

The Breakfast, the Politician, the Preacher, and Paul

As I write, the dust has more or less settled on Sajid Javid's reaction to Les Isaac's sermon at the Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast, sponsored by *Premier* at Westminster on 5th July 2022. As is the way with such news items, the powers-that-be in the media rapidly lose interest, and public memory soon fades. But before the episode passes into oblivion, there is a vital lesson which evangelicals must draw from it. And not only here, in the UK. But a lesson, I suspect, many evangelicals will fail, or be unwilling, to grasp.

First, a word about the characters in my title. Take the politician: although his resignation from the government, and the reason he gave for it, kindled the media's interest, he is the least important of the three; the preacher – or, more particularly, his sermon – is much more important than the politician; but it is the final character – Paul – who is by far the most important of the three. Yet, in what I have read, nothing has been said about his role in the episode. I want to put that right.

Can you imagine – is it remotely conceivable – that 2000 years ago the citizens of Rome would have been booting up their laptops to discover that Paul had addressed a meeting of 700, including 150 senators, and encouraged humble collaboration between believers and politicians for the common good? And that as a result, one senior senator in the governing elite, was sufficiently moved by what he heard to decide he could no longer go on serving under the present Emperor – a man who clearly lacked integrity – and, as a result, the conscience-stricken senator had gone back to his office and penned his resignation letter?

To ask such questions is to answer them.

But just in case ignorance of basic Bible teaching is far wider and far deeper than even I suspect, let me show – from Scripture – that the answer to my (supposedly rhetorical) question about

Paul's preaching is an unequivocal 'No!' If Paul had been invited to speak to 700, 150 of whom were politicians, he would not have addressed any political issue whatsoever.¹ Specifically, he would not have called for humble collaboration between believers and politicians in public affairs. When he was given the opportunity to address gatherings where unbelievers were present, such concerns were never on his agenda.²

¹ Although Paul always took full cognisance of the people he was addressing, and would adjust the way he got their attention (1 Cor. 9:19-23), the central point and purpose of his discourse never varied. The apostle was driven by the fact that all his hearers were sinners and needed to be converted. D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones hit the right note in Oxford in 1941. After he had preached, a student complained that Lloyd-Jones had failed to take into account that he had been speaking to students, academics, and the like. Lloyd-Jones: 'I confessed freely, that though I might be a heretic, I had to admit that until that moment I had regarded undergraduates and indeed graduates of Oxford University as being just ordinary common human clay and miserable sinners like everybody else, and held the view that their needs were precisely the same as those of the agricultural labourer or anyone else. I had preached as I had done quite deliberately!... There is no greater fallacy than to think that you need a gospel for special types of people' (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching & Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, pp129-130).

² See, for instance, Acts 17:16-34. Indeed, read Acts in its entirety to see how the first believers addressed unbelievers. See my *To Confront or Not to Confront: Addresses to Unbelievers*; 'Evangelism: Then and Now'. Despite the previous note, sad to say, in 1957, Lloyd-Jones preaching at a Civic Service in Cardiff, failed make the proper application of Isa. 22:8-14 (see D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Sound An Alarm: Report of a sermon delivered at a Civic Service on first of January, 1957*; 'Sound an Alarm...' in D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1995, pp208-223). The prophet was addressing God's people in his day, and doing so in the name of the Lord God Almighty, and delivering God's complaint concerning their thinking and behaviour, and, in no uncertain terms, letting them know what God required of them. Furthermore, the prophet was recording the appalling reaction of the people to his preaching. The application today is not to pagan society but, as Paul so clearly explained, it is to believers, the *ekklesia* (see 1

Wait a minute! Didn't Paul have something to say about issues like, for example, sexual sin within the family? He certainly did! Of course he did. Yet, as he well knew (see, for instance, Romans 1:18-32; 2 Timothy 3:1-9), while there was no shortage of sin – of all sorts, not only sexual – in the Jewish, Greek and Roman societies all around him, even so he never called for believers and politicians to collaborate for the good of society. But when he found sin in a local *ekklēsia*... then he spoke; and how! Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 – read it aloud – and see how he addressed the Corinthian *ekklēsia*.

