

Tuesday, February 19, 2013 – Crisis in the Pulpit

Alvis Nichols, preacher at the Wylie church of Christ, is a wonderful example of what gospel preaching used to be, can still be, and should be. My family and I, as well as all those who attend Wylie, have been enormously blessed by the way he preaches the whole counsel of God with such a pure heart and loving spirit. He preaches the gospel. His only concern is that those who sit in the pews understand what it means to live a life pleasing and acceptable to God. We need more Alvis Nichols' in the pulpit!

The word “preacher” is from the original term kerux, signifying a “herald.” The herald was an important person in Greek society. One of his most vital functions was to preserve the integrity of the message he was delivering. Unfortunately, we live in an era where many “preachers” are turning away from Biblical preaching to human doctrine, gimmickry, and appeasing those who are easily offended when faced with the Truth of God’s Word. A century ago there was a complimentary saying concerning well-studied preachers: “His sermons smell of kerosene,” which signified that he had spent long nights by the light of the coal oil lamp in preparation. It might be said of some sermons today: they just “smell.” The preacher, whose characteristic lesson consists mostly of home-spun tales and a collection of stale preacher-jokes, with a minimal amount of Bible, usually paraphrased, sprinkled in here and there, is a disgrace to his profession. There is no excuse for such malfeasance.

Unfortunately we live in an era where most “preachers” are judged based on their longevity, their skill at self-promotion, their appearance of self-importance, and worthless accolades bestowed upon them by the world (even if they come from so called Christian Universities). Too many times a congregation expresses great personal affection for “their preacher” and are very grateful for the many years he has spent “preaching”, however, his “preaching” consisted of mostly “don’t offend” type of lessons. Unfortunately, while focusing on appeasing his audience, the preacher does not expose the evils that the church faces and has faced in every age. The congregation does not know where he stands on the moral and spiritual problems which are destroying so many of our young people as well as our older people because he never takes a stand.

No one should ever begin to preach the gospel without an awareness of the responsibility involved. God has no work at all for craven cowards and the “fearful and unbelieving” (**Rev. 21:8**). Ours is to do or die in the service of our Lord. Boldness is of God when it is based on truth and right. “The righteous are bold as a lion” (**Prov. 28:1**). **1 Thessalonians 2:1-12** reveals characteristics of a good preacher (or Bible class teacher, personal worker, etc.) which all of us would do well to consider.

Boldness (2:2)

Opposition and adversity must not silence the preacher of God. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that before arriving in Thessalonica he had been beaten and imprisoned at Philippi (**Acts 16**). Did persecution produce in Paul a hesitancy to preach or preach a watered down gospel? Absolutely not: "We were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict." Let us all preach and teach with the same boldness, for "God has not given us a spirit of fear" (**2 Tim. 1:7**).

Certain Of His Convictions (2:3)

Paul could be bold in the face of opposition because he was certain that his appeal did not come from deceit or error. Here was a man certain of what he believed and why he believed it. There is great danger when a man begins to preach without being certain of the source of his convictions. Many a pulpit has been filled by one whose faith was his father's and whose sermon was straight from an outline book. Godly parents are a blessing and outline books can be helpful, but it is imperative that our convictions come from God and not man. That necessitates studying the word for ourselves and thereby developing a faith that is our own (**Rom. 10:17**).

Without Guile (2:3)

Paul and his companions preached the truth not error. Paul and his companions did not use tricks or false motives. Guile was neither part nor parcel of their preaching. They were not deceived nor did they deceive. Their preaching was not the wiles of error nor were they "bond servants of corruption" (**2 Pet. 2:19**). They spoke truth. Insincerity is usually so easily detected in one's preaching. Sincerity must be the basis of our life and work. Nothing else can take the place of sincerity. The absence of hypocrisy is essential to motivate and teach men the truth. The devil is so clever and we can only best him in any battle if we have no ulterior motives or desires. Deceit is error.

Their motives were pure and they lived pure lives. The shameful debacle of the television preachers has caused people all over America to become even more skeptical of religion and preachers. If men will not deny themselves the most blatant forms of sin, how can they possibly help others with anything wrong in their lives? The way we live always influences those about us. Our influence produces light or darkness (**1 John 1:7-8; John 3:18-19**). Jesus was the Light of the world (**John 8:12; 9:5; 12:34-35**) and His preachers must be also (**Matt. 5:13-16**). This does not suggest that he must be perfect; that person does not exist upon this earth today. But his life must not be so tarnished by flagrant disobedience that he has no moral or spiritual influence.

Among the many admonitions given to Timothy, Paul encouraged the young brother to “follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness” (**1 Timothy 6:11**), being an “example” to others in both “word” and “manner of life” (**1 Timothy 4:12**).

Not a Crowd-Pleaser, But A God-Pleaser (2:4)

They were speaking to please God not men. God knew this because God knows what is in the hearts of men. Preaching is a life that seeks not the pleasing of men, “but God who proveth our hearts.” Being “entrusted with the gospel” is a solemn trust, for the gospel is a great treasure, a “pearl of great price.” “So we speak; not as pleasing men, but God ...” How truly marvelous the concept, the work and the life that is able to do such a thing! “Our sufficiency is of God, who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament” (**2 Cor. 3:5-6, KJV**). Men's opinions are irrelevant as long as we are pleasing to God. If we please God, we may not please some men (**Gal. 1:10**).

