

IS YOUR MESSAGE ALIENATING OR SOUL-WINNING?

Today's Text: Lk 6: 17-49

Extracts:

And He came down with [the twelve apostles] and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the sea-coast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases, as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out of Him and healed them all. Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ...But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" [Lk 6: 17-20, 24]

Terry Jones, 58, is the head of the Dove World Outreach Center, a fundamentalist Christian church in Gainesville, Florida, USA, with a congregation of less than 50 members.¹ Recently, he announced "An International Burn the Koran Day" for Saturday, 11 September 2010 to mark the day in 2001 when Islamic terrorists crashed hijacked passenger planes into major landmarks in New York and Washington, DC, killing thousands of innocent people. Following appeals and pressures from President Obama, the Pope and other top world and church leaders, Pastor Jones cancelled the planned event. However, much damage had already been done with violent protests in several Muslim countries, leading to some deaths in Afghanistan.

The pastor's threat was based on the message that he has consistently shared with his congregation over the years. That message (from his sermons and recent threat) may be quite popular among so many Americans who feel threatened by the activities of extreme Islamic groups, such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban. But how many souls has he won for Christ that way? We all face similar challenges. In our words and deeds, we daily send out messages to others about our faith (or the lack of it) in God through Jesus Christ. Are others encouraged or convicted to come close (soul-winning) or to run far away (alienated) from the Lord? Let us find out from this week's study, based on the message of Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount.

¹ Story based on the following sources: Russell Goldman, "Who Is Terry Jones? Pastor Behind 'Burn a Koran Day'," <http://abcnews.go.com/US/terry-jones-pastor-burn-koran-day/story?id=11575665> ; Sept. 7, 2010; and "US pastor Terry Jones cancels Koran burning," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11255366> ; ; Sept. 9, 2010

1. Background: Jesus “markets” His message of salvation

According to marketing experts, you must begin with full knowledge of what consumers want before you start production. You must be consumer-oriented, to use the buzz word. There must be demand for something before you can supply it. However, marketing also recognizes what is called planned obsolescence. That is, the producer can make the consumers feel that what they are holding on to is no longer good enough; that they need a better and newer model! That suggests that the consumer may not always be king! Jesus combined both techniques in delivering His message of salvation to His listeners, as the following analysis suggests:

a) *His audience*

If you have no audience to speak to, you have nothing to say! At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus attracted a variety of listeners to hear His message. There were the twelve *apostles* that He had just called [Lk. 6: 13-16] plus “a crowd of [other] *disciples*.” A great *multitude of people* came “from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the sea-coast of Tyre and Sidon” [v. 17]. We are told that the multitudes “came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases and [unclean spirits]” [vv. 17-19]. Note that the people came not only to be healed but to hear Him. In other words, they were looking to satisfy their desires as well as obtain yet unknown long-term benefits. For Jesus to get them to hear His message of salvation, He would have to first address their urgent material needs, especially with respect to healing their diseases and casting out unclean spirits.

People who gather today in our places of worship also vary. Many are unemployed and are not sure if they can get a new job soon or at all. Many have graduated from college and are looking for the opportunity to put a foot into the employment market. Some of them are devastated by terminal diseases or a costly divorce or crippled by credit card or mortgage debts. Some of them live in run down neighbourhoods without running water or stable power supply. Some are retired, old or feeble. Yet, each worship day, their pastors or priests preach the same message to all of them. How can you know what such people really need and whether their needs are being addressed or met? Jesus has shown us a good example to follow.

b) *His message*

Jesus began by first healing the sick in the multitude. We are told, “And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out from Him and *healed them all*” [v. 19]. Do you know that hunger or pain or anxiety can block the ears of those you are preaching to, especially when you do not seem to care about their pressing needs? Are you as interested in their good (welfare) as in their goods (tithes and offerings)?

