

Felt-Need Preaching And A Feel Good Message

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I was sitting in my chair listening to a missionary explain why he adopted the methodology of felt-need preaching. He said that you could not preach the gospel to people today because you first had to touch their needs with felt-need preaching. The one thing you didn't want to do was to turn people off to the gospel by mentioning sin or repentance so you first much touch their needs with a feel good message. He said that was the best way to draw a crowd. He made a real good case for it and had adopted it as his way of ministry and many pastors here in America have adopted that kind of methodology and they've filled their churches with thousands of individuals who love to hear their message on Sunday morning.

John the Baptist did felt-need preaching. Listen to his words found in the gospel of Matthew. "O, generation of nice people, God loves you. He knows your hurts. Just accept Jesus and he will make it better." Isn't that what he said? That's what we think he said. Actually he said this, he said unto them, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance." John the Baptist told King Herod, "You're not so bad. You just need some improvement. Accept this Jesus and he will help you have a better life. He'll help you rule your kingdom better." Actually, John the Baptist rebuked the sin in Herod's life by saying, "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife." Old King Herod didn't like that kind of felt-need preaching because it made him feel his need of eliminating John the Baptist so he cut off his head.

Jesus Christ preached a feel good message as well. Listen to his words, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?" Jesus' audience ended up being the ones who crucified him because they didn't like his feel good message. Even the Apostle Paul preached a feel good message. Listen to his words, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness." Paul's message got him arrested and his head cut off. But today's preacher doesn't want to lose his audience, much less his head so he gives them what they want and touches on their needs and gives them a gospel to serve their needs. Everybody's doing it and growing huge churches with it, so why not jump aboard and become a popular preacher too?

My message this afternoon is entitled “Felt-Need Preaching in a Feel Good Message.” Listen friends, when I was in New England conducting research on the Second Great Awakening, I took some time to sit in the old stained glass chapel at Yale College. I spent the afternoon there just reflecting on what kind of preaching had taken place there back in 1795 when the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, Timothy Dwight, became President of Yale from the year 1795 to 1817. The campus was gripped with revival under the powerful preaching of Timothy Dwight. In fact, four distinct revivals took place at Yale during that time period and many students entire lives were so radically altered that they went out and saturated the country with their powerful pulpit ministries.

But how did they preach? Did they use felt-need preaching and a feel good message back then? Allow me to read you a section from a manuscript written by Heman Humphrey. He was the President of Amherst College and Humphrey was an eye witness to the revival of religion that took place in New England during the Second Great Awakening. He was good friends with Asahel Nettleton and during his tenure as President of Amherst, of the 765 graduates, over 400 entered the gospel ministry. Allow Heman Humphrey to explain to us here today what the preachers in his day preached.

Now, before I begin reading his words, I want to emphasize that the goal of preachers back then was different from the vast majority today. Back in the 18th century, pastors were not obsessed with growing a large church campus and they were not consumed with nickels and noses like pastors are today. Back then, they preached for one result and one result only, the salvation of a soul. Today, pastors read and study the new hot book on church growth, back then pastors just read their Bible.

I want to read you a passage from my biography on Asahel Nettleton in which Heman Humphrey describes the preachers in his time. Listen carefully to his striking words from his personal observation of preachers back then.

“Their preaching was not in man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and with power. It was eminently scriptural. The ministers of that day read and studied the Bible more than all other books. They had received it from their Master as their only commission, and in virtue of it, as ambassadors for Christ, they besought sinners in his stead to be reconciled to God. It was surprising to notice with what facility they would quote chapter and verse from all parts of both Testaments, without turning over a single leaf. Indeed, it sometimes seemed to me as if they knew all the Bible by heart; and it is no disparagement to say, that they did know much more of it than most preachers do now. They had a great deal more of it in their sermons. Almost all their illustrations, as well as their proofs, were drawn from its rich and inexhaustible treasures. 'Thus saith the Lord,' was enough for them, let who would criticize, cavil, or blaspheme. They did not shun, either from fear or favor, to declare all the counsel of God, as they understood it, whether men would hear, or whether they would forbear. They did not wreath the sword around with flowers, but left the two edges bare and sharp, to cut where they would -

the deeper the better; and they applied no emollients to heal the hurt slightly.

