than merely invoking his name or telling people that he loves them and will save them. When Philip went to the city of Samaria, he preached "**Christ unto them**" (Acts 8:5). However, the context tells us a little about what he said. Verse 12 tells me that they heard him preaching things "**concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, and they were baptized both men and women.**" Thus preaching Christ involved something about (1) the kingdom, (2) the name of Jesus and (3) baptism. Paul said that he only preached "**Christ, and him crucified**" (1 Cor. 2:2). That doesn't mean that all of his preaching only talked about the death of Jesus. Rather, the context shows that he preached that which was revealed from God (vv. 6-13). Thus if we preach any part of the revealed will of God (about the kingdom, baptism, marriage, divorce, the work of the church, worship, etc.) we are preaching Christ. Any concept that says we can preach Christ without dealing with all of these other things is false. If the whole counsel of God is to be preached (Acts 20:27), our message must be distinctive.

Little Reference To The Bible

Too much of what we hear today is filled with illustrations, stories and quotes from secular writers. No one is opposed to some proper use of any of these, but little time is spent reading or quoting from the word of God.

Many preachers are giving the people just what they want to hear: a short course in pop psychology rather than real preaching from the text. I'm reminded of the story about Floyd Thompson and Homer Hailey riding together to hear another man preach. After the services, when they got in the car, brother Thompson said, "*Homer, good pie, but too much calf slobber* (an expression referring to the topping on the pie - DVR)." We work so hard trying to put something into our sermons to spice them up that we end up with very little Scripture and too much "*calf slobber*."

What has happened to the old pleas of "give me the Bible" and "**speaking as the oracles of God**"? Has the time come that we are more interested in what man says than what the book of God says?

*"One is greatly impressed with the way the first century preachers relied upon the Word. Their sermons were Scripture-filled and powerful. They did not have to quote 'scholars' or rely upon what Doctor Know-It-All said about it. They stuck with the word, God's power to save. Their lessons were not filled with soft soothing words. Sinners were called sinners. Repentance was boldly required. Error was treated like poison. Nobody had to come to these preachers, as happened in a meeting not long ago, and say, 'Brother, please preach God's word...' (Willard Conchin, **The Church Of The Lord**, p. 71).*

Elimination Of Things Negative And Controversial

We would all do well to quit labeling teachings "negative" and "positive" and just call them truth, since every biblical point cannot be put under one of these categories.

The attitude of many among us is to eliminate any negative statements which include preaching against anything (sin and error). Any lesson that challenges God's people to do more or calls attention to commands and laws is viewed as negative. No longer do we want to hear lessons on immodesty, social drinking, dancing, unscriptural marriages, responsibilities, instrumental music and the like. Are these not problems among us anymore?

If I use the word of God in the way it was designed to be used, I will be "negative" and preach against a few things at times. The word was designed for "**doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness**" (2 Tim. 3:16). Who dare say that we should not so use it? Paul told Timothy to "**reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine**" (2 Tim. 4:2). Should he have been told only to exhort and not to reprove and rebuke?

Teaching on denominationalism and their doctrines is discouraged. We are afraid for our friends to hear the truth. It might

“run them off.” Most especially is any discussion of issues and uncertain sounds among brethren discouraged. Warnings are minimized and belittled as nothing but a “preachers’ fuss.”

Men of God in the first century had a different concept. Stephen boldly said, *“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have now been the betrayers and murderers: who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it”* (Acts 7:51-53). His preaching upset his hearers so much that they stoned him to death.

The apostle Paul did the same. He *“confounded the Jews”* (Acts 9:22), *“disputed against the Grecians”* (Acts 9:29), called Elymas a *“child of the devil”* and *“enemy of righteousness”* (Acts 13:10), *“disputed in the synagogue with the Jews”* (Acts 17:17), charged them with ignorance (v. 23) and commanded repentance (v.30).

We must learn to preach strongly and defend the gospel as the apostles did (Phil. 1:17). Foy E. Wallace is quoted as saying *“The strength of the church is found in the truth, and the defense of it.”* Amen!

Being Non-Offensive

We are too afraid that something is going to be said from the pulpit that may offend someone. It is true that nothing ought to be said to purposely try to upset a listener or run him off. However, I’m afraid that we are more interested in having people present to add up the number than we are in their souls.

If someone is offended at the truth, then so be it. Jesus didn’t seem to back off when the Pharisees were offended (Matt. 15:12). The purpose of the apostles was not to entertain but to instruct and convict (cf. the great sermons in Acts 2, 8, 10, 13 and 17). If their preaching offended someone or “ran them off,” the apostles didn’t seem to be too upset.

“The Bible is a tumultuous book, and explosive book, a revolutionary book. The Bible is a disruptive influence. Before the bar of contentedly respectable men it stands convicted of disorderly conduct” (Roy Pearson, *The Preacher. His Purpose And Practice*, pp. 150-151).

When we get to the point that we just want to pat people on the back, make them feel good (in spite of sin and error) and say nothing that would offend so we all can get along, we will be accomplishing nothing but sending folks to hell in a good humor.

