

Study Fourteen

CALLED TO PROCLAIM

Peter says that those who obey Christ are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Peter 2:9). There is a simplicity about this call and also a magnitude and richness which will occupy us throughout our lifetime. The simplicity is this, that we who have experienced the transference from darkness to light could hardly do other than declare in every part of life, the deeds whereby we were freed. The magnitude and richness is this, that we were destined for such a role and constituted, with all who believe, as a priest nation, to represent God to all peoples.

It should be observed that the simplicity, and the magnitude of this call should both be preserved. The richness of the call can only be appreciated by those who maintain its simplicity. Those who become preoccupied with the magnitude of the task or intoxicated with the prestige of having the truth will only proclaim their own frustration or their own wonderful deeds.

I think, it is fair to say that Western Evangelical Churches have come through a period of almost unrelieved emphasis by its leaders on sharing the message of Christ but with no proportionate response from the Church. It has been observed however, that the great periods of Christian awakening have come when there has been a revived understanding of the truth of the gospel, that is to say, when the simplicity has been preserved. The church must keep its first love for Christ if its proclamation is to happen (Rev. 2:4f.; Jer. 2:1–3).

This study pre-supposes the other salvation theme studies in this series, and particularly the study 'Called through the Gospel' (Study 4), which focussed on the nature and content of Christian proclamation. This study will emphasise the authority and the responsibility to proclaim, and the goal of that proclamation.

BEGINNINGS OF PROCLAMATION

From the time of Abraham, the Hebrews had a priestly function among all the nations. Through them, all the families of the earth would be blessed. The Israelites at Mt. Sinai were called 'a kingdom of priests' among all the nations. (Exodus 19:5f.). The meaning of this seems to be that all the peoples of the earth rightly belonged to God, yet he chose Israel through whom to reveal himself to them. This revelation to the other nations is not prominent in the OT yet always present, and to be made particularly by demonstration, rather than proclamation (occasionally prophets were sent to other nations). Psalm 96 certainly shows that all people are subject to the Lord and so should know his truth. Also Isaiah 34. Isaiah 40—66 speaks repeatedly of Israel as God's witnesses. This referred firstly to the fact that they could not deny seeing God's works (eg 43:10), but had in mind also that that testimony should reach the Gentiles (43:21; cf. 49:26; 51:4; 55:3–5; 66:19).

In the days before Christ, Israel had set out to make converts on its own initiative but with a view to preserving and bolstering their own institution and outlook. Therefore it had no value in bringing people to God. (Matt. 23:15). It was exclusive whereas the NT proclamation was expansive. The Pharisees loved men when they repented, but Jesus loved them, so they repented. Discerning people will sense if they are being loved as people or as prospects.

It would appear that God wanted his people to know him fully as their Father in the freedom of forgiveness before a full-orbed proclamation was required. But when the Son came with this effusion of knowledge, his servants could be released to the whole creation.

Christian proclamation necessarily begins as a confession. When Peter exclaimed: 'You are the Christ' he was not benefiting Christ or his fellow disciples as much as himself. Human integrity requires that what we believe we acknowledge before men. Jesus said those who denied him before men he would deny before his Father (Matt. 10:33; cf. Mark 8:38). Paul said that if men would confess that Jesus was Lord and believe in their hearts that God had raised him from death, they would be saved (Rom. 10:9). Discovery of the truth remains an inward matter, but the reality of the discovery is betrayed by the ability to hold that truth while under pressure. (Rev. 12:17). The seed that is given good soil becomes fruitful. When Peter says 'We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard', he is not so much being bold as taking the only course open to him because what he knows he cannot 'unknow'. So confession is the beginning of proclamation and is the measure of a man's discovery. (cf. Acts 9:20; I John 1:3). The proclaimer must first be one who has tasted the goodness of the fruit (II Tim. 2:6) because the world is going to regard his message as folly, and he will need to know that the fruit is good.