Having met their pressing needs, Jesus was able to get their attention for His message. Then, He carefully crafted it as follows:

- The promise

What was in there for them in the coming kingdom of God? The poor would be blessed; the hungry would be filled and those who wept would laugh. The oppressed and outcasts would leap for joy because they would be rewarded in heaven when they were reviled or cast off or even martyred for Christ's sake [vv. 20-21]. On the other hand, it would be "woe" to those who relied heavily or solely on their material wealth or human adulation [vv. 24-26].

Faith has been defined as "the substance of things hoped, the evidence of things not seen" [Heb. 11: 1]. By giving His listeners a better hope for the future, Jesus was giving them the need to have faith in Him which is what makes us whole. So, what hope do you give to your audience in your sermons? Recently, I watched on television a sermon where the preacher said to his listeners, "For those of you who came to this crusade by public transport, I prophesy that by the end of the year (four months away!), you will own your own car in Jesus' name!" Would you say "Amen!" to such a mere wish?

- The conditions for receiving the promise

Jesus then went on to give His listeners the requirements for the kingdom of God. First, they had to love their enemies. They had to do good to those who hated them and pray for those who spitefully used them. They had to treat others as they would want others to treat them [Lk. 6: 27-31]. Second, they should give unconditionally to others so that their "reward [would] be great; and [they would] be sons of the Most High [f]or He is king of the unthankful and evil" [vv. 33-36]. He revealed to His listeners a golden principle of giving, namely [v. 38]:

Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.

Finally, they had to bear fruits of good discipleship. For example, they should be humble, serve instead of being served; they should not be judgmental but rather show the fruits of righteousness than of evil [vv. 39-45].

In summary, Jesus told His listeners that their priorities in life should be guided by the principle (as per Matthew's report of the Sermon) to "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be

added to you” [Matt. 6: 33]. Therefore, there is nothing scripturally wrong in promising your audience material blessings and earthly favours provided that they are *preceded by or anchored on the pursuit of eternal life in heaven through Christ Jesus*. That is the message for us from the Sermon on the Mount.

2. Marketing the message to the modern listener

On the day of His ascension into heaven, Jesus commanded His disciples to *“Make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all things that [He had] commanded [them]*; and lo, [He was] with [them] always, even to the end of the age” [Matt. 28: 19-20]. That mandate is for all generations of believers. *A true disciple of Christ must become born again and remain in Christ until death*. Jesus asked His listeners, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do the things which I say?” [Lk. 6: 46]. Therefore, obedience is the heart and challenge of the Christian message, no matter the church or denomination in which we worship. *We are to win souls for Christ on His terms, not ours*.

Many churches have employed marketing techniques in their drive for membership. For example, they make the church look more like a movie theatre than a house of prayer- with padded pews, Teleprompters and large screens to beam sermons to viewers or listeners. They conduct fewer and shorter services as worshippers’ attention span is shortened by work pressure or Internet indulgence. They carefully select sermons that glamourize prosperity and earthly favours. They “modernize” church practices to accommodate popular cultures that are based on gender equality and human/civil rights.

Ordinarily, there is nothing wrong with being user-friendly if that will *genuinely* win more souls for Christ. For example, if the Bible had not been translated into other languages in the Middle Ages, the spread of Christianity might not have been as rapid as we now have it. Without adapting to technological and social changes, Christianity could easily become a relic of history. But what is popular may not necessarily be always good. In practice, we see a variety of messages being conveyed by us or our church leaders to other worshippers or the secular world as the following examples suggest:

a) *Fear-mongering*

When we make an altar call (for people to give their lives to Christ), those coming forward may actually be Christians from other denominations or those that had backslidden trying to return to God. To convert Muslims or Hindus carries a severe threat of persecution, if not martyrdom. So, in practice, we may be experiencing “cannibalism,” that is, raiding of one denomination by another or people moving from one church to a more popular one. Popularity may not necessarily be out of spiritual growth but more of opportunities to meet people of influence- politically or otherwise.

