

Are We Preaching the Gospel? **by Bob Young**

“Did he preach the gospel?” I have this question written in one of my Bibles. I wrote the note after attending a gospel meeting and hearing an entire “evangelistic sermon” about the evils of displaying a cross inside a church building.

How do we communicate our faith? What do we believe? What matters? What is central? What can we not avoid? Here is my short list. We have to talk about....

- God (evidences, creation, including the contrast of the divine and human natures)
- Jesus (identity)
- Bible, revelation (covenants, Old Testament and New Testament)
- Sin (repentance)
- Salvation, Christ’s sacrifice (gospel)
- Forgiveness (obeying the gospel)

With these topics developed, we can talk about God’s plan for his saved people. Obviously, we cannot talk about all of this in one lesson.

We must evaluate what we preach, how we do evangelism, and ask ourselves: “Are we guilty of preaching another gospel, or of preaching no gospel?” (Gal. 1:6) Are some preaching another gospel? Is it possible that our lack of preaching the gospel is a great reason why we are not seeing the church grow as it did in the early days of Christianity? Could this be one of the reasons we are divided even among ourselves?

I grew up hearing about the American Restoration Movement, Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and James O’Kelly, although I do not remember in-depth studies. I earned an undergraduate degree without a church history class (probably because I had enough hours for a minor in history). Through the years in my own studies I developed a great love of history. I identify with the statement: “If I had known history was so important, I would have taken more history courses.”

When I finished my MA, I had to do some additional graduate work before enrolling in my doctoral program. The courses I needed were in two major areas: theology and church history. I loved the church history courses: early church history, Reformation history, Restoration history, general American church history. My enthusiasm was rekindled. I taught church history at OVU for a time. I visited the historic sites associated with the American Restoration Movement—Bethany and Cane Ridge. I identified; this was my legacy. James O’Kelly was calling people to New Testament Christianity as early as 1793, seeking to return to the pattern of the New Testament church. The plea is almost as old as the United States. There is much right with that history and dream.

Problems arose with the passing of generations. Studying Restoration church history, one can pick up a subtle change in focus. The plea changed; the emphasis changed. The central idea got pushed to the sidetrack. Many never realized what was happening. The message shifted from the cross of Christ to the church of Christ. It is true that you cannot have one without the other, but the order is important. Many unfaithful, precious brothers need to hear again the importance of faithfulness to the Head, and then to understand that faithfulness to Christ the Head means faithfulness to his body the church. Another way to describe what happened is that the focus shifted from Him to us. This is no small matter or minimal difference in semantics. The emphasis becomes the message.

Our plea shifted, centered more on us than on Him. The emphasis was on the need to restore the church rather than the need to preach the gospel. We assumed we were doing both. Only when we preach the gospel can we truly restore the church, but we got the cart in front of the horse. We began to cheer the limousine rather than the president inside. Our battle cry began to point people to us, the saved, the people, rather than to Him, the Savior, the Christ. With this change in emphasis, we subtly began preaching ourselves rather than Jesus. What was the result? Ours became a movement often more focused on correcting religious beliefs than proclaiming a Savior, more focused on meeting requirements than showing people the Redeemer, more focused on preaching the response than on preaching the Savior. What we do in worship became more important than the one being worshiped. For many, these things eventually came to define the gospel. Preaching the gospel meant preaching what is wrong and the requirements for being right.

This shift was not intentional, but the emphasis became the message, and the message preached replaced the gospel. Analyze our tracts, our soul-winning materials, our evangelism, our semantics. Tune in to our talk: “The Church of Christ: Who are these people?...40 reasons I am a member of the Church of Christ...What is the Church of Christ?...Why I am a member of the Church of Christ.” You probably recognize the jargon. “I have been trying to tell my neighbors for years about the church. You need to get back into church. You cannot be saved unless you are member of the church. Our goal is to restore the New Testament church.” Such talk, coupled with sermons lamenting denominationalism, became for many the gospel, the diet, and the emphasis.

I am not trying to take the kingdom away from the king, but without the king, there is no kingdom. The American Restoration Movement (ARM) is not our message. [Just last year, a group of church leaders in Peru asked me how to preach the gospel without focusing on the ARM. It appears that most people in Peru are not terribly interested in this aspect of U.S. history.] Our message is the gospel preached on Pentecost. That gospel is a gospel of life and death statements. The early Christians were accused of filling Jerusalem with it (Acts 5:28). Could we be declared guilty of filling our cities and our world with it? The gospel must be our emphasis.

Christ came to this earth (Phil. 2:5-11), put on flesh (John 1:14); is our mediator God-Man (1 Tim. 2:5). He was killed on the cross, shed his blood to forgive our sins, and through his death we can be presented faultless before him, justified from all sin, counted innocent before the Righteous Judge. Jesus arose from the grave, conquered the grave to give us immortality, secured victory. The Bible screams this gospel: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, bringing reconciliation and salvation. This is reflected in the history of the early church as recorded in Acts; this is the message they preached. This must be our message. The church of Christ without the gospel of Christ is no church at all. We must get back to Pentecost—to reclaim our message, to find ourselves and our message.

If people are hearing us preach anything but the gospel of Christ, we are at fault. If we try to preach the church without the gospel, that is another gospel. I want to preach the gospel.