

Preaching and Teaching

James Philip

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Inspiration and Authority, Infallibility and Inerrancy are the necessary prerequisite for preaching and teaching, and are indispensable if a true ministry is to be exercised. This is implied in Paul's employment of the word 'ambassador' to describe the work of the ministry.

The word 'ambassador' is used twice in the New Testament by Paul in 2 Cor. 5:19 and Eph. 6:20. Thus, he says, 'Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God', and comments, 'That I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak'.

In this connection, we note the following:

1) The word 'ambassador' in Greek is *presbutos* (from the verb *presbeuo*) and literally means 'to be older or oldest', 'to take the place of others', 'to take precedence by right of seniority', thus 'to be an ambassador'. The idea of seniority leads inevitably to the concept of authority. It is a responsible post.

2) Significantly, in the New Testament instances above, the verb is used, not the noun. This indicates a) activity – the job is no sinecure, and b) it is not the office, but the duty that is stressed. There is here, no resting on laurels but a getting on with the job. It is something we must do.

3) An ambassador is the authorized representative of a sovereign: and it is his representative capacity that gives him his authority and position. He is nothing in himself. One thinks of the analogy of Lord High Commissioner at the General Assembly. For the brief spell in May he represents the Sovereign, and is to be treated as the sovereign, he takes precedence over all the dukes, and is next to the Lord Chancellor. He may be nothing in himself, but in his office he bears this position of authority and power.

He speaks, moreover, not in his own name, but on behalf of the ruler whose deputy he is. One of the implications of this is that there is necessarily a 'given-ness' about his message. This is especially true in the Christian sense. Just as an ambassador is not at liberty to change or modify a dispatch from his government or Sovereign, or to tone it down in any way, but rather hand it over as given, so the Christian ambassador is not at liberty to change or modify his message. The minister, therefore, who when asked the question, 'Do you believe in hell?' answered 'Yes, but I would never preach it.', is betraying his commission. It is part of his responsibility, as

an ambassador for Christ, to 'warn every man' (Col. 1:28). By contrast, Paul says, in 1 Cor. 15:1ff., 'I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . .' and 1 Cor. 1:17 'Christ sent me . . . to preach the gospel.' This is the work of an ambassador.

4) There are several things involved in the proper fulfillment of this work. In the first place the nature of the gospel has to be made clear. The gospel is the good news of the incarnation, atonement, and kingdom of the Son of God – a message massive in its scope and extent, needing to be learned and understood before it can be lived by and applied and communicated.

All this involves, on the one hand, wrestling with it oneself until it is understood – this is how Paul himself qualified as an ambassador: there were long years of training and discipline between his conversion on the Damascus Road and his commissioning at Antioch. On the other hand, it involves teaching and imparting it to others. The work of evangelism is basically a teaching ministry, 'to make all men see . . .' (Eph.3:8), expounding and opening up the Scriptures in all their fulness, so as to impart the whole counsel of God. Jesus said, 'we speak that we do know', and we must do likewise.

In the second place, it is the ambassador's duty and responsibility to interpret his sovereign's mind faithfully to those to whom he is sent, so as to be able to convey the spirit of the message he delivers. For this, a knowledge of the mind of Christ is necessary. This means two things: on the one hand it means a relationship of fellowship with Christ, and this is much more important and critical in the Christian ambassadorship than in that of the natural realm. How could we know the mind of Christ, unless we walked with him? On the other, it means close and continual study of his Word in which he reveals himself to us. It is in and through the Word that fellowship with him is deepened and enriched.

