



RESURGENCE

The Importance of Preaching the Negative as Well as the Positive

Phillip Jensen

I had just met one of the wiser older saints of North American Christianity. We were walking together to an evening dinner party. Apropos of nothing he said to me, "Phillip, when men grow old, some of them go soft-headed and sentimental while others become cantankerous and irascible."

It was a strange lesson to be given, but I understood what he meant about an hour later, when he seated me between two elderly preachers. In these two men I discovered a classic illustration of each type. I had been warned!

Over the next few days I listened to both these men preach, and sure enough, one was negative and the other positive. I saw in those few days a very common pattern of two different styles of preaching: an affirmative style that looks in the text for positive things to say about people and a negative style that always finds in the text things to criticize about others or the congregation.

Some people preach with great fervour sermons that are little more than reflections of their personality -- emphasizing the positive or the negative in the text and in the congregation. These sermons have less to do with "speaking the words of God" than reflecting the personality of the preacher. Either he will place his personality upon the text or he will select only those texts that reflect his personality. However, faithful explication of the text in an ordered fashion will sometimes be negative and sometimes be positive, for both are to be found in the Bible irrespective of the preacher's personality.

Reasons for Affirmative Preaching

Leaving personality aside, the current choice for most preachers today is the affirmative over the negative. There are several reasons for this choice. First, society at large pushes the preacher in this direction. Educational models promote the effectiveness of the affirmative style of teaching, as do most studies in advertising and public relations. Also, the relativism of today's postmodern thought is positive about all statements -- all statements, that is, except negations! The ideology of a multicultural society requires positivity about alternative views and frowns upon any communication that threatens the fragile peace that has been established between communities.

Second, the current climate in religious circles favors affirmative preaching. Courses in pastoral counseling point to the advantages of non-judgmental, positive communication. Pastors have to perform. The key to evaluation is no longer God's judgment on the last day (1 Cor. 4:1-5) but the growth in congregational numbers, budget and buildings. Leaders in the church are tempted to be like modern politicians, leading by following the popular sentiments expressed in surveys and polls.

Third, the pastor's own congregation often pushes him to preach affirmatively. These churches do not choose ministers to change them, but rather those who will confirm them in

their current beliefs and practices. There is a feedback system at work. The affirmative preacher is affirmed by the congregation into greater affirmation in his preaching, while the negative preacher is constantly negated out of preaching negatively. There are hardly any attempts these days to negate affirmative preaching or to affirm negative preaching. Our sinful desires to be well-thought of by people encourage us to think well of them and speak positively to them. The pressure on pastors to maintain what is already there – and therefore to preach positive sermons that unite all parties in the congregation -- is massive. The sinful hearts of the preacher and the congregation seek pleasant, peaceful things that will confirm them in their sinfulness rather than remind them of judgement and challenge them to repent.

Advantages of Affirmative Preaching

Even though we face these pressures, there are advantages to affirmative preaching. The affirmative preacher rightly reflects the generous graciousness of our God and Savior and of the Gospel we preach. There is something ill-fitting to the Gospel of Grace to see a mean-spirited negative preacher denouncing everything and everybody.

Evangelistically, the affirmative preacher being more inclusive in his language, content and manner will be appreciated by a larger and wider audience. His width of appeal makes it easier for the congregation to invite all sorts and conditions of men to hear the message. When people come they are less likely to be offended by trivial, minor and irrelevant issues as the preacher will be more attuned to confirm them in their present position.

Pastorally, the more affirmative preacher will establish and develop relationships within the congregation that will enable him to minister privately to people. The non-confrontational, non-judgemental attitudes from the pulpit increase people's openness to talk about problems, issues and sinfulness, knowing that the preacher is sympathetic and supportive.

Disadvantages of Affirmative Preaching

Over time, however, people come to understand that the preacher who is always positive cannot be trusted with the truth. He may make you feel good, but he is not addressing the real issues of life. The public relations kind of saccharine preacher is first loved, believed and trusted, then questioned, doubted and finally despised.

The positive preacher finds it very difficult to change roles in private counseling to say anything negative. People who come to him will not expect to hear the truth, but to be confirmed in their opinions. Being negative about a topic when speaking to a congregation is considerably easier than being negative to a person about his behavior privately and face-to-face.

Affirmative preaching encourages ministers to be "men pleasers" (Galatians 1:10). I cannot recall publicly speaking against Roman Catholicism without being criticized -- even though as a Protestant, I should be expected to be critical of Roman Catholicism. Yet whenever I make even a small positive mention of Rome, I am always commended by people.

Woe unto you, said Jesus, when all speak well of you and blessed are you when men revile you and say all manner of falsehood against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad for this is how they treated the prophets of old and because your reward in the kingdom of heaven will be great (cf. Matthew 5:11-12). These words are not necessary for those who are called to preach a popular message, but for those whose task is likely to lead to unpopularity.

