

## **Should We Preach a Non-Confrontational Gospel?**

You've heard it before: 'Don't Bible-bash people! We don't need so much fire and brimstone – we need more love. We don't want all that negativity. If the church is to succeed, people must hear how positive God is. We mustn't alienate people with preaching on sin and judgment, we must attract them with friendship. We should get some prominent celebrities to give their testimony – show how important, respected people believe the Gospel.'

This is the age of the non-confrontational Gospel. We're in an age where the Gospel is supposed to sidle up to a person, politely introduce itself, and with their permission, speak gently about all the positives it will bring to their life. Under no circumstances is the Gospel to speak on how the person is a sinner, on how that sin brings death, on how they stand condemned and hell awaits.

No, no, not in the 21st century. The Gospel is not to offend. After all, if we offend the person, then we have missed the whole point, right? We have driven them away, when we were trying to win them. So the Gospel must shed its 'John the Baptist camel skin crying in the streets' look, and put on the robes of respectability. This is the age of the non-confrontational Gospel.

It has become unfashionable for preachers to preach a direct message of sin, judgment and righteousness. Today, preachers must apologise every second statement, continually watering down their delivery with statements meant to make them appear to be non-judgmental.

Being judgmental is seemingly the greatest sin of all in modern day Christianity – you can do anything, including live wickedly, but you can never judge. Seemingly the greatest wrong in our compromised era is to point out that something is wrong. The greatest sin in the non-confrontational gospel is declare something to be sin.

So, in this environment of 'don't seem or sound judgmental or condemning,' the Gospel is being re-packaged to seem nice, non-threatening, and well-behaved.

This is the Gospel you can believe and not lose favour in the sight of unbelievers. This is the fashionable Gospel that you can claim to believe and continue to be an immoral pop star or entertainer. This is the trendy Gospel that you claim to believe while continuing to live, act and think like the world. This is the non-confrontational Gospel.

All around us, we see Christians and churches succumbing to this thinking. Entire courses and Bible studies are modeled around this thinking. Entire methods of evangelism, church environments and church services are being remodeled after this idea.

'We must make the Gospel palatable. We must make it easy to understand. We can't use terms like sin, judgment, righteousness, justification. Oh, no – this will alienate people! We need to make it sound like something anyone could do.' So the thinking is – let's slowly acclimatise the unbeliever to the ideas of the Gospel.

'Let's hide away those elements we think would offend them. Let's try and attract them with what will appeal to them, and once they bite, we can slowly introduce the other 'negative' aspects. Perhaps we'll rephrase it in such a way that it doesn't sound negative at all. Perhaps we'll just completely avoid mentioning them. This is the non-confrontational Gospel.

We see it in the music. We cannot use the kind of music that honours and reflects a majestic God. No, we need to use the music that unbelievers use to sell their messages of immorality, drugs and rebellion. Yes, that way, if we put Christian lyrics to it – it will acclimatise them to the Gospel. They'll feel at home with the music, and then will be more open to receive Gospel lyrics. This is the non-confrontational Gospel.

We see it in the church's programmes. There is a move away from preaching. Preaching is old-fashioned and boring. We need to have creative dances, drama, lots of multimedia, maybe a music group that will sing and speak. Yes, people will be drawn to that. They don't want to hear some old preacher banging the pulpit and going on about how sinful we are. Yes, let's get more creative ways of sharing the Gospel. Let's entertain them. This is the age of the non-confrontational Gospel.

What does the Bible have to say about this? It's pointless to simply compare notes with other Christians. Every man can render a reason of why he does what he does.

**Proverbs 26:12** says *"Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him."* It is pointless debating with men who are convinced they are justified in adopting the methods they do.

Looking at results is not way to judge the situation either. If we are simply to look at things like increased sales, listenership, attendance figures, professions of faith, we might conclude that whatever is big is blessed. But that is definitely not the case. That is simply pragmatism.

Pragmatism says that the ends justify the means. Pragmatism says that whatever you do to achieve a certain goal, once you have achieved it, becomes right. In others, doing wrong to achieve right, becomes right. The Bible is flatly against this. We cannot judge on numbers, or on results alone.

By this standard, Jeremiah was a miserable failure. It seems in his long ministry, he did not produce a single convert. By this standard, the false prophets were incredibly successful, because all of Israel believed them. No, we cannot use mere numbers to justify how or why we do things.

Our standard for deciding how we are to present the Gospel must come from the Scriptures. The source of the Gospel also describes the course of the Gospel. Let us go to the words of our Lord Himself to understand how He expected the Gospel to be declared.

*Then said Jesus unto his disciples, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"*

**Matthew 16:24-26**

In those words, Jesus answers the question for us. Jesus states the nature of the Gospel as being one of life and death. Because of the kind of Gospel it is, it can only be a confrontational message. The nature of the Gospel determines the way it must be declared.

You could not warn a man about impending disaster by hiring a clown to come and sing it to him, or by sending him a Hallmark card. You do not call a man to the battle with a bunch of roses and some chocolates. To do so is to betray the heart of the message you are trying to convey.

