

Appendix 5: Gospel Preaching in Church: Eight Reasons

I now face an objection to my thesis, one which I can easily imagine being made: ‘But if what you say is true, then we shall never preach the gospel in any church service. After all, in your system only believers will be present!’ Not so! And for eight reasons.

1. For a start, the Bible knows nothing of a church service in order to ‘preach the gospel’ to see unbelievers converted. This, in itself, is nothing but another Christendom concept. Staggering as it will sound to many, nevertheless it is a fact. We have the record of several sermons, addresses or discourses in Acts, but none of them fit this bill. Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost had nothing like it. Nor had Paul’s addresses to the Jews in the synagogues.¹ His addresses at Lystra, to the gathering of women at the riverside, to the jailer and at the Areopagus had nothing to do with ‘church’. And so on.

Of course, nothing prevents a church arranging – organising – a meeting designedly to address unbelievers – as long as this avoids all the trappings of ‘church’.² I am talking about such things as hymn singing and prayers in which the ungodly are treated, and encouraged to participate, as believers, openly welcomed (even thanked) for attendance. Where these trappings are used – which is in virtually every institutionalised church in Christendom – granting that some, in God’s sovereign grace, might be converted,³ for the

¹ Paul would never have dreamed of allowing the synagogue to affect his approach. As soon as the synagogue rulers tried to twist his arm, he was off. See Acts 13:42-52; 14:1-7; 18:6-7; 19:8-10.

² See my *Gadfly*.

³ God’s sovereignty – what God might do, what God has decreed to do, his secret – must never govern our action. For a start, it is

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majority of unbelievers under such a system, all the practice accomplishes is, at best, to turn them into hypocrites.⁴ At worst, it deceives and deludes them into thinking they are believers.⁵ But it is the link between addresses to unbelievers and a normal church service that is the sticking point. This may seem nitpicking. It is not! Once that line is crossed, the Christendom tsunami floods in, sweeping all before it.⁶

And we know what it is to ‘preach the gospel’ scripturally, whether to sinner or saint. (Yes, we have to preach the gospel to the saints! Read on!). The apostle told us what preaching the gospel is. For a start, it must be preaching – real preaching, that is, not lecturing⁷ – preaching the entire Scripture, preaching the gospel of God’s grace, preaching the whole counsel of God, preaching the kingdom, preaching anything and everything that would be helpful to believers, while telling sinners that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, urging them to do it at once, proclaiming the whole will of God, declaring the word of his grace. Just in case this needs to be said, all I have been doing is repeating what Paul said by way of reminding the church elders of what he had done for two years at Ephesus,

impossible. God’s secret will is just that: secret. We must obey his revealed will: Scripture. See my *Offer*.

⁴ While the possible conversion of some is often trotted out to justify anything, rarely is the thought of the hardening of others (probably the majority) made a reason for caution.

⁵ I suppose it might be possible to choose hymns and say prayers which are legitimate for participation by an unbeliever, but I find it very hard to think of what they might be. In any case, however carefully we try to explain to unbelievers what is going on and so prevent the damage, we are all only too well aware that people hear what they want to hear. The only safe way is to avoid all such trappings. In this context, they are without scriptural warrant. Moreover, whenever Scripture is read to a mixed congregation, the repeated use of ‘us’ and ‘you’ (plural) in Rom. 6 for example, inevitably means unbelievers are included in assertions which are, in their case, false.

⁶ See my *Deceit*.

⁷ See my *Preaching*.

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both in public and in private (Acts 20:17-35). I could put it in terms of the apostle's words to the Corinthians and speak of preaching Christ, preaching Christ crucified, preaching Christ as Lord, preaching the gospel (1 Cor. 2:2; 9:16; 2 Cor. 4:5). And the phrase, 'in public and in private' could mean in both open and closed meetings, in a large gathering or a private conversation, and so on. It could also include specially designed meetings for the unbeliever, free, as I say, from all the trappings of 'church'. Nothing that I have said mitigates against this.

That is the first reason why we need to preach the gospel in the *ekklēsia*.

