

PC Preaching?

Do We Need More – or Less – of It?

PC? Politically correct; that is, designed not to offend, intended to meet local taboos, calculated not to upset anyone.

Do we need preaching that is PC in this sense? Do we need *more* of it? that is, do we need more preaching that is Nice, Genteel, Sedate, Accurate but Non-Offensive, Pleasant, Non-Threatening?

I say we do not! I say we don't need any of it!

Let me start again.

PC preaching; that is, Powerful, Penetrating, Pointed, Personal, Confronting, Challenging, Convincing, Conscience-Pricking, Convicting, Converting preaching. Do we need such preaching?

I say we do!

Consider some biblical preachers.

Take the prophets.

Take the account of Nathan addressing David over his sin with Bathsheba; he was PC, in this right sense (2 Sam. 12:7-10).

Take Isaiah. Look how he opened his ministry:

Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: 'I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand'. Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him (Isa. 1:2-4).

Having started in this way, Isaiah carried on in the same vein

And Isaiah is typical of all the prophets – all of them, up to and including Malachi.

John the Baptist was no exception. Hear how he addressed Israel:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near... You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves: ‘We have Abraham as our father’. I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:2,7-12).

Now consider the apostles.

Take Peter:

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross (Acts 2:22-23).

When challenged about the healing of the man at the gate of the temple, Peter’s answer was, in the right sense, PC:

Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no

other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:8-10,12).

And when Peter and John were told not to speak of Christ again, they did not mince their words:

Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).

The apostles preaching was obviously PC in the right sense since the high priest complained: 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name... Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood' (Acts 5:28). By way of response, the apostles could not have more PC in the right sense:

We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him (Acts 5:29-32).

Take Paul addressing the religious intellectuals at Athens:

People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious [that is, very superstitious].¹ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you... God... now... commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:22-23,30-31).

And listen to the apostle's closing words to the Jews in Rome:

The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: 'Go to this people and say:

¹ See my *To Confront or Not to Confront?: Addresses to Unbelievers*.

“You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them”’. Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen! (Acts 28:25-28).

This is PC preaching in the right sense!

Let me take it a little further. PC preaching like this – is this not preaching *at* people? So it is! So it ought to be! It goes without saying that treating the pulpit as a coward’s castle, settling old scores, dealing with issues that should be dealt with personally, 6 feet above and 50 feet beyond criticism, is reprehensible. Nevertheless, our preaching must be personal, pointed, convicting; in other words, PC in the right sense. All the above were examples of it.

And what about the greatest example – the most PC, in the right sense, of them all – the Lord Jesus Christ? Where shall I start? Where shall I end? Consider this:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you (Matt. 11:21-24).

And this:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single

convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

Woe to you, blind guides! You say: 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath'. You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say: 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath'. You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?...

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say: 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets'. So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt. 23:13-39).

Of course, many do not like this sort of preaching. It is not PC; that is, politically correct. It is nothing new. In the nineteenth-century, Lord Melbourne put it in his dry way: ‘Things are coming to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade private life’. In other words, spiritual life, especially preaching (or, as he put it, ‘religion’) must remain detached, impersonal, decorous, polite; it must be PC (in the wrong sense) – certainly *not* PC (in the right sense).

If he had lived a little longer, Melbourne would not have thought much of C.H.Spurgeon, would he? Oh no! Spurgeon was clear on the issue:

And now, says one: ‘Sir, are there any here that you have been preaching *at*?’ Yes, I like to preach *at* people. I do not believe it is of any avail to preach *to* people; preach right *into* them and right *at* them.²

PC preaching in the right sense!

Again, as he concluded a very pointed sermon on August 9th, 1857, Spurgeon mused aloud: ‘Now, I do not know whether I have been personal to anybody this morning’. Was he apologising for it? Certainly not! ‘I sincerely hope I have’, he declared. He went on:

I meant to be. I know there are a great many characters in the world that must have a cap made exactly to fit them, or else they will never wear it, and I have tried as near as I could to do it. If you will not say: ‘How well that applied to my neighbour’, but just for once say: ‘How well it applied to me’, I shall hope that there will be some good follow from this exhortation; and though the antinomian may turn away, and say: ‘Ah! it was only a legal sermon’, my love to that precious antinomian. I do not care about his opinion. My Saviour preached like that, and I shall do the same. I believe it is right that Christians should be told what they should do.³

PC preaching in the right sense!

