

The Marshmallow Gospel

I have just moved home, and last Lord's day I attended the morning service at the (fairly) local evangelical church. Alas, the service fully lived-down to my expectations. I say 'lived-down' and 'expectations', because I am convinced that the evangelical world is in a spiral (and spiritual) decline, and I have written and spoken about it.¹ Sad to record, I met it again last Lord's day!

So strongly do I feel about my (to put it mildly) disquieting experience, I want to set out – very briefly – my impression of what I heard. I do so in hope of raising some sort of protest against what is going on. I know my experience is not unique, but I cannot let it go unchallenged. Furthermore, when this article and its audio are live, I will forward the links to the man who conducted the service, and offer to meet him to discuss it. While it is grievous that I have to make this critical review, and contemplate this confrontation, nevertheless I have a responsibility to discharge; I cannot bury my head in the sand. I know we need to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and I know I need the weeping attitude of Jeremiah and Paul (Jer. 23:9; Acts 20:31; Phil. 3:18), and, above all, God in Christ (Matt. 23:37; Rom. 10:21), but the truth must be spoken.

While I do not want to fault a man for a word, and I acknowledge that not every discourse can contain the entire gospel, there must be an irreducible minimum. And it is not only the negative – the omissions – that I complain of; several of the man's positive assertions were seriously wrong.

For a start, he treated everyone of us – me, in particular, even though I was a perfect stranger to him – as a believer. He did not

¹ See, for instance, my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly; Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder; Deceit in Death: Christendom in the Raw: 'Christian' Last Rites for Unbelievers; 'Why Are You Following Christ?'; 'A Vital Lesson For Today'; 'Turn or Turn Up?'; 'The "O" Word'*.

deem it necessary to offer even a hint of the unbeliever's need to be saved, he gave no warning to the ungodly, nor any indication of how a sinner can be saved. Indeed, I cannot recall that words such as 'sinner', 'unconverted' or 'judgment' were used.

I was told repeatedly that I was Jesus to this generation.

I was told that in the parable of the good Samaritan and 'love your neighbour' (Gal. 5:14) we have the gospel in a nutshell, the gospel's essence; 'loving my neighbour' is the gospel.

I was given the decided impression that the provision of food for the hungry, accommodation for the homeless in the community, the running of coffee mornings – that this is the work of the gospel.

I was assured that there is no anger in God; I need have no fear of it.

'Love... love... love...' is the key, was the repeated theme.

The man constantly talked of 'Jesus... Jesus... Jesus'. Never once, that I recall, did he speak of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He made no mention of the spiritual deadness of the sinner, the wrath of God upon the unbeliever, the necessity of regeneration, the conviction of sin, conversion, the redeeming work of Christ – his blood and righteousness – the need for repentance and saving faith, and such like. We were not given a hint of a whisper of a suggestion that the Bible speaks in the stark terms of, for instance, Romans 1:18 – 3:20, Ephesians 2:1-3 and Hebrews 9:27. Indeed, we were presented with a God more akin to Father Christmas.

The real Christ – the scriptural Christ – the Christ of Matthew 3:11-12; 11:20-24; 23:1-39 – as the merest selection from the Gospels – was not mentioned. Judging by this man's discourse, such a Christ does not exist. Anyone reading the Gospels for the first time, after hearing the discourse in question, would surely find just as William Griffin said of C.S.Lewis's experience on reading the Gospels:

Lewis had been led to expect a lovable figure in the person of Jesus; instead, he met a stern and unbending one.²

I can hear the objection: ‘Isn’t God a God of love? What of John 3:16-17?’ Of course. As Christ told us:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16-17).

But look how Christ went on:

Whoever believes in [Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s only begotten Son... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him (John 3:18,36).

Indeed, John 3:16-17 plainly teaches that unbelievers will perish. There was no mention of any suggestion of it, however, in the discourse last Lord’s day.

I was repeatedly told that God’s love is unconditional. Really? Has the man never read the verses just quoted? Don’t they contain a condition? And what about:

No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying: ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:3,5-7).

