

Gospel or Gimmickry?

"Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:2-4).

These verses clearly indicate that there are times when gospel preaching is in season and out of season. History indicates the same. In the first century in most places it was in season; in the middle ages it was out of season. There was a thrilling season for the gospel in middle America in the early nineteenth century, while at the same time it was largely out of season in France and Europe.

In our own lifetime, we have seen the same situation change. This writer remembers days in Chattanooga when non-Christians attended meetings in large numbers for no other reason than to hear the gospel, and ten or twenty baptisms were not uncommon in such a meeting. Simple gospel preaching does not now seem to have such drawing power.

What are we to do when gospel preaching is out of season; when people are more interested in education, entertainment, recreation, and social activities than they are in preaching; when the wisdom of the world has more appeal than the wisdom of God?

Common Answers

"You have to reach people where they are," we are told. "We have to give them what they want to attract attention. Then we can reach them with the gospel." On this basis, all kinds of gimmicks are used to entice the worldly. Many churches have turned into little more than community centers and social clubs. They are more involved with ball teams and scout troops than with Bible teaching. The highways are crowded with their buses taking various age groups to every kind of amusement area in the country. Their advertising reads for all the world like a circus flyer, offering prizes, free gifts, and fun. Often, no promise is made of anything spiritual at all.

Others realizing that the gospel "is the power of God unto salvation" limit their activities more to preaching. But even here, appeal is still to the worldly tastes of our generation. If possible, preachers are obtained who have made a big reputation in sports, in entertainment, or in government. Otherwise, great emphasis is given in advertising to the educational attainments of the speaker or to his gifts as a "dynamic, powerful, eloquent" speaker.

God's Way

The problem of disinterested people is not new. It existed in some places even in the first century. Paul said it existed in Corinth. "For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).

Paul had the power to offer signs to the Jews and the knowledge to compete with the Greeks in worldly wisdom. The philosophy described above would have suggested advertisement of a lecture on "The Judaistic Philosophy in the Roman World." Obtaining his audience with this, he could then slip in a little about Jesus and the cross. But this was not Paul's approach, as he told us: "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Human philosophy and human wisdom had no place in Paul's plan for saving the lost in Corinth.

Preaching only the gospel, of course, Paul could have announced himself as "Dr. Paul, graduate of the University of Gamaliel, noted author, world traveler, inspired and dynamic lecturer." Rather, he says, "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God ... I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:1, 3-5).

Worldly appeals simply cannot save lost men. And to attach them to the gospel is to cheapen the good news of Jesus Christ. By such appeals we may increase numbers and even

"make waves," but such individuals in the local church are liabilities rather than assets. As materials in God's building they are classified as "wood, hay, and straw." Paul warns against building such material into the church: "According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work" (1 Corinthians 3:10, 12, 13).

- by Sewell Hall

Comparing & Conforming

There is a natural tendency to compare ourselves to those who are around us. The result is a general conformity with the norms of the society in which we live. How we dress, talk, and act are affected to various degrees by what we observe in others.

This conformity is not all bad. It makes it possible for us to relate to those within our circle of influence. Paul said that "unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews . . . I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:20-22). A social "odd ball" or misfit will have little ability to influence others in any positive way.

A problem arises when we take this comparing and conforming too far. We are warned to "be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). The danger is that we will begin to imitate the people around us in ways that lead to sinful thoughts and actions. For example, we can dress, talk, and act like those in our society -- but only in so far as it does not violate God's law. Stylish clothes are not wrong, but immodest ones are. Using popular phrases and expressions is okay -- but not if they convey an evil message.

Ultimately it becomes a matter of authority. What is your standard? How do you determine what is right and wrong? If societal norms constitute your highest authority, then you will be carried along with whatever becomes popular. This will inevitably lead to sinful choices. For instance, the popular culture would have condemned homosexuality 25 years ago. Today it is widely accepted. The Bible, though, has never changed in its denunciation of this sin (Rom. 1:26,27).

"We dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Cor. 10:12). Let's be sure that we evaluate our spiritual standing before God - not by the ever changing popular trends - but by the absolute and unchangeable standard of His Word.

- by Greg Gwin