

2013/5: The Gospel To All The Nations (Rom. 10:14-17)

by BS Poh

I have a burden. It is to convince local churches of the need to bring the gospel to all nations on a regular basis. Three things are involved - to ensure that the gospel is preached, to reach out to all nations, and to speak to the same hearers regularly for as long as that is possible. Let us consider each of these in turn.

I. Preaching the gospel faithfully.

The first point is that we should preach the gospel faithfully. What is the use of preaching something that is not the gospel? A distorted gospel misrepresents God and the way of salvation. It will not save, while misleading the hearers into thinking they are Christians. If saved at all, the faith of the believer will be severely malformed. Much "corrective surgery" is needed later to bring such a believer to the full enjoyment of the Christian life. If not corrected, he may pose a pastoral problem to the local church. He may even become a danger to the church at large by propagating his distorted beliefs. The apostle Paul warned against preaching a gospel that is no gospel (Gal. 1:8-9).

What is the gospel? Different circumstances present different opportunities and challenges in the presentation of the gospel. The gospel can be expounded as extensively as the whole book of Romans, or it can be presented in a nutshell as in 1 Timothy 1:15: "This *is* a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Whether preached extensively or briefly, the content must consist of two basic ingredients, namely, the person of Jesus Christ as Saviour, and the work accomplished in His death. Paul summarised the gospel as "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The resurrected Lord revealed to His disciples that the OT Scriptures spoke concerning Him: "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:46-47)."

What is important, then, is not how long or how short the preaching is, but the content - whether it consists of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified". When preached correctly, it will be clear that salvation is "by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ alone", and not "by works" (Eph. 2:8-9). It will be seen that "a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Rom. 3:28)." When properly preached, the gospel will be judiciously applied to the hearers, so that they are made to see the need to repent of sins and to believe in Jesus Christ. They will be moved by the love of God shown in the giving of His Son to save sinners. The Holy Spirit will use the preached gospel to bring conviction of sin, and the need for the righteousness of Christ to stand before God.

A controversy over gospel preaching in recent years is whether there is a need to preach a distinctive gospel message in contrast to the consecutive exposition of Scripture. It is claimed that as long as the Scripture is expounded systematically, the gospel will automatically be found in the exposition. This is based on the Lord's words in Luke 24:27, "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself", and also verse 44, "These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me."

However, when we look more closely at the context, we discover that the Lord is referring to certain things about Himself. He says in verse 26, "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into glory?" And in verse 46-47, as we have noted, the Lord says, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." So then, what we find is the Lord saying that all the OT Scriptures speak about Him and His death and that the message of salvation will be declared to all nations. There is a distinct message that focusses on Himself, His death, His resurrection, and the remission of sins in His name. It is clear, therefore, that a distinctive gospel message is to be found in all the OT Scriptures. We should preach a distinctive gospel message to win souls to Christ.

Preaching the gospel differs from expounding Bible passages for the edification of believers. While there is considerable overlap between gospel proclamation and teaching that edifies believers, the distinction between the two must be noted. Since the aims are different, the emphases will be different, and the contents put forward will differ. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, preaching to "make disciples of all the nations" is different from teaching the new disciples "to observe all things" that the Lord commanded. In Acts 20, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that in his time in Ephesus, he preached "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" and he also declared to the believers "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:21, 27). In Ephesians 4:11, we are told that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers are given by the risen Lord "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ ..." The extraordinary officers of apostles, prophets, and evangelists have been withdrawn with the completion of Scripture. Pastors and teachers remain to do the work of "equipping the saints" and "edifying the body of Christ". The church should not be remiss in this work of building up believers. It should also not be remiss in reaching out to non-believers with the gospel.

Another issue connected with the message of the gospel concerns how it is denied by actions arising from its proclamation. The practice of having the "altar call" in mass evangelism was popularized by Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) in the 19th century in America. In that practice, those who desired to become Christians were to indicate so by walking to the front of the congregation so as to be prayed for, or to be led in prayer. The Pentecostals adapted that to include prayer for the reception of the Holy Spirit, indicated by tongue-speaking, or for healing of sicknesses. The practice of having the altar call has been followed by men like Billy Graham and Benny Hinn. In Asia, it was adopted by John Sung (1901-1944) of China and is practised by a professed Reformed preacher in Indonesia, Stephen Tong. The altar call is supposed to be based on Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service." Another passage that has been appealed to is Christ's call in Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." These passages, however, have nothing to do with physical walking. The "coming" is in the heart. The call is to believers for consecration to Christ and to non-believers for faith in Christ. We do not find the Lord practising the altar call. We do not find the apostle Peter practising the altar call on the day of Pentecost. We do not find the apostle Paul practising the altar call in his ministry. The altar call is an invention of man that contradicts the doctrine of "salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone". It gives the wrong impression to the hearers that their act of walking to the front of the congregation has contributed to their salvation. It becomes a form of "faith-plus-works" doctrine of salvation. The altar call is based on the Arminian doctrine of the freedom of the human will from bondage to sin. The focus is on the number of decisions made during the meeting. It has produced many false converts who are not found attending any church subsequently.