“Oh how we smarted under it. I remember it well in my own case, and how my heart rebelled against some of the doctrines which my Bible and my conscience told me were true, till, as I hope, I was brought to bow and submit at the foot of the cross. And as it was with me, so it was with multitudes of others. We complained of some of Paul's hard sayings, and wondered why our ministers dwelt so much upon them. We wanted to get to heaven in some easier way. But instead of abating one jot or tittle to relieve us, they pressed harder and harder, driving us from one refuge to another, till there was no hiding-place left. The law, which we had broken times without number, we were made to feel was just; its fiery penalty hung over our heads, and we must submit or die. Under such preaching it was hard to get hopes; but when embraced, they were more to be relied upon, than if they had been gained in some easier way.

“Our spiritual guides and teachers never said to us, when under awakening, 'Don't be discouraged; wait God's time, and he will deliver you.' No, no; but, 'How long will you hold out in your rebellion against God?' They never asked us while in this state, 'Don't you feel better?' but, 'Why don't you submit to God, and cast yourselves upon his mercy, embracing the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, who came down from heaven on purpose to save the lost. Turn ye, turn ye; why will ye die?'

“I do not say that this law work, as it has been appropriately called, was alike marked and pungent in all cases. It was not. He who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will, opened some hearts, as he seems to have opened that of Lydia, at once to receive the truth in the love of it. But I am quite sure, that in most cases the conversions in that revival were preceded by sharp conviction of sin and of deserved punishment. It was eminently a law revival, issuing in the more abundant and abiding consolations of the gospel. Those loved most, who felt that they had been forgiven most.

“As our pastors were careful not to encourage us that we had passed from death unto life without good scripture evidence of the change, they were very strict in their examinations for church-membership. If they thought any of the candidates did not give satisfactory evidence of having been converted, they did not hesitate to tell them so.”

Did you hear that, friends? Did you hear that last part of Heman Humphrey's comments that the pastors in those days did not admit you to church membership unless you underwent a strict examination and gave satisfactory evidence of having been converted through regeneration. Today most pastors want you to join their church as quickly as possible and the sooner the better, without presenting any clear evidence of a changed

heart. They need you to maintain their vast church campus and they need you to invite your friends so their friends can join and give their money to the church as well. And in the name of religion, they will preach you a felt-need feel good message and make you feel a little better about yourself before you go and have lunch.

But let me ask you a question: is the preaching of our day bringing revival? Is the preaching of our day even converting anyone to Christ? Or are most church members merely people who are decisionists, they decided to become a Christian based on a text or a verse of Scripture but they've never been awakened to their lost condition, never been convicted of sin by the Spirit and never been the subject of a regenerated heart through the new birth. Jesus said, "Ye must be born again," but we hear today, "Just walk this aisle and accept Jesus and join the church."

Listen friends, does felt-need preaching and feel good messages make someone cry out, "What must I do to be saved?" No, they just sit there and listen to it and laugh along with its nonsense. Felt-need preaching and a feel good message is the devil's favorite kind of preaching because it fills hell with false converts because of its false message.

Listen friends, we need a revival of preaching in America today where God-called men preach the full counsel of God by preaching the great doctrines of the gospel which are ruin, redemption, repentance and regeneration. We need God-called men, not CEOs to lead our churches. We need men set apart by God and filled with the Holy Spirit of God. Men who when they preach, the awful presence of God fills the sanctuary of God and men and women and boys and girls begin to cry out in conviction, "What must I do to be saved."

Pray, dear friends, that the preaching of our hour will change into the kind of preaching that Heman Humphrey described in that time of revival in the Second Great Awakening when men were bowed under the awful solemnity of God's preached law and convicted of sin by the Spirit of God and awakened to their lost condition and shut up to their only refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ. Back then, when you were converted, you submitted to the claims of the gospel on your life and you experienced change but today we merely walk an aisle while we chew on our gum and grin our way to the front of the platform to accept a Jesus we know nothing about because we were never told why we needed him in the first place, that we needed him because we were guilty rebels who had broken the holy law of God and as law-breakers we would one day be held up against that strict and severe law of God and that God requires perfection to get into his heaven and we are not perfect and if we stand in our own merits, we will fail that test so we must stand in the merits of another.

I know I'm a sinner and I need a sin substitute in the person of Jesus Christ. So do you, friend. So do you. Felt-need preaching and a feel good message is what we have today and you see where that has gotten us. Pray for the Lord of the harvest to send God-called messengers into the harvest for the fields are white unto harvest but a feel good message just won't get the job done because a felt-need feel good message will give you a harvest of tares instead of wheat. Heaven help us all.