NEW FOCUS

The Faith He Once Destroyed

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Saul of Tarsus was a formidable enemy of the church of Jesus Christ and of the doctrine of free grace. He despised Christ as the way of salvation and he cherished the law as a means of righteousness. When we first meet Saul he is debating and reasoning with the followers of Jesus. He was convinced they were merely simple, deceived fools whose convictions would soon evaporate under his searching arguments and the weight of centuries of Jewish tradition. The trouble was these disciples of Christ were slippery debaters and Saul soon learned to his shame that he was neither able to deny the wisdom of their testimony nor resist the Spirit by which they spoke.

Full of faith

One of the number of these followers of Jesus, a man called Stephen, especially confounded Saul. In fact he embarrassed a whole synagogue of Saul's fellows to such an extent that between them they hatched a plan to ensnare, falsely charge and publicly condemn Stephen in order to rid themselves of him once and for all. A few untruthful allegations, a few dishonest witnesses and a very real execution by stoning would deal with the problem of Stephen forever.

Stephen's death was a watershed moment for Saul. He realised the way to deal with followers of Jesus was not to waste time reasoning with them but to stamp them out by harassment and persecution. If Saul could disrupt their gatherings, banish their leaders from Jerusalem and pursue their followers to far away places he could destroy this movement and its influence for ever.

Saul the Destroyer

Saul dedicated himself to do just that. With as much force as in him lay he endeavoured to extinguish the church, its ministry and its followers. Though he could not entirely root it out he nevertheless shamefully abused and heartlessly destroyed many of Christ's disciples. He did all he could to discourage others from embracing the Gospel and professing it. He opposed the Gospel of Jesus Christ with what theological arguments he could to confute it and also employed the secular arm to crush its adherents and eradicate its influence.

Until, that was, he met the Lord Jesus Christ personally. On his way to the

city of Damascus carrying letters to arrest and imprison believers the Lord Jesus stopped Saul in his tracks. Saul's intention was to waste the church, Christ's intention was to convert and transform this murderer into a minister of the Gospel and a preacher of the very faith he once destroyed. As it always does, the will of Christ prevailed and soon the apostle Paul, a man of changed heart and amended name was himself being hounded by the enemies of the Gospel amongst whose ranks he once had been so prominent a champion.

A preacher of 'the faith'

Many years later, while writing to the Galatians, Paul spoke about his conversion experience and testified of how the Lord Jesus transformed his life, showing him the true meaning of grace and righteousness and calling him to serve Christ's cause. Paul had sought righteousness from being a young man and by his understanding of Moses' law was overmuch righteous in his own eyes. However, Paul had to be taught the true gospel by Christ and tells the Galatians 'the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.'

News spread amongst the young churches that Saul, the troubler of the Lord's people, 'now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed'. Paul became a Gospel minister and a preacher of 'the faith'. Paul's ministry was more than telling people about faith and more than calling sinners to repentance. Certainly, Paul preached about the gift of faith in Christ by preaching the nature and necessity of saving faith and directing and encouraging sinners, such as the Philippian jailer, to believe in Christ. However, 'the faith' Paul preached meant not so much the grace of faith which is the Spirit-imparted gift of believing, but the doctrine of faith or the body of Gospel truth which is 'the word of faith' or 'the faith of the gospel'.

'The faith' Paul preached was the full and comprehensive message of the Gospel that is variously called 'the mystery of faith', the church's 'common faith', our 'most holy faith' and 'the faith once delivered to the saints'. The doctrine of faith, as distinct from the gift or grace of believing is always intended when 'the faith' is said, as here, to be preached. The Gospel contains things to be taught, received and believed concerning Christ and His work. It informs men and women about, and directs to, Jesus Christ the great object of faith, and is the powerful means of implanting and increasing the grace of faith without which the ministry of the Gospel is of no use to those dead in trespasses and sin.

A body of divinity

Some preachers use the four Gospels as a narrative example for Christian living hoping that reading and memorising the facts and copying the example of Jesus' earthly activities will produce spiritual experience.

Others imagine they preach the Gospel when they use the miracles, parables and teaching from Christ's ministry to supply lessons for morality, good conduct and respectable character to their hearers. Yet others restrict gospel preaching to little more than fishing for 'freewill' decisions.

However, preaching the Gospel as Paul preached it involves preaching all the articles of faith and all the revelation of scripture concerning the divine Being. 'The faith' includes preaching the unity of God, the trinity of persons in the Godhead, the equal and proper deity of each person and their personal distinctions from each other. It requires attributing all divine works to their proper source and tracing them back to first cause and ascribing the proper worship and honour to God for them.

Preaching the Gospel means preaching what the scriptures teach concerning man with respect to his original creation in innocence, Adam's temptation and fall, the imputation of his sin to all his posterity resulting in the corruption of human nature and the inability of man to do, or even desire, any spiritual good. Preaching 'the faith' includes preaching all the Father's acts of covenant grace, the Son's offices of suretiship and substitution and the Holy Spirit's sanctifying and preserving protection.

The doctrines of grace

All the doctrines of grace from their origins in the divine will to their application in the lives of God's people are included in the Gospel. These include the free, sovereign, everlasting and unchangeable love of God; the eternal, personal and unconditional election of certain individuals to grace and glory; the redemptive work and success of Christ's atonement and the quickening, sanctifying and preserving work of the Holy Ghost.

Gospel preaching includes setting forth the everlasting, absolute, unconditional, and successful accomplishment of God's covenant mercies of grace and peace; of particular redemption by Christ, the satisfaction of divine justice; of justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; of reconciliation and pardon by Christ's blood; of regeneration and sanctification by the Spirit; of the perseverance of the saints in faith and holiness, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal glory. All this is included in 'the faith' that Paul preached and must be included in the Gospel ministry of every minister who aspires to preach the Gospel of which Paul was not ashamed.

The Gospel, ‘the faith’, the objective truth revealed by Scripture as the whole counsel of God is to be preached, published, declared, openly and publicly owned without dropping, concealing, or keeping back anything. ‘The faith’ is to be explicitly and plainly declared without using ambiguous phrases or words of double meaning. This was the practice of Paul and the other apostles and it is the means by which God calls His elect to Himself, exposes false doctrine and profits His people in the most holy faith for spiritual protection, comfort and wellbeing.

This Gospel of God should be the burden of every preacher and the passion of every congregation, the one calling God’s people to hear it, the other requiring it to be faithfully and constantly preached among them, for the glory of God and the building up of the church.

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