



Imploring Men to Come to Christ

Paul often brings together contrasting pictures of the Christian, and especially of his own work as an apostle of Christ and also the pastor of a congregation. He tells the Corinthians, *'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God'* (2 Cor. 5:20-21). There is, first of all:

The Glorious Commission

'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us' (verse 20). The office of the ambassador suggests dignity, movement, encounter and authority. The word Paul uses is in fact related to the Greek word for 'elder', that is, *'presbuteros'*, which literally means an old man, and so both the high office of ambassador and the very word employed suggests a certain rank which comes from a man's seniority. Eighteen months ago Britain's Conservative Party lost another General Election by a large majority and their leader promptly resigned. They were a minority, struggling and leaderless. One columnist writing in *The Times* gave them some advice: *'In choosing their next leader, Tory MPs will make a mistake if they take a second stab at finding a whiz-kid to dream up the brilliant fix which will catapult them back into the fast lane. They don't need another promised rocket ... They should look for grey hair, a proven track record, dignity, stamina, patience, and an ability to inspire affection and respect'* (Matthew Parris, 'Panic – then Find a Gent with Grey Hair', *Times*, 9 June 2001).

Think of the newscasters on television. They are not like the breathless hosts of children's programmes with their way-out clothes. They are usually middle-aged or old men in suits. I have never heard anyone complaining that their image is all wrong for reading the news, or suggesting that, if you asked a rock star or pop idol to read the news, that would put the ratings up. The image is right. For the news one needs a figure of authority and trust to address the nation.

So too in the case of an ambassador. He does not need entertainers in order to be heard. He does not need 'personality' or 'charisma' for men to heed him. He is not heard for any such reasons but because, behind his ambassadorship, lies all the authority of the monarch or nation whom he is representing. He must always remember his office and whom he represents as he speaks. He never officially speaks on behalf of himself.

The office of an ambassador was well known to Paul and the Corinthians. There would be constant communication, day by day, between the various Greek city states and for such intercourse an ambassador was employed. He spoke on behalf of the city. That was his authority for talking and behaving as he did. There was a similar office of 'legate' in the Roman Empire.

So the apostle Paul took to himself that title 'ambassador' when he speaks of his work. At the end of his epistle to the Ephesians he describes himself as *'an ambassador in chains'* (Eph. 6:20). He had been speaking for the kingdom of heaven, serving his mighty Lord, proclaiming his Word, and it was on account of this that he had been arrested and put in prison. But in our text he does not say, 'I, as an apostle of Christ, am the Lord's ambassador.' He separates the office of apostle which was uniquely his and the Twelve's, from the office of ambassador and he says, *'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors...'* There is that great 'we' as the apostle embraces the entire church in Corinth. He stands in solidarity with the whole body of Christ in the form of a local congregation.

As local churches we face the world as one of the embassies of the kingdom of heaven. You would be glad of your national embassy to run to if you were in serious trouble when overseas. The embassy staff would have the knowledge and authority to assist you. The church is an embassy from God and as it confronts the world it does so as those who are conscious that they speak on behalf of Jesus Christ. A true preacher comes with an authoritative word, as the ambassador from the Court of Heaven to plead the cause of Christ with men whom God so loved that he gave his Son to save them. As ambassadors we work *'on Christ's behalf.'* *'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors ... we implore you on Christ's behalf.'*

Notice the magnificent grace of God: it was *'on our behalf'* that God made Christ to be sin; it is now *'on Christ's behalf'* that God makes us ambassadors.

'His concern for us was so great that it led to the cross; how much concern have we for Christ? If we loved him as much as he loved us, we should be zealous ambassadors indeed. This phrase "on Christ's behalf" could transform our ministry. There is no more powerful incentive in evangelism than "for the sake of his name" (Rom. 1:5) ... Has God in and through the death of Christ done all that is necessary for man's reconciliation? Then we should spare no pains to urge upon men, persistently, earnestly, the necessity of being reconciled to God.'

(John Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait*, IVP, 1961, p. 44).

The Imploring Ambassador

The office of an ambassador suggests dignity, culture, measured tones and a firm almost regal bearing. But notice that the manner of Christ's ambassador is that *'God (is) making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf.'*

Paul uses two terms to describe how the ambassador speaks. God *'makes his appeal'* he says, that is, God is beseeching, or begging, or entreating people. It is the word used to describe disciples in intercessory prayer. Then there is this similar phrase, *'we implore you'* and this word is used of the leper who came to Jesus and fell on his face and pleaded with Jesus to heal him. It is used of the father of the epileptic boy who had *'begged'* the disciples to cast the unclean spirit out of his son. It is used of Jesus' intercession in Gethsemane. Does this not show the perversity of sin, that men have to be pleaded with by all the power of the living God to trust in God's own Son and receive everlasting life? Yet what grace, that a dignified ambassador descends to entreaty. What an incomparable glimpse of the pity of God!

Saul of Tarsus once thought he was serving God when he went as an ambassador of the Chief Priests to find any who were of the Way, throwing them into prison, both men and women. No pleading there: what rigour, what unyielding authority and uncompromising assurance of the rightness of his position he displayed! But old things have passed away, and this new ambassador is very different. He is beseeching men to be reconciled with God. He is an ambassador in tears.

