

WHAT YOU HEAR

By

Curtis Dickinson

“Belief comes of hearing” (Romans 10:17).

Returning home from a preaching convention the occupants of the car seemed in agreement on the power and force of one particular sermon. Praises ran high for the speaker. “A really great message”, “He really hit the nail on the head”, “A stirring sermon”, “A powerful speaker.” Until one person raised the question, “Just what did he say?” After a moment of silence another answered, “He didn’t say much, but didn’t he say it pretty.”

We have no objection to one who is able to say it, pretty. In fact we labor long and hard in the hope of improving the way we communicate the message, and often are downcast at not being able to do a better job. But the attention given to the oratory in our pulpits has had an adverse effect in two directions: by detracting from the actual truth of the message and appealing on the basis of the messenger’s personality; and by-removing the responsibility from the listener and putting it all on the preacher’s back.

THE MESSAGE IS THE THING

“To be sure, if the means of communication are words, it is desirable that they should be well chosen: just as it is desirable that a letter which brings you important news should be fairly written. But this is only a minor convenience; for the letter will, in any case, go into the waste paper basket as soon as you have mastered its contents, and the words are going to be forgotten as soon as you have mastered the Myth” (C. S. Lewis, in the *Introduction to Fantasies*). The gist of the message translated from one mind to another is what counts. Some of the most significant letters I ever received were not on fine stationery and were not the least careful in proper style. It didn’t matter. The truth they conveyed was important to me, and the message, once read, became significant knowledge to my mind.

Jesus said, “No man can come unto me except the father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him up at the last day. As it is written in the prophets; and they shall be taught of God, every man therefore that has heard and learned of the father cometh to me.” (John 6:44-45). It is through the hearing of truth which God reveals that brings men to salvation in Christ. “Of His own will he begat us with the word of truth” (James 1:18). Again and again Jesus made it clear that the truth is what brings man into a mind-to-mind relationship with God. But such has been the emphasis upon the messenger that the message is often incidental. The minister is under such pressure to measure up to the expected standard of public speaking that his concern is more for the impression he makes than for the impact of truth. Unpleasant facts are couched in language that removes the stark reality of sin and judgment. A plain sermon is not likely to be

considered powerful, especially if the interest depends upon the truth it contains and not the clever alliterations, scholarly construction and skilled turning of a phrase. On the other hand one who rejects the truth often continues to receive the plaudits of men because of his “pulpit power” – not, of course, the power of the message, but the personal magnetism and the speaking technique of the preacher. The fellowship thus created is not a fellowship in truth, a relationship based upon a harmony of purpose and thought, but a superficial relationship between entertainer and audience. Questions of truth are unwelcome in such a relationship.

Yet if Bible truth is not the essential element in the church, then we are led by blind guides, and one church is as good as another; one religion is as good as another; in fact, no religion at all is as good as the Christian faith - if the truth of the Bible is not the criterion. Indeed many people act today as if there were no truth. They choose churches merely by their taste in music, or the crowd which attends, or the architecture, or the appeal of the person (not the message) in the pulpit. The consequences of such choice is not even considered by most people, so immune has man become to truth and its revelation from the Scriptures.

There is no excuse for a Minister’s sloppiness, either in appearance or speech. One who loves the truth of the Gospel will do his best to make it appealing. But there is a vast difference between adorning the Gospel in order to present the truth, and in adorning a sermon in order to receive recognition as a pulpit master.

Paul wrote, “And I, brethren...came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.” “And my speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:1, 4). The sermons and epistles of the apostles are void of display of human personality. But they are filled with facts which reveal such truth as to move those who are receptive to a message from God. If faith comes by hearing, it is not because of the lovely sound of a voice or the clever and entertaining words that one hears, but because of the truth that reveals the Creator’s desire and intention to the one who is interested in these desires and purposes. “We are of God; he that knows God hears us, he that is not of God hears us not. Hereby we know the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6). But the faith of the preacher is often weak, and rather than trusting in the power of the Spirit of Truth, he comes to feel that he must add his own power through psychological pressure, persuasive speech and a bit of fun.

But think how utterly serious is this business of heralding the message of God’s truth. Think, then, how the Creator must view the preacher who treats his pulpit as a tool of human manipulation. Think how it must sound to the ears of Jesus the King to hear His message of the cross mixed with jokes and facetious phrases, all to tickle the ears that cannot bear to hear the serious truth.