Now – particularly – the mind of Christ is revealed to us in Scripture in Paul's wonderful words in Philp. 2:5ff, 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus . . .' This, the apostle means, is how Jesus thought, this expresses the mind of Christ – he emptied himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. We shall look at this passage in more detail below. In the meantime we must go on to say something else: knowing the mind of Christ means having the mind of Christ ourselves. To have fellowship with this Son of God and Lord of life must necessarily involve being likeminded, for 'can two walk together except they be agreed?' How can we beseech men in Christ's stead in any worthy way (to use Paul's words in 2 Cor. 5), unless we think like him. We must be able to say, as Paul does in 1 Cor.2:16, 'We have the mind of Christ'. The words in 2 Cor. 5, 'we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God' have a very clear implication: God speaking through us,

Christ acting in and through us. And how could this be, except we were one in mind and spirit with him, identified with him in his redemptive work in the world?

Finally, in relation to the theme of ambassadorship, – and this serves also to underline what has just been said – Paul, in the second place where he uses the word (Eph. 6:19) calls himself ‘an ambassador in bonds’. He was, of course, literally a prisoner in Rome at the time, but in a metaphorical and spiritual sense also he was in bonds, for he was the bond-slave of Jesus Christ, captive to his love, and to the Word of God. And so must we be, if we would fulfill our stewardship in the gospel.

But this means – and here we come to the crux and the heart of what I want to say – it is not merely a question of holding doctrinal orthodoxy, but having a life controlled by, and submissive to, the Word of God and the love of Christ. In other words, what we say in our preaching is important but what we are when we say it is also important – indeed, the most important thing of all. I want to underline this by referring to some passages in Scripture that indicate its centrality.

First of all, let us think again of the passage in Philp. 2 to which I have already referred. The phrase, ‘thought it not robbery to be equal with God’, is better rendered by the R.S.V., ‘did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped’. What do these words mean? What they mean is that although equality with God might be thought to be a status to be grasped and held on to at all costs, yet Jesus did not think like that. Equality with God was something that was his by right, and enjoyed by him as the Second Person of the Trinity before the world was. Yet he did not hold on to it, as of right he could have, but freely and voluntarily surrendered it, before all worlds, before creation, for a mysterious and ineffable purpose, the redemption of the world.

If this is the force of Paul’s words, then they mean that the incarnation of the Son of God was the coming of such an attitude of voluntary self-surrender into the world. Think of our world, our bent and broken world, self seeking and grasping, in which values are so distorted and corrupt – and into it there came this principle, incarnate in Christ. One has only to put it like this to see something of the immense and incalculable potential of such a situation. For it is about this that Paul says, ‘let this mind be in you’. We are to be like this in the world, as ambassadors!

Significantly, Paul goes on in Philp. 3 to show how all this worked out in his own experience. ‘What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss . . . I have suffered the loss of all things . . . that I may win Christ . . .’ Here is Christ’s self-surrender reflected in the life of the man who has the mind of Christ: as Christ freely and voluntarily surrendered his equality with God in the interests of the world’s redemption, so Paul freely and voluntarily surrendered all that was gain to him, for the gospel’s sake.

But Paul’s words in Philp. 2 can be taken another way also. Some of the commentators, rightly I think, draw a parallel here between the first Adam and the last Adam, and believe that this is what lies behind Paul’s words, ‘did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped’. What happened with Adam? He was made in the image of God, is called in Luke ‘the son of God’, was made overlord of creation and given dominion over all the beasts of the field. And

Adam was tempted. What was the nature, the heart, of the temptation? Satan said, ‘Ye shall not surely die, but ye shall be as God (RSV), knowing good and evil.’ Note the phrase – ‘as God’ – equality with God. This is what Satan offered man. And he snatched at it: he regarded it as something to be grasped. He reached out at it and claimed it as his own, though he had no right to it.

But the second Adam, whose right it was, and who could have reached out for it, and claimed it as his own, considered it not a thing to be grasped at in that way, but on the contrary emptied himself. Christ thought that the appropriation of divine honour and equality *in that way* constituted a temptation to be resisted, and he refused to countenance it. One sees the recurring temptation throughout the story of Jesus, particularly in the wilderness episode: the words ‘all these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me’ are nothing more than a thinly veiled suggestion of equality with God. And Jesus estimated it as something he was not prepared to grasp.