Our concern is that the gospel should be preached faithfully, the message of which must revolve around the two points of Jesus Christ being the only Saviour of sinners, and that His death on the

cross alone makes atonement for sin. The hearers must be called upon to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. The gospel is a distinct message which constitutes the essence of the Bible's message. We do not want to distort or obscure it.

II. Reaching out to all the nations.

We consider the second point, which is that we are to reach out to all the nations with the gospel. It needs to be emphasized that "all the nations" in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 means "all the ethnic groups". The Lord indicates, in Luke 24:47 that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Where are "all the nations" to be found? In the Lord's days, "all the nations", i.e. the Gentiles, were found even in Israel. The gospel was at first preached only to the Jews, even though some Gentiles benefitted from the Lord's teaching (Luke 7:1-10; John 12:20-21). Since then, the grain of wheat has fallen into the ground and died, and it is now producing much grain. The Son of Man has been lifted up from the earth to draw all peoples to Himself (John 3:14-15; 12:24). He wants His people to make disciples of all the nations.

The "all the nations" are found even at our doorsteps. We must understand that mass migration of people have been a known phenomenon from time immemorial. With increasing globalization and the improvement of transportation, more individuals and families are on the move, due to education, work, and other reasons. People of diverse ethnic background are found everywhere. Even in what appears to be a homogenous situation, different dialect groups and classes of people are found, who constitute "all the nations". These nations are to be reached with the gospel. We do not have to cross the oceans before encountering "all the nations". This is not to deny the place of foreign missions, but to emphasize that the local church has much to do in its own locality, other than being involved in foreign missions.

Individual freedom and personal initiatives in gospel work must be valued, especially if the persons concerned are attached to the local church and operating under its general oversight. There is such a thing as "the centrality and uniqueness of the local church in God's purpose". Most church members, however, are tied up with work and family and look to the church to organize some avenues of service for them. The Lord organized outreach work, sending out His disciples two by two to preach. They also travelled together with the Lord to preach. In all probability, the two were combined - travelling as a group, and breaking up into twos where necessary while on the journey. The apostle Paul showed that this was done in his missionary journeys (e.g. Acts 17:15-16; 18:5; 1 Cor. 16:10-11).

Language was never a barrier in the work of the gospel. Apart from the initial period following Pentecost, the miraculous gift of tongues did not seem to have continued. Paul used the *lingua franca* of the day, namely Koine Greek, to communicate with the people - as is clear from the epistles he wrote, which used the language. He might have needed translators in some local situations, but that did not hinder him from preaching. The Bible must be translated to the mother tongue of any significant community that is being reached, but that is the work of Bible translators and missionaries. The nations around a local church are normally those who have migrated from elsewhere and have adapted by learning the dominant language of their new domicile. The church must attempt to reach these peoples using the common language, while translators can help in situations where the migrants are struggling with the common language.

Local outreach fits into the wider truth that "local church growth must go hand in hand with wider church planting". Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:15, "... as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere ..." Looked at in context, the apostle is saying that if the Corinthian Christians stopped quarreling among themselves and grew in spiritual maturity, Paul and his companions would be able to channel their effort of solving their problems to the wider work of

missions. There is a "symbiosis" between local outreach and wider missions. By being linked with like-minded churches overseas, we can be involved in wider missions in a meaningful way. However, the local work must not be neglected. Weekly outreach to the nations around us must be engaged in. The church members would be more than happy to be involved in such organized outreach. How is this to be done?

III. Going to the same hearers regularly.

That leads us to the third point, which is the importance of going to the same hearers regularly. Let us lay down the biblical basis of this practice first. We find recorded in Mark 6:6, "Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching." The word "circuit" (Gk., *kuklo*) implies two things: first, the journey was planned and, second, this was a regular practice. Next, we consider the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. A striking feature is that, each time, he returned to visit the churches he had planted earlier. For example, we read in Acts 14:21, "And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch ..."

It was Paul's practice to preach to the same people until they were converted or he was rejected. He was stretching himself to reach out to more people, but not to the extent of failing to preach to the same people regularly. An example is recorded in Acts 18:4-8:

And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews *that Jesus is the Christ*. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook *his* garments and said to them, "Your blood *be* upon your *own* heads; I *am* clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain *man* named Justus, *one* who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.

