

"CONTENT CENTERED EVANGELISM"

(Acts 13:13-52)

(Ajith Fernando)

There are three key factors in today's world that impede making the content of the gospel central to the evangelistic process. (1) The dominant philosophy of our age, pluralism, has given the idea of truth a severe bashing. Pluralism denies the importance of objective truth. In such an environment apologetics is regarded as inappropriate and even presumptuous. The pluralist says that truth is subjective—something we learn from our experience. There is therefore no absolute truth that comes from objective revelation. Instead of apologetics they propose dialogue—by which they mean an exchange of beliefs and experiences that will result in each one enriching the other.

(2) We live in a technological and information era that concentrates so much on action and information that there is little time to think about ideas and truth. Sammy Tippit has said, "Perhaps one of the greatest needs of this generation is for thinking men and women. The advent of the computer has brought artificial intelligence into the world. Many Christians have ceased to be thinkers in an age of computers and television." When people want refreshment, they go to something that will keep them active (like outdoor recreation) or that will numb their senses (like television). Preachers have an abundance of computer programs available that have done a lot of the thinking they would usually have done. While these have a place, nothing can replace meditation and hard thinking about truth. It is from such lingering with truth that effective apologetics and proclamation emerge. We should use the marvels of technology to make us efficient in doing things and gathering information so that we will have more time to think.

(3) Many Christian groups are oriented to experience. While this is not wrong and is, in fact, desirable, it must never dethrone truth. Sometimes experiences like healing can become so prominent that people do not associate the gospel with intelligent and demonstrable arguments. Many are not willing to work hard at studying the background of the audience and tailoring the message of what Christ has done for our salvation in order to be relevant, as Paul did. People fast and pray in order to receive the power of God—and that is vital for evangelism. But so is the power of being equipped with God's Word, which requires preparation time. For this power we must both pray and study.

In other words, we must exhibit the power of God's Spirit both in experience and in the world of thought. In this way we will have a balanced gospel that can withstand the dry spells that will surely come, when God's hand



seems withdrawn from us. Christians are not immune to such experiences. Those whose faith is founded on the truth will persevere, knowing that nothing can take away the truthfulness of the gospel. They will have the joy that the Christian disciples in Pisidian Antioch had despite the problems they faced (v. 52). But those whose faith is founded on experience will flounder when they encounter times of darkness. One would hope that at these times such people will stumble on the more secure and unchanging realities of Christianity.

It is not wrong, then, to attract people to Christianity by presenting them an attractive program that ministers to their felt needs. But that is not enough. We must get people to understand the glory of the truth of the gospel—something deeper and more lasting than experience. Then they will have joy in the gospel, a joy that can withstand the mysterious times of darkness in life.

In order to communicate this vision we must know in our own lives the joy of truth. We must take time to feed our minds with the truth and to meditate on it so that it will glow within us. As a result, those to whom we minister will, by observing us, also acquire a respect and appreciation for the truth. They will catch our enthusiasm over it. In the meantime we too will find ourselves refreshed and fed. This will help us remain fresh amidst the debilitating challenges of ministry. John Stott has said, "Scripture comes alive in the congregation only if it has come alive in the preacher first. Only if God has spoken to him through the Word which he preaches will they hear the voice of God through his lips."¹

¹ John Stott, *The Preachers Portrait: Some New Testament Word Studies*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 30.