

A Very Dangerous Word

Of all the books and articles I have written or sermons I have preached, none cuts me – personally – deeper than this brief article. As I write it, as I read it, I sense the force of it. I want to. I need to. I must.

And, reader, so must you.

Even though I do not want to fault anybody for a word, nevertheless, there is a word which, if used in the wrong place, leads to extremely serious consequences. Indeed, I do not see how it could be more serious.

The word I have in mind is ‘about’. Of course, ‘about’ is a perfectly good word, and can be used in admirable ways, but there are occasions when, as I say, this little word ‘about’ poses immense problems. I have two issues in mind.

Take preaching.

We know what we should be doing when we stand to preach; we know what we should expect when we listen to a preacher. Or we ought to! Scripture tells us plainly enough.

Consider Paul. He spelled it out to the Corinthians:

We preach Christ crucified... Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 1:23; 9:16).

Take Philip. Scripture records that when he met the Ethiopian eunuch – who was reading Isaiah 53 – then:

...Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus (Acts 8:35).

And we have Christ’s standing manifesto for his people throughout the age:

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation (Mark 16:15).

Following the dispersion of the early believers (apart from the apostles) from Jerusalem:

...those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ... When [Peter and John, who had been sent to look into the work] had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-5,25).

Further afield:

There were some... men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:20).

And:

When [Barnabas and Saul] arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews (Acts 13:5).

When Paul stood before the Areopagus in Athens, he was blunt:

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you (Acts 17:23).

As he told the Romans:

I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome... I make it my ambition to preach the gospel (Rom. 1:15; 15:19).

And, in concluding his letter to the Romans, the apostle rounded it off by speaking of:

...the preaching of Jesus Christ (Rom. 16:25).

As he explained to the Corinthians:

I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 2:12).

I leave it there. The point is made. Quoting scores of other scriptures would only further enforce the point. Our duty, our privilege, is to preach the gospel, to preach the word of God; above all, to preach Christ. Various words are used to describe the activity – preach, herald, declare, announce, proclaim, and

such like¹ – but our duty is plain: not to beat about the bush and preach, declaim, herald *about* the gospel, *about* Christ, but to get straight to it and preach the gospel, preach the word of God; above all, preach Christ.

The point is this:

*We are to preach the gospel, preach Christ; we are not to preach **about** the gospel, preach **about** Christ.*

There is a world of difference between the two. In this context, the word ‘about’ ruins all. Ruins it, I say.

I know of no text which tells me I must ‘preach about’ Christ.

So much for preaching in this regard. We are to preach Christ and not preach about Christ.

The second issue cuts even deeper. Preaching is one thing; personal experience is another. I am talking about the difference between knowing Christ and knowing ‘about’ Christ.

Remember what Christ declared in his great prayer of intercession:

This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).

God had made it clear in the prophets:

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this: that he understands and knows me [the LORD] (Jer. 9:23-24).

No wonder, then, that Paul prayed for the Ephesians:

...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him (Eph. 1:17).

Hence he could speak of the purpose of the gospel ministry for every believer:

¹ See my *Preaching Today: Food for Action as well as Thought*.

...[that] we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood (Eph. 4:13).

So much so, as he told the Philippians:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... that I may know him (Phil. 3:8,10).

And Peter spoke of it:

[God's] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence (2 Pet. 1:3).

As did John:

By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments... We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 2:3; 5:20).

This last extract holds the key. Understanding – knowledge, in that sense – is involved, but this knowledge or understanding must lead us to a felt knowledge, a personal experience, of Christ. Otherwise, it amounts to nothing. The biblical use of ‘know’ certainly carries this intimate sense (cf. Gen. 4:1,17,25; for instance).

Just like preaching – that it must not be preaching ‘about’ – so with knowing. There is a world of difference between knowing Christ, knowing God in Christ, and knowing ‘about’ God, knowing ‘about’ Christ.

The other week, a man in the congregation, wanting to encourage me, spoke to me after my sermon. And he succeeded: he did encourage me. Driving home what I had said, he exclaimed: ‘It is not knowing *it*, experiencing *it*; it is knowing *him*, experiencing *him!*’ or words to that effect. First class!