So that the first Adam grasped at life – the tree in the midst of the garden – and laid hold upon death. The second Adam grasped death and laid hold upon life. And that is the heart of the gospel. Jesus thought equality with God a thing not to be grasped at in the way Adam grasped it. So right at the outset, the Incarnation becomes a substitution – not that but this; not that way but this; not Adam’s way, but a new and living way. This is the mind that must be ours in the work of the gospel.

Another passage to which I want to refer is 2 Cor. 2:14ff. Here again the R.S.V. rendering is more accurate: ‘Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?’

The picture Paul uses here is that of a Roman triumph, in which the conquering general rode into the capital, with his captives chained to his chariot wheels, watched by cheering crowds, while incense burned on every altar by the way, to celebrate the victory. What Paul is saying is, *not* that *he* wins the battle, or that he is made to triumph (although this is taught elsewhere in Scripture and is blessedly true), but that he is the captive led in the conqueror’s train, and men see in him the trophy of the Conqueror’s power. It is he, Paul, who is the captive of Christ’s chariot wheels. Christ triumphed over him on the Damascus Road and bound him forever to himself, and wherever he went, his captivity to Christ made the knowledge of the Saviour available to everyone he met. This is the message here, and what a tremendous word it is. Let us follow through its meaning, and gather its significance.

Dr. J. Denney has some very fine things to say on this. Let me quote:

When God wins a victory over man, and leads him captive in triumph, the captive too has an interest in what happens: it is the beginning of all triumphs, in any true sense, for him . . . (The Damascus Road) was the beginning of God’s triumph over him: for that is how God led him in triumph in Christ, But it was the beginning also

of all that made the Apostle's life itself a triumph, not a career of hopeless, internal strife, such as it had been, but of unbroken Christian victory.

Furthermore, the true meaning of the word reminds us that the only true triumphs we can ever have, deserving the name, must begin with God's triumph over us . . .

It is not for nothing that Paul begins many of his epistles with the words, 'Paul, bond-slave of Jesus Christ' – but can we say this of our lives, that the way we live, the experiences through which we pass, are for the blessing and redemption of men?

Paul speaks not only of God triumphing over him in Christ, but also making manifest through him the savour of this knowledge in every place. Why 'savour'? The figure is suggested by the idea of Roman triumph, with the incense smoking on every altar, and its fragrance floating over the whole procession. What Paul means is that the knowledge of Christ communicated through the lives of believers is a fragrant thing. As Paul went from place to place, men saw in him not, only the power, but also the sweetness of God's redeeming love. 'The Mighty Victor made manifest through him, not only His might. But His charm, not only His greatness but His grace.'

Well! What a challenge! Is our communication of the gospel a savour, a fragrant thing? The charm, the winsomeness, the attractiveness of it – is this what comes over?

Listen again to J. Denney:

It is not to preachers only that this word 'savour' speaks: it is of the widest application. Wherever Christ is leading a single soul, in triumph, the fragrance of the gospel should go forth; rather, it does go forth, in proportion as His triumph is complete. There is sure to be that in the life which will reveal the graciousness as well as the omnipotence of the Saviour. And it is this virtue which God uses as His main witness, as His chief instrument to evangelise the world. In every relationship of life it shall tell. Nothing is so insuppressible, nothing so pervasive, as a fragrance. The lowliest life which Christ is really leading in triumph will speak infallibly and persuasively for Him . . . And if we are conscious that we fail in this matter, and that the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ is something to which our life gives no testimony, let us be sure that the explanation of it is to be found in self-will. There is something in us which has not yet made complete surrender to Him, and not until He leads us unresistingly in triumph will the sweet savour go forth.

Who is sufficient for these things? There is only one way: it is to be at Christ's chariot wheels, manifestly a bond-slave of the Conqueror, manifestly conquered and mastered by the Master of men. Is that what we are?

