

Revivals And Church History :: Preaching that Hinders Revival

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Preaching That Hinders Revival-Richard Owen Roberts

Repentance must always begin in the house of God. Doubtless the best place for it to start is with those who preach. Let us examine some errors of preaching that stand in the way of revival.

Preaching That is Man-Centered.

All of us, by our very own natures, are lovers of self more than lovers of righteousness. True gospel preaching exposes the wickedness of this self-orientation and calls its hearers to radical conversion. It is only through a genuine Christian conversion that a thorough change of heart and life occurs, enabling one to keep the great commandments of Christ: loving God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength and one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:29-31).

Man-centered preaching cannot result in radical conversion. Tragically, the preaching which characterizes much of today's pulpit activity wallows in the weakness of pandering to perceived needs — needs which are ordinarily dramatically different from true needs. For instance, many of those who are clamoring for acceptance really need repentance, and multitudes who come to church for comfort need to be severely discomforted and awakened out of their lethal slumbering.

In a day when multitudes have overloaded on self-love, man-centered preaching only fortifies man in his lostness. It may add a modicum of religion to his life, even a proof-text assurance of faith to which he vainly clings, but it does not bring those who hear into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Every preacher is in danger of telling his people what they want to hear. The motives for doing so are numerous, including larger paychecks, greater applause, easier circumstances. If the preacher is called by men, he may sensibly give those who called him what they want, but what if the preacher is called by God? How can he dare speak less than all the truth of God?

Every genuine revival constitutes a return of the people of God. Thus, any preaching that is not God-centered — that does not life up and exalt the God of the Bible above all else, calling all to return to Him — will prove to be a distinct hindrance to revival. May God deliver each of us from this hindrance.

Preaching That is Timid

What ever happened to the fearless preachers whose fiery denunciations of sin and awesome warnings of impending doom used to grip the land? Are we too advanced a culture to be affected by prophets of God or are the men who think themselves called of God too timid to tell the truth?

I remember that old Sunday School song: "Dare to be Daniel to stand alone! Dare to have a purpose firm! Dare to make it known!"

Do you dare to be Daniel? Are you prepared to face your den of lions unafraid? Are you boldly standing, even if all alone? Are your purposes firmly set? Do all who you know to what you are unhesitatingly and compromisingly committed?

Do you dare to resist the clock-watchers who are vastly more committed to keeping the services short than to the prosperity of Christ's Kingdom?

Do you dare to stand against the unregenerate leaders in your church, calling them to repentance and faith, even when they are scheming your departure?

Do you dare to insist that the wealthy and prestigious must follow the same path of surrender and devotion to Jesus Christ as the poor and down-trodden?

Do you dare to preach against the favorite sins of your congregation or is you preaching fashionable and acceptable to it

he unrepentant Christ-haters among your people?

Do you dare to live a life of godly simplicity and open holiness before your watching world?

Does the daring of Daniel mark your daily devotions? Does the courage of Christ characterize your Christian walk? Does the fearless passion of a post-Pentecost Peter power your preaching?

Christians without courage are a strange and pathetic contradiction and a constant hindrance to revival.

Preaching That Evokes Strange Fire

In Leviticus ten the disturbing story is told of Nadab and Abihu who introduced "strange fire" into the midst of the work of God. This incident occurred at the time of the inauguration of the Aaronic priesthood and at a time when fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering. Prompted by pride and lack of self-control, these brothers grievously offended the Lord with their "strange fire" and were themselves consumed by fire from the same source that burned up the sacrifice.

"Strange fire" represents all those acts and activities of men in ministry that emanate from their own proud hearts and undisciplined spirits. The worship and service of God is under the control and authority of God Himself. The scriptures guide and govern the entire life and ministry of the church. God has spoken and men are not at liberty to introduce their ideas and ways into His work. True men of God spend their primary time and energy finding and following God's desires as He has revealed them in the Bible. Proud and undisciplined men think they do God service by introducing new ways and means and means into the life of the church. In recent years an almost unbelievable host of novelties have appeared. Many of them are now accepted as if they were a part of divine revelation.

