

Three critical errors in the modern church – Part 1

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, and those who plundered us requested mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the Lord's song In a foreign land?

Psalms 137:1-4

Sometimes one feels that these words could so perfectly describe the heart of a true worshipper in the midst of modern Christianity. Many contemporary churches seem to be in a Babylonian captivity – sold out to the world and increasingly absorbed and assimilated by the world, instead of converting it. Instead of conquering the world with the Gospel, the church is being conquered by its philosophies and ideologies. The world mocks modern churches and their antics to try and look impressive.

But a true Christian often feels the weight of the words “How do we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” How do we truly worship and enjoy and praise God when all around us the church is sold into slavery to the world? How did we get to this place? And for that matter, how is it that we continue to mimic the world, be like the world, and honestly crave the world’s approval?

I wish to suggest three critical errors that the church has made, and is making, in its relationship with the lost, and in its methods. These errors continue to perpetuate the secularisation of the church, the numbing of its spiritual sensibilities and the weakening of its influence in the world. I believe the three critical errors are these:

- **Error 1:** Believing that respectability equals authority
- **Error 2:** Believing that size equals influence
- **Error 3:** Believing that reflection equals relevance

In Part 1 of this three-part series, we’ll explore Error 1 – the idea that respectability equals authority. Because of a lack of clear thinking on this issue, Christianity is rushing headlong into trying to gain credibility and respectability before the world, thinking that this will give the church the authority it needs, and consequently, that everyone will listen. But what is at work here is a failure to define our terms.

What is respectability? What is authority? Are they the same thing? If not, does the one result from the other? If we ask and biblically answer these questions, we will go a long way to avoiding this critical error. So let’s begin that way.

What is respectability?

For the purposes of our discussion, let’s define it the way it is used in Christian circles. Respectability has to do with your competence, your proficiency, your skill, your ability. Therefore, when the church seeks respectability, they are seeking to be as professional, as advanced, as technologically *au fait*, competent and skilful in what they do as anyone in the world.

For example, a pastor may seek to be proficient in grammar, in his use of rhetoric and logic – and be as skilful in this as a university academic. A Christian magazine will seek to have its layout be smooth and attractive, its text free from errors, its printing without smudging or off-centre prints, and perhaps nice, glossy paper. A Christian

radio station or podcast studio will seek equipment that is or is nearly the best available. It will train its operators, sound engineers and presenters with the skills related to the best possible audio presentation.

Similarly, a church may seek to have its services carefully planned and orchestrated, with a smooth transition from one item to the next. A Christian musician may seek to grow in his or her proficiency with their instrument, get further education, perhaps seek to play with a local orchestra. What all of this amounts to is striving for excellence. And indeed, this is very important. Reading the Lord's words in Malachi drives home how God expects His children to offer their best in His service.

"And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, Is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, Is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favourably?" says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 1:8

You also say, 'Oh, what a weariness!' and you sneer at it," says the LORD of hosts. "And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?" says the LORD. "But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and takes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great King," says the LORD of hosts, "and My name is to be feared among the nations."

Malachi 1:13-14

Some Israelites were taking the utter rejects of their flock – the blind, the lame, the sick sheep, sheep which would be good for nothing, the mere leftovers, and bringing that to sacrifice to the Lord. God rebukes them for such an appallingly unbelieving attitude. After all, He says, would you offer something like this to your human governor? Would you look him in the eye and present a blind or sick sheep to him?

The principle is this: God's people need to bring their best to God. Sometimes we give more to our earthly governors, so to speak, than to God. Our earthly boss has us at work every day, but our faithfulness to our local church is hit and miss and sporadic. Our spending on our own luxuries and personal entertainment is quite sacrificial sometimes, but our giving to God is often meagre in comparison.

We dress our best for those important corporate meetings, but shorts and sandals are what God gets on Sunday. And I can already hear the 'legalist police' sirens on their way to arrest me – because of course, David we're under grace. Well, amen to that, but grace has freed us to offer our very selves as living sacrifices to God – to give Him nothing less than our best.

For too long has the world rightly accused Christians of being sloppy, casual, and careless in our worship. Unbelievers can detect when things are thrown together in a slipshod, careless manner. So, it is good to see believers who believe in excellence. They want music which glorifies God and is well done. They seek to produce sermons which are deep and meaty and well-presented. They seek to produce radio and television programmes that are technically on par with the best that unbelievers produce.

But that is what respectability is, and it has its place. But unfortunately, many a Christian, many a church, many a Christian organisation is using respectability as a substitute for authority. Primarily, through a subtle shift, believers have come to think that they are the same thing. And they are not. The difference is the difference between night and day.

Respectability has to do with competence. Authority has to do with conviction. Authority is when the message of the church grips the listeners. Authority is when the hearers become deeply convicted of the truth of what is

being said. When Jesus began to teach, the reaction was one of astonishment. The Bible tells us: *“And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes,”* (Mark 1:22).

