

Doing God's Work God's Way

Do you have one of those relatives that really embarrasses you? That uncle who always tells an off-colour joke at the wrong time, the cousin who makes everyone blush. I think we all have one, at least. The relative we deep down wish we could ship out to a faraway island.

Here is a shocking statement: there are many Christians for whom God is that relative. There are many Christians who regard God as something of an embarrassment. He always seems to be saying things that are completely inappropriate in the Bible – things about death, sin, hell and judgement. As unbelievers ask about God's view on these things, these Christians shuffle uncomfortably, and try to explain God, they try to cover for Him, they try to make up for God's rather thoughtless statements.

I mean, it just seems that God had no idea how to communicate with 21st century man when He wrote the Bible – because He keeps saying these offensive, tactless, negative statements. He condemns us as sinners, He rebukes our sin, He calls us twisted, deceitful, darkened and blind. He runs completely in the opposite direction of today's pluralism by stating that He alone is the way of salvation, and that it is on His terms alone.

Faced with these non-politically correct statements, with a message clearly hostile to this world's way of thinking, and an approach completely foreign to today's marketers and businessmen, many well meaning Christians have felt that they have to adopt a new emphasis to accomplish God's mandate for the church. Christ's command to make disciples of all nations by going, baptizing and teaching is our goal – we are all agreed on that. But what these people decide is that in our new century, in this culture, in this society, we need to change our approach. Like us, they want to see Matthew 28:18-20 fulfilled, but they have made a tragic error. Their human reasoning has made them ashamed of the Gospel.

They are embarrassed by the hard demands of Jesus. They are afraid to look unbelievers in the eye and announce their judgement. They squirm at the idea of preaching about a literal hell. They blush at the idea of telling people that Christ alone is the way. They have become ashamed of the Gospel.

Unfortunately, that is where it begins and ends. Paul said in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" Paul says, the entire uncompromised, undiluted Gospel is not an unsightly blemish that he will seek to cover from friends, family and colleagues, but rather it is a heavenly treasure, bristling with the power of God Himself!

Unfortunately, when the church loses sight of this, we adopt the wrong approach.

I'd like to show you the wrong approach, and then turn it on its head and show you the Biblical approach to doing God's Work God's way.

The wrong approach today is the following: It reasons

1) To be effective for God, I must be influential with men.

That's the thinking. If I want to win souls to Christ, I must win their friendship. The thinking is that if the church is to be effective in evangelizing the world, the world must come to admire the church. In order to make an impact for God, we must make our mark

with men. Then, supposedly, they will admire, respect, even like us, and then listen to the message.

Immediately there are two problems. One, God told us we would be hated, not liked.

Number 2, suppose they do like us and listen to the message. How will that make the message more palatable to them? Even if you like me, how will that make the news that you are a sinner on your way to hell more pleasant?

See, we have come to a sad state in the church to where we are blinded by and obsessed with image. Someone has sold the church the idea that image is the key to evangelism. If the kids think church is cool, then they'll come. If people think that church is non-threatening and relevant, they'll come. If people think the church is making a valuable contribution to society, they'll pay more attention to us. Image is the key.

Now, there's a definite place for Christians having a godly testimony amongst the unsaved. Col 4:5 "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time".

But as we'll see, that is not what these people are talking about. They are talking about gaining the approval, comfort and even admiration of the working through any means possible, in order to supposedly coax them into the church.

