

STUDY 13

The Power of the Gospel

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EVANGELIST OR TEACHER?

My qualification (or lack of) for taking this session: in terms of Ephesians 4:11, I would regard myself as a teacher (of the church) rather than an evangelist (of not-yet-believers). Even when setting out to announce the gospel in an evangelistic setting, I have found myself talking to already-believers.

Even so, I seek to proclaim the gospel in all my teaching, and always desire to see the gospel occupying centre space in the life of the church. We could ask, in the context of 1 Timothy 4:1–5, with its emphasis on ‘the utmost patience in teaching’, whether ‘do the work of an evangelist’ is exclusively with regard to not-yet-believers? It is difficult, on the basis of the New Testament, to keep the various ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 in watertight compartments.¹ Furthermore, Geoffrey Bingham says:

I personally believe that teaching is the best form of evangelism. I am not convinced that extremely simple presentations of a few points with strong pressure to ‘make decisions’ is the best way to bring life to the churches and the churches to life. Even so, I believe God uses all kinds of human endeavours, often in spite of ourselves, our ideas and our methods.²

HERE IS A WRETCH WHO CRIED

Whether a teacher or evangelist, I have made some attempts at presenting the gospel in ways that might bring to faith those who were yet to believe. In one such attempt I was taking a group of well-heeled young marrieds through *Christianity Explained*.³ At the end of it I had the impression that it had been listened to politely, but with little impact. Several years later I came across one of them whose life had been turned around to committed faith and active service of God during those meetings. On closer enquiry it was not anything I had said in the teaching sessions—though it was clearly

¹ Barnabas is called both an apostle and a prophet, and possibly also a teacher (Acts 13:1; 14:14); Paul was an apostle, who proclaimed the gospel, and taught (1 Cor. 9:1–2; Acts 20:20); Peter was an apostle who also spoke as a pastor (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1–4); and so on.

² Geoffrey Bingham, *Eager to Preach*, NCPI, 1998, pp. 16–17.

³ Prepared by Michael Bennett, Scripture Union, Queensland, in the 1980s.

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a setting in which the gospel was ‘in the air’—but a ‘chance’ remark I made in a conversation with him over supper, that made the difference.

What we may learn from that comports with what we heard Jens Christensen saying in Study 2: ‘you are God’s means’. We may think that we come equipped with our gospel programs or whatever—and we must indeed ‘preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season’ (2 Tim. 4:2, RSV)—but it could be that in God’s way of doing things the telling witness is us as we have been dealt with by God. Each of us personally is the means. We ourselves are the weapon in God’s hands, the missile He launches into the enemy’s ranks. Christ’s gifts in Ephesians 4:11 are *people*.

Roxby Downs, a mining community in the north of South Australia, has become very multicultural. Ministering there recently we met a Christian woman from Papua New Guinea who befriended a newly-arrived Nepalese woman. Nothing was said about Christian faith, but after a while the Nepalese woman asked to know more of Christ. Without any special preparation, the PNG woman told her John 3:16, and Christ met her. I am reminded of a conversation among a group of students in Europe about how best to evangelise, as they discussed various methods and materials. Finally they turned to a student from Africa and asked her how they evangelise. She replied simply, ‘We find a non-Christian village and place a Christian family there’.⁴ Or friends of ours who have hosted overseas students in their home, which has not been without a measure of dysfunction, and the grace evident in that situation has brought more than one of them to convert to Christ.

One translation of Psalm 34:6 reads:

Here is a wretch who cried, and the LORD heard me:
and saved me from all my troubles.⁵

Can we say of such a person with whom the Lord has dealt in this way that *this* is the power of the gospel?

UPON THIS ROCK

A key statement in Ian Pennicook’s *Power in the Church* is this:

To reduce the gospel, in the mind of the preachers at least, to the mere imparting of information is a denial of the wonder of the unity of the preachers with the one whom they proclaim.⁶

We are not saying it is all up to us, but we are saying that the proclamation of the gospel is not apart from the person who proclaims, and the person who proclaims is not apart from Christ, and this is the power of the gospel.

We take the example of the apostle Simon Peter. To him Jesus said:

you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (Matt. 16:18).

⁴ I think this comes from John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, SCM, London, 1972; but I have been unable to locate it.

⁵ The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books, 1995, p. 254.

⁶ Ian D. Pennicook, *Power in the Church*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1997, p. 62.

