

A Harp with One String?

No doubt most of us have heard of Bach's 'Air on a G String' – a tune played entirely on one string of a violin.¹ Is this a good model for a gospel preacher?

What a silly question!

Read on.

The answer is both 'No' and 'Yes'. Let me explain.

Take the negative. Some preachers seem to spend most of their time, devote most of their energy, and expend most of their labours in promoting one theme. One string to their harp, you see!

For instance, some men are endlessly declaiming on creationism. In particular, they major on demonstrating creation's reasonableness as a matter of design, attacking the theory of evolution, defending the construction and logistics of Noah's ark, explaining dinosaurs, and the like. This about sums up their life's work.

Then again, there are those who rarely move from the prophets.² In particular, such men are professed experts on the visions of Daniel and Zechariah, and are – in their own eyes, at least – masters of the Revelation, especially the times and the seasons referred to in those books. They are forever calling their hearers' attention to the news from the Middle East or to developments in the shenanigans of the Common

¹ The German violinist August Wilhelmj (1845-1908), taking the second movement of Johann Sebastian Bach's Orchestral Suite No.3 in D major, arranged it for violin and piano. By changing the key into C major, and transposing the melody down an octave, he was able to play the piece on only one string – the G string.

² I am not sure if this still applies as much as it did way back in the days of my youth, but I certainly recall men who were forever preaching prophecy; that is to say, preaching what they understood to be the burden of the prophets.

Market, showing how all has been predicted in Scripture. Above all, the fate of Israel is their constant theme.

Some men seem to be consumed with a study of the tabernacle, even down to the finest detail, often using an intricate model to make their points.

Other preachers seem to have a harp of five strings, but in reality it has only one: ‘The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened [or blinded]’ (Rom. 11:7). A truth, of course, but hardly the whole truth.

Others seem to spend their days arguing the truth of new-covenant theology, showing that both covenant theologians and dispensationalists are wrong.

Some exhaust their energy declaiming against Rome and all its endless errors.

Some devote their strength to advocating what they see as the merits of the Received Text (whatever they think this to be), and the King James (or so-called Authorised) Version of the Bible (whatever edition is currently available).

And so on.

I am convinced this is a mistake. And a big one.

First, it is wrong for a preacher to concentrate on anything but Scripture. I am not nit-picking. I think it is wrong to start with a subject. I am not saying that a preacher should not have a purpose in mind, but it is vital that he should preach Scripture, and be seen to be preaching Scripture. We need to be confronted with the mind of God, not the mind of man. We are to preach the word, Scripture, as Paul tells us:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word (2 Tim. 3:16 – 4:2).

Not theology. Not a subject. Not a doctrine. Not a system. The word. ‘Preach the word’. And we know what the apostle meant by ‘the word’. He was speaking of the entire Scriptures.

In particular, the gospel. Above all, Christ. As he told the Romans:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written: ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ (Rom. 1:14-17).³

Do not miss Paul’s stated eagerness to preach the gospel to believers as well as unbelievers. This he made clear right at the start of his letter to the Romans. And then, having got close to the end of his treatise, the apostle declared:

I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel (Rom. 15:19-20).

When he was at Corinth:

Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus (Acts 18:5).

As he told the Ephesian elders:

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of

³ And we have: “‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’”. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ’ (Rom. 10:13-17). There is a manuscript variant: ‘the word (*rēmatos*) of Christ’, or ‘the word (*rēmatos*) of God’. I think the former, and take it to mean Scripture, preached at the command of God, and centring on Christ himself.

faith in our Lord Jesus Christ... I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God... I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom... I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:18-27).

Notice the interchangeability of ‘declaring... profitable... testifying... repentance toward God and... faith in our Lord Jesus Christ... the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God... proclaiming the kingdom... declaring... the whole counsel of God’. Putting it in a nutshell, the apostle preached the gospel:

Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (1 Cor. 1:17).

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

And this was just as Christ commanded:

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation (Mark. 16:15).

In all this, Paul preached Christ:

We preach Christ crucified... And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:1-2).

What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 4:5).