The third passage I want to refer to follows on from the second – Paul's mighty utterance in 2 Cor. 4. There is so much here that one is almost tempted to say too much, in trying not to miss out anything valuable; but I want to concentrate particularly on vv. 7-13, which speak of 'treasure in earthen vessels'.

Paul is speaking of being 'able ministers of the New Testament' (2 Cor. 3:6) and it is in this connection that he gives

such important teaching on the stewardship of the gospel, and in communicating it faithfully to men. What is it that makes us able ministers, and effectual in the work of the gospel?

First of all (v. 1), an able minister is one who 'does not lose heart', and this is because he has a sense of the mercy of God. A sense of what we owe to Christ should be the inspiration of all our endeavour, and the divine force that keeps us going on and on. Denney comments,

It was a signal proof of God's mercy that He had entrusted Paul with the ministry of the gospel; and it was only what we should expect, when one who had obtained such mercy turned out a good soldier of Jesus Christ, able to endure hardship and not faint. Those to whom little is forgiven, Jesus Himself tells us, love little, it is not in them for Jesus' sake to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. They faint easily, and are overborne by petty trials, because they have not in them that fountain of brave patience – a deep abiding sense of what they owe to Christ, and can never, by any length or ardour of service, repay. It accuses us, not so much of human weakness, as of ingratitude, and insensibility to the mercy of God, when we faint in the exercise of our ministry.

The second thing that makes us able and effectual ministers or witnesses is that we should have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty (all that hinders the sweet savour from going forth). We see here, by implication, where weakness and discouragement can lead a man, betraying him into dishonesty and compromise in handling the things of God. The question then passes from the emotional realm to the moral. When a man loses heart he may also lose his testimony, yielding, for peace' sake, to the temptation to accommodate or adapt his message to suit the spirit of the time, to manipulate the gospel dishonourably, to apply diplomacy in the preaching of it so as to avoid the reproach of the cross that straight preaching will certainly bring.

Thirdly, an able minister manifests the truth. His task is to unveil and show forth what the Word of God says, to lay bare the truth, and allow it to come out and speak for itself (cf. Neh. 8:8 – giving the sense, and causing the people to understand the meaning). Underlying this is a basic, central presupposition, namely, that the truth itself contains the virtue and dynamic of God, and has within itself a converting, regenerating power.

There is another consideration here, however, and it is contained by implication in what was said earlier about renouncing the hidden things of dishonesty. For, of course, one great hindrance to the manifestation of the truth can lie in the preacher himself. If he is not right, the manifestation will not take place. He may say the right words, but the truth will be hidden, not merely in the sense that the hearers will be put off by the speaking of someone whose life they know is not right, but also even when the wrongness is quite hidden and unknown to any but God. Only when the channel is clean does the living water flow. But when it is thus made manifest it will appeal to a man's conscience, making an irresistible impression upon it.

'Commending' is the word Paul uses, but he does not see

it in the sense that the message creates a pleasing impression on the hearers. It was anything but that in the Acts of the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, when Peter manifested the truth, expounding the Scriptures, and made the people cry out, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' They were pricked in their hearts as they listened to Peter's manifestation of the truth. There is something very important here. Conscience is God's monitor in the soul, it is man's moral nature or the moral element in man's nature, and it is this that the Christian message has to address. Denney maintains that this is why the preacher's task is not to prove but to proclaim the gospel –

not to set out an unanswerable argument (although of course the gospel has a reasoned and reasonable case), but rather to make an irresistible impression, and to make that impression upon the conscience, the moral nature of man, in such a way that it will be futile for him to protest against it, an impression that subdues and holds him for ever, to manifest the truth, to hold up the truth before men until it tells on the conscience of those that hear it.

We do not have time to look at the immediately following words in vv. 3-6, tremendous as they are, except to link them with what follows in 7ff – 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face Jesus Christ' – this is the treasure that we have in earthen vessels. We must note the association of ideas: this light has shined in our hearts, and now, having been enlightened it is our responsibility to let the light shine before men. (Matt. 5:16)

But how to let the light shine? Through preaching, through witnessing? Yes – 'we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord' (v. 5) but there is another prerequisite. What I mean is this: look at the link between 'earthen vessels' (v.7) and being 'troubled on every side' (vv.8ff). The 'light' has to be let out. How can the light shine out of an earthen vessel? Well, there is not much you can do with an earthen vessel except break it. If the vessel is broken, the light gets out.