² C.H.Spurgeon sermon 128.

³ Spurgeon sermon 145.

A few weeks later, he took the same line:

Now... by God's help, I shall labour to be personal... I ask... every... person that he will please understand that I am preaching *to him*, and *at him*; and if there be anything that is personal and pertinent to his own case, I beseech him, as for life and death, to let it have its full weight with him, and not begin to think of his neighbour, to whom, perhaps, it may be even more pertinent, but whose business certainly does not concern him.⁴

PC preaching in the right sense!

J.A.James contrasted what he called 'the blameless commonplace and accurate insipidity of many modern [that is, mid-19th century] discourses' – that is, PC in the wrong sense – to the addresses of preachers in the past:

For pregnancy of thought, for knowledge of the word of God, for raciness of style, for evangelical warmth, for [knowledge of the] anatomy of the human heart, for closeness of application, and especially for intensity of feeling, where shall we find their equals? They preached *to* their congregations, and not merely *before* them;⁵ they felt that the objects of their addresses were immortal souls in danger of being lost, and [they] knew their business in the pulpit was to save these souls from perdition. They preached as if they expected there and then to achieve the great work of conversion;⁶ and felt as if the eternal destinies of their

⁴ Spurgeon sermon 165, emphasis his. See also his 'One More Cast of the Net' (Spurgeon sermon 1931).

⁵ What an important point! *To* not *before*. I would broaden this to include *to* not *for*. How often a preacher is regarded as 'one who will preach *for* us today'. That tells us a great deal. I have been prepared to reply to an invitation to preach *for* a people to say that while I do not preach *for* men, I am willing to preach *to* them. But, in my experience, too often men would prefer a preacher who preaches *before* or *for* them not *to* them. As for preaching *at* them, words fail!

⁶ A man complained that he saw no conversions. Spurgeon retorted: 'You don't expect conversions every time you preach, do you?' 'No! Of course not', came the reply. 'There's your trouble', said Spurgeon (or words to that effect). See Lewis A.Drummond: *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers...*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1992, pp411-

hearers were suspended on the name in which they discharged their duties, and as if they were to ascend the next moment after they had finished their sermons to give an account of them at the bar of God... The power [their sermons] exhibit, their heart-searching appeals in which they abound, are the very things now wanting. There may be, and should be, more... logical arrangement... precision... vigorous clear argument, but still, combined with this, there should also be the pointed interrogation,⁷ the pungent appeal, the bold apostrophe [that is, direct address], the gush of feeling, the forcible expostulation [that is, earnest remonstrance, protest], and the tender invitation... Especially should there be the direct personal address... Our hearers must be made to feel that they are not merely listening to the discussion of a subject, but to an appeal to themselves. Their attention must be kept up, and a close connection between them and the preacher maintained by the frequent introduction of the pronoun 'you',⁸ so that each may realise the thought that the discourse is actually addressed to him. Many preachers do not come near enough to their congregation.⁹

And, of course, there is one topic which is the most PC, in the right sense, of the lot! rather, it is a person. It is not considered at all PC (politically correct) today to insist on the uniqueness of Christ, and to insist that it is essential to know him as Saviour and Lord if one is to be saved. Yet Scripture could not be more explicit. When Christ challenged his disciples as to whether or not they would leave him, Peter replied for them all:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God (John 6:68-69).

412, for this, and for the occasion when Spurgeon had the point turned back upon himself.

⁷ The use of questions is vital. See my *Preaching Today: Food for Action as well as Thought*.

⁸ Note the emphasis on 'you' – vital, PC in the right sense but certainly not politically correct. Note also James' 'pointed interrogation'.

⁹ John Angell James: *An Earnest Ministry the Want of the Times*, Hamilton, Adams & Co., London, 1848, pp126-128.

Christ later advanced on that confession, making his exclusive and essential role even more explicit:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

The disciples did not fail to get the point. As Peter unequivocally declared to the Jewish bigwigs:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

To proclaim this today will become increasingly non-PC (non politically-correct), but it is definitely PC (in the right sense) to preach Christ in this way; that is, to preach him pointedly, probingly, personally and with conviction, confronting sinners with the gospel – confronting them with Christ the only Redeemer – that they might be convicted and converted.

More PC preaching? In the biblical sense, we can't get enough of it!