I say it again: we should not preach a subject, a theory, a doctrine, a system, a theology. We must preach the word, the entire body of Scripture. If we do, we are bound to preach Christ, as he himself demonstrated in his conversation with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus:

Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Christ] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

Do not the miss how Christ began with Moses and the prophets; that is, the Scriptures as they then were. Here is our pattern.

So, should a preacher have only one string to his bow? If that string is Scripture, and that man is looking to preach Christ from Scripture, yes. But if that string is a theology or a system or whatever, no. We must preach Christ. For in preaching Christ, we preach all, because Christ is all (Col. 3:11). In preaching Christ as he is set forth in Scripture, we preach him in all his scriptural balance. And that, and that alone, is saving for sinners, and edifying to saints. Above all, it is in this way that God is glorified.

C.H.Spurgeon, addressing his students, and, incidentally, all preachers who will listen to him:

Of all I would wish to say this is the sum; my brethren, preach CHRIST, always and evermore. He is the whole gospel. His person, offices, and work must be our one great, all-comprehending theme. The world needs still to be told of its Saviour, and of the way to reach him. Justification by faith should be far more than it is the daily testimony of Protestant pulpits; and if with this master-truth there should be more generally associated the other great doctrines of grace, the better for our churches and our age. If with the zeal of Methodists we can preach the doctrine of Puritans a great future is before us. The fire of Wesley, and the fuel of Whitfield, will cause a burning which shall set the forests of error on fire, and warm the very soul of this cold earth. We are not called to proclaim philosophy and metaphysics, but the simple gospel. Man's fall, his need of a new birth, forgiveness through an atonement, and salvation as the result of faith, these are our battle-axe and weapons of war. We have enough to do to learn and teach these great truths, and accused be that learning which shall divert us from our mission, or that wilful ignorance which shall cripple us in its pursuit. More and more am I jealous lest any views upon prophecy, church government, politics, or even systematic

theology, should withdraw one of us from glorying in the cross of Christ. Salvation is a theme for which I would fain enlist every holy tongue. I am greedy after witnesses for the glorious gospel of the blessed God. O that Christ crucified were the universal burden of men of God. Your guess at the number of the beast, your Napoleonic speculations, your conjectures concerning a personal Antichrist – forgive me, I count them but mere bones for dogs, while men are dying, and hell is filling, it seems to me the veriest drivel to be muttering about an Armageddon at Sebastopol or Sadowa or Sedan,⁴ and peeping between the folded leaves of destiny to discover the fate of Germany. Blessed are they who read and hear the words of the prophecy of the Revelation, but the like blessing has evidently not fallen on those who pretend to expound it; for generation after generation of them have been proved to be in error by the mere lapse of time, and the present race will follow to the same inglorious sepulchre. I would sooner pluck one single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit is a more glorious achievement than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy as Doctor Sufficientissimus; to have faithfully unveiled the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will be in the final judgment accounted worthier service than to have solved the problems of the religious Sphinx, or to have cut the Gordian knot of apocalyptic difficulty. Blessed is that ministry of which CHRIST IS ALL.

Others must speak for themselves, but if I have to have an epitaph, I would settle for this, hoping that it might be true: ‘Here lies a man whose life was spent proclaiming Christ’.

As Charles Wesley put it:

*O that my Jesus' heavenly charms
Might every bosom move!
Fly, sinners, fly into those arms
Of everlasting love.*

*Him I shall constantly proclaim,
Though earth and hell oppose;*

⁴ 19th century references. In the early 20th century it would have been the Somme and Passchendaele. In the 50s it was Russia and Nasser. In the 70s and 80s it was the Common Market. And so on.

*Bold to confess his glorious name
Before a world of foes.⁵*

*His only righteousness I show,
His saving grace proclaim;
'Tis all my business here below
To cry: 'Behold the Lamb!'*

*Happy, if with my latest breath
I may but gasp his name,
Preach him to all and cry in death:
'Behold, behold the Lamb!'*

And, finally, if may slightly adapt the words of Paul, I hope I can say at the end that 'I have fulfilled [my] ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I [have satisfied] my ambition to preach the gospel' (Rom. 15:19-20).

⁵ In this verse, I have changed Wesley's second person into the third person.