

The Gatepost
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Speculative Preaching

A pastor friend related to me his experience with the religious movie “A Thief in the Night.” “I had not previewed the film,” he said, “and if I had, I would not have allowed it to be shown. After viewing it, however, I refused to allow them to give an invitation. I would have had scores of children and adults respond to that thing who knew nothing of the gospel and the saving grace of Jesus Christ.”

A few weeks ago I ministered in a church near a large Baptist Seminary where a large number of Seminary students attended. This was an exceptionally strong spiritual church and attracted some of the best of the student body. Yet I was amazed at the large percentage of *divinity* students who displayed no gifts and evidenced no clear calling to a vocational Christian ministry. One young man who was contentedly employed as a meat cutter in a local supermarket, in whose home I was invited to dinner had graduated with a Master of Divinity. The pastor assured me that this was no rare exception, but very common. Indeed, it seemed to be more the rule than the exception.

These two examples illustrate the dubious value of speculative preaching. The former were victims of “Jesus *may* come tonight.” The latter of “God *may* be calling you to be a preacher, missionary, etc.” Both are presented with skillful zeal, depicting vividly the tragedy of missing out by failing to respond in the case that what might be so is actually so.

Speculative preaching is preaching and majoring on what *might* be or what *could* be, instead of what *is*. It hopes to invoke a response or decision through the emotional and mental agitation that is stirred over possibilities, not facts.

Some of these raise no more serious objection other than a waste of time, valuable time that could be utilized in the preaching of the gospel. Such things are geological conjecture, how old is the earth, how many times it has been judged and renovated, its former occupants . . . if we have no definite word from the scripture on it, nothing can be proved, and therefore, no sound doctrine can be formulated and it is totally unprofitable. Such speculations will only entertain idle minds who want in thirst for sound truth.

Others are more dangerous, or at the least, less harmless. I will list a few.

Political or economical disaster. These are seen as possible fulfillment of isolated portions of scripture. The preacher then reinforces his postulation with some ever-present current events, some of the “present-distress” that is and can always be found at any point in time to give people a fearful and gloomy outlook for the future.

Examples are not lacking for the results of this kind of speculative preaching. Bomb and fallout shelters, hoards of food, silver, and gold bought at inflated prices and stored away in vaults are all monuments of disasters that never happened.

Nor am I suggesting that such political and economical disasters will never come. I am only putting a big question mark on the wisdom of wasting valuable preaching time with conjecture when it has no sound “thus saith the Lord” base. It will only disillusion people and make them more skeptical of truth when a true warning must be set forth. We cry “Wolf, Wolf” too much.

Appeals to give, to buy, to sell, to move your place of residence. These are presented with strong arguments that God *might* want you to draw all your money out and give everything you have to this or that cause. God *may* want you to buy so many church bonds or such and such minister a new car, or He *may* want you to sell your home and move to another state where conditions are different

and you will have a great ministry for the Lord. These are generally presented with stirring testimonies or stories of how some person made such a move or gift or purchase, and how God mightily blessed that person. Or sometimes how one refused to do what God wanted him to do and how much misery he suffered as a consequence.

Believers have enough trouble from the devil trying to push them into foolhardy impulses, accusing them lest they “miss the will of the Lord,” without preachers joining the attack also. Too many have discovered too late, to their bitter disappointment, how subtle and convincing such enemy assaults can be.

Calling out the called. Apparently many ministers and denominational leaders do not feel that God is able to make Himself heard in calling those whom He has chosen to serve in full-time vocational ministry. Special meetings are scheduled for such appeals, where young men and women or even juveniles are urged to surrender to preach, for missions, for full-time Christian service, or even to particular fields of service, such as India, Africa, Brazil, Chili, Etc. Mission fields, church pastorates, and especially colleges, Bible schools, and seminaries are continually littered with the debris of wasted lives of people who have no call and no gifts for and no business in pursuit of such a career. They had been pressured into yielding to what *might* be a call. God is able to make His call definite and unmistakable. Many times persons respond to a call for special service when they simply need to be converted. It is far more honorable and less humiliating to do that than to admit one is a lost church member.

Prophetic Fulfillments. There is a marked contrast between the Prophets of the Bible and the preachers of prophecy today. The Prophets stood and declared, “Thus saith the Lord, at such and such a time on such a day, this will surely come to pass.” They made definite statements, stuck their necks out and put their lives on the line when they spoke. Today’s preachers of prophecy say, “This may well be the Anti-Christ, the Mark of the Beast, the Ten Federated Kingdoms,” etc. Peter stood up and said, “This is that.” Today’s impotent imposters bellow in impressive, resonant tones, “This may well be that.” Lost in the overwhelming personality of the man is the fact that he has said nothing of any profit or value, has committed himself to nothing, has taken your time and money and left you nothing but idle speculation in its place.

Despite the many admonitions that it is not for us to know the times and seasons that the Lord has put under His Own power and hidden from us, men insist upon speculating upon them. Two facts ought to settle and end the matter. The first is for the unbeliever: “For when they shall say Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.” For the unbeliever there are not signs that he will believe and from which he will take warning. Abraham told the rich man in hell that if his brothers would not believe the truth (Moses and the Prophets), they would not believe such a sign as one rising from the dead.

The other fact is, “But ye, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief” (1 Thess. 5:3-4). Christians will not be surprised, alarmed or unprepared when the Lord comes. That is a fact. God has warned, and prepared us, and we will be ready. The unbeliever will heed no warning, the believer needs none, so why all the speculative preaching?