When the time comes to preach how can one think of foolishness? I think of God speaking to Noah. Could there be anything humorous about millions of people drowning while Noah sat safely in the ark? I think of Moses. Who could tolerate a facetious remark

while half a million slaves awaited in breathless silence for a verdict from Pharaoh, and all the first born of Egypt were near the door of death? And I think of Daniel. How the frivolity of Belshazzar must have grieved his heart as he labored up the stairs of the banquet hall to read the handwritten doom upon the wall. And after dinner speech? Yes. But where were the usual jokes? And John the Baptist? “And even now the axe lies at the root of the tree”; and it lay also at John’s head to think of Jesus: “Why have thou forsaken me?” And isn’t every preacher a messenger of the fact that without repentance and faith, man is God-forsaken?

Yet in spite of these plain considerations, in which the Creator is seen as serious, the modern pulpit seeks to reach the condemned by frivolity, or psychology or persuasive and clever manipulations of speech. And too often the condemned (all who have rejected the pardon of God through Christ) are approached on the basis of good humor, a hail fellow w-ell met, a good Joe, a laugh and slap on the back. How can he hear with seriousness when all the business of God is presented lightly with a dash of chuckling good humor, as if it didn’t matter much?

God has given a message through which we glorify God and change the heart of man. But in the effort to glorify the messenger we have taught the congregation to measure the message, not by its content, but by its delivery.

THE LISTENER’S RESPONSIBILITY

If the speaker is responsible for exposing the truth, the listener is equally responsible for receiving it. Jesus said “Take heed how you hear”, and “Hear and understand”. He did not conform his reaching to the desires of his listeners. While he admitted that some things he said were not easy to hear, just the same he commanded men to hear them and understand.

If the messenger is one of the many who speak not from the authority of God but merely to attain a following, then he should be marked as an imposter and one is well off not to listen to him at all. But if we are to attend church as one who attends to the divine assembly of God’s people; if we are sincere in our attention as a member of the divine body; if we are honest in the greeting of the minister as one who is ordained of God; if, I say, we are at all sincere and honest in recognizing the minister as the one duly ordained and appointed by the church as the shepherd of the flock of which we are one of the sheep, then we must- listen seriously to consider how the message applies to our lives.

The constant exposure of our ears to the blaring sounds of a discordant world, which seems intent upon screaming its false claims louder and louder until we give in from sheer ear-ache, has indeed made the 20th century man dull of hearing. The audience is likely to applaud the clever speaker who makes a telling point, but unlikely to apply the point personally. But if the point is indeed clever, they will be back to hear him. The more cleverly he steps on toes, the better they will like it, for they can feel that the repeated submission to this verbal lashing is a sort of atonement for their sins. The hearing goes only ear deep. He hears without perceiving the message. The message is

often measured, not upon the truth or lack of it, but upon the ease with which one may sit through it. Hence one may hear truth, and reject it because he did not enjoy listening to the messenger, or he may hear a lie and embraces it because it was well presented. The hearer is responsible for how he hears.

A few months ago J learned that a couple had joined the Mormon Church after I had talked to them about the Gospel. I inquired as to why they had chosen the Mormon religion over the truth which I had presented from the Bible. The only answer was that the Mormon missionaries had the most fabulous method of presentation they had ever seen. As I was about to begin whipping myself for my own failure in “method”, they went on to say that I had certainly presented to them the truth! Obviously they had not been interested in the message of truth. We wonder how many churches are filled with those who listen, not for truth, but for a fabulous presentation. We suspect that there are many, and that this is the reason for indifference, and failure of an adequate witness to the lost.

The hearer should listen as one privileged to be let in on the Creator’s secrets ... as one on the verge of eternity bent on learning the secret entrance. Remember, eternity has no need of you, the listener. But YOU are desperately in need of Eternity.

It is not God who is in need. It is not the message which needs you but YOU need the message. Thus God speaks in a still small voice. He is not in competition with the world’s clamor. The world in desperation, on the brink of death, cries loud and clear, so that you can hardly escape its compelling voice. It clangs, clamors, rings bells and waves flags. But then you do not need its voice. You do need the still small voice of God, and thus you must take heed how you hear. The man who responds so quickly and effortlessly to the compelling voice of the world is not fit for the intimacy with God. God seeks you, indeed, but only on the ground that you desire Him enough to listen for Him – even in a whisper, even if the messenger, like John, is clothed in camel’s hair, and lives on Locust and honey. The question is not whether God will raise His voice in competition to thousands of self-seeking voices of the world, but whether you will hear Him in the message of truth that is all but obscured in the din of Satan’s stronghold. It is not God and His message at stake. It is you.

.....
Copyright © Curtis Dickinson. Formatted and Posted by Ken Fortier Ministries.
Permission is hereby granted by Mrs. Regina Dickinson to reproduce and distribute
Curtis’ articles to as many as possible. This statement is to remain attached to this article
for permission to be valid. Vol. IV. Number 10.
.....