Unless you are converted and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3).

Unless you repent, you too will all perish... Unless you repent, you too will all perish (Luke 13:3,5).

Aren’t they conditions?

² William Griffin: *C.S.Lewis: The Authentic Voice*, Lion, Tring, 1988, p172.

The man's text for his discourse was Psalm 145, which he read, giving running thoughts on the verses. However, he gave us no sense of the context; he made no attempt to argue the text; he simply delivered a series of sentimental thoughts on the psalm. And even then, he suddenly stopped at verse 18, left the passage, saying nothing at all about – not even reading – the closing verses, especially:

The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy (Ps.145:20).

Why? Why did the man not deal with this solemn statement?

Such a cavalier attitude displays a gross abuse of Scripture, a prostitution of the text, and it carries a heavy price tag.³

Although I am not a prophet, my spirit is moved to repeat God's words to Judah through Jeremiah:

'I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say: "I had a dream! I had a dream!" How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?' declares the LORD. 'Is not my word like fire?', declares the LORD, 'and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?' (Jer. 23:25-29).

Last Lord's day, I did not receive grain, I did not sit under a ministry of fire and hammer. Rather, I was served a sickly dish of froth, syrup and candy floss. It was social work smothered with the sauce 'Jesus... Jesus... Jesus'.

As I say, I am not a prophet; nor am I an apostle. I do not have an apostle's authority. But my spirit within me cries out, echoing Paul's words to the Galatians:

³ See my 'Hatpegs or Driving Seat?'

I am astonished that you are so quickly [remember, Galatians is the first letter written – DG] deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be under God’s curse! (Gal. 1:6-9).

Here in the UK, I am bound to add, I am astonished to see how widely evangelicals are deserting the scriptural gospel for that which is no gospel at all, and doing so despite our glorious spiritual heritage.

As the psalmist prayed:

May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him. May you blow them away like smoke – as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God. But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful (Ps. 68:1-3).

Today, I am afraid, we need to pray that we might be delivered from our friends!

What would Paul have thought of such a performance? We know his settled determination:

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

The so-called gospel with no sense of sin, no recognition of the wrath of God, no placarding (Gal. 3:1) of the finished work of Christ, no mention of – let alone emphasis on – the necessity of regeneration, conviction and conversion, no attempt to persuade sinners to repent and trust Christ at once, is, at best, a marshmallow gospel. It is, in fact, no gospel at all!

I cannot close without repeating God’s warning to us all:

It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Then we have God's promise of salvation to all:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

So, as Isaiah declares:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon (Isa. 55:6-7).

Finally, let me address the preacher I heard last Lord's day – and with him, all who stand to preach the gospel (not excluding myself):

You know that we who teach will be judged more strictly (Jas. 3:1).

We know that Israel and Judah were plagued with false prophets. But we also know that the churches will have to face false teachers (2 Pet. 3:1). Consequently, God's word to Ezekiel in this context is surely relevant to us, and we would do well to heed it. Listen to one of the marks of the false prophet or teacher:

They lead my people astray, saying: 'Peace', when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash...

What did Ezekiel (and we, therefore), have to do about it:

Therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you: 'Where is the whitewash you covered it with?'

Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury. I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the LORD. So I will pour out my wrath against the wall and against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you: 'The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it, those prophets of

Israel who prophesied to Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her when there was no peace, declares the Sovereign LORD' (Ezek. 13:10-16; see the entire chapter).

To close, a word to all of us who speak for Christ: We need constantly to bear in mind the solemn warning God issued to Ezekiel:

Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not heed the warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had heeded the warning, he would have saved himself. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood'.

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked: 'You wicked person, you will surely die', and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked person will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from his way and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, though you yourself will be saved' (Ezek. 33:1-9; see Ezek. 33:1-20).

Yes, the sinner is accountable for his sin. But my point in this article is to underline yet again the heavy responsibility borne by every believer who speaks for Christ. I leave the man I heard last Lord's day to face this. I have to. We all do. There is no escaping it.