It is interesting to note that “approval” is a perfect tense form which speaks not of a single act, but of a continuing state before God. It is great when we are able to please both God and man, but it cannot always be that way and, like Paul, we must make it a priority to please God first. Preaching the truth on divorce and remarriage, baptism, decency of dress and other unpopular subjects will likely please few men, but preaching the whole counsel of God will please the One we should desire to please. “For if I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ” (**Gal. 1:10**).

Avoiding Flattery (2:5)

While it is true that Paul frequently used sincere praise and commendation in his teaching efforts, the apostle did not use flattery and insincerity to win converts or influence people. Never forget that the gospel must first humble a man before he can be exalted. Proper teaching will show a person that he desperately needs the Lord.

Not Covetous (2:5)

When Paul went to Thessalonica, it was not a move motivated by thoughts of monetary gain. Though the Philippians sent him some help (**Phil. 4:15**), Paul still had to work with his own hands in order to preach there (**1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7-9**), for he would not allow or require the Thessalonians to support him lest he be accused of covetousness. In this day when preachers are generally well paid, it can be a real temptation to become men pleasers unwilling to risk losing financial support because of controversial preaching. Some resort to craftiness or whatever is necessary to gain “converts” so that

the offering can be increased. The solution to such a problem is having both the preacher and the church realize that no matter who signs the check the preacher must be a servant of God and not an employee of the church. Churches should desire that the one laboring with them preach in such a way as to please God and not those providing his support.

Gentle (2:6-7)

One of the greatest challenges a preacher faces is maintaining a balanced approach in his teaching. We have focused so far on strength, courage, boldness, etc. and there are some who seem to specialize in these characteristics. On the other hand, there are those who seem to manifest only the gentleness that is seen in the remainder of our study. What we need are men who are able to blend the two. Remember that it was possible for the same apostle to claim boldness and yet admit to the gentleness of a nursing mother.

Paul and his companions did not arrive in town making the type of demands an apostle might be expected to make. (Some preachers would do well to read **1 Thess. 2:6** before their next gospel meeting.) They did not seek glory from men, but instead were as gentle as a mother nursing her children (NKJV & NASB). Such gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit (**Gal. 5:22**), and is Heavenly in origin (**James 3:17**). Boldness and gentleness are often difficult to combine, but we must make every effort to do so. Boldness does not justify ugliness; gentleness does not necessitate weakness.

Giving Of Self (2:8)

Why did the preaching of Paul and his companions have a great impact on so many towns? He was “affectionately desirous” of the converts. This affection was pure and without blemish. No lust or physical desire is found here, but friendship and holiness motivated this man. There was no vain self-serving or self-seeking of human glory from his converts or those outside, but simply a desire to serve God. The verb being affectionately desirous is not found anywhere else in the New Testament. It expresses very strong emotion and a depth of feeling. The present tense indicates that the feeling was continuous. Paul and his companions came to give not to get. They gave not only the gospel of God, but they gave themselves. They loved the Thessalonians very much.

Blameless In Conduct (2:10)

Many can offer firsthand testimony regarding the damage done to a church when a preacher (or any other teacher) does not live in a manner consistent with his teaching.

The Christians in Thessalonica knew what matter of life Paul and his companions lived among them. God also knew. They lived good Christian lives. Paul used three terms to describe this. They lived holy lives which indicated all that a Christian should be. They lived righteously which indicated they lived in obedience to God's law. They lived blameless which indicated there was no charge that could be made against them. "You that believe" were the Thessalonian Christians. Paul and his companions lived right toward them. They also lived right toward those who were not Christians.

Behaving Like A Loving Father (2:10-12)

Paul used the figure of a father and a child to conclude his expression of affection for the Thessalonians. The constant "exhorting, encouraging, and testifying" to them was to enrich their lives and bind them closer to Christ. A good father teaches his children out of concern for them; he points out that obedience is for their own good. We must not be afraid to reprove and rebuke (**2 Tim. 4:2**), but it should be the kind of rebuke that a father concerned for the welfare of his children might offer. Let us make certain that when we reprove and correct, it is as one with fatherly love and not a vengeful meanness.

Preachers must seek to be like Christ in their preaching as well as in every other aspect of their lives. "I do always those things that please him" (**John 8:29**). If preachers make Christ preeminent in their lives (**Col. 1:18**), they will take adequate time for study, meditation and prayer. They will have the courage to preach what everyone needs, whenever he needs it. They will not be able with a clear conscience to negotiate on doctrinal matters. Christians everywhere will demand that the preacher know his Bible and preach it fearlessly, compassionately, completely and enthusiastically.

The preaching of the gospel is a great work and there is always a need for more men who will follow the example of Paul (who followed Jesus). May God help us to become brave, fearless, truthful and frank, but at the same time, loving and gentle.

Thanks be to God for men like Alvis Nichols, Phil Davis, Robert R. Taylor, Jr. and others that have followed that great example given to us by the apostle Paul.