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“I AM NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL”

By David Phillips

In what ways might we be ashamed of the gospel? One way might be to teach part of the gospel message, but not all, that is to leave out or water down those parts which might offend people. Put bluntly it is possible for people to teach the positives of the message about Christ, without the negatives. That is to call people to faith, without calling them to repentance. We declare that ‘God is love’ but are shy of warning of His wrath against ungodliness. We speak about the joy of following Christ, but do not call people to count the cost. Similarly we can lose confidence in the gospel being the power of God unto salvation and instead believe, or at least act as if, people will come to faith through other means. As a consequence other things, such as social action or church events can become seen as the gospel, rather than an opening to make known the gospel. In all these ways, and more, people today do seem to be ashamed of the gospel, and have lost confidence in the power of the gospel. But, what did Paul mean when he wrote the word of our title in his epistle to the Romans?

A debt to pay

When Paul wrote the words ‘*I am not ashamed of the gospel*’ (Rom 1.16) he was writing about his desire to preach in Rome. He had just written that he was ‘*debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise*’ (v14). It is an unusual way of speaking, but it means that he owed them the gospel. It is possible to say that this was part of his calling as the apostle to the gentiles, but it is also true that for all Christians having found the riches of Christ we have a debt to pay, we are to seek to share those riches with others. But Paul knew, from his own experience, that to Greeks the gospel appears foolishness (1 Cor 1.23). It is no different today. The culture around us may not be identical to that of the ancient world, though it is not much different, but still people consider the gospel to be foolishness. The danger therefore is that we become ashamed of the gospel. Therefore, instead of preaching the message we have been given, we not only adapt what we say to the audience, but change the message to remove the offence, and end up preaching a different gospel.

If you are a Christian you have a debt to pay to others, to tell them the gospel of Christ. If you change the gospel then you are handing over counterfeit currency which may look good, but is ultimately worthless. What was the consequence of Paul’s dogged determination? Certainly he was ridiculed, arrested, killed. But what was the impact of the gospel? The Christian communities grew and grew, because the gospel of Christ is the power of God to salvation of everyone who believes.

The foolishness of the cross

It would not be difficult to find people today who find all manner of things about the Christian faith offensive. But there are certain things in particular which we find in the New Testament that offend. The first is the cross – *we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to Greeks foolishness* (1 Cor 1.23). It is hard for us to comprehend just how shocking the message of the cross was to Jews and although it is still a stumbling block to others, it is not in the same way. The crucifixion went against so much of what they expected of the Messiah and spoke to them of curse (which it was) rather than blessing. Yet the Jews could understand some of what the cross meant because of the revelation of God in the Old Testament. It was in terms they could understand, even if they could not believe. But to the Greeks it was just nonsense, it did not fit their ideas of man or God, the whole way of thinking was alien to them. This was a fact that the early Christians had to wrestle with for centuries, and which we still wrestle with today. How do we explain the message

to a people who do not understand some of the basic concepts? This is not easy, but it can be done, and the things to remember is that if we want to remove the offence of the gospel from our message, then we have to remove the gospel itself, and that we must not do. Therefore, no matter how hard we try to make it understandable, we cannot stop it appearing foolish unless God opens their hearts to believe.

Mockery of the resurrection

The problem of presenting the gospel was acute for Paul when he was asked to speak before the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17.22-34). It is notable that Paul begins with creation, does not worry about criticising the ignorant religion of his hearers and moves on to speak about the day of judgement. Yet it was the message about the resurrection of the dead which really stirred things up. We can imagine that many listened quietly as this new teaching was explained, perhaps they were already beginning to boil up inside, but it was mention of the resurrection that seems to have brought things to a close as some of those present mocked. As with the Jews and the crucifixion it is hard for us to truly understand the impact of this sermon on those who heard it, who heard for the first time this message of the resurrection. It may be that this too is changing but at least until recently most people in the western world would know that somewhere in the Christian is a belief in the resurrection. People may not therefore mock the resurrection openly in quite the same way but it is still a stumbling block and therefore something of which it is possible to become ashamed.

The Messenger

It appears that some in the Corinthian church were ashamed of Paul as a preacher. He was not, they apparently, said a trained speaker (2 Cor 11.6) nor did he have a commanding presence (2 Cor 10.10). It is hard for us to understand this because Paul seems to have been so 'successful' and that ought in itself make us stop and think because his 'success' was not to be measured there and then, or by his approval rating amongst those who heard him, but in the lasting fruit of his labours.

This is not an easy area to get right because it clearly is possible to excuse bad preaching on the basis that it is faithful preaching when in fact the preacher prepares poorly, is not mindful of his hearers or is just plain sloppy. But the danger is that if we lose confidence in the gospel we replace it with confidence in the preacher. Some preachers are it seems especially gifted by God whilst others have a natural ability (still God-given) as a fine speaker. The danger is that we put these considerations above faithfulness to the gospel and then we become inclined to welcome those who preach well, even if they preach a false gospel (2 Cor 11.1-4). Not only had this happened in Corinth, it can happen today too. Though we all like to hear fine preachers, we should be concerned first and foremost to hear faithful preachers.

It is also apparent that some were ashamed of Paul's chains. When he was imprisoned some who had been fellow workers abandoned him. The pain this caused Paul can be felt in his second letter to Timothy where he also writes "do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God..." (2 Tim 1.8). Presumably they were fearful that the same fate awaited them as Paul. But perhaps there is also a hint, that his imprisonment seemed to undermine the gospel in their eyes. If that was so, they had forgotten that at the heart of the gospel is the cross. *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* (1 Cor 1.12).

Even the expectation that the gospel will 'work' can be misleading because as Scripture and Christian history show clearly in the short-term there may be little visible fruit. Our confidence in the gospel must not be based on anything other than the fact that it is the gospel of Christ and the power of God.

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