How do they do this? Well, there are 2 main things that have to be done in order to win the world's approval:

1) Change the message

I'm sorry, there's no other way to put it. If you truly want to have a completely non-confrontational relationship with the unbelieving world, you'll have to change the message. Why? Because the essential nature of the message of the Gospel is confrontational! It attacks a man! It slays him with the truth of his sinfulness, his hopelessness. It shows us the mirror that none of us want to see. Paul calls the Gospel the 'offence of the cross' in Gal 5:11. Why is the Gospel so offensive? Because it removes from man any reason to boast before God. It removes from Him any work with which he can boast and say – I'm not that bad, God! You must accept me. The cross, full of the ugliness of death and reproach reminds us of the true nature of our sin, and what we deserve. The cross underlines in the strongest terms that God is not only love, but Just – a Judge who pours out anger upon sin. All of that is insulting to man. "What?" says the cultured 21st century socialite, "you don't mean you actually believe in a personal God who will throw people into a hell of fire and brimstone? What next, elves and goblins?", he chuckles. So be it Let us not scramble around trying to win his approval. I'm sure Noah had quite a few laughing critics around his huge boat in the middle of dry land. If you want to win such a person's approval, by necessity, you must change the message. You'll have to change God's Words to mean something they don't. You cannot preach the Gospel the way it's presented in Scripture plainly and directly without offending a fair amount of people. Read the book of Acts. The pattern gets pretty well established. The Gospel is preached in a town – some believe, some don't. Some cleave to Paul, some want to cleave Paul in two. As we'll see, the Gospel is always either a smell of life or the stench of death to whoever is listening.

It's interesting to see what's happened in our particular time and culture. In times and places where the government and laws have been hostile to Christianity, an ideology is usually forced upon the people. The state declares what people are to believe.

Under such systems, the church has usually been persecuted, and has thrived.

However, in a situation like ours, you have what is called hegemony. Don't let the size of the word scare you. All it means is a situation where particular ideas or people begin to assume leadership without the use of force. They become accepted, and exert a new form of power. So, for instance, in our culture, a current hegemony is that if you disagree with someone else – you are intolerant. Increasingly, society is frowning upon those who claim to have the truth, and who say that others are in error. So, this hegemony affects the church in a far more dire way than persecution. Because instead of the immediate threat of execution or imprisonment for preaching Jesus, there is the cold disapproval of even close colleagues, relatives and friends, if we claim that Jesus is the only way. This kind of hegemony exerts a social pressure, a power on Christians to not be so direct, to not be so confrontational in the preaching. I hear it a lot. We mustn't be so negative. We need to attract people to the Gospel with positive ideas. And, so we edit out the threat of hell. We water down the fact of personal sin and accountability to God. We gloss over God's judgement. Instead the Gospel is all about God having a wonderful plan for your life. The Gospel is like an additional accessory that the busy 21st century person can add to their lives, and presumably dispense with at will. 'Try Jesus' is the motto today, as if He is some sort of hobby that you need to get into to appreciate.

But Scripture teaches that the Gospel has negative and positive aspects. There is life, but there is also death. There is heaven, but there is also hell. There needs to be the negative preached as well. As we shared once before – how can you give the cure if they don't know they're sick? There needs to be a breaking down before you can build, a putting off before you can put on. There needs to be repentance in our Gospel, there needs to be mention of self-denial and taking up your cross. All these things, I freely admit are things that will repel someone you are witnessing to. These are concepts that will certainly not attract them. But edit them out, and you have changed the message. What we have to realize is that Scripture says that unsaved man cannot comprehend these issues until God turns the light on." But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned" I Cor 2:14. More directly, Paul anticipates the response of unbelievers to the Gospel in I Cor 1:18 "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God". There it is again – the Gospel is the power of God. We do not have to re-paint it, renovate it or update it. We preach it as is, and leave it to God to switch on the light. So BY trying to chew the unbeliever's food for him, will do him no good. It will only confuse the issue. Moreover, I am convinced that when we change the terms of the gospel, we have corrupted the message. Thus, the Holy Spirit is not in it – He will not illuminate our ideas and so there is no chance of salvation. Worse then, if a person believes that corrupted gospel – they may think they are saved when they are not, an awful fate that plays itself out in Matthew 7:21-23.

The second way of trying to gain the approval of the world is to re-make the church for the unbeliever.