“Don’t Preach To Me”

I have known that people of the world don’t want anyone to preach to them, but now some of my brethren don’t want to hear how their lives may not be pleasing to God. Do they really want preachers to leave them alone and just talk to them in a way that it soothes their conscience?

It seems that some preaching today is designed to cater to man’s sense of his own importance, make him feel his ego and make sin seem minor and unimportant. Yet, true gospel preaching calls attention to a man’s sin, spells out the consequences and calls for repentance. Then and only then are we speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Love will cause us to preach to aliens and Christians alike. *“When a sermon contends for the faith delivered to the saints, it will often be contending with the saints themselves”* (Roy Pearson, *Ibid.*, p. 96).

The Lord preached to his audiences (Matt. 5-7; Matt. 23 – *“Woe unto you,” “ye fools,” “hypocrites,” “blind”* and *“ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity”*). Peter did the same in Acts 2. He blamed his hearers for the death of Christ (vv. 23, 36). He commanded that they repent (v. 38). Paul wasn’t any softer (Acts 13; 17). Preaching that doesn’t get around to addressing something to the people isn’t gospel preaching.

Before we get all wrapped up in preaching that is smooth and soothing, we might search our Bibles for warnings about good words and fair speeches.

Excitement Is Not Edification

We mistakenly measure the success of this popular style of preaching by the excitement that it stirs. If the congregation gets enthused and excited we think that is the kind of preaching we really need.

The mistake is thinking that excitement is equal to edification when it is not. Mere excitement without some solid teaching doesn’t build faith. True faith comes by feeding upon the word of God (Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 4:13). We need to be reminded that any entertainer, denominational preacher or T.V. evangelist could draw a large crowd and excite the people. Shall we

invite one of these in to excite us for a few days?

One of the dangers is that people leave our services being impressed with the man rather than God and his word.

Causes

Why have the attitudes among “conservative” brethren changed in recent years? I can only suggest what appears to be a few of the causes.

(1) Over reaction to the other extreme. In the past some have spent too much time on denominational error and things that would be labeled as being “negative.” Seeing a need for something else, some have overreacted and have gone to the other extreme.

(2) The positive-thinking movement. This school of thought led by Robert Schuller, Norman Vincent Peale and others has stressed that we think positive, eliminate the negative and make others feel good about themselves. This movement has had a great impact upon the religious world in general, including the church of our Lord.

(3) Motivational (non-doctrinal) preaching is well received. Without a doubt it is pleasant to listen to. So, we do more of that type of preaching. The preacher gives the people what they want and they give him what he wants. A man sees little reaction from a lesson on the one New Testament church, instrumental music or the impossibility of apostasy. Some are offended by sermons on sin that are specific. So, the temptation is great for the preacher to just keep preaching more and more upbeat sermons.

(4) The whole religious community is shifting an emphasis to devotional type of material. All one has to do is visit any denominational bookstore and see what most of the books are like. Very few take a strong stand on “doctrinal” matters. The same is true of some of the bookstores among our “liberal” brethren. The signs seem to indicate that we are headed in the same direction. The only difference is that we are just a few steps behind. It just takes us a little longer to get there.

Warnings

As I analyze the problem I see that we are in a transition period. We have a number that don't like any distinctive preaching. They think all of the sermons should be “motivational.” Then there are many others who are supportive of “doctrinal and distinctive” preaching, but they see no danger in a non-distinctive gospel. The latter concerns me as much as the former. May I suggest a couple of dangers that I see in our toleration of a non-distinctive gospel?

(1) Makes us ripe for apostasy. The kind of preaching done by many will reconstruct the Lord's church into a denomination. I fear that the next generation will grow up not knowing the sinfulness of denominationalism, why we don't use the instrument, what is sin and a host of other things. *“A generation of Christians is being reared without the benefit of hearing sermons which distinguish the Lord's church, from Protestant denominationalism. Because they see no difference between denominations and the Lord's church, they will soon want to recognize that there are Christians in all denominations and then join hands to work with them in those areas in which we are agreed. Some of the more liberal churches which have been fed a constant all positive diet for years are already at that stage now. Attitudes have consequences; we reap as we sow. Unless there is a consistent program of instruction which teaches the uniqueness of the church and the necessity for following the word of God, apostasy will occur”* (Mike Willis, **Guardian Of Truth**, May 7, 1987).

(2) We wouldn't appreciate the Lord or his apostles. If they lived today, I wonder how well they would be received among brethren. They reproved and rebuked - sometimes very sharply (Tit. 1:13). That would not be appreciated. I'm afraid that if they could return that they would be unwelcomed in many “conservative” churches of Christ.

Don't forget that apostasy doesn't come overnight. It takes time and it is slow. While it may not seem all that bad now, where will we be in ten to twenty years?

Conclusion

Only time will tell how serious the problem really is. Until then let us ***“ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein”*** (Jer. 6:16). As for me, I plan to preach the Bible in a clear and distinctive manner and not bow to the pressures to do otherwise. Barbara Mandrell sings a song that says *“I was country, when country wasn't cool.”* Well, I intend to be strong, doctrinal and distinctive when being strong, doctrinal and distinctive isn't cool! – **Guardian of Truth**, April 7, 1988. ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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