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‘Peter’ here is Πέτρος (*Petros*); ‘rock’ is πέτρα (*petra*). The normal Greek word for ‘rock’ is *petra* (fem.); *Petros* is a masculine form of it, applied to Simon as a nickname. The difference in the form of these words has led some to claim that *Petros* is not the same as *petra*, but a smaller version of it—say, a ‘little rock’ or ‘stone’. This attempt to dissociate the word ‘rock’ from the person of Peter himself is largely in reaction against the Roman Catholic use of this verse to undergird the primacy of the Pope in succession to Peter as bishop of Rome. Similar misgivings lie behind the interpretations that take *petra* not to be referring to Peter but rather in principle to Peter’s faith, or to his confession of Jesus as the Messiah. Even if this were so, neither Peter’s faith nor his confession can be dissociated from Peter the person. Behind the Greek form of both words would have been Jesus’ Aramaic utterance, using the word *kēpha* (‘rock’) for both (compare John 1:42). So literally it would have been: ‘You are Rock, and on this rock I will build my church’. We need have no qualms about saying that Peter himself is a rock on which Christ will build his church. Paul speaks of the household of God being ‘built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets’ (Eph. 2:20), and John saw the holy city as having foundations on which are written ‘the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb’ (Rev. 21:14). Peter himself, with his understandable new interest in rocks and stones, speaks of *persons* as the ‘living stones’ that are ‘built into a spiritual house’ (1 Pet. 2:5).

But what of this person Peter on whom Christ will build his church? The name is newly given by Jesus to one called Simon, and it is not Simon as Simon he is referring to but Simon as dealt with by God: as one to whom the Father in blessing has revealed the identity of His Son (see Matt. 16:17), and to whom He has given faith and boldness to utter it.

Even so, upon subsequent showing, Peter would appear to be a rather shaky foundation—a bit of a rocky road and a rocking ride (see Matt. 16:21–23; 26:31–35, 69–75; John 18:10–11). But even here it is Peter as the person for whom Christ has prayed (see Luke 22:31–34), for whom Christ has died (see 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18), to whom the risen Christ has made himself known (see Luke 24:34), and in whom, perhaps to Peter’s surprise, the love of Christ has been discovered (see John 21:15–19). We are in no less a position. In this position, can we not say that we, speaking this word from the Father—‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’—are ourselves, in that saving action of God, the power of the gospel for salvation to all who believe? Even, or especially, when we have failed and been restored by His grace?

WEAK IN HIM, LIVING BY THE POWER OF GOD

This does not make us the powerful ones (as in Mark 10:42–45), or the power vendors (as in Acts 8:17–24). Paul suggests it is the cracks in the clay jars, arising out of weakness and suffering, that allow the light of Christ within us to shine out as an effective witness:

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

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always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Cor. 4:5–12).

Ian Pennicook comments on 'he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God' (2 Cor. 13:4):

it is worth observing that Jesus' weakness is probably not to be understood as some sort of deprivation . . . His weakness in which he was crucified was his humanity. He lives now, as he always lived, by the power of God (II Cor. 13:4). Likewise, 'we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God' (II Cor. 13:4). The context of Paul's dealing with a specific issue in Corinth aside, the principle remains that both Christ and those in him are ontologically weak and only know power as weak persons. Of himself, Christ, either as pre-existent Son or as incarnate Son, had no power. The only power available to him or us is the power of God, that is, the power of the Father.⁷

Our weakness is not just momentary, but ontological—part of the way we are:

Paul is not saying that the Lord occasionally gave him bouts of weakness and that it was at those times that the power of God was available to him . . . There are no times when we are not weak, and there is no power which is not from God. All human boasting is thus excluded. This does not mean that God somehow wants to humiliate us by depriving us of any grounds for boasting. Rather, by depriving us of grounds for boasting He is restoring us to our true humanity:

For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness *in him*, who is the head of every ruler and authority (Col. 2:9–10).

Even when Christ is proclaimed 'from envy and rivalry . . . out of selfish ambition, not sincerely', rather than 'from goodwill . . . out of love'—even when the intention is to increase the suffering of an imprisoned brother—the power remains undiminished: 'Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice' (Phil. 1:15–18).

We must indeed never underestimate or deny 'the unity of the preachers with the one whom they proclaim'⁸—the one who has saved us, even from our deficiencies in proclaiming him, and thereby testifies to the glory of our Father.

⁷ Pennicook, *Power in the Church*, pp. 67–9.

⁸ Pennicook, *Power in the Church*, p. 62.