Once again, the thinking at work here is – we must be like them to win them. Therefore, we don't want them to feel uncomfortable in church, or threatened, or out of place. So we'll adjust the music – so it's recognizable to them. We'll use music they know, and just add Christian lyrics. We'll adjust the preaching to address topics

they want to hear, and even adjust the sermon length to fit into their busy schedules. Churches have gone so far as to do marketing survey to find out what people wanted to have in their churches, and then modeled the church on that. So you have church movie evenings, where filthy, worldly films are consumed, supposedly because it will attract the unbeliever. You have comedians, dancers, magicians and all kinds of things – to attract the unsaved. You have church moving to Saturday night because we wouldn't want to ruin Sunday as people's picnic and sports day. You have preachers that become nothing more than weekly motivational speakers, stroking the people into complacency, because we don't want offended people.

Now first of all, the church is for the saints. That's what it is. Ekklesia is the Greek word – called out ones. Yes, we want to win the unbelievers, but the whole idea is to win them into a new life, a new fellowship. By bringing the world into the church, you have missed the entire point of 'called out ones'. The church is not meant to cater to man's needs, it is meant to glorify God and stand on His Word. The church is to be visibly different. I'm not sure where we lost the elementary logic that in order to make a difference, you have to be different. Where did we lose sight of Christ's words that if salt has lost its savour, it is good for nothing? Where did we lose sight of 2 Cor 6:17 ¹⁷Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you. The church is to be different. The church is to be a living representation to the unbeliever of what it will mean to accept Christ – a new, changed life. Christ's words to Paul sum up the difference salvation is to make "To open their eyes, *and* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" Acts 26:18. In our effort to win people's approval, we have lost sight of this glaring fact – that to try to water down the Gospel while courting the favour of the unbeliever is deceitful. Do you hope to win them to the Lord, and then surprise them with the news that Christ expects them to forsake everything to follow Him? Jesus did not first try to win people and then shock them with the news of what they had got themselves into – He told them up front, He that loveth father or mother more than me cannot be my disciple. He preached that to follow Him would mean to accept all of Him. John 6 tells us that many were offended and stopped following Him. Jesus didn't run after them, for His followers must be sincere. Jesus often sent home insincere, half-hearted seekers. He was concerned with being truthful, not with winning people's approval. Also, will you stop and think for a moment. Why is it that we are so paralyzed with fear that an unbeliever will be uncomfortable in church? Isn't that exactly what is supposed to happen? Isn't that what we call conviction? Do you want to make conviction a smooth and rosy process? Do you want to try and deliver an unbeliever from the painful conviction of the Holy Spirit – whether in the preaching of the Word or the preaching of holy lives? You are then guilty of anaesthetizing a man against the only pain that can save his soul. You are not helping him into the kingdom, but in fact preventing him from entering.

Now, let's be clear on this – there is no Scripture at all to support the idea of trying to win the world's approval in order to win their soul. Not one. The only Scripture pulled out the bag to supposedly support image evangelism is I Cor 9:20-22 "And unto the Jews I

became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; ²¹To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. ²²To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.” There, says the proponent of image evangelism. Paul became like a Jew to the Jew. So I become like the unsaved so as to win them. But that is not at all what Paul was saying. Paul was saying that he dealt with Jews differently as to how he dealt with Gentiles. Just as Hudson Taylor wore Chinese clothes and grew his hair to win the Chinese. But did Paul engage in idolatry to win the Gentiles? No. Did Hudson Taylor or any other godly missionary adopt the pagan practices of the heathen – so as to win their approval? No. You don’t change the message. You present the true message correctly, obviously making it understandable for the age and culture you are dealing with, but the moment you take elements of the evil world system and include it – you have changed the message itself.