No doubt the scribes were competent when it came to discussing the meaning of Hebrew words. They were competent in their vast recollection of oral tradition. They were skilled in remembering the fine nuances of applications and interpretations of the Law – but the plain teaching of Scripture is that their competence did give them authority.

We have to understand the difference. Respectability is where the world may acknowledge that you have produced a good product. Respectability is when the world is impressed with your ministry. But that does not confer authority on your words. They may walk out of your service, walk away from your company, switch off your audio or video programme and feel no more challenged than they normally do.

Respectability is when the world can see you have done your homework. They acknowledge your production is commendable on technical and production grounds. But nothing has happened inside them to draw them to an encounter with God. They have not come face-to-face with themselves in light of God’s Word and trembled. They have not been seized by the validity of the truth, the beauty of the truth, and the urgency of the truth to respond with their mind, their emotions and their will.

You could say it this way: Respectability impresses. Authority humbles. Respectability may catch their eye, but it will not convict them, challenge them or transform them.

Sadly, the church has been for some time madly rushing around trying to gain authority through competence. They confuse the two ideas and blur the distinction between them. So a so-called Christian rock group thinks that if they sound as raucous and violent as the secular ones, then unbelievers will take their message seriously. A Christian radio station thinks that if it sounds as seamless as a commercial music station, that people will tune in and submit to the authority of the Gospel.

Or perhaps a church thinks that if its auditorium and lighting and ‘praise and worship team’ seems slick and polished, that unbelievers will regard the Christian message seriously. A pastor thinks that if his sermon is based on much syntactical, grammatical, lexical, historical, cultural and theological study, that it will naturally have authority. In all these cases, there is a confusion, a morphing together of the concepts of competence and authority.

What is authority?

The fact is this – authority is a spiritual work of God. Authority is something God delegates on His faithful servants, which allows the message to go forth in power, and convicts and humbles the unbeliever. You can be as competent as they come, and yet have no authority.

Someone will no doubt object – ‘but if we are competent, we get their attention! They see we mean business and they take us seriously! It does give us authority!’ I reply – a lack of competence brought about by laziness or carelessness will certainly remove any hope of authority. An unprepared sermon will not be blessed by God. Sloppy presentation of a Christian programme turns people off. A poorly written Christian book detracts from its message.

But understand that the competence is only preliminary to the authority. Respectability and competence are just things which open the door, grab the attention, smooth the way – they are not the core reason for

authority! Competence does not in and of itself give authority. It serves like a John the Baptist – to make the path straight for the Lord, to draw people’s attention. We see this made very clear in 1 Corinthians:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe... Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God; and righteousness and sanctification and redemption; that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."

1 Corinthians 1:21-31

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Here Paul is speaking of God’s manner of working with men. The Corinthians have been fighting over which Christian leader they follow – much like Christians today. Paul goes on to speak about how God appointed him to preach the Gospel – a message regarded by the wise of this world as foolish, to say nothing of the method of delivery – preaching. But, says Paul, what men think is foolish is God’s wisdom. And God will use those weak, foolish, despised things to shame those who glory in themselves.

In other words, God loves humble, childlike, teachable people, because they accept His wisdom as wise, while the apparently scholarly, learned, intelligent academics dismiss the Gospel as a silly fiction. From there Paul makes these interesting claims, pertinent to our discussion. He says his preaching was not with excellence of speech – literally a superiority of speaking ability.

Nor, we read in verse 4, did he speak with persuasive words of human wisdom. Simply put, Paul lacked the competence of the Greek orators of his time. He was called to be a preacher, but could not lay claim to great human ability to speak. Nevertheless, Paul says, his preaching was marked by “*demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*”

His preaching was not excellent technically, but it was Spirit-filled and the Holy Spirit was the dynamic. It had power. It had power to move, to shape, to change hearts. It had authority. Authority is when the world is convicted of the absolute truth of what you say, sometimes in spite of the frailty of the messenger.

The bottom line is this – while incompetence can compromise your authority, competence does not guarantee authority. I’m sure Paul wasn’t content to be a less than average speaker, and probably sought to improve. But the Scriptures teach us that God worked over and above his technical ability to send forth His Word with authority.

That's because authority has to do with the life of the messenger, not the technical excellence of the presentation. The Holy Spirit fills *people*. He empowers people. He does not empower microphones, computers, printers, cameras or sermon manuscripts. He does not empower musical instruments, lighting equipment or performances. However competent you may be with those things, true authority comes from His filling and working through *you*.

Excellence is a good thing, and something to strive for. But if we think that competence or respectability will do the work of the Holy Spirit, we have bought into a critical error. We have begun a subtle form of idolatry, worshipping our own efforts, and trusting in them to convert hearts, to shatter hard hearts, to regenerate dead souls. So, how do we minister with authority? It starts here:

1. Humility before the authority of God Word

God shows Himself strongly on behalf of those who submit entirely to His Word. In other words, we do not interject our own ideas, philosophies, traditions or practices and use the pulpit as the place to expound them. The pulpit is the place for God to speak through the channel of His Spirit using the Word in a disciplined, careful preacher.