Above all – and here is the key point – in rebuking the Corinthians and authoritatively demanding their obedience to apostolic command, the apostle made a dogmatic assertion in which he laid out, for all time, the governing principle for dealing with such questions when facing unbelievers:

What have I to do with judging³ outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you' (1 Cor. 5:12-13).

On such questions, within the *ekklēsia*, Paul was blunt; in the public square, he was silent.⁴ When it came to unbelievers, Paul knew what his responsibility was: it was to preach the gospel, to preach Christ, in order to see sinners saved; nothing more, nothing less. He knew, and felt very deeply, that unconverted

Cor. 10:1-33). See my 'An Alarm to the Converted' on my sermonaudio.com page.

³ A word on Paul's use of 'judge'. Think of 'getting involved in a lawsuit for or against, condemning, passing an opinion on, pronouncing sentence on'. In other words, Paul would not get involved in trying to improve fallen society. This was none of his business. He wanted to see sinners converted. That was Christ's commission, and he intended to stick to it.

⁴ I am not denying that believers are light and salt in society (Matt. 5:13-16), but they are so incidentally. In any case, in terms of the new covenant, personal conversion has to precede public service. Though Caesar has his God-given role (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17), he comes a very poor second to Christ (Mark 12:13-17; Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

sinners would perish, and he longed for their conversion (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1; 11:13-14; 2 Cor. 5:16 – 6:2). At the moment of his conversion, Christ had given him his marching orders. As Paul told Agrippa – a politician, please note – Christ had at that time spelled out the apostle’s life-work for him:

I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:16-18).

From then on, Paul knew what he had to do, and how he had to go about it:

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

Ah, but what is ‘the gospel’? What – specifically – did Paul mean by it? What did he have to preach? What did he have to call for? Humble collaboration between the Church⁵ and politicians in furthering the good of society? Not at all! It was this:

I decided [determined, resolved] to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

And:

We proclaim... not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5).

And that was it! As he reminded the Ephesian elders, his work could be summarised thus:

...in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).

The truth is, Christ had already made this clear to his disciples:

⁵ I talk of ‘the Church’ because Isaac did; see below.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark. 16:15-16).

Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:47-48).

It has to be recognised that not all gospel preaching can be said to be preaching the gospel – in the biblical sense. And that is the only sense which counts. No confusion can be tolerated here. It is vital to let Scripture speak. Paul, writing to the Galatian believers made the position clear:

I am astonished [he exploded] that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9).

The apostolic gospel is the only gospel; all other gospels are false.

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In light of the above, what of the prayer breakfast?

If we could have read that Les Isaac had preached the gospel to the 700, and that time showed that many had been truly converted to Christ under that address... Ah... if... if only...

But we did not! Nothing like it! And on both counts – the discourse and the result!

What Les Isaac preached at the breakfast fell far short of the apostolic gospel. In fact, it was nothing like it. Here is a flavour of what he said, the burden of what he was appealing for:

Many men and women are quietly demonstrating service, humbly and compassionately, for the common good of the community, of society, of their city and their nation.

There's a challenge for us, whether we're politicians, whether we are church leaders, there's a challenge for us to work in a collaborative way. To work where we can work for the common good with everyone within our community, to bring hope. We recognise that as we work together, we are bringing hope but, equally, we recognise that we cannot do it on our own. I'm so glad to see so many parliamentarians here, coming with their local church leader, sitting together, eating together. And I pray that they are asking the question: 'What can we do together in our constituency?'...

I want to remind us today that all of us have influence. All of us have the ability to influence and to make a difference. And we are called to serve. We are called to work together for the common good – not just for the party, not just for the denomination, but for humanity. My words of encouragement to us this morning: Give hope a chance. Let hope flourish as you seek to lead and as you seek to have influence and as you seek to exert your influence across the world, across the city, across our community. Let us recognise it's together we will make a difference. It's together the common good of our community would be realised. May the Lord help us as we continue to serve.

And Javid's response:

I made my decision then, sitting there listening to his sermon, and I just thought, it's about integrity, it's about a duty. If you haven't got confidence in the boss, you owe it to yourself and the country to tell the boss nicely that you can't serve and that was it.

