

## **447 Staying faithful, standing firm**

The Lord Jesus Christ remains a “stumblingstone and rock of offence” (Romans 9.33) in the eyes of most Jews and Gentiles of today, which explains why evangelism can often be hard and apparently fruitless.

But the Christian Church, appointed as the “witness and keeper of holy writ” (from Article XX of the 39 Articles), has no permission from the Lord to dilute the Gospel message even though the various blunt truths within that message are not welcome! These truths include: all are sinners currently cut off from Almighty God in their natural state, and will remain so, both now and after physical death, if nothing changes (egs., Romans 3.23; 6.23a / Revelation 20.11-15); all are helpless to gain forgiveness from God by human effort or achievement (egs., Romans 3.20 / Galatians 2.16; 3.11); all are accountable before Almighty God (eg., Luke 12.2 / John 5.22,27 / Rom 2.16); and all therefore depend totally on Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God, “the way, the truth and the life”, for “no man cometh to the Father but by me” (from John 14.6 / and 3.14-18, 35-36 / I Timothy 2.5-6).

So the Church is entrusted with proclaiming the Christian Gospel, the ultimate Good News indeed. But for that Gospel to be properly understood, its proclamation has to start with the ultimate Bad News as outlined above. Little wonder therefore that there is a constant debate in local churches over how much to downplay the Bad News, and instead to play up trendiness, fun and informality so as to “get people in” to a popular, friendly, easy-going fellowship; then, it is hoped, the full realities of the Gospel, the Bad and the Good, can be properly explained when many happy people are already “on board” the Church. Is this the best way forward?

We turn to God’s Word for His guidance in such debates, involving God-given precedents, principles and promises. The children of Israel were always surrounded by heathen nations with abominable, idolatrous practices, and time and again they downplayed their unique status as God’s covenant people, turning their backs on His Law so as to “join the crowd”, to be acceptable, or to gain protection. Thus time and again in response, the Lord sent His prophets into their midst who never once “pulled their punches”! We think of the courage of Micaiah or Jeremiah for instance, who “spoke truth – God’s truth – to power” whatever the personal consequences for them might be: sin was sin, and repentance with a true return to the Lord was vital – or else (egs., I Kings 22.11-28 / Jeremiah 26.1-15). Of course too often the “or else” of divine judgment

occurred, because God's truth had been swapped for idolatrous falsehoods.

Later John the Baptist was equally fearless – “Repent ye ... O generation of vipers!” (from Matthew 3.2,7), and to Herod, “It is not lawful for thee to have her” (Matthew 14.4): no trace there of John seeking acceptance and popularity! The Lord Jesus trod the same path, proclaiming God's truth, as focussed in Himself: He came not to destroy the Law and the prophets but to fulfil, not to bring peace at that stage but division, and not to ingratiate Himself with the authorities but to expose their sinful hypocrisy (egs., Matthew 5.17; 10.34-39; 23.13-39 / Luke 13.32).

These precedents of fearless proclamation of the truth continue into Acts and the Epistles: by Peter, John and others, (egs., Acts 2.36; 4.10-12; 5.27-33; 8.18-24); by Stephen (Acts 6.9 – 7.60); and by Paul and his companions (eg., Acts 13.26-39,44-52).

We are not to “conform” to the world (Romans 12.1-2), nor to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (II Corinthians 6.14). Timothy is urged to “war a good warfare, holding faith, and a good conscience” (from I Timothy 1.18-19), along with many other similar instructions, and in the letter to Titus a bishop is urged to – “hold(ing) fast the faithful word he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Titus 1.9); and - “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world” (2.1,12). A final example for this time comes in Jude 3b – “that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”.

So the message from all these examples within God's Word is clear and consistent: our primary calling, as the Church and as individual Christians within the Church, is to faithfulness, obedience, truth; to boldness, assurance, clarity; to the exposure of sin and error, the call for repentance, and the need for belief in Jesus Christ as Lord. Nowhere is there a hint of “trim your message to keep in with the world”, while of course we do our best to present the unchanging Gospel in a manner that is relevant to, and understandable within, the culture in which we are placed.

We take courage, for we know from Scripture and experience that the Lord in His mercy blesses those who stay faithful, and who stand firm - for Him.

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