Face the fact! Every arrogant act in the church and every undisciplined addition to its ways is a hindrance to revival. God may yet send His fire to consume these men, but how much better would it be for them to repent and return to the Lord now.

Preaching That is Self-Exalting

Some preachers love fine-tuned words and phrases more than divine truth, and symmetry of sermon construction more than the welfare of their auditors. What a tragedy that preaching, which was devised by God as an instrument of salvation for those who believe, should be one of the greatest possible hindrances to the progress of the gospel in ordinary times and to revival in times of great apostasy.

Certainly there is beauty in carefully arranged words— the Beatitudes of Matthew file are an outstanding example of this as is the love chapter of First Corinthians thirteen— but beauty is turned into ugliness when the motive is impression rather than the glory of God.

Sir, does the way you prepare and preach hinder revival? Which receives the greatest attention: the ornamentation of your words and phrases, or prayer for empowerment from the Holy Spirit? Which is your greater focus: exciting pleasure in the people and praise for the preacher, or reducing the impenitent to tears of contrition and repentance? After which does your heart clamor: the pleasure of knowing that your sermons have been remarkably good, or joy in seeing your people radically affected by the truth of God?

Preaching That is Non-Doctrinal

A pathetic wave of biblical ignorance has swept through the contemporary church. Much if the wind behind the wave is generated by the grossly erroneous preachers who frown on doctrinal preaching and from whose unsanctified lips emerge such impious frothing as, "Don't preach doctrine! It divides!" Of course it divides! It is intended to divide! It was never God's plan to have more goats than sheep in His flock! And yet that is precisely what has happened in multitudes of parishes.

While the scriptures clearly indicate that there will be tares scattered throughout the fields of grain, and some goats lurking amidst the flocks of sheep, the biblical picture is not the prevailing image of this day. Instead, the tares vastly outnumber the wheat and the goats far more prevalent than lambs.

The direct result of non-doctrinal preaching is millions of persons in the churches who believe that they are Christians as a result of something they have done, and whose claim to faith would have been denounced in a saner age as nothing more than mere mental assent.

Shame on the preacher who is too graceless to preach the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, the wrath of the Almighty, the eternal condemnation of the unbeliever, the atonement of Christ, the mandatory nature of regeneration, the necessity of repentance, the justification of sinners by true faith, and all the other sobering and convicting doctrines of the Word of God.

Preaching That is Either Irrelevant or of Minor Consequence

Some sermons, which might have had a measure of usefulness fifty years ago when preached to a Biblically literate congregation, are completely insignificant today when heard by a generation of pagans unschooled in Bible basics.

What a strange phenomenon it is for preachers to boast that their preaching has not changed for half a century when society itself has changed so radically. My preaching has changed immensely. When I began preaching, people knew there was a God big enough to have created them, who had the authority to command their lives and control their futures. Today, multitudes who claim to believe in God know almost nothing of the God of the Bible and are often worshipping and serving a god no bigger than their own imaginations.

When we send missionaries to pagan lands we do not expect them to begin their proclamation to the heathen with statements about grace and forgiveness. We expect them to begin at the beginning, introducing their hearers to the God of the Bible. Indeed, the most effective missionaries take months in establishing the truth of God and His rights of authority before speaking of salvation.

A colossal hindrance to revival occurs when pearls are cast before swine. Jesus taught us that "They that are whole need not a physician but they that are sick" (Mark 9:12). The generations that preceded us preached the law, thus enabling people to feel their illness, long before they preached the grace that heals. Preaching grace to those who have never felt the sting of the law is a major infraction of God's ways. Preaching truth that cannot be appreciated and received by its auditors is ever a hindrance to spiritual awakening.