Biblical Evaluation

The outcome of an action should not be ignored, but Christians ought to make decisions based on the rightness of the action, not on its outcome. The rightness of an action is revealed in the Scriptures.

Because God is the author of Scripture and the Creator of the world, we can expect the right actions, revealed in Scripture, to have the best outcome in God's world. Sometimes the outcomes will be long-term rather than immediate. Sometimes it is only in eternity that we will be able to see the outcomes or the value of the outcomes.

In preaching we are instructed by God to speak "the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). These words from God are sometimes negative and sometimes positive. The faithful preacher will deliver both in proportion. As it is the negative that currently needs reinstating in our culture, let us look at that side of the Bible's teaching.

First, we must note the biblical evidence for negative preaching. It was the false prophets in Jeremiah's day who preached "peace, peace" when there was no peace. Isaiah's task in preaching was to confirm people in the judgment that was coming upon them. Nathan was not affirming King David when he said, "You are the man!" It was Paul who had to contend with Peter and even Barnabas over the truth of the Gospel by opposing Peter to his face. It was our Lord Jesus himself who preached woes, warned people of coming division that he was bringing, and called upon people to hate even their closest family members. Remember, Jesus was the one who introduced the word *Gehenna* (i.e., "hell").

Second, we need to note that certain key concepts are by their very nature negative. The classic example is repentance, since it means the denunciation and renunciation of our present and former lives. It is to say *no* to yourself as well as taking up the cross and following Jesus. Paul described his settled evangelistic ministry in terms of declaring "to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21).

Just as becoming a Christian requires this negative action of repentance, so growing and going on as a Christian requires negating ourselves. Being led by the Spirit of God requires all Christians to "put to death the misdeeds of the body" (Romans 8:13), as our dying with Christ also requires us to "put to death ... whatever belongs to our earthly nature" (Colossians 3:5). Mortification is negative, painful work, but one which will bring forth great joy.

Third, the preacher must preach in such a way as to negate the sinful, worldly, and self-determining patterns of fallen humanity. Not in the way of the world, but by divine power he must fight, demolish strongholds, and take every thought captive to Christ by demolishing arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:45). The preacher must not just personally flee idolatry but also denounce it and warn others against it. The prophets of old used sarcastic mockery to ridicule idolatry. The overseer is not only to exhort in sound doctrine, but also to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9).

The preacher is called upon to use the Word of God in the way it was intended, which includes negative preaching. Since God's word teaches, rebukes, corrects and trains in righteousness, so the preacher must teach, correct, rebuke and train in righteousness with great patience and care.

Fourth, there is the logical power of the negative found in the text of Scripture itself. So the more powerful part of the words of Jesus is not His claim that He is the way, the truth and

the life, but that there is no other way to the Father except through Him. Or to say that somebody should be born again is not as strong as to say that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

Advantages of Preaching Negatively

The power and clarifying effect of the negative is why preachers today must also preach negatively. For some years we have run University missions under the title "Know Christ, Know Life." It is a useful pun for we are also able to preach on "No Christ, No Life."

Most people patiently patronize the positive expression (Know Christ, Know Life). They feel glad that knowing Christ has been such a positive experience for us that we feel now in touch with life itself. They have had the same experience through Buddha or transcendental experience or even golf. However, when we preach the negative they become angry, because we are confronting them with the claims of Christ. The negative proclaims more clearly that without Christ there is no life. Thus we make clear what we mean when we say that with Christ we know life.

In an age of postmodern relativism any assertion is believed, but the hardest ones to accept are negatives. When all views are equally valid, negative views push the relativism into the absurd -- from which some people recoil.

But it is not just evangelistic preaching that needs to be negative. Christians need to be warned about the dire consequences of continuing in sin. Some evangelicals believe theoretically in sin, but are too naive and trusting about human nature in practice.

How does this responsibility to preach "the negative" affect our preaching on manhood and womanhood?

In today's cultural climate, it is important that preachers, especially pastors, have the courage to address the issue as it appears in the Scriptures. We must not avoid the potentially divisive passages like 1 Timothy 2 for the sake of holding the congregation together and causing no offence.

In particular, it is critical that preachers negate the feminist worldview as it collides with biblical truth. This must be done both in terms of the world outside the church and in terms of the inroads that feminism has made amongst Christian people. To only preach those aspects of the relationship between men and women where the world and the Bible agree is seriously to distort not only the Bible as a whole but also the very passages where there is agreement -- because they come in the context of a Bible which is quite alien to feminism.

Negative preaching is not everything and is not to be encouraged as an expression of personality, but it does need a good deal of affirmation, in order that it might return to its rightful place amongst those who would speak the very words of God.

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