Some believe that the flood of preaching on prophecy, on Eschatology today, is God sent. They say that just as the Lord raised up the Reformers in the Reformation to preach on the great theme of justification by faith, and that other doctrinal issues occupied the forefront among theologians in time past, God is raising up men to put the focus on the doctrines of last things today.

I think not – the Reformation was simply a return to the truth, the true doctrine of salvation that had always been taught by the true Church and had been obscured by the leaven of Rome. Today’s preaching on prophecy gives no certain sound. It formulates no doctrine that has not been generally agreed upon by practically all evangelical Christianity down through the ages. The one

exception to this is the advent and rise of pre-tribulationism and imminence that appeared in the mid-19th century. The scriptures do not permit a dogmatic foundation for any system of the order of events at the close of the age. The Christian Church has always recognized this, and not one of the major confessions of faith has included a *system* of eschatology. Men are preaching on prophecy today as a last desperate attempt to attract people to religious meetings. It is a thinly veiled gimmick, an indulgence offered to itching ears that will not endure sound doctrine on the facts of sin, grace, holiness and judgment. If one doubts this, he only need check the popularity of current best-seller books on prophecy in secular newsstands and bookstores.

Jesus may come tonight. Please don't leave me before you hear me out on this one. I know I am dealing with a sacred cow now, because many have come to believe that the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ was synonymous with conservative evangelical Christianity. While this is far from the truth, I am not going to concern myself with supporting or denying the doctrine of imminence, but only to illustrate that the doctrine is unnecessary to the gospel message, adds nothing of any value to it, and we would lose nothing by leaving it out of our preaching altogether.

Some may now say that the fact that it is taught in the bible is sufficient reason to preach it. Quite true. If it were actually taught in the Bible. The fact is, it is not, and was not generally preached until the mid-19th century.

It is preached, not because it is a Bible doctrine, but because of its supposed utilitarian value. The fact of Christ's imminent return is held out as an incentive to excite people to do something *now*, because He may come tonight and catch you unprepared. I want to now challenge the validity of that utilitarian value. It is generally imagined in two arenas: An incentive to holiness and a deterrent to sin in believers, and, to impress the urgency of trusting Christ now upon the unbeliever, lest Christ should come before he has another opportunity.

As to the first, I would like to give an illustration that will prove its absurdity. A certain woman, a wife, and homemaker is greeted:

"May I speak with your husband, please?"

"He is not here. He has gone to work."

"When will he be home?"

"I do not have any idea. He never lets me know when to expect him. He just tells me to be prepared when he does come."

"Where does he work? What does he do? Where can he be located?"

"He never gives me any of that information. If he did, I could check up and find out where he is and if I knew where he was, I would have some idea how much longer he would be gone."

"Madam, I do not understand why your husband will give you no information as to his whereabouts, what he is doing and when he will be home, but expects you to be always looking for him."

"Why, it is really quite simple. My husband does not trust me. He is sure that I have a whore's heart and that any time I thought I had time to get away with it and would not get caught, I would take myself a lover. But the prospect of his imminent return keeps me pure and holy to him. It is his way of making sure that I am a faithful, obedient and loving wife."

Ridiculous? To be sure. But do not think my illustration has been unfair. It is exactly the relationship pictured by those who preach imminence as a deterrent to sin. Husband and wife is the precise relationship the Lord uses to portray Himself and the Church. Christ has purchased for Himself no harlot, but a blood-washed holy people who so desire to please Him and so love His holy law, that they hate every false way. His omnipresence and their fear of offense to Him is sufficient to keep them holy.

Imminence and the possibility of Christ's any-moment return is preached simply as a prop to restrain the wicked from indulging in their hearts' desire. It is accommodated to ignorant unconverted church members.

As to the second, a means of impressing upon the unconverted the urgency of trusting Christ now, I have touched upon it in the opening paragraph in this article. Men are scared and stampeded into making a decision who know nothing of Holy Spirit conviction of sin and of the Holy God to Whom they should petition for mercy. When the passion of the hour has faded, their religion can nowhere be found, for it was based upon a possibility that did not materialize.

An objection may now be set forth: Are not men threatened with the possibility of eternal perdition and so urged to flee to Christ? No, they are not. They are told of the *certainty* of everlasting hell, except they find mercy in Christ Jesus. The thing is a fact, not a possibility, and it is real to the elect sinner, driving him into the arms of a merciful God. Christ's coming tonight is not a fact, but a theological possibility.

Another objection may now be heard. Yet many are soundly converted under such preaching. This proves nothing. God is able to make His sovereign call heard in spite of our error. They who have been genuinely saved were not saved through the preaching of a possibility but through the preaching of gospel truth. Leaving out the speculation in preaching will not diminish sound converts one iota. It will only diminish the spurious ones.

The fact of the matter is, we have not been given a gospel of speculation and conjecture, of what might possibly be: We have been given the word, the truth. We are indwelt by the Logos, the Word, that which may be *known*, expressed and declared with certainty. Why should we forsake this vein of pure gold for a mud wallow, which might have a few copper pennies scattered around? If men are not brought to face the Christ in pure truth, they have no light or life (John 1:1-4)

The promise and prospect of Christ's return is the blessed hope of the believer, not a horrible threat to the sinner. His return is our comfortable promise, not an axe of intimidation.

"Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the *day of Christ is at hand.*" . . . "Therefore brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." (2 Thess. 2:1-2, 15)

- C. M.