When Jesus began his ministry he appointed other men to be with him and to be sent out to preach (Mark 3:14). Those who were fishermen were told they would be made 'fishers of men' (Matt. 4:19–21). One suspects that this call engendered in the disciples a sense of superiority, which Jesus had to counter on several occasions. But it was necessary to teach them that they would have a special role among men, and by the time they came to lead, they were well purged of their excesses. (cf. Joseph and Moses in the OT). The twelve were sent out with specific tasks associated with Jesus' ministry (Luke 9:1) and later the seventy (Luke 10:1–3). On this latter occasion, he taught them to pray for more labourers because the harvest was plentiful. On the occasion of Jesus' talk to the Samaritan woman, Jesus had shown a similar longing for more people to share the harvesting with him, and also showed that the whole kingdom proclamation was essentially a shared work (John 4:34–38).

THE AUTHORITY FOR PROCLAMATION

From the beginning man has been created to share in the bringing about of the goals of creation. He was to know God's mind concerning what was made and so enter into its fulfilment. (eg, fill and subdue the earth). So if it is the

purpose of God to redeem what has been lost, it is not surprising to see that he chooses to involve man in that action. One could argue that the part played in redemption, as in creation, is small, and it would be better to say that it was no part at all but rather an involvement in all that God does of himself. However, a part there is to play. In the case of proclamation, it is the exuberant confession of those who find that they know God, which is commissioned to inform the creation of what has been done. The human response to grace is not left to its own resources or the world could object to being drafted into someone else's enthusiasm, or say that one man's meat is another's poison.

In fact, God does not share his gospel on the basis of recommendation, but on the basis of command. The recommendation is inevitably present in the enthusiasm of the messenger, but this is never its authentication. The simplicity of eager response gives credibility to the message and so must never be absent, but its authority is based on Christ's commissioning.

Christ has been given authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18) because he gave his life for man and conquered his greatest foe (Rom. 1:4f.; Phil. 2:8–11). It is this authority of love that is behind gospel proclamation (cf. John 20:20–23). He conquered as man in the arena of men (Heb. 2:9) and therefore his authority has a peculiar applicability. Peter says very simply that Jesus commanded the apostles to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42f.). Therefore the proclamation of the gospel always arises from the authority of Christ (Rom. 1:5; cf. Rom. 16:26; 'command of the eternal God'), and so those who hear must respond to it.

It is worth noting that in Matthew 28, the obedience of the apostles is not in question. Jesus assumes that by using a participle ('going'). They had obeyed his 'Follow me' several years before and their presence with him now implied their obedience. In any case, the 'Follow me' was repeated on another sterner occasion (John 21:19, 22). But in Matthew 28, it is the nations who must respond to the authority of Jesus, and with this in view, Jesus gives directions to the apostles.

So the messenger is under the orders of Christ and both he and those who hear must come to terms with the fact that proclamation is what God wants done (Luke 24:44–49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). A man could not take this priestly role upon himself any more than an OT priest could appoint himself to office (Heb. 5:4; Rom. 15:16), but if commissioned he is under obligation (Acts 20:26f.; Rom. 1:14; I Corin. 9:16f.; cf. Ezek. 3:16–21). Paul had a very specific commission which placed him under this obligation (Acts 9:15), but all who know the grace of God are thereby constituted ambassadors (II Corin. 5:20 and 4:13–15). All of God's chosen people are to declare his wonderful deeds (I Peter 2:9). The familiarity with God which arises from grace, does not breed contempt but rather, godly fear, and this guards against any slothfulness in regard to discharging duty (II Corin. 5:9–11).

THE ACTION OF GOD IN THE PROCLAMATION

From beginning to end, the proclamation of the Gospel is God's affair. Jesus said he would make Peter and Andrew fishers of men. Paul was aware of a real ordinariness about himself and his works and could see that this was to show that the excellency of the power was of God and not man (II Corin. 4:7). The gospel itself, being what it is, the power of God to salvation, (Rom. 1:16–17; I Corin. 1:17–18) is dynamic, and needs only to be spoken with simplicity (II Corin. 4:2).

