

## *Preacher: Postman or Pleader?*

A preacher, opening his discourse on a passage of Scripture which was full of the gospel invitation and command, asked the congregation to look upon him as a postman<sup>1</sup> that day<sup>2</sup>. In saying this, he got his sermon underway on entirely the wrong foot.

Why? How?

A postman has to deliver the mail, faithfully and completely untampered with. That's his task. That's his only task. He has no interest in what he is delivering, whether or not the mail is wanted or hated, whether or not the recipient will do anything about it. The postman has done his job when he has pushed the mail through the letter box. He has no business to knock at the door, argue with the householder, plead with him to open the letter, read it and respond to it. Not at all! His job is to deliver the mail safe and sound, untampered with. That is all.

Whatever else a preacher is, however, most definitely he is not a postman. He is meant to do far more than merely deliver the text – in this case, the gospel invitation and command. He has to be faithful in his presentation of the gospel (1 Cor. 4:2; 2 Tim. 2:15), in his delivery, yes, of course, but – above all – he is meant to connect with his hearers, to touch their hearts, move them, persuade them, challenge, warn, encourage, exhort and seek to persuade them to obey the gospel – and, if they are unbelievers, to come to Christ. He must be the exact opposite of disinterested.<sup>3</sup> He must follow God in Christ and the apostles,<sup>4</sup> and show his love and concern for his hearers, his longing for their spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> US 'mailman'.

<sup>2</sup> I have produced this very brief – but I think important – article by slightly expanding material from my *The Secret Stifler: Incipient Sandemanianism and Preaching the Gospel to Sinners*.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 18:4,13; 19:8,26; 20:21; 26:28-29; 28:23; Rom. 9:1-4; 10:1; 2 Cor. 5:11.

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 10:21; 2 Cor. 5:11,14,18-21; 6:1-2.

welfare, his earnest desire for their benefit – even their salvation. And he must be pressing – wanting their conversion, under this sermon, now. And it must show.

Alas, today, we have far too many postman and far too few pleaders in the pulpit. Yes, we need the text laid out properly. Yes, we need the proper deductions to be made from the text. No question of it. But when that is done, the mail has been delivered, and that is all. Unless the preacher presses the gospel upon his hearers, he has failed. He has been a postman, nothing more; he has not been a pleader.

Take the Welsh Methodist preacher, Howell Harris (1714-1773). While not defending everything that he said, on the point I raise here, across the centuries Harris speaks today. Indeed, he cries out! He described the way he preached. He would open his discourse by explaining the text in its context, but in doing that he knew he was not preaching; he was waiting for ‘the gale’, ‘the authority’, to come upon him. By this, he meant the Spirit of God in power. But when the Spirit did come upon him, then, he would preach. But only then. Having explained the text, then, by the Spirit’s enabling power, Harris would preach, really preach with ‘authority’, as he put it.

As I say, without endorsing every turn of phrase, Harris was right. We, today, need to catch some of his fire.

Reading sermons is utterly destructive of the vital distinction I am trying to make, and which Harris so graphically illustrated. Reading may be fine for accuracy, explanation, passing on of information – though I doubt it! – but to preach, to feel, and – above all – to make the hearers feel, to be persuaded, is a very, very different thing. Fiddling with a sheaf of notes, rustling sheets of paper, presenting a smooth and polished PowerPoint, delivering a boring, read-sermon drone, constitutes a very, very serious hindrance to preaching.

Preachers awake! We are not mere postmen. We **MUST** be pleaders! As was said of Robert Murray M’Cheyne, so it must be

said of us: the hearers 'felt he was a'dying to have them converted'.

But let me close with Paul. Writing to the Thessalonian believers, the apostle set out what he was aiming for in his preaching, and how he measured success:

Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction... You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:5-10).

Nothing less will do.