The old Puritan, Matthew Henry, has a remarkably fruitful interpretation of these words. He suggests that Paul may have in mind the well-known story of Gideon and his three hundred men (Judges 7:13-21). When the light shone through the shattered pitchers, there was such a display of light that the enemy thought they were surrounded by an army of thousands, and fled the field in disarray. This is how the victory was won!

Whether Paul had this in mind or not, it is an excellent illustration, and very pertinent for our point. There is only one way for a light to shine out of an earthen vessel, and it is for that earthen vessel to be shattered. And so Paul goes on to say: 'We are troubled on every side yet not distressed, always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.' The life also of Jesus – what is that? It is 'the light of the knowledge of his glory', for to speak of that light shining into us to transform us means nothing else than that the risen Lord of glory comes by his Spirit into our hearts. And he wants to *shine out* to bless men. It is the same idea, in different imagery, as Paul expresses in Gal-3:1, when he speaks of Christ crucified being 'placarded' for all to see.

The 'earthen vessels' refer to our human nature as it is, not merely our bodies, but including them: 'man's body in its weakness, and liability to death; his mind with its limitations and confusions.; his moral nature with its distortions and misconceptions, and its insight not yet half restored', It is to this that the mighty God commits the treasure of the light of the gospel.

This idea is something very deeply embedded in Paul's theology. You might call it the theology of Christian experience. Cf 1 Cor. 2 'I was with you in weakness, and fear and much trembling – (I had this knowledge in an earthen vessel), that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us – and my speech was not with the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.' You see? The earthen vessel was shattered, and the light shined out all over Corinth! Accompanying the marks of the cross, there are the marks of the resurrection. The one produces the other, as an infallible law of spiritual harvest: 'Death worketh in us, but life in you' Denney comments,

Suffering, for the Christian, is not an accident; it is a divine appointment and a divine opportunity. To wear life out in the service of Jesus is to open it to the entrance of Jesus' life: it is to receive, in all its alleviations, in all its renewals, in all its deliverances, a witness to His resurrection. Perhaps it is only by accepting this service, with the daily dying it demands, that the witness can be given to us; and 'the life of Jesus' on His throne may become incomprehensible and unreal in proportion as we decline to bear about in our bodies His dying.

What Paul means is that the 'dying of Jesus' is borne about by the evangelist, and that those who receive his message partake of Jesus' risen life and power! Our lives, he means, are to reflect the death of Christ in such a way that men are somehow reminded, of Calvary. We are to be signposts to Calvary, and our lives must say to men, 'Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.' They must say, and say positively and convincingly, 'I know a fount where sins are washed away.'

What Paul goes on to say in vv.13-15 serves to bear all this out. The point of the quotation from Ps. 116:10 seems to be this: 'I believe this to be the pattern of effective service for God. I believe this is what he promises to bless, and I am going forward on that assumption, that my sacrificial living, my bearing in my body the dying of the Lord Jesus, the shattering of the earthen pitcher, will be owned of God in revealing the risen and omnipotent Saviour to dying men and women.'

This is the real challenge of the minister's inner life and preparation for his work. It is a costly way to live, and we will often be tempted to take the lower ground, and substitutes for it are common. This is the realm where evangelical orthodoxy is made to do duty and becomes a substitute for living, fruitful, faith. No doubt you will have attended theological conferences, as I have done, whose intellectualism, though impeccably orthodox, has been barren of life, whose evangelical brilliance has been a brilliance without a heart, and therefore has come over as mere cleverness. I still recall with pain, after more than thirty years, a paper on Dispensationalism, in which a well known scholar sneered at the