

The Root Issue

We have reached the point where I have argued that preaching the biblical gospel in the biblical way is incompatible with the modern re-organisation of the *ekklēsia* to attract pagans. In this chapter, I want to get to the root of the matter.

The gospel – especially the person and work of Christ – is, at best, foolish to the natural man. I have already quoted these words:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing... We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:18,23).

For, as Paul went on to say, the gospel is foolish to the unbeliever because he cannot abide it, nor can he understand it:

The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

Indeed, the gospel is not merely foolishness to the unconverted man; Christ himself – Christ, above all – is an offence to him.¹ Simeon prophesied of it when holding the child Jesus in the temple:

This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed... so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed (Luke 2:34-35).

Peter spoke of it:

For those who do not believe, [Christ himself is] ‘the stone that the builders rejected...’ and ‘a stone of stumbling, and a

¹ Religion, Churchianity, Christendom, ‘spirituality’ and such like, can be acceptable to the natural man; Christ, never!

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rock of offence'. They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do (1 Pet. 2:7-8).

The unregenerate cannot – will not – submit to the word of God, will not yield to Christ, will not obey the gospel. Indeed, the natural man not only resents the gospel; he hates both it and the God whose gospel it is:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh... For to set the mind on the flesh is death... For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law;² indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:5-8).

Unbelievers are spiritually blind, ignorant in mind, heart and will, and, consequently, cut off from God. They are spiritually dead:

You [believers] were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

This is the present state of all natural men. Moreover, they are responsible, accountable for it:

This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil (John 3:19).

[They] suppress the truth... [Consequently,] they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools (Rom. 1:18-22).

² God's law is defined by the context. Here it means the word of God, especially the law of the new covenant, the gospel, God's command in the gospel, the law of Christ.

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The Gentiles [walk – that is, live] in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity (Eph. 4:17-19).

[They are] alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds (Col. 1:21).

No wonder, then, that unbelievers find the gospel an offence. An offence, please note! Not merely strange, an oddity, but an offence, a stumbling block. The natural man hates both it and the one who preaches it. Above all, he hates Christ. Christ could not have made the position clearer:

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake (Matt. 10:16-22).

They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake (Matt. 24:9).

The world...³ hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil (John 7:7).

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours' (John 15:18-20).

³ I have omitted the words 'cannot hate you, but it' because the 'you' refers to Christ's brothers and sisters who were goading him at the time. The world always loves its own (John 15:19).

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As Christ prayed:

I have given them [my disciples] your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18).

Moreover, the natural man's rebellion against Christ and the gospel is an important aspect of God's judgment, a judgment which is active even now; it is not reserved for the final day. As Christ said:

For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind (John 9:13).

Earlier, John had set out the issue:

Whoever believes in [Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:18-19,36).

Christ, by and in his gospel, therefore, produces this judgment. And judgment means division. Yes, Christ, by his Spirit awakens his elect, but he also hardens and condemns the reprobate by that same gospel. It is inevitable. As Paul declared:

Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so

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many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-17).

This note is signally absent in modern evangelicalism. There is nothing surprising about this. How can modern evangelicals work on these biblical principles, and preach the gospel biblically, if they are determined, by fleshly inducements, to attract and hold unbelievers in long-term church attendance? How can pagans find the *ekklēsia* and the gospel even tolerable, let alone attractive?

Christ well knew this, of course. So, what did he command his disciples? Did he give them leave to come up with ways to get round the dilemma?

Christ was categorical. As we have seen, he said that the gospel (especially Christ himself) will be hated by the natural man, and the gospel (especially Christ himself) will always be divisive. But the way of evangelism, he declared, is by preaching that divisive gospel! This is what he himself did.⁴ A dividing, separating ministry is essential. So said Christ. He left us in no doubt about it. Take his commission to the twelve; note what he told them to expect:

Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.

Such was Christ's word to the twelve. No thought of compromise or watering down the gospel message in order to make people feel comfortable and willing to come again and again, and listen to preaching. What did the twelve do?

So they went out and proclaimed [as a herald] that people should repent (Mark 6:10-12).

A call – demand – for repentance is a sure mark of a dividing, separating ministry. The last thing the natural man

⁴ See, for instance, Matt. 11:21-24. I will return to this passage.

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wants to be told is that, in his sin, he is going completely in the wrong direction, and that he must turn around, admitting his guilt to God. Of course the natural man resents such a demand, and he will show it. But Christ could not have been more explicit:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:34-39).

Do you get that impression in most evangelical churches today? Nothing like it! Rather, there is a virtual silence on it. It is as though the Lord never said what he did in Matthew 10:34-39, nor that he preached like this:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you (Matt. 11:21-24).