Jesus still works, but in his greatly diversified body (Eph. 4:8–12). He is seated at the right hand of God, head over all things waiting until all enemies are made his footstool. (Heb. 10:13). He is king in his kingdom until the time for handing the kingdom to the Father (I Corin. 15:21–28), and so the proclamation is the good news of the kingdom (Matt. 24:14; Acts 8:5–12; 19:8, 11, 18–20; 20:25; 28:23–30). This is the reason for the signs which accompany the preaching, and the effectiveness of it, in turning people to God (Rom. 15:17–19; I Corin. 12:29; II Corin. 12:12; I Thess. 1:5; Heb. 2:3f.; 6:5; I Peter 1:12). Paul could say that his speech and message were 'in demonstration of the Spirit and power', and that 'the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power' (I Corin. 2:3–5; 4:20).

Therefore the proclamation is to be by the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. As such it will be effective in all manner of situations and people's faith will be in God rather than in man. (See Mark 13:11; John 15:26f.; Acts 1:8; 4:8, 13,31; 6:9f.; 13:2; 16:10; I Thess. 1:4f.) The messenger, conscious of this dependence, will not assume everything will happen automatically, but will pray to be enabled by the Spirit (Eph. 6:17–20).

THE GOAL OF PROCLAMATION

The goal of Christian proclamation includes a number of elements but basically it must be the same goal as the one God has in mind. This is 'to unite all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth'. (Eph. 1:10). This is the plan he has revealed to man in all wisdom and insight through Jesus Christ. This would be related to the joy that Jesus anticipated when he was enduring his cross (Heb. 12:2).

Numerous intermediate goals arise from this. **Firstly**, people must be made to see God's forgiveness (Luke 24:44–49; John 20:23; Acts 13:38) for only then will they lose their hostility to God and become amenable to his plan. This would be the same as men being 'saved' which is contrasted to not knowing God (I Corin. 1:21). They must be called on to repent so as to go in the direction that God's grace is leading them (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; etc).

Secondly, believers are to receive the gift of the Spirit, ie, be indwelt by God himself (Acts 2:17, 38). They are to be learners of all that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20; Acts 2:42), obedient people (Rom. 1:5, 16; 15:18; 16:26). In other terms every man is to be presented to God, mature in Christ (Col. 1:28) with 'love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith' (I Tim 1:6). These people will give taste and light to their

communities (Matt. 5:13–16). All peoples, and whole peoples together are to be made learners of Christ (Matt 28:19), a task of incredible dimensions, but the one Christ is working at none the less, and therefore the one with which the Church must co-operate. This seems to imply that each grouping of people must be shown what it means to live as a Christian in terms of their own culture. As Jesus showed Jews, so Christians must show those to whom they are sent, becoming all things to all men in order to teach them (I Corin. 9:19–23).

Thirdly, the believers are to be baptised into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19), or into the name of Jesus which is effectively the same thing (Acts 2:38), and so be added to the church (Acts 2:47) or baptised into one body (I Corin. 12:13). Leaving aside the distinctions between local and universal church, and Spirit or water baptism, it is clear from the contexts of these references, that those who believed in Christ became immediate members of visible communities who baptised and taught them and in which they had obligations to love and serve. It is also just as clear, that this local and visible belonging was simply part of a wider belonging, because they all had access to one Father by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Therefore their attachment to a local community was indispensable because it gave immediate expression to the overall and ultimate goal of the gospel—to unite all things in Christ. In this tangible way, the church is a demonstration of the gospel's purpose and power and therefore is indispensable to its proclamation (Eph. 3:8–10).

Fourthly, the church is to pray that the Father's kingdom will come (Matt. 6:9f.). Already his power within believers is able to do abundantly more in them than they can imagine (Eph. 3:20f.). They are to seek his kingdom, and it is his pleasure to give them the kingdom (Luke 12:21f.). They share this kingdom now, together with its sufferings (Rev. 1:9), knowing that the kingdom of the world is to become the kingdom of their Lord and his Christ (Rev. 11:15) and that the accuser will be finally silenced (Rev. 12:10). Then every knee will bow to Christ (Phil 2:9f.) and because this is the way God will unite all things, the Church's proclamation must take every thought captive to Christ, destroying arguments and proud obstacles to the knowledge of God (II Corin. 10:5). The Church is not the kingdom, but shares in its power, speaks of its reality and anticipates its glory (Matt. 24:14; 25:34).