It is a crucial observation concerning the state of our pulpits today that this note is not sufficiently present. It is not enough to have the best exegesis, and all of the insights provided by the history of redemption, and a well-constructed sermon with illustrations. Such sermons are rare enough, but more than that is needed. The sermon has to be an entreaty to the congregation to act in the light of the mighty works of God. The New Testament does not tell us to preach and then afterwards to make an appeal to men's wills to take action. All the sermon is couched in an appeal to our hearers to listen and *do* what they are hearing, whether this is rebuke or correction or instruction in righteousness. We appeal to them to be *doers* of the word'.

If they are unconverted we appeal to them to receive the reconciliation. If they are reconciled we entreat them to live the Christian life. Think of the picture of the ambassador which Paul gives us: *'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people'* (Rom. 10:21). We are longing for men to do what God requires, entreating and beseeching them to change. There are no true ambassadors without this, and there will be no effective evangelism. The ambassador declares the great central message of his Lord. He brings it to bear on the whole life of his hearers.

The repercussions for every part of their life follow from the impression made on their minds at the very time they are listening – not in the remembrance of it afterwards.

But more than that is required, the impact of our invitations to our hearers is not that they have seen a wonderful sight, some auspicious ambassador has been speaking to them, and he has actually been beseeching them to heed what he was saying – though it would be a great achievement for any preacher to lay that impression on their minds. But Paul increases the picture by an infinite measure, as though *God* were beseeching the hearers through the preacher.

The congregations are not thinking of some ambassador now, or indeed of any man. They are seeing the living God! That same God who spared not his Son, but counted our sins against him and Christ's righteousness to us, has now become a preacher. He who has 'in these last days spoken to us through his Son' continues to speak through his ministers.

Of course, not in the same way that he spoke through Paul, so that the apostle's words became the infallible Word of truth. Our words are never inspired like that, and it would be a disaster for any man or woman to think that they were. That is the beginning of every cult. But Paul was conscious that as he was speaking the truth of the gospel God was speaking to sinners at that same time, in his words, through his lips. As he was pleading with them to believe it, God was pleading. As he was exhorting, God was exhorting. As he was encouraging, God was encouraging. As he was rebuking, God was rebuking. So the assembly soon stopped thinking such things as, 'I wonder what that accent is ... I don't like his tie ... he is much shorter than I expected ... this is a long sermon.' In fact the congregation was thinking, 'I must remember this ... I need to stop that sin ... I am sorry I acted in that way ... isn't God great and holy? ... shouldn't I repent and follow the Lord Jesus? ... O for grace to soften my heart ... thank God for this gospel of divine mercy to the chief of sinners.'

They began hearing the sermon thinking those casual horizontal thoughts, but they ended thinking of the glories of the gospel. Every preacher who stands before men has the aim of achieving that in his congregation:

*May his beauty rest upon me
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only him.*

(Katie B. Wilkinson)

What picture of God do we have? An Old Man up in heaven? That is all right for the children, but there are many other pictures of the living God. God is a young man who is breaking his heart, with tears running down his face, as he looks at the city's vast crowds because they refuse to come under the protection that he has for them. God is a man speaking on a street corner stretching out his hands all day yearning for his hearers to be safe: '*Come unto me, and I will give you rest.*' God is a preacher who protests to crowds who are scorning his message, 'Why? Why will you die? I take no delight in your death. I want you to live. Turn! Turn to Christ!' So when I preach on the imploring God and the message of reconciliation I say such words as these:

The Message of Reconciliation

'God tells you what you must do. He has imputed sin to Christ and the righteousness of Christ to believing sinners. He tells you now to trust in Jesus. Look to him. Believe upon him, and he promises a full pardon and the beautiful robe of Christ's righteousness to cover you for ever. Why won't you receive it? To them who will receive this righteousness he gives the right to be called the children of God, even to them who believe on his Name.

'If I said to you that tomorrow I was going to take you to the best dress shop in town and purchase for you the dress of your choice whatever the cost, what would be your response? If I were to say that tomorrow I was going to pay off whatever remained of your mortgage, what would be your response? If I took you to a big garage and said, "You choose any car and I will pay for it", what

would be your response? I am sincere. Would you refuse my offer? If I said I intended to buy for you a comprehensive health insurance and maintain the payments until you died, would you refuse my generous offer?

'How incredible it is that men will gratefully take anything the world offers them, though such things will last only until death, while rejecting what God promises he will do for them eternally. Here is the righteousness of Christ. It will remain enduringly spotless forever. Will you not take it? Why refuse? What benefit can possibly come to you from refusing? Be clothed in this glorious garment. What could you desire more? Here is Christ's worthiness, for our unworthiness – his sinlessness, for our sinfulness – his purity, for our impurity – his beauty, for our deformity – his sincerity, for our guile – his truth, for our falsehoods – his meekness, for our pride – his constancy, for our backsliding – his love, for our hate. In a word, his fulness, for our emptiness – his glory, for our shame – his righteousness, for our evident unrighteousness.

'How happy the boy or girl, the man or woman, who hides himself in this righteousness. Be reconciled to God. End the alienation in God's way. We beseech you in Christ's name receive the righteousness of God in his free justification today.'

Geoffrey Thomas

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