As I have noted, I can well understand the reasoning behind today's silence among many modern evangelicals. It is the crux of my book. The modern evangelistic method is built on the very opposite principle of confrontation, division and separation; namely, inclusivism.⁵ In order to attract – and

⁵ See Appendix 2 for a sermon which illustrates this.

keep attracting – unbelievers into church attendance, not only do many modern preachers and their churches accommodate the unbeliever’s aspirations, they actually arouse them! The last thing they want is for their preachers to engage in a confrontational, dividing, separating ministry. Yet this is the very thing Christ requires! It is a matter of obedience!

This, of course, at once highlights a consequence of disobedience to Christ. Since the modern method relies heavily upon attracting and holding unbelievers in prolonged church attendance, surely the need for a distinguishing ministry in the ambience of the church, not least in its preaching, is more vital than ever! And yet the spirit of the day is the very opposite! A vicious circle indeed: inclusivism is the basic principle, and everything is done to enforce it. The virtual absence of a distinguishing, dividing, confrontational ministry encourages the appalling inclusivism we see all around us, and which is widely aimed for, and welcomed.

Inclusivism! That is, believers and unbelievers all mixed together in the life of the church, with unbelievers made to feel at home with believers, engaged in what is supposed to be spiritual life in the *ekklēsia*. No wonder we are in such a mess.

Immense damage is caused when preachers and churches are doing so much which, in effect, kids unbelievers that we are basically all the same. I have heard evangelicals say that both believers and unbelievers are all God’s children, when they are not (John 8:31-47; 1 John 3:10; 5:19). Thinking they are is ruinous to the gospel. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that the biblical doctrine of conversion is masked, and worse; we should not be surprised when – not if – conversion dwindles, becoming virtually meaningless, just a social rite of passage. I see it on the near horizon. Do you never hear something like: ‘She comes to church regularly’? How about: ‘She has been converted’?

So, I ask again, in light of such shenanigans, why would modern evangelical churches want to stress the wrath of God and impending judgment – which, as we have seen is precisely what the apostles did when addressing the unconverted? Even though the doctrines of the wrath of God⁶ and the last judgment are written large in Scripture,⁷ to bring them into preaching with any prominence at all – certainly to give them scriptural prominence – would, in the eyes of the modern evangelical, be to make a mammoth mistake: to preach for the conviction of sin, and conversion to Christ, and do so in biblical terms, just does not fit with the evangelical approach to the gospel and evangelism today. Fit in with it? The clash, the discord, produced by such a confrontational preacher would strike the congregation dumbstruck, then angry! In contrast to this, what the modern evangelical wants to do – what unbelievers like (if they like anything about preaching except that it should be short and major on ‘me’, (2 Tim. 3:2)) – is to talk about meeting ‘issues’, what the unbeliever sees as his needs – his loneliness, dissatisfaction, financial difficulties, lack of purpose, lack of significance, lack of fulfilment, sadness, emptiness, low self-esteem (or, in some cases, his pride), self-centeredness, and so on. If the preacher does approach his hearers on the other, negative, flank – with talk of self-centeredness, pride, boasting – he does so in a chatty, non-confrontational way.⁸

But, whichever line is taken, these are not the real concerns; they are but the symptoms of a deep-seated, intractable

⁶ See, from the New Testament, John 3:36; Rom. 1:18; 2:5; 5:9; 9:22; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rev. 6:16-17; 15:7; 19:15, for instance.

⁷ See, from the New Testament, Matt. 25:31-46; John 12:48; Acts 1:9-11; 10:42; 17:30-31; Rom. 2:4-11; 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 2 Thess. 1:5-9; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 9:27; 10:26-31; Rev. 20:11-15, for instance.

⁸ See my note below concerning Simon Rowell’s sermon. See also Appendix 2.

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plight – the natural man’s total depravity,⁹ his sin. Sins are one thing; sin is the root of it.¹⁰ The sinner is in rebellion against God. The sinner’s great need is not to have his passage through this life smoothed, for him to be made comfortable, made to feel good about himself, but for him to be regenerated, brought to conviction of sin, brought to repentance and faith, brought to bow the knee to the Lord Christ, and to live for and unto him in obedience, and thus be prepared for eternity. What modern evangelicals dare not do – openly, and from the word ‘go’, with constant reinforcement – is to insist that without regeneration followed by conviction and conversion, nothing good can be done, that there is no acceptance with God. The modern approach, if consistent with itself, just will not allow it, cannot allow it. Yet regeneration leading to conversion is *the* fundamental need of fallen man.

This modern way of concentrating on perceived symptoms, not the cause, is a disaster. In addition, it is cruel.

Let me illustrate from the world of medicine.

