

I.

Preaching with the right goal in view

As the apostle Paul reflects on his life and ministry, in chains as a Roman prisoner, he writes to the Christians in Colossae one of the most revealing paragraphs in all of his letters about the contents and motivation of his ministry (Col. 1:24-29). He reminds them that he is a steward, with a divinely-given commission 'to make the word of God fully known' (Col. 1:25). His whole life has been a response to God's call to take the revelation of the mystery of God's otherwise secret plan to the Gentiles, the entire pagan world. As a steward, he has been entrusted with his Master's resources, which constitute the glorious treasure of the gospel, 'now revealed to his saints'. This then is the content of his ministry, 'which is Christ in you, the hope of glory' (1:27). Here is God's provision for the present – Christ Himself dwelling within His people. And flowing from that reality is the sure and certain hope for the future of coming glory. Verse 28 is both a glorious declaration, 'Him we proclaim' (Christ, not just Christianity), and also an insight into the methodology of His preaching 'warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom'.

But perhaps even more significant is the ultimate purpose of this stewardship of the gospel by the great apostle to the Gentiles. The proclamation, with its warning of the negatives and teaching the positives, is to this end – ‘that we may present everyone mature in Christ’.

That apostolic purpose must surely govern all of us who stand in the true apostolic succession of the gospel, as we seek to fulfil the commission given directly by the Lord Jesus Himself to His apostles after His resurrection. ‘Go ... and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28:19-20). And this clearly specific command, to teach the nations, is one of those to be followed by disciples, in every generation and across the world. At one level it is a wonderfully uncomplicated goal, to ‘present everyone mature in Christ’, but it may easily degenerate into an overly simplistic definition of the teacher’s task, unless we take the time to unpack what that ‘maturity’ consists of and how our teaching can promote and achieve this very demanding aim. But as we do that, we should remember that Colossians 1:29 is full of encouragement to embrace the challenge, through hard work and in dependence on the divine energy. Paul writes, ‘For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me’. Without ‘his energy’ all our ‘toil’ would be in vain. But without our toil that energy will never be experienced in the church and the quest for maturity will be quickly abandoned.

For over fifty years now it has been my immense privilege and responsibility to seek to be a faithful preacher and teacher of the whole counsel of God, in the Scriptures. During that time I have learned a great deal about the

dynamic power of the Word of God to transform lives through its careful exposition. I have seen people drawn to Christ through the spiritual magnetism of the Word preached, people at different ages and stages of life and from all sorts of different places and backgrounds. I have witnessed God's grace and truth building up churches, transforming and strengthening believers, developing godly character through many faithful labourers in many different countries. But I have also learned a great deal about myself and my fellow-preachers – how weak and ineffective we are, how easily diverted from God's priorities, how the other demand-levels of our everyday ministry can pressurize us into trading off the important in order to focus on what seems to us to be the urgent. During my life-time in ministry those pressures have only increased, exponentially, as they continue to do. Time for reflection and re-orientation is notoriously difficult to find, but I become more and more convinced that it is essential if our ministry is not just to survive, but to bear fruit that remains.

Towards the end of my time in local church pastoral ministry I discovered the great benefit of taking a day every two or three months, to be on my own with the Lord, dealing with the things I had shelved due to lack of time or energy, seeking to come to a sober assessment of the immediate past and the present situation, in the church, in my family, in myself and prayerfully thinking through future possibilities and direction. It often took me most of the morning just to unwind, to quieten my heart and to seek God's face. Later, when I worked in the training ministry of the Proclamation Trust through the Cornhill course, there was more opportunity for this sort

of reflection to be built into my regular schedule, but I have never forgotten both the particular pressures of pastoral ministry and also its delights and fulfilments. That is what has generated my desire to attempt some encouragement for those who bear the heat and burden of the day and who may be growing weary in well-doing, in the regular ministry of teaching God's living and enduring Word.

My purpose in writing then is to call each of us who has any responsibility for teaching the Bible to others, to whatever groups and at whatever level, to stop and consider as we re-evaluate what we are doing and why we are doing it. Every generation faces its own particular challenges in ministry, as well as those which seem to have been constant throughout history. Ours is certainly no exception and so we need to identify some of the contemporary traps and pitfalls into which we can easily stumble, if we are not aware of our own blind spots. Perhaps more than anything else we need to re-discover, clarify and be convinced about the priorities which the Bible itself gives us, as we explore its examples of what the early church was taught and how it was applied to life.

As a stimulus towards doing this, I have been re-reading a book which first appeared sixty years ago, but which, as far as I am aware has never received the attention which I think it deserves. 'The Recovery of the Teaching Ministry' by Dr J. S. Glen, the sometime Principal of Knox College, Toronto, is an apologia for teaching to be at the very heart of Christian ministry. In the light of the past sixty years, its thesis is profoundly relevant still and even prophetic. Noting that the Gospel of John introduces the person of Christ as 'full of grace and truth' (1:14), Glen

laments that in ministry the two are too often separated, which he sees exemplified in the division between the academy (theoretical) and the ministry (practical). As an ordination college principal, he observes that he deals with 'young scholars who are not at heart inclined to the ministry and young ministers who are not at heart inclined to scholarship'.¹ Scholarship is seen either on the one hand as an escape from the pressures and demands of ministry, or on the other as an obstacle to the 'real' work, to be overcome and left behind. We would be naïve to imagine that things are much different today. If anything, theological training has become increasingly academicised, as have the equivalents for most professions, with the outcome that degree results open doors to ministry.

Just recently, I asked an able and gifted young man currently in his theological training how his studies were going, to which he replied, 'Oh, really well! I have been told I could become a theological educator.' Somewhat mischievously I responded, 'You mean a pastor?' But he didn't.

Being a pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11) is often regarded as being somewhat inferior academically, perhaps because the role of the teaching ministry has been so underplayed, or even ignored in the churches. But for every academic theologian, we need a cohort of competent, educated pastor-teachers, because the future of the faith in the western world is, humanly speaking, dependent on them and their work. After a lifetime in Christian work, Dr Oliver Barclay, who was General Secretary of

1. 'The Recovery of the Teaching Ministry,' by J. S. Glen; Edinburgh, St. Andrew Press, 1960; p. 23.

the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UK), reflected on this situation in an article entitled, 'Where is Academic Theology Heading?', which was published in the December 2006 edition of the British monthly 'Evangelicals Now'. While in no way denigrating the need for good academic theological standards, he questioned whether the debates that interest the world of academic theology are, in fact, the ones that many people outside the universities care about. He concluded, 'Few university departments are able to help students to face the postmodern and relativistic fashions today, the secular challenges to Christianity, or the real ethical problems that confront the local churches'.

Since the article appeared, the conservative colleges have been moving to a much more practical training base, which is very heartening, but we must never lose sight of the guidance of the New Testament that training is designed to give the potential minister the knowledge and understanding to make him a 'man of God, competent, equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:17). As Barclay comments, "That, Paul says, is the true function of the Scriptures when they are rightly taught in the churches'.

These are not peripheral matters, but absolutely central to the health and well-being of the church and therefore to the continuance and spread of the gospel in every location and each generation. To quote Glen further, "The teaching ministry insists that the substance of the Bible and of its faith, including the substance of the great confessions of the church, are essentially intelligible and must be communicated from one generation to another'. But he laments that, "The evidence indicates, however, that the