Well, how are we to do it then? Let’s turn that phrase around. The wrong way is to say – to be effective for God – I must be influential with men. The truth is, the correct way is – **if you are effective for God – you will be influential with men.** You see that in Scripture. Acts 2:47 tells us the early church had favour with all the people. They were being effective for God – the by-product was that they influenced man. Jesus, Luke tells us grew in favour with God and man. How? By compromising the message? No, by the fact that as God in the flesh He was effective for God. We know this is a general principle, because Jesus warned us that we would be hated by the world. The general principle is that one being effective for God will influence man.

The reverse always happens when God’s people compromise – we do not win them – they win us. We end up going down into their sin, not pulling them up to holiness. That’s because when you try to win them by being like them – you have surrendered your ground, taken a low stand, and the unbeliever has the upper hand. If your church is like the world, the unbeliever has had to surrender nothing by going there. He can remain in his unbroken pride. It is you who are on the defensive now, trying to protect God from ridicule, trying to win the approval of the unbeliever. Only if your church is truly different, will the unbeliever know from the word go, that this entire deal is about humility and a change in life

So how will we be effective for God? Many ways, but for the purpose of this topic, let’s quickly mention two.

- 1) **Don’t corrupt the message.** 2 Cor 2:17 “For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.” Paul says, after saying we are either a stench of death or a fragrance of life to those that hear us, he says – we do not corrupt the Word. We don’t try and pedal it, which is exactly what people are doing today. We are not hawking a product, Paul says, instead, by His power we manifest the fragrance of his knowledge in every place. By rightly dividing the word of truth – we truly bring unbelievers face to face with God. See, God blesses His Word. He will bless His Word far beyond any human effort, organisation or scheme. He has magnified the Word above His name! The man who tries to cover for God, thinks God wrote an out of date, irrelevant book, in fact cuts himself off from the only true source of

God's power and blessing – the Spirit working on the Word. It's a humbling thought to consider that the Bible was here before you and I were born, and it will be here when we are gone. His Word is forever settled in heaven, and it endures forever. The only wise thing to do is to study it diligently, meditate on it, wrestle with it, let it dwell richly in us, and then accurately teach it as it is to others. Paul tells us in I Cor 1:21 "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." He has chosen to use the simplistic teaching of His direct, undiluted truth as the primary means to reach the world. So don't add to His Words. Don't take away from them. Don't try to dress them up in another garb. Preach the Word.

2) Take your place as God's holy alternative, not as the competition

See, the church is not competing with Satan. God is not frustrated, or trying hard to keep up. The true church is running exactly according to plan, since it is Jesus who is building His church. The writer of Hebrews tells us how to act in this present world "Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. ¹³Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. ¹⁴For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come" Jesus was hated, despised, misunderstood and mocked. He asked us a penetrating question. "Is the servant greater than his lord?" i.e. Jesus was mocked, misunderstood, abused, hated and killed. He's your Lord. You are the servant. Do you expect better treatment than He received? No, Jesus promised, if the world hated me, they will hate you too. Our goal then is to take our place as God's alternative to this world, not as it's competition. If you worry that no one will get saved if we are an alternative and not the competition, may I remind you of the disciples question to Jesus after he told them it's hard for the rich to get converted. "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answer is our comfort. "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" Matt 19:25-26. It is God who does the saving. Leave the convicting, illuminating, convincing and saving up to Him. You preach the Word accurately, and then give an object lesson of the Gospel with your life. Show what the Gospel does – it changes you completely.

Sadly, the church today resembles rebellious Israel, courting the surrounding pagans for their approval. God called Israel a whore, an adulterous wife, a sentiment which James echoes in chapter 4:4 of his epistle. The church is trying to make itself a home for the unrepentant, rather than a refuge for the repentant. But it will not work. We cannot change the message. We cannot accommodate sin. We can not make the narrow way wider. It's God's plan, not ours. We must simply declare. Declare with love and humility, yes, but without compromise. We must do God's work God's way. Taking our place as God's called out ones, we declare His knowledge in every place with our lips and our lives. To influence man we must be effective for God – not the other way around. Will you stand with Paul in saying – "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ – for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth."?