2. We have plenty of examples of apostolic addresses to the unconverted in their letters to churches (Rom. 10:1-21; 2 Cor. 5:11 – 6:2; Gal. 5:4-6, for instance). So, when we preach, we must address the congregation as though there might be unconverted people present. Who knows?

3. God only knows who the true converts are; only he can read the heart (2 Tim. 2:19; see also John 10:14; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9). So we must preach, erring, in this matter, on the side of allowing that unbelievers might be present. And, as I have said, it is almost certain that Christendom 'Christians' will be in the congregation.

4. The gospel, when it is truly preached, including the giving of clear warnings, invitations, commands, exhortations to repent and come to Christ, accompanied by the warmest of encouragements and promises, is, in itself, a means of assurance, edification, progressive sanctification and comfort for believers, and a spur to their worship (and by 'worship' I mean 24/7, not just 'in church'), as to its motive and content.

5. The unconverted children of believers will be present. They need to be called to Christ.

6. There is an educational, instructional, aspect to such preaching. As they hear the preacher truly preaching Christ, believers will themselves be helped and encouraged to go and

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do likewise in their families, among their friends and acquaintances, and in their work place. ‘Preaching’ in the New Testament is far, far wider than ‘pulpit work’.⁸ And herein lies the key to much of the New Testament way of reaching the lost. Such preaching will also instruct believers how to read the Bible for themselves.

7. It will encourage believers to know what to expect if they bring an interested unconverted person to hear the preacher, or if any unbeliever should happen to wander in.

8. The full explanation and application of any passage of Scripture demands it. In other words, if the preacher really is preaching, he must preach the gospel.

Now for another objection. What about 1 Timothy 4:16? Doesn’t such a verse show that Paul expected unbelievers to be present at preaching services within the church? Well, of course, as we have seen, Paul recognised that unbelievers might be present (1 Cor. 14:23-25). Can there be any doubt, therefore, about his speaking in such a way as to bring the unconverted to Christ? And, of course, he would have wanted Timothy to do the same. Certainly. But this is not what the text means. This is not what Paul was telling Timothy. When Paul promised his protégé that ‘you will save... your hearers’, he was not, in the first place, thinking of the unconverted at all. Let me quote the words in their context:

Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but *set an example for the believers* in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, *you will save both yourself and your hearers* (1 Tim. 4:12-16).

⁸ See my *The Priesthood; Pastor; Sowed*.

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The words I have emphasised show beyond any doubt that the apostle was thinking primarily of the salvation of believers. Timothy was already converted, was he not? The salvation of believers is what Paul wanted Timothy to aim for. What? The salvation of believers? Yes, indeed.⁹ Believers were saved in eternity past in God's decree, were saved on the cross in Christ's work, were saved when they came to faith, are being saved, and will be saved in eternity to come.¹⁰ Paul wanted Timothy to live, preach and teach so as to get the saints to glory. As Paul puts it: 'I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory' (2 Tim. 2:10). Again, writing to the Corinthian believers: 'If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation' (2 Cor. 1:6). And this ties in with suffering for the gospel. As the apostle told the believers at Corinth: 'I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church... We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ' (Col. 1:24,28).¹¹ In addition, do not miss the fact that passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:18 – 6:2, 2 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 2:1, and so on, were written to believers, and the writers had believers in mind before anybody else.¹²

In other words, 1 Timothy 4:16 cannot be used to justify 'churchifying the unchurched'.

⁹ See my *Dutton* pp210-211. See Acts 15:1; Rom. 13:11; 2 Cor. 1:6; Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:10; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5.9-10; 2 Pet. 3:14-15.

¹⁰ See my *Eternal*.

¹¹ See my three short discourses on Rom. 8:18-27: 'Global Liberty In Christ'; 'Glorious Hope'; 'If God Is For Us...'

¹² See John Piper: 'Brothers, Save the Saints' in: *Brothers, we are not Professionals: A plea to pastors for radical ministry*, Mentor, Fearn, reprinted 2011, pp105-111.