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones spoke about ‘the danger of knowing “about” a subject rather than knowing it’:

What a difference there is between preaching about the gospel and preaching the gospel! It is possible to preach round the gospel and say things about it without ever presenting it. This is quite useless – indeed it [is]² very dangerous. It may be true of us that we know ‘about’ these things, but do not really know them. And this, of course, becomes all-important when we realise that the whole end and object of theology is to know God! A person! Not a collection of abstract rules, nor a number of philosophical propositions, but God! A person! To know him! – ‘The only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent!’³

Again:

We are to preach the gospel, and not to preach about the gospel. That is a very [*sic*] vital distinction, which one cannot easily put into words, but which is nevertheless really important. There are men who think that they are preaching the gospel when actually in fact they are simply saying things about the gospel... [Some] talk constantly about ‘the word’, and say things about ‘the word’. But that is not what we are called to do; we are called to preach the word and to present the word, and to bring the word directly to people. We are not simply to say things about it, we are actually to convey it itself. We are the channels and the vehicles through which this word is to pass to the people.⁴ Another way I can put that is to say that we are not called just to say things about the gospel. I remember a type of preaching fifty years ago and more,⁵ which was often described as ‘praising the gospel’. The comment on the sermon and the preacher was, that he had praised the gospel. He had been saying wonderful things about it, or showing how wonderful it was. I suggest that that is wrong. [It *is* wrong! – DG].⁶ The gospel is wonderful, the gospel

² Lloyd-Jones had ‘can be’.

³ D.M.Lloyd-Jones: ‘Knowledge – False and True’, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, pp31-32.

⁴ This must not be taken to mean that hearers must accept the preacher’s words as absolute truth. Every hearer is responsible for testing the preacher’s words against Scripture (Acts 17:11).

⁵ Lloyd-Jones was speaking in 1969, so he was referring to the opening decades of the 20th century.

⁶ It did not die out all those years ago! How often I hear a preacher telling me how wonderful the gospel is – or asking me in a weak way if I agree that it is wonderful. Oh that they would actually preach it to me, actually preach Christ!

is to be praised, but that is not the preacher's primary task. He is to 'present', to declare, the gospel.

Or let me put it like this. The business of the preacher is not to present the gospel academically. This again is done frequently. The preacher can analyse it and show its parts and portions, and show how excellent it is; but still he is saying things about the gospel, whereas we are called to preach the gospel, to convey it, and to bring it directly to the individuals who are listening to us, and to bring it to the whole man. So let us be clear that we are not to talk about the gospel as if it were something outside us. We are involved in it; we are not to look at it just as a subject, and to say things about it; it itself is being directly presented and conveyed to the congregation through us.

Lloyd-Jones recorded the deplorable way in which he had been treated as a young man when the minister suggested – suggested, mark you – that he become a church member:

I was received into the church because I could give the right answers to various set questions; but I was never questioned or examined in an experimental sense.⁸

Alas, despite Lloyd-Jones' popularity, despite his clear warning fifty years ago, nowhere is this confusion of 'knowing Christ' and 'knowing about Christ' more clearly manifest than in much of today's preaching,⁹ and in evangelism-by-courses-in-Christianity. The doling out of facts, often tediously reinforced by PowerPoint, the learning of facts, the ability to repeat facts is not the same as preaching Christ, and calling for a personal, felt knowledge of Christ.¹⁰ Not by a long chalk!

As Joseph Hart said, true belief is more than notion:

Let us ask th'important question,

⁷ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching & Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, pp67-68.

⁸ Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching* p152.

⁹ See the note just above.

¹⁰ See, for instance, my 'Beware of Parrots'; *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly; The Secret Stifler: Incipient Sandemanianism and Preaching the Gospel to Sinners; No Safety Before Saving Faith*.

*(Brethren, be not too secure),
What it is to be a Christian?
How we may our hearts assure!
Vain is all our best devotion,
If on false foundations built:
True religion's more than notion;
Something must be known and felt.*

Just so! Something must be *known and felt*. In fact, I would improve Hart: *Someone* must be known, and our relationship to him must be felt!

Let me remind you of how I began this article:

Of all the books and articles I have written or sermons I have preached, none cuts me – personally – deeper than this brief article. As I write it, as I read it, I sense the force of it. I want to. I need to. I must.

And, reader, so must you.

There is no neutrality. We either know God or we simply know something about him. Eternal consequences hang on the difference. One is saving; the other is not. Remember the words of Christ:

This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).

Listen to Paul:

To the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work (Tit. 1:15-16).

Reader, do you know – know in a felt sense – do you know God in Christ? Or do you merely know some facts about him, and that is all?