When a man or woman leaves using the Word of God as the absolute and only authority for what they teach, they are like a person who speaks away from the microphone. At that point, their voice is no longer amplified and projected for all to hear. God ceases to spiritually broadcast those words to the hearts of people, because they are speaking apart from the microphone of his Word. There are now simply a clanging gong, a human noise maker.

2. Declaring the Word with fear and trembling

This does not mean preachers are to be overcome with terror when they preach. It does mean we are to be gripped by the solemn nature of declaring the message of the Sovereign Creator. We are to be awed at the thought of being a mouthpiece for Deity. And that ought to drive out the trite, foolish, flippant, frivolous ways of so many today. It ought to drive out the flamboyant, theatrical, showy and often gaudy histrionics of all too many supposed Christians.

God does not confer authority on fools, clowning around, trying to be cute and lovable, when the glory of God is at stake. God gives authority to those who preach it in humility.

3. Living the Word in sincerity

There is no faster way to lose authority than to be an impure vessel. The channel for God's authority must be uncorrupted by worldliness, immorality, impurity, greed and covetousness, coldness of heart toward God, and secret sin. Hypocrisy is a short-circuit to authority. God does not bless duplicity. The reason why Christ had authority and the scribes did not was that they did not live what they taught. By contrast, consider how the Bible describes the prophet Ezra:

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Ezra 7:10

The most authoritative messengers are the ones most like Christ, who is the supreme authority. To the degree that a Christian is unlike Christ is the degree to which his or her authority wanes. And on all three of the counts above, large sections of the church are striking out.

1. Firstly, in place of humility before the Word there is psychology, homespun theology, pithy sayings, anecdotes and clichés that become springboards for whole messages, books and sermons that reference the Bible, but do not actually emerge *from* the Bible. Everyone tells you today that they base their teaching on the Word, but what they mean is, they use the Word to back up their teachings. They do not submit themselves to the text of Scripture, allowing it to shape their view, attitudes, opinions, and so forth.
2. Secondly, in place of preaching the Word with the gravity and reverence it requires, we have religious entertainers – slick crowd pleasers, Christian pop idols, quasi-comedians, religious cheerleaders, spiritual motivational speakers. They are indeed persuasive, but Paul said his teaching was not the kind which caused one's faith to be in the wisdom of men, but the kind which caused faith in the power of God.
3. Thirdly, in place of holiness and separated living, we have people who are brazenly as worldly, sensual, immoral and sin-laden as the world they claim to be preaching to. Only the blind, naïve or willingly ignorant would say that the church at large is in a purer, holier and more Christlike state than ever before. It takes only a few minutes' worth of conversation with Joe Christian to learn that this is not the case.

So, it is no surprise that the kind of Spirit-filled authority which Paul talked about is a rare thing to find today. And the church, instead of repenting, has set about improvising. In the place of lost authority, they are furiously trying to make up for it with technical competence, academic achievement, with scholarly articles, with state-of-the-art technology, with performance extravaganzas, with trying to get our video or audio content onto secular channels.

You will note I have not condemned striving for excellence at all in this message, I have commended it. But what is to be condemned is resisting the hardest work of all – being humble and broken before God in a fervent, dependent, submissive relationship with Him that requires searching out the Word, living it in sincerity and simplicity, and then declaring it with gravity and earnestness.

These things are in fact much harder than being technically precise, or academically rigorous, or administratively superb, or any other field of skill or competence. The competence is not to be sniffed at. The problem is when we sniff at devotion, and like Cain, present our own offering on the altar – the offering of our respectability, and believe it is enough to please God and win men to Him.

The fact is, the Christian church has made a critical error in maximising the channel and minimising the message. The message is being increasingly diluted, modified, trimmed and edited for our generation that wants everything in abbreviated forms, while we spend all our time trying to spruce up the format, and make the channel that delivers the message as attractive as possible.

Respectability is fine and well. You may get it from the world, you may not. While we must strive for excellence, we do so not because we want the world to admire, but because we want our offering to be worthy of so great a God.

Whether or not we get respectability from the world is not as important as whether or not we have authority in our declaration of the Word. Respectability before the world is desirable, but not essential. Authority is essential. Authority without respectability is still used by God – as it was in Paul’s case. But respectability without authority is dead. It has no use in converting sinners or bringing glory to God. It is merely a trophy in our cabinets of pride.

Respectability makes the world think you have what they have – competence in a particular area. Authority makes the world realise you have what they *don’t* have – a relationship with the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. May we strive not only for excellence, competence, respectability – but for true authority. May we seek the power of the Spirit on a Word-centred, humble and obedient walk with Him.

In part 2 of this series, we look at the second error churches make – believing that size equals influence.