Isaac made no attempt to convince sinners of their sin, he did not warn them that they were under the wrath of God, and he issued no call whatsoever for their conversion. Javid's decision to resign

from the government – although (it might well be thought) very commendable – falls very far short of conversion to Christ.

What passage of Scripture was Isaac proclaiming? None! He quoted two verses – Psalm 23:4 and Philippians 2:8 – neither of which remotely gets near the case he was trying to make. Indeed, he misused the latter:

Humility is the absence of pride and the ability to be down-to-earth and modest under all circumstances. This is Jesus in his life. Jesus came into this world to serve; to serve us, to serve humanity. But Jesus also expects us, as the Church [all 700, including Javid?– DG], to serve in humility. ‘And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!’ (Phil. 2:8).

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians to – naturally enough – the Philippians; that is to say, to the *ekklēsia* at Philippi, the believers in that city. Isaac, addressing a mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers, took God’s word to believers regarding their behaviour within the *ekklēsia*, and, without hesitation, inclusively misapplied it to all and sundry about community service, even addressing the entire audience as ‘the Church’. How aptly this gels with the contemporary slide from the biblical doctrine of the *ekklēsia* to a Christendom Church which is in danger of becoming little more than an all-inclusive social-political-environmental-postmillennial pressure group, or a club to promote the well-being of society.

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Even so, in this article I am not primarily concerned with Isaac’s sermon, or Javid’s response. Rather, what concerns me is the reaction of moonstruck evangelicals who are thrilled to think that such a sermon led to a politician’s resignation from the government. In the dark days in which we live – spiritually speaking – what a welcome shaft of hope and encouragement!

Somebody – and somebody in the public eye, at that – actually responding to a sermon! Phew!⁶

Not at all! Evangelicals who take that line are acting like desperate mariners cast into a rising sea – clutching at any passing piece of splintered-driftwood. It is, as Alfred Bunn (1796-1860), said: ‘The heart bowed down by weight of woe, to weakest hope will cling’.

Javid has resigned as a result of a prayer-breakfast sermon. OK. Very good. But... we need to get our brains in gear: Javid attended that breakfast as a non-active Muslim, and, now that he has resigned, he remains a non-active Muslim, describing himself as one with no religion. Whether or not he is in the cabinet has some importance, of course, and integrity in the public square does matter. Having said that, writing as an evangelical believer, as a preacher of the gospel, my concern in events like these must be – as it was with Paul – that sinners should hear the gospel and be converted to Christ. That is the point moonstruck evangelicals need to grasp. They must stop clutching at things which will make matters worse. Worse? Evangelicals who are enthusiastic about the ‘Javid Prayer-Breakfast’ episode are encouraging – maybe even settling for – something far less than the apostolic

⁶ ‘Danny Webster... director of advocacy for the UK Evangelical Alliance, working to represent evangelical Christians to government and inspire them to engage in all areas of public life’ was delighted with what happened (see Danny Webster ‘Can Prayer Breakfasts Change Politics? UK Resignations Suggest Yes’, *Christianity Today*, 12th July 2022). ‘Christians in Politics executive director Andy Flannagan, who led the gathering in worship, said the event had “clearly had an impact” on Javid. He said that there was a problem with the current “culture” in government and that the Church had a role to play in inspiring good leadership. “We have to challenge the violation of ethics that we have seen in the political leadership of this land – and also those who went along with it for many years”, he said’ (*Christianity Today*, 10th July 2022). He ‘told *Premier* the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable: “It’s quite remarkable. It felt really significant. There were what you might describe as holy moments where God’s presence was just irresistible. It was profound and powerful”’ (Donna Birrell: *Premier Christian News*, 10th July 2022).

gospel, and something very different to apostolic aims in preaching that gospel. In so doing, they are encouraging an even greater loosening and blurring of the *ekklēsia* and its biblical role – which is already in a perilous state. If this drift continues, a coming generation of evangelicals will find itself with no biblical distinctives whatsoever.

Calling for humble collaboration in the public square is not the business of the *ekklēsia* or a gospel preacher; calling sinners to Christ, is. Humility and integrity in the public square, while excellent in its way, is no substitute for conversion to Christ.