What is then happening is that to prevent an exodus of their members, churches have begun to barricade them in by using fear-mongering techniques, no matter how subtle they may look. For example, they use rituals or practices to dissuade their members from interdenominational worship or services. They quote Scripture verses out of context to show that they are the only ones who are born-again or going to heaven. Or, they may define rules of conduct that challenge your understanding of the Scriptures.

In one major African global church, for example, a recently published rule is that you cannot perform weddings and other ceremonies there unless you show evidence of paying your tithes and offerings. To comply, you will then have to show proof of payment, thus requiring you to disclose to a third party what is supposed to be a solemn relationship between you and God alone. To refuse to comply is to put yourself outside and not many people would want to be in that situation. The parents of the man that Jesus had restored his sight were afraid to testify to the divinity of Jesus “because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was the Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue” [**Jn. 9: 20-22**]. In such circumstances, fear-mongering alienates listeners (especially as they do not see the fruits of true worship in their lives) and that may drive them farther than closer to Christ.

b) *User-friendly contraptions*

A related practice is to attract more members by lowering the bar of righteousness and make it relative rather than absolute. In such congregations, Scriptures become culture or situation-based. So, what may be considered wrong in Biblical times is now acceptable in the sophisticated modern world. The church must move with the times if it wants to attract or retain members. So, you should love the sinner and his/her sins! Messages from the pulpit no longer condemn sin or preach repentance. Listeners are told to come to Jesus “as they are” but I do not know the Scriptural basis for that assertion!

The word of God is clear that God does not change [**Mal. 3:6**], just as “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” [**Heb. 13: 8**]. When He confronted the woman caught in adultery, He challenged whoever was free of sin among those who wanted to stone her to death in accordance with the Law of Moses to cast the first stone. When nobody did, Jesus turned to her and said, “Neither do I condemn you; *go and sin no more*” [**Jn. 8: 3-11**].

User-friendly contraptions may produce a large congregation but not for heaven’s sake or for long. Unless they are combined with a call to repentance and holy living, they may wind up more alienating than soul-winning. That is why church attendance has dropped significantly in

Europe and America, compared to Africa and Latin America that are gradually becoming net exporters of missionaries to the West.

c) *The living word*

In Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount, we are told, "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teachings, for *He taught them as one having authority*, and not as the scribes" [Matt. 7: 28-29]. On another occasion, when Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum, He told His listeners, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. *The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life*" [Jn. 6: 63]. At the Sermon on the Mount, therefore, the message of Jesus was authoritative because He spoke the living word of God.

Any message that is Spirit-filled will be soul-winning. For example, after Peter had preached to thousands of pilgrims (to Jerusalem) on Pentecost Sunday, we are told that his listeners "were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" About three thousand of them gave their lives to Christ that day and were baptized [Acts 2: 37-38, 41]. The early churches in Judea, Galilee and Samaria "had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied" [Acts 9: 31].

From the foregoing, we can conclude that ***only the Holy Spirit can understand what your audience needs and how you can convey the salvation message to them***, which consists of not only meeting their material or earthly needs but eternal life.

3. Conclusion: Let your message stay on the Christ!

When people face pressing problems, coming to Jesus may not be their first option. They may hold on to any straw that they can grab- magicians, soothsayers, voodoo priests, experts, etc. It is only when all else fails that they come to Jesus, like the woman with the issue of blood for twelve years who had spent all her livelihood on physicians without any respite [Lk. 8: 43]. They will come to you because they believe that you are a true follower of Jesus. Therefore, you should help them with their immediate material needs. Thereafter, introduce them to Christ and His salvation plan by teaching them the word of God, not your personal precepts. Nurture them by practising faith with love [Gal. 5: 6] so that they will be encouraged to remain on the road to eternal life with Christ. In the words of Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, "you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" [Matt. 5: 48]. Jesus was in Spirit and His message had authority. Jesus is the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12:2] and without Him, you can do nothing [Jn.15: 5].

Therefore, to *effectively* win souls, let your message stay on the Christ.