Preaching That is Without Authority

How can one read the life of Jesus with any care at all without noting the authority with which He conducted His ministry? Matthew, Mark, Luke all record this. The same essential authority is evident in the ministries of the New Testament days. Is such authority a special gift to Christ Jesus and to first-century Apostles but not to be hoped for in times like these? Certainly not! There are men of authority today just as in every preceding generation: but why do some men speak with impressive authority and others without noticeable impact?

Can a self-called man preach with the same authority as a God-called preacher?

Can a man whose confidence in the Holy Scriptures is shaken by personal doubts with the authority of the man of the man whose heart, soul and mind are dominated by conviction concerning the absolute accuracy of the Bible?

Can a man whose own conscience rises up in condemnation of him for some secret sin in his life preach with the same authority as the man whose conscience condemns him not (1 John 3:21-22)?

All of us need to face the fact that there are self-called men in the ministry. They may be good men who mean well, but they are doomed to a different kind of work than the called of God. None who listen to their preaching should be surprised at their lack of authority.

While I believe with all my heart in an educated ministry, I know full-well that many men have lost what little confidence they had in the Scriptures during their formal preparation. I will never forget the negative impact of my own seminary days as my confidence in the written Word of God bordered on destruction. It was only because of the interference of a gracious Providence that I was spared the permanent doubts and uncertainties that plague many men in today's pulpits.

While some might like to pretend otherwise, the men in ministry whose own lives are marred by unconquered lusts and unbridled sins are legion in number. It is utterly impossible for a man who rejects God's command "Be ye holy as I am ho

ly" (I Peter 1:16) to preach with divine authority. The crippled churches and limping Christians affected by the ministries of these leaders are everywhere apparent.

Christian preachers say that they deal with the most significant issues that mortal beings can ever face; issues of life and death, of hope and destruction, of eternal salvation and everlasting condemnation. Yet they often handle these sacred matters with less enthusiasm and passion than prisoners working on chain-gangs.

In second Peter one the apostle speaks of applying all diligence to your faith by supplying "moral excellence" or "moral power" or "moral energy." Faith must be supplemented by passion.

Those who listen to preaching have the right to be convinced that the preacher is morally in earnest about what he is saying, that he believes in it with all his heart, and that it is of the greatest possible consequence. If the listener has reason to doubt the earnestness of the preacher, he is fortified in doubting the message preached.

Preacher, why is there so little passion in your ministry? Do you yourself believe what you say?

Preaching That is Without Power

Many a congregation is doomed to listen to a powerless preacher, a man without unction, one upon whom the fire of God never seems to rest. What a strange anomaly it is to see an unanointed servant of the living God who is an eternal fire. How can such creatures exist?

For some, it is a matter of theological error. By their system of beliefs they have ruled out the present empowerment of the servant of God by the Holy Spirit. Somehow, in their twisted thinking, special endowments of power either ceased at the end of the apostolic age, or all believers receive all of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit it is possible to receive at the time they first believe. God pity the congregations that must listen to such men.

For others, it is a very practical issue — they are too busy to seek the power of the Holy Spirit on their ministries. Empowerment does take time. It is connected with protracted season of prayer and seeking. True Holy Spirit power is not something once received, always possessed, but is to be freshly sought in connection with every opportunity of service. Oh, the tragedy of those too busy to seek!

For far too many, it is a moral matter for they are too sinful to allow for this profound and gracious influence of the Holy Spirit to work through them. It was ancient Job who recognized, "He who has clean hands grows stronger and stronger." But the reverse is obviously also true — unclean hands always rob men of power. How sad it is that multitudes listen weakly to powerless men with dirty hands.

Preaching That Heals Superficially

In Jeremiah the Lord laments, "For from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for gain, and from the prophet even to the priest everyone deals falsely. And they have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:13,14). These words are certainly true today and their application perfectly apparent. Because of greed for gain, whether it be the love of money, the love of power, the love of acclaim, the love of crowds, the love of success, multitudes from the prophet to priest are dealing falsely, pronouncing persons healed who are still fatally ill.

