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A PASSIONATE PLEA FOR DOCTRINE – PART 2

By Antony Rees

“Go, stand and speak in the Temple all the words of this life”. Acts 5.20 This was the message delivered by the Angel to the imprisoned Apostles as supernaturally the prison doors were opened and they were free to preach again.

Our Gospel is not propaganda, a manifesto, a mere ideology. No, it is LIFE. The article in the previous edition of *Cross†Way* homed in on a passionate plea for Christian doctrine. But it is sadly true that doctrinal preaching can become lethal preaching if it lacks this essential element of life. We know that this vitality is especially the dimension of the Holy Spirit but we cannot off load all responsibility onto Him. The Holy Spirit acts supernaturally but not independently. He seeks to work through us, through the human voice. How then can we handle the magnificent doctrines of our Christian faith so as to convey the Spirit’s life? Prayer is the key factor here but not the only one. It is not enough by itself. What else is involved? Someone has observed that the Lord is fond of adverbs. So let me answer adverbially.

Scripturally

We must handle the doctrines as the Bible handles them. Take that sadly neglected but primary doctrine of election. How do we handle this? Is it to send people away convinced that God is a racist or with G.K. Chesterton that He is an eccentric? “How odd of God to choose the Jews!” It is often helpful when confronted with Scripture truth to go right back to the original reference. So this takes us to Abraham in Genesis 12. Note what it says in the second verse. “I will bless you and you shall be a blessing... In You shall all the nations of the world be blessed”. So the blessings of divine election never terminate on the believer. If the Lord in His grace chooses me it is that through me He may reach others. The Lord’s strategy is always to reach the many through the few. There is no elitism here, no favouritism. After all, if you are going to change the world you have to begin somewhere. So why should not the Lord begin with Abraham and the Jews? “How odd of God to choose the Jews”. Let me continue - “And light a fuse/ that’s with us to this day./ But would that oddness all have gone/ and would the problem then be done/ if He had chosen none!” Is this what we want?

Interestingly

You want to keep the people’s attention? Well then - say something interesting. Open some windows on the doctrinal truth being handled. Let in some fresh air. Put some plums in the custard. Here’s an example. In Luke’s account of the parable of the Sower, the good soil is that which “holds fast” the spoken word of God. Now listen to Spurgeon gilding this lily. He takes us to the death bed of an elderly tailor who had prospered far beyond his fellows. But he promises them that if they gather around his death bed he would disclose to them in his dying moments the secret of his success. So they come from North, South, East and West and bend over his bed side eager to catch his every syllable. At last he whispers - “Gentlemen, always remember - Tie a knot in your thread!” Horace Bushnell used to refer to the Gospel as God’s gift to the imagination. Gerard Kelly takes it a step further and enquires “If the Lord has promised to give us far more than we think or imagine - why do we not pray for more imagination?”

But there is something more important than imagination -

Relevantly

This takes us to the realm of application. The Apostle Paul’s method here is a bread and butter

approach. He first of all gives us a liberal slice of doctrinal bread and then he spreads on top the butter of practical application. The Apostle Peter on the other hand prefers a warp and woof approach. He mixes the doctrine and application together as does the author of Hebrews. No matter where it is done. It must be done. To go back to our prosperous and dying “knight of the thimble” as Spurgeon calls him. Go on and apply the truth. Screw it in, as Charles Simeon counsels. So ask - Does the word of God slip and glide through our minds like an unknotted thread through the eye of a needle? Or when we hear it, do we knot it and remember it so as to obey it? John Calvin in a beautiful sentence puts it like this “The Word of God is not received in faith when it merely hovers and flutters in the brain. What the mind has received must be transferred to the heart and there become a bulwark to withstand all the assaults of temptation.”

Humbly

That 18th century model of erudition and master of lexicography, Samuel Johnson, was once sharply rebuked by an aggrieved lady who complained in high dudgeon “Dr. Johnson, you have defined ‘pastern’ as something to do with the knee. It is nothing of the sort. It has to do with a horse’s foot. What have you to say for yourself?”

“Ignorance, Madam, sheer ignorance” the sage admitted! We must never give the impression that we are doctrinal know-alls. Far from it. Moses’ distinction in Deut 29.29 is a key verse here: “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God but the things that are revealed belong to us...” John Stott has well observed that the Christian believer must be both dogmatic and agnostic. We are agnostic on matters that the Lord has been pleased to conceal e.g. the harmony between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. But we are dogmatic about what He has been pleased to reveal, not least the Bible away of salvation - the same in both testaments.

I have kept the best wine to the end. We still have one adverb to go.

Humanly

“I drew them with the cords of a man” Hosea 11.4

Woe betide us if we preach so as to give the impression we are first cousins to the Angel Gabriel! Jim Packer distinguishes three reasons for the amazing influence of George Whitefield. He addressed his hearers as fellow human beings: he sought to awaken and grip the heart and he put spiritual issues to his hearers as one who transparently loved them. Sarah Edwards (wife of the renowned Jonathan) commented - “He speaks from a heart aglow with love.”

“How are things in your new Parish” asked Jack of his friend Hugh. Hugh replied – “There’s an awful lot of eternal life hanging around that place.” Gospel Churches should pulsate with life, the living presence of the risen Lord. But this life must come from truth.

Having ministered in India, North London and at Oak Hill College Antony Rees is now retired.