A low sense of self-esteem

Everywhere today it seems that preachers are inhibited in their evangelical testimony because they are told that there may be people in their congregation with a low sense of 'self-esteem', and so they had better be careful what they say if they should speak of sin. Sermons can start out well, but then go off at a tangent because it is remembered what the psychologist said at the last ministers' fraternal or what Robert Schuller thinks a sermon should be like.

The effect of this thinking is that something less than a full-orbed gospel is preached and, too often, hearers are deprived of a real saving gospel which glorifies God, confounds the devil and saves souls. Others may not be reducing the apostolic and biblical content of their sermons, but feel uncomfortable about the issue just the same and so there is a loss of passion and conviction.

No one is suggesting that the gospel should be preached heartlessly, with no feeling for the needs of people. No preacher should want to see a person suffer as that person faces the awful truth about himself. When Jesus looked on the rich young ruler before He gave him those hard words, it is said, 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him' (Mark 10:21).

The hearer must be made to look to a real salvation and a real deliverance, but God's remedy will not be understood or appreciated if the real condition and state of the hearer before God is glossed over. This does not mean that the law has to be preached in every sermon. To preach the gospel remedy is to preach the law, for no one ought to sit under preaching about the cross and the blood of Christ without eventually feeling what an appalling condition the human heart is in to require such a drastic remedy.

The intrusion of pop psychology into evangelical thinking represents one of the most serious threats to the church today. How is it to be faced?

1. God calls us to humble ourselves before him and where there is no humility of mind and heart there can be no salvation and blessing. Matthew 18:4 and Matthew 5:3 are just two of many such verses of Scripture.

   Mary said, 'He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.'

   (Luke 1:51-53)

2. In spite of Reformed, biblical Christianity giving such a devastating diagnosis of the human condition, it is that same Christianity which elevates the worth and value of people for time and eternity. And it is where vital Christianity is missing that life is considered cheap, though after the church has lost its power this may not be immediately apparent. The worth of the individual is always at its greatest where Christ's gospel has been preached (see the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son, Luke 15). The blood of Christ says that the human heart is in a serious condition to require such a remedy. But it also says that God has held back nothing to redeem his people, no matter how costly. The believer can truly rejoice that he is the object of such amazing love. He is not proud but rejoices with trembling.

3. It is a full-orbed gospel with its message of a crucified Saviour which motivates people to go to the rejected and despised, and to tend to their physical and spiritual needs in the face of enormous difficulties, though the work is often ignored by the world and even the professing church. The modern combination of evangelicalism and psychology may produce a social worker but it will never produce a William Carey, a Hudson Taylor or a J. G. Paton.
4. A true biblical understanding teaches people the right attitude towards children. The Bible teaches parents that though their children are fallen, sinful creatures, yet they are precious gifts from God and of infinitely greater value than material possessions. A parent who constantly and contemnously tells the child 'you are no good, you are no good' is light years away from the true spirit of Christ, though on the face of it he may be expressing good theology.

    Jesus said, 'Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.'
    (Matthew 18:6)

The Apostle Paul warns fathers against provoking their children to wrath (Ephesians 6:4). A true Christian parent will give prayerful and emotional support to a son or daughter as he or she enters some new phase of life. (May God have mercy on us for the sins we have committed towards our children!).

5. An undesirable low sense of self-esteem (as against a desirable one which is humility) is caused by guilt and a feeling of having been defiled by sin. I say it is undesirable, yet to a point it is the best thing that can happen to a person. What do we think of a person who can sin with his tongue, body or mind and feel no sense of shame, guilt and defilement? Or the person who can sit under gospel preaching for years and still be hard of heart? Psychology and Schullerism would not care as long as the person is 'happy'. But we surely ought to feel that such a person is in a lamentable condition. Something drastic will have to happen to him to awaken him, so that God is no longer offended, his own life as well as the lives of others are no longer injured and no more condemnation is heaped upon himself.

    For such people the best thing is for them to have their righteousness and sufficiency laid in the dust, for them to come to a state of 'undoneness', to say, 'Woe is me' (Isaiah 6:5) and 'I abhor myself' (Job 42:6). And woe to the preacher or counsellor who would hinder that process. 'Pain is God's megaphone to a deaf world' says C. S. Lewis, and that includes spiritual and mental pain.

When God in his mercy, awakens the dull and listless conscience, guilt is aroused and there is a feeling of uncleanness which all the washing and perfuming will never take away. Then a beginning is made which should lead to the Saviour and to the fount for uncleanness or, in the words of Thomas Chalmers, to 'the sufficiency of the atonement' where 'all anxieties and terrors can be buried'.

    Of course, the non-Christian, worldly-wise counsellor is not interested in that. He would try to short-circuit the work of the conscience and the Holy Spirit and make the person feel 'good'. He would perhaps suggest a bit more sin, more worldly excitement to smother the inner voice and to restore a sense of well-being. But that course leads only to more self condemnation, more defilement, hardening of the heart, hell here and hell to come.

    The disciple of Schuller may not go as far as that, but he will probably make pathetic suggestions such as 'Believe in yourself', 'Look to yourself for possibilities', which is a more respectable but an equally certain way of going to hell.

How important that the feeling of guilt and condemnation should lead in the right direction! Judas felt these things but went and hung himself.

Guilt and condemnation should lead us to the Saviour and there one can even capitalize on one's sad feelings. After all, it was not for the righteous but for sinners, not for the healthy but for the sick Jesus came (Matthew 9:9-13). Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6. See also 1 Timothy 1:15). These are powerful arguments which the guilty sinner can use as he dares to approach God in prayer,

    Unless thou purge my every stain
    Thy suffering and my faith are vain.
Spurgeon makes the weighty remark: ‘If you are a real sinner you may have a real Saviour. If you are a sham sinner, a sham Saviour will suit you very well’. It is a turning point in a person’s life to see that it is because he is a sinner that Christ came and that in a marvellous way his condition and state before God, serious though it is, is an opportunity for God to display his grace and power in such a manner as never could be demonstrated in creation or any other way.

In all this two natural tendencies have to be fought. The first is the legalistic self-righteous state of our hearts which thinks it is our goodness rather than our wretchedness which draws down the pity and grace of God. The other natural tendency is to say that if we sin a little more or plunge into a bit more worldliness, we shall feel better and the low sense of self-esteem will go away. It is a great place to come to when we begin to pity the counsellor/psychologist/psychiatrist/minister who encourages this way of thinking and we see him as feeding our ego with lies and leading us away from the true remedy (read Ezekiel 13).

What a relief to confess before God what we really are, to throw off the burden of pretence, to expose him to our condition when ‘the whole head is sick, the whole heart faint; from the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it; but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores’ (Isaiah 1:6).

The person who knows ‘godly sorrow’ which ‘works repentance to salvation not to be repented of’ (2 Corinthians 7:10) is one who says: ‘I acknowledge myself to be the sinful creature that I am and what I have done is in accordance with my nature. I will turn to the Saviour for forgiveness and cleansing. To my dying day I shall resist sin, rejoice in being a son or a daughter of God, and look forward to that day when I shall be like him’.

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