MEANS AND MANNER OF PROCLAMATION

In recent years Christians have used Marshall McLuhan's saying: 'The medium is the message,' and perhaps wondered if it was true. I think it would be more true to say that the message is the medium. The gospel is not a concept to be conveyed but a power to be released and which inevitably communicates. This means that everything a Christian does is communication.

It may be worth observing that what Christians do with the intention of communicating is often not living. (e.g. the joyful songs which the song leader says should be sung louder for people outside to hear probably bears no relation to the joy people have in their hearts.) The world should by now be

aware that commercial advertising of products is more closely related to people's whims than it is to the nature of the products. People who are hungry for truth will be aware that all public relations must be tested. The church would do well to ignore the question of public relations and concentrate on good relationships which would communicate itself. Then, when the church came to doing what it must do, bear testimony to the saving acts of Christ, the world would know she had something worth talking about.

The apostle John could say that he had seen and heard, viewed with wonder and handled the word of life. He then added that they proclaimed what they saw and heard with a view to sharing the fellowship with the Father and the Son which they enjoyed (I John 1:1–4). Each aspect of this statement is important for proclamation. John was markedly impressed decades after the ascension, with the richness and truth of Christ's appearing, and was currently enjoying, with others, a fellowship with that same Christ and the Father. His desire was not so much to declare this as to have the fellowship of those who would believe. Finally there will not be any more teacher and taught groupings as are necessary now. The prophecy has it that all shall know God from least to greatest, and no one will say to his brother 'Know the Lord' (Jer. 31:34). The reason for proclamation is simply that the bread given is for all to eat (cf. the lepers in II Kings 7:9). Knowing this preserves the purity of the message and the simplicity of communication.

All may share in the communication as did those who were scattered from Jerusalem by persecution (Acts 11:19f.). Probably their testimony arose out of the explanation of their refugee status. Whole communities may share in the proclamation as at Thessalonica (I Thess. 1:8–10). In this case, the radical change in lifestyle of many in one city sent ripples of interest across the whole Grecian peninsular.

The apostles and evangelists had special responsibility for spreading the gospel by virtue of their call from God, and appropriate spiritual gifts. The church played its part by commissioning them (Acts 13:2f.) and supporting them (Phil. 4:14–16). Paul said he used 'mighty weapons' to effect his ministry (II Corin. 10:4), but did not specify what they were other than that they were effective. They would be related in any case to the full-orbed communication described by Paul throughout II Corinthians. He loved those to whom he went (II Corin. 2:4) and was an aroma of life or death by his very presence among people (2:14–17), and commended himself by endurance, purity, knowledge, kindness, the Spirit, truthful speech and the power of God, and weapons of righteousness (6:1–10). His weapon beyond all others would be the one available to all brethren, the word of God, together with all the armour for protection and mobility (Eph. 6:10–18). Everywhere he set an example and asked people to imitate him (I Corin. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; I Thess 1:6; II Thess 3:9; cf. I Peter 5:3).

In all of this it is to be the Holy Spirit who guides in all strategy (Acts 16:6f.; 20:22f.) and God who causes the fruitfulness (I Corin. 3:8f.).

A picture of how rich the proclamation of the gospel can be is given by Paul in his farewell to the Ephesian elders. He said he had not shrunk from declaring anything that was profitable, had taught in public and private, not accounting his life as valuable if he could fulfil his ministry. He had testified of the grace of God, preached the kingdom, declared the whole counsel of God, and admonished everyone with tears (Acts 20:20–32). One may feel exhausted or deterred by this list, but the question is not what Paul did, but what Jesus did that made Paul do what he did. If we are captivated by that same Christ, we too will be ambassadors in the ways and places of God's calling, and God himself will integrate them all by his own supervision of the proclamation.

© 1979 Grant Thorpe