When a physician faces a patient, what is his first task? Surely his number-one priority must be to diagnose the patient’s plight, his condition – not just think about symptoms. Of course, the physician uses the patient’s symptoms, but he does so in order to get to the root of the problem; it is the disease, the cause of the disease, and not merely the symptoms, which must concern him. Symptoms, yes, but his main task, his overriding priority must be to deal with the cause. And it is this that the patient must be made fully aware of. If the physician fails to do this, he is criminal. The patient may well be seeking relief from his symptoms, he may not like to hear unpalatable truth, but the physician

⁹ Not that the sinner is as bad as he might be, but that, since Adam’s fall, since that original sin, and, as a result of it, every one of us has been born enslaved to sin and helpless to redeem himself.

¹⁰ I will explore this further. See below.

knows he must drive to the root, and not deal merely with the superficial.¹¹

And this is where modern evangelicalism with its evangelistic efforts so signally fails; this is precisely where it jumps the rails. The medical principle applies in the spiritual realm – even more so. John Brencher:

As [Lloyd-Jones] said, medicine is ‘an applied science’ concerned with ‘the treatment and cure of disease’, and so is ‘the Christian faith and the Christian message’ which is the only¹² ‘remedy for the curse of sin’. Since¹³ the wrath of God rests on all men and women outside of Christ, and since¹⁴ people are to be called to face the condemnation of God¹⁵ on the day of judgment, an exact diagnosis is necessary.¹⁶

Today’s evangelicals are increasingly demonstrating that they are very poor physicians of the soul – concentrating, at best, on symptoms, and failing to go for the cause of the sinner’s plight. Indeed, they even get the symptoms wrong! The wrong diagnosis – the sinner’s desire for self-esteem, self-fulfilment, to find the missing piece of the jigsaw (Jesus), to have Jesus as a friend (or, more like, a buddy), and all the rest – leads to the wrong prescription for the cure.

Sinners are not primarily to be pitied for their symptoms; they are to be rescued from God’s impending punishment (and his present wrath) for sin, especially for their lack of

¹¹ As is well known, Lloyd-Jones left medicine for the ministry because he knew that men’s hearts needed to be changed, and only Christ in the gospel can do that.

¹² Original had ‘a’.

¹³ Original had ‘If’.

¹⁴ Original had ‘if’.

¹⁵ Original had ‘give account of themselves to God’.

¹⁶ John Brencher: *Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) and Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism*, Paternoster Publishing, Carlisle, 2002, pp29-30, quoting from D.M.Lloyd-Jones: *The Approach to Truth: Scientific and Religious*, pp-3-4.

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trust in Christ (John 3:18-19,36; 16:8-9). They need to pass from death to life:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

Judgment, the wrath of God (now and at the last day) for the sinner and his sin – this is the issue.

It is sin – not merely sins, and, above all, not the sinner's perceived wants – which is the root of the sinner's problem. And the only way a sinner can be rid of his sin and his sins is through repentance and saving trust in Christ. And for the sinner to be able to repent and believe savingly, he must be regenerated. We must be clear in our thinking on all this before we can spell it out to the unconverted. But spell it out we must!

To preach the gospel, therefore, is, arguing from Scripture, to go for the root, addressing unbelievers as they really are, exposing and dealing with their plight; that is, their depraved, helpless, hopeless state as condemned sinners under the wrath of God as spiritually dead sinners, polluted, idolatrous sinners, locked in rebellious slavery.

Paul showed us the way. In the plainest terms he set out what he understood by the gospel, the gospel he was determined to preach so that sinners might hear and be saved. He began his letter to the Romans thus:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1-6).

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So, as he told his readers:

I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome (Rom. 1:15).

But why? He left us in no doubt:

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. 1:16-17).

Having set the scene, what was it that Paul preached, always preached, and what he wanted so eagerly to preach at Rome? Would he deliver a bright and breezy, cheerful, upbeat discourse, full of comfort and bonhomie? How would he open? Would he set his hearers (readers) at ease by cracking a joke or telling them an amusing story? And how would he go on? Listen to him:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven...

What? 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...'? Is that the way to open? Really? Surely, we can put that on the backburner, can't we? Certainly not – if we want to walk in the path marked out by the apostles.

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

There is a group of people who accept the wrath of God in theory, but they deny it in practice. 'Oh, yes', they say, 'we believe in the wrath of God, but you have to be careful. You don't put that first'. So, in the interests of evangelism, in the interests of attracting people, they deliberately do not start, as Paul does, with the wrath of God [Rom. 1:18]... [But] Paul did not stop to ask: 'Will the Romans like this doctrine?'¹⁷

Quite right! According to Paul, this is the place to start:

¹⁷ See Iain H.Murray: *Lloyd-Jones: Messenger of Grace*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2008, p218.

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The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-32).

Read again the extract from 1 Thessalonians 1. Paul always sang from the same song sheet.

This, then, is the great dilemma for evangelicals. The principles of modern church evangelism and the biblical

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gospel are incompatible. Sadly, the former has triumphed over the latter in many evangelical churches today.

How does this show?