Think of a person who is dying of cancer but has been afraid to seek the help of the physicians. Imagine his family and friends finally prevailing, scheduling an appointment, and taking him to the doctor's office. Because of weakness, he must be helped out of the car and up the walk but suddenly collapses in front of the office, falling into rose bushes whose thorns scratch and pierce his arms, hands and face. When the doctor sees him he flies into a fury of healing activity, cleansing and treating the wounds, sending him home with the assurance that all is well when all the time it is cancer that is killing him, not rose bushes.

A major portion of today's preaching deals with the superficial hurts. Millions have been pronounced healed who still are dying of the cancer of sin.

Does the Lord God omnipotent lament the healing nature of your ministry? Is it a hindrance to revival in your life and church?

Preaching That is Not Preaching At All But Merely Teaching

Tragically there are many men in ministry who do not know the difference between teaching and preaching. But there is a very real difference. That vast body of men who consider themselves preachers but are really teachers constitutes a major hindrance to revival. Do you know the difference?

Over a period of some years I was a frequent visitor in the home of a leading theological bookseller in the United Kingdom whom I had taken to be a very placid man. Then one day he called me indicating he was going to visit the United States and would like to spend some time with us in our home. We were delighted to be a part of his American itinerary. Upon my next visit to his home in England, I enquired concerning his impressions of this first visit to America. I was astonished at the vehemence of his response. In no uncertain terms he declared his great disappointment in not hearing a single preacher in America, albeit he had visited numerous churches in widely scattered areas. While he acknowledged hearing many teachers, he adamantly insisted he had not heard a single preacher. When I quietly asked, "What, in your opinion, is the difference between teaching and preaching?" I was amazed at the vigor with which he insisted, "It is not a matter of my opinion! It is a well established fact! To teach is to inform! To preach is to move! I heard all kinds of teaching in America but I was never moved from where I am to where I ought to be!"

Have you caught that distinction?

There appears to be tens-of-thousands of churches throughout the world where you can become better informed about a huge variety of issues, religious and otherwise, but where you will never be moved from where you are to where you ought to be. Granted, every sermon ought to convey information, but it will do much more than that if it is true preaching!

Preaching That Calls For No Response Or A False Response

Preachers must guard against two false extremes: on the one hand, the failure to issue any call for response to the message; and on the other hand, the foolish notion that an immediate overt response to a presentation of partial truth always results in eternal salvation.

Much preaching appears pointless. If there is anything the hearers ought to do in response to it, they are left with no idea of what that response should be. A serious question must be raised whether this is preaching at all. Even if by some stretch of the imagination, or by some act of charity, pointless preaching can be favorably judged, a solemn fact must be faced: preaching that calls neither for a response nor moves people toward responding correctly is a hindrance to revival.

The hindrance to revival is equally as great when over-confidence is placed in overt responses. That the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to totally and permanently transform a person in an immediate response to a partial truth is not questioned. That this is the normal way the Spirit works is certainly not the case. In the ministry of Jesus, the bulk of the permanent responses, came as a result of years of disciplining. The records of those who had a one time exposure to a tidbit of truth and were eternally saved are scarce. The stress I place is upon partial truth. Most of today's sermons are so brief and so shallow that almost any truth conveyed has to be incomplete. Surely there was wisdom in the practice of earlier itinerant evangelists in preaching for days, even weeks, before issuing any call for overt responses.

What is a major contributor to the moral and spiritual decline in this generation? Is it not the negative impact of the inconsistent lives of millions of professed Christians who have never experienced a transforming work of the Holy Spirit. To add to that multitude by overemphasis on premature overt responses to sermons is a grievous offense against the Savior. This is a problem that every loving preacher can immediately correct.

Those of us who preach do not need to look for hindrances to revival in others until we have first eliminated all the hindrances already working in our own lives and ministries. Let us covenant together to make changes that are needed.

But what about those who are not called to preach? Is there some way you have contributed to those hindrances? If so will you repent? Then will you pledge yourself to pray that all the preachers you know will rise above these hindrances. To your prayers add whatever help and encouragement you can give. Together, with God's help, these hindrances can be moved.