So, that leads us to believe that people are not clear on what the Gospel is. If we understood the Gospel in its entirety, we would know how it should be declared. Let's examine Christ's words a little closer.

## **The Gospel is a call to discipleship**

Jesus firstly says, *"If any man will come after me..."* He then gives the procedure of denying self and taking up one's cross and following Him. There we are back to 'following Christ'. This is the heart of what the Gospel announces.

It announces God's desire to draw men to Himself who will turn from being followers of themselves to being followers of God. This is discipleship – following God. The word disciple means "pupil" – one who learns from the master and imitates Him. A disciple of Christ is one who seeks to be saved from sin so that they can follow Christ all their life.

It is sad that some have made discipleship something totally distinct from salvation. They say: 'Get saved, and then afterwards you can make a commitment to follow Jesus. Jesus, however, turns that logic on its head by describing salvation with the words, *"If any man will come after me..."* He means, 'if any man would receive eternal life' – the phrase is His synonym for salvation.

Following Christ is not a hobby, a side-interest, or a fun philosophy. If you think you can win someone to Christ by making the Gospel seem sensible, acceptable and something

that they will come to view as being useful to their lifestyle – you don't understand the Gospel.

A call to discipleship deliberately confronts a person with the fact that they will have to make radical changes in their life. The Gospel is not an add-on to your busy life. Following Christ is not simply another interest you pursue. Jesus either becomes Lord of all, or not Lord at all. He cannot be one of many things you are following. This is how he described it Himself.

**Luke 14:33** says, *"So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."* Jesus described salvation as an absolute turning point. When the Gospel is described as a nice accessory to complement your 21st century lifestyle, it flies in the face of our Lord's view that the Gospel walks in and completely re-arranges your life.

How can you have Christ's words about forsaking all, and still try to present this Gospel in a non-confrontational way? The message is undeniably confrontational. Go back a few verses and the language is even stronger: *"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple"* (**Luke 14:26**).

Was Jesus commanding hatred here? No, of course not. This is another way of stating **Matthew 10:37**: *"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."* Your love for Christ must so exceed your love for others that it can seem like rejection by contrast. Christ always comes first. Priority is always given to Christ in every decision.

Being a disciple is clearly not a nice new way of viewing the world. It is a radical, life-changing situation that will alter the most fundamental relationships in your life – those of your closest family:

*"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household."*

**Matthew 34-36**

There is no way around it. Discipleship is an absolute, total surrender. It is an abandonment of life as we used to live it, to follow Christ. It accepts the possibility of complete earthly loss – but wants it since Christ is ultimately the highest gain. Like Paul's testimony in **Philippians 3**, it is willing to give up anything that stands in the way of knowing and following Him.

If the Gospel is not confrontational, why then did Jesus spend time instructing people to consider the cost of following Him?

*"For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish."*

**Luke 14:28-30**

Jesus says – consider carefully the true demands and expectations of following Me. If it is not what you want – don't come. Jesus was, by modern Christianity's standards, rather negative, by saying things like 'you cannot be my disciple.' Jesus did not water down His demands, He stated them. He did not sugarcoat the Gospel. He stated, in a kind and truthful way – this is what it means to follow Me.

Jesus confronted man with the Gospel, and allowed man to respond. Today's Gospel emphatically avoids these confrontational statements, and insists, 'You can, you can, you can be His disciple! Let nothing hold you back. Don't think twice! Don't hesitate. The Gospel is easy. It's user-friendly. It won't change your life too much.' This is almost the total opposite of Christ's words. And not only is the Gospel a call to Discipleship, it is a call to death.

### **The Gospel is a call to die**

Christ's words for following Him as a disciple are, *"let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."* The Greek "deny" here literally means – to disown yourself. To say – I no longer recognise my claim over myself. I no longer regard myself as part of myself. I choose to lose my old way of living. I reject my sin, my rebellion to God. I refuse to live under the lordship of self any longer.

This is what the Bible calls repentance. It is a turn away from self and sin, to follow Christ. The next phrase is *'take up his cross'*. Now, think about what Christ is saying. People in the first century didn't just walk around the streets with crosses on their back. It wasn't something that was part of life. A man carrying his cross was walking to his own execution. He was carrying the means of his own death, and marching to his death.

That is what a first century audience would have understood by Christ's words. If you want to follow Me, you need to march to your own death. You need to accept My death on the cross as your own death, and then follow Me. You need to realise the old life you had will die with Me on the cross. You will execute the old man, and become new. There will be more than pain, or a kind of discomfort.

Following Christ is as radical as human experience gets – it involves death. This is why Jesus explains His words with the phrase: *"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."* In other words – if you want to keep your life, then lose it. But if you refuse to lose it in Me, you will not keep it.

All of us want life, real life. Jesus targets this desire and says – if you want real life – then end your self-life with me on the cross, and embrace My resurrection life as your new life. This is the Gospel. I accept Christ's death as my own death, and receive His life as my own life.

Now, what is there about a bloody, gruesome cross that is non-confrontational? What is there in the message of "You must die to follow Jesus" that we can make palatable in a user-friendly course, or a nice friendship evangelism course, or a snap-your-fingers pop-beat song?

