

The Old Paths

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“Distinctive Preaching”

W. Curtis Porter (1897-1960)

I cannot conceive of there having ever been a time in all of the history of the church that distinctive preaching was not needed. Perhaps there have been periods of that history in which such preaching was more sorely needed than at other times; but if so, the failure of some to preach a distinctive gospel was responsible for the increase of the need for it. And it may be that there was never a time when the need for distinctive preaching was more imperative than now. We have entirely too much preaching that means nothing, and the need of the hour is for men who have the courage to preach a distinctive message.

To me it is no compliment to a speaker for the audience to be unable to place him. I have heard it said of preachers: “He has preached in our community for two weeks, but people could not tell by his preaching to what church he belonged; he was an orthodox preacher.” While such things have been said by way of compliment, to me they shout their criticism and are not complimentary words at all. Whenever a man is so vague, indefinite, or general in his preaching that his auditors cannot place him, or identify him, there is something seriously wrong. A preacher is certainly not filling his mission as a preacher when his pulpit proclamations are char-

acterized by such vagueness. I am talking, of course, about a preacher who stands identified with the church of the Lord. I am not so much concerned about how other preachers preach. If they are preaching the doctrines of men, there is nothing vital to the soul lost if they never become definite about it.

And yet if I were a member of some human church, I would want my preacher to preach the things for which the church stands. If I were the member of the Baptist Church, I would want my preacher to preach a Baptist doctrine; and if I belonged to the Methodist Church, I would want my preacher to preach a doctrine that would be distinctively Methodist; and the same goes for any other denomination. In any case I would expect my preacher to preach definitely the doctrines of that denomination. Then since I am a member of the church of Christ, should I expect less of the preachers of that institution? The world will lose nothing of importance if denominationalism is not distinctively preached; but if the gospel of Jesus Christ is not preached in a distinctive manner, a great loss is incurred.

Who Preaches What?

There is a vast difference between the truth of the gospel and the theories of denominationalism, and that difference ought to be held up to the people who hear. Jesus said: *“Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted*

up” (Matt. 15:13). Why, then, make any compromise with such plants? Or why fail to show that human institutions are not growths from a heavenly planting? I am just certain of the fact that it often becomes necessary to tell who preaches what. This would not be so necessary if denominational preachers would preach the doctrines of their churches, but they are like some of my brethren would be if they listened to the clamor of the audience for “soft preaching.” They have no distinctive message to proclaim. Consequently the average member of denominations does not know the doctrines of his church. You may preach ever so strongly upon some point of error, but he does not know you are talking about his doctrine, for his preacher has not preached it; such things have been kept from him. To this there are some exceptions, but the condition is very general.

In order for a member of the Baptist Church to know that you are contrasting the truth with Baptist error it becomes necessary to state that the error is taught by the Baptist Church. Otherwise he may not discover that you have taken his doctrine apart. The need of this was very forcibly impressed upon me as a result of one of my own sermons. I was engaged in a mission meeting near where I was laboring for the church. At one service I preached on the subject, “What Must I Do To Be Saved?” I contrasted truth with error and showed plainly what the Bible teaches about that subject. When the service had been concluded, a stranger came to me, took me by the hand, and complimented very highly that sermon, stating that he believed every bit of it. Upon later inquiry I found that he was the main leader of the Baptist Church of that community. And yet I had been preaching things that were in direct conflict with the doctrines

of the church to which he belonged! The next day a conversation was heard over the telephone in which one lady told another that she should have been at the meeting last night, for she would have heard one of the best Baptist sermons that she ever heard. And yet I had not failed to preach the truth! However, they did not know the teaching of the Baptist Church; and if I had told who preaches what, they would have seen the difference. At least, they would not have accused me of preaching Baptist doctrine!

I know that harm can be done by mentioning denominations in the spirit of sarcasm. There is a difference between exposing error and abusing the adherent of the error. We may show kindness to the man and yet expose the error which he holds. Therefore, I do not hesitate, when I feel that conditions demand, to call denominations by name and show the error of the denominations. This is exactly what Jesus did while he was on earth, and, judging from what he did then, it is exactly what he would do now!

Make People Know They Are Lost

Preaching that is not distinctive enough to make the lost realize they are lost is not the kind of preaching it takes to save men. Whenever an unfaithful brother, one guilty of sins against the high heaven, or with an ungodly attitude toward the work of the Lord can sit under a man's preaching without feeling any discomfort or alarm, there is probably something wrong with the preaching. The man needs to be blasted with the gospel dynamite till he can see his lost condition. As long as your preaching allows him to feel secure in his sins he will not likely be redeemed from his sinful state.

Just so it is with the member of the sectarian churches. If my preaching allows them to feel safe in denominationalism, there is not much chance to rescue them from it meshes. My preaching must be distinctive enough to make them see the sinfulness of denominationalism, then I can have some hope of saving them.

Just remember that in order to save a man you must make him know that he is lost. By your following some other method he might decide to "change churches" because he likes the preacher, or that he might be with some other friends he especially likes, or something of that kind; but "changing churches" for any such reason is not conversion. What we want to do is to convert the man that his change may be the result of conviction.

Jesus Christ and the apostles did not hesitate to let men know they were lost. Paul called Elymas a "child of the devil," and "enemy of all righteousness" (Acts 13:10). There was no reason for Elymas to think that Paul considered him in a safe condition. Peter plainly told Simon to repent and pray that God might forgive him (Acts 8:20-23). He let him know that he stood condemned. And Jesus said the Pharisees were children of hell (Matt.

23:15). With such worthy examples before us, why should we fail to preach so that men in sin and sectarianism can see they need to be saved?

(Guardian of Truth November 20, 1980)

You Finish The Story ...

Selected

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