Absolutely nothing. It is a dark and terrible thing – the cross. This is why Paul called it the "*offence of the cross*" in **Galatians 5:11**. It is why he said in **1 Corinthians 1:18** that the "*For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.*"

Man is offended by the gruesome cross. The wise of this world regards it idiotic that their salvation is through Christ's death on the cross, and by identifying with that death through faith. They hate this idea of repentance and faith apart from human effort and merit. If we try to hide this offence, we change the Gospel. Paul very emphatically said that the Gospel will always have two reactions:

*For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.*

**2 Corinthians 2:15**

In other words, the Gospel will smell sweet or stink. There is no middle ground. The Gospel will always produce reception and rejection, happiness and hardening, belief and unbelief. God means for this to happen. He means for the hardening of some to prove His justice in condemning them, and the reception of others to prove His great mercy and love.

The non-confrontational Gospel seems to omit these verses from the Bible and insists that everyone, at all times, must regard the message of Christ as sweet-smelling. The Gospel is a call to death. Paul did not hate this idea of the confrontational cross, he loved to preach it:

*For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*

**1 Corinthians 2:2**

*But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.*

**Galatians 6:14**

*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*

**Galatians 2:20**

## **The Gospel is a call to dishonour**

Not only is the Gospel a call to death, but it is also a call to dishonour. Jesus' listeners would have further understood what Jesus meant by taking up your cross. Someone carrying a cross was an unusual criminal. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals. People would hit and spit upon someone walking with a cross on their back – because it was a symbol that they were socially unacceptable.

In Roman times, it was actually impolite to mention crucifixion in conversation, such was its stigma. For that reason, the writer of Hebrews parallels this with the Jewish law of taking what was vile outside the camp. *"Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach"* (**Hebrews 13:12-13**). There is no other way to put it but the way Jesus did:

*"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also."*

**John 15:18-20**

The non-confrontational Gospel seems to have a dual purpose. It aims to win the unbeliever without exposing them to the offense of the cross, and it aims to shield the witnessing believer from any reproach when sharing the Gospel. Part of the idea of the non-confrontational Gospel is simply to preserve our image before the world.

We don't want to be laughed at, looked down upon, to alienate certain people or lose social standing or respectability. We want the world to regard us as just as acceptable, trendy, intelligent and articulate as them. We wish to somehow retain their favour, while bringing a message that says they ought to abandon their old ways to follow Christ. No, the Gospel is a call to dishonour in the eyes of man.

Once again, how do you reconcile the idea of being like them to win them with carrying a cross on your back? How do you reconcile using ungodly music to supposedly court the unbeliever with the idea of having a cross on your back? How do you reconcile wanting the socialites and unbelieving powers of the day to continue to admire and love you with the idea of carrying a cross on your back? These ideas are polar-opposite.

Covert Christianity is not Biblical evangelism. Jesus never taught a Gospel of infiltration. You will never find an account in the Gospels of Him telling us to be exactly like the world, make them accept you, and then slip the Gospel in when they're not looking. How can you make a difference by being no different? It boggles the mind!

Evangelism can only be effective when the person witnessed to sees the point of salvation – a radical change of life into the image of Christ! As **Luke 14:34-35** puts it, *"Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out."*

If you are not making a difference by being different, you have missed the point of evangelism. Unbelievers do not have to see how much you are like them. They know you are a sinner and are like them. They need to know how much you are unlike them. It is those very differences that will draw them to God, that will make them hungry for change in their own life, that will create curiosity as to the power of God in a life.

Now, does preaching a confrontational Gospel mean we are to be belligerent, rude and offensive? Does it mean we are to be hard, cold and mean-spirited? No, not at all. The Bible warns us against having this spirit.

*Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.*

**1 Corinthians 10:32**

*Let not then your good be evil spoken of.*

**Romans 14:16**

*Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.*

**Colossians 4:5-6**

In other words, we need to have a godly and wholesome way of bring across the message. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love is not rude – it does not behave itself unseemly. Proverbs is filled with advice warning us off being contentious and harsh in our language. But this must simply bring balance to our presentation of a hard, confrontational message.

The spirit of the day is to water down the message, strip it of its true confrontational elements, and believe that we are then being loving. We are erring on the side of being compromised. The balance is to preach the absolute truth, in love. We must not shy away from preaching a Gospel that calls people to total discipleship, to death, and to dishonour. Anything less than that is not the true Gospel, and will produce a harvest of false converts.

The Gospel is by nature confrontational. When we preach it any other way – we are denying its very essence. We cannot shy away from the hard demands of the Gospel,



nor seek to clothe it in the robes of social respectability or in the clothes of the political correctness of our day.

The Gospel does not cater to the relativism of our day. It does not cater to the idealistic non-judgmental notions of some Christians. It is a message of repentance, of death on a cross, of absolute truth in Christ and in none other, and of a radical renewal of the life. It's a call to discipleship, a call to die, a call to dishonour. But as Paul put it: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth"* (**Romans 1:16**).