Note that in verse 4, we are told, "he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath ..." In verse 7, he similarly preached in the house of Justus until there were many converted. We are told in verse 11, "And he continued *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." The principle to be grasped is that we must preach to the same people until they are converted or we are unwanted. After all, the Great Commission of Matthew 28 tells us to "make disciples of all the nations", meaning that we are not just to preach the gospel fleetingly to as many as possible without seeing anyone converted. When unwanted by our hearers, we move on to preach to others (Matt. 10:14; Acts 13:46; 18:6). There are so many others to get to know, to visit, and to preach to on a regular basis.

We have not finished yet with the biblical basis of such a practice. The apostle Paul tells us in Acts 20:20 that he taught "publicly and from house to house". The Lord similarly taught publicly and from house to house. Multitudes heard Him publicly, and He brought His disciples to preach from house to house in a circuit. We read in Matthew 10:12-14, "And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet." Obviously, it was impossible for the Lord and His disciples to visit every single house. They must have visited selectively those homes known to them, recommended to them, or which they deliberately got to know.

We have seen that Paul preached publicly and from house to house. He proclaimed the gospel to win souls to Christ, and he taught the believers with the view of building up their faith. Today, public teaching would be conducted in the church, to which non-believing friends and relatives are invited. We may preach in the open fields or in stadiums, but the expenses and logistics incurred

would mean that we can hold such meetings only very infrequently. The sensible thing to do is to preach weekly to smaller crowds in the setting of the church. Since there are the two needs of proclaiming the gospel to the lost as well as teaching believers in order to build them up in the faith, it would be appropriate to have two main services on the Lord's day to cater for these. One service would be devoted to teaching believers, while the other would be devoted to win souls. The church members would attend both, since these are worship services, regardless of the aim of the message that is preached. In conjunction with meeting these two needs, there is the necessity of keeping the Lord's day holy. Note that it is *the day* that is to be kept holy, which means that it is appropriate to begin it with worship and to end it with worship as well. This is in line with the teaching in the OT concerning how days were kept holy, namely that there were the morning sacrifice and the evening sacrifice (Num. 28:1-10). Furthermore, the Lord's day is to be filled with a set of activities different from the works done on other days (Ex. 31:12-17; Jer. 17:19-27). The Puritans taught this and had two main services of worship on the Lord's day. This practice is still kept up by churches whose history stretched to the time of the Puritans. Churches founded in more recent days tend to have only one service of worship on the Lord's day.

We have digressed somewhat to discuss about the meetings held in the church premises. The gospel must be proclaimed in the church on a weekly basis, to which non-believers are invited. Furthermore, there are the children of believers who need to hear the gospel as well. While the preaching of the gospel is carried out in many churches today, there seems to be an absence of understanding that it must be carried out in homes on a regular basis. What we mean is gospel preaching in the homes of our contacts, not the homes of church members. Is it not significant that many households were converted and baptized under Paul's ministry? There were the households of Lydia, of the Philippian jailer, of Crispus, and of Stephanus (Acts 16:11ff.; 16:25ff.; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16). Timothy was converted in a family in which his mother and grandmother were believers (2 Tim. 1:5 cf. Acts 16:1). We know that these were not cases of one person believing on behalf of others in the family. We also know that these were not cases of infants being baptized because all those who were baptized were believers. These were cases of households being evangelized until they came to faith. To many churches today, outreach to the local community is carried out sporadically, if at all, and this done in a fleeting manner and not on a regular basis. The distribution of tracts is a commendable activity, and so is open-air preaching around the vicinity of the church. But where is the biblical practice of having home evangelistic Bible studies on a regular basis? When challenged with regard to this matter, the common excuses given are that times have changed, and the local culture does not permit the practice. Or it is claimed that the particular church has a special ministry to a specific group of people. Are these not mere excuses? Are we still not convinced of the biblical practice? It is my hope that many of us here are convinced that it is a biblical teaching to preach the gospel to the same people on a regular basis, until they are converted or we are rejected.

The practical question arises as to how this may be done. Normally, the pastor, and possibly some gifted brethren in the church, initiate such meetings. A team of two to five people, including males and females, then visit the family on a regular basis, at which the team leader preaches. The others in the team are there to lend moral support to the preacher, and provide safety in numbers. In time, some of them develop to become team leaders. Ideally, the same homes should be visited on a weekly basis and, if not weekly, fortnightly. A short Bible Study of ten minutes is conducted, in which the message of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" is drawn out and applied. Yes, ten minutes is sufficient! Our practice has been that the pastor summarizes the message of the morning service to the gathered teams, focusing on the key verses only. He shows how the message - even one that was meant to build up believers - may be adjusted to point to "Jesus Christ and Him crucified". After the pastor commits the teams to God in prayer, they go forth to visit up to five homes each. The teams return to church in time for the evening worship, some earlier than others, depending on how many of the homes have people in on that day. The same may be done on another day, and not just on the

Lord's day. The message of the evening service may be used this time. That way, the team leaders are spared the difficulty of preparing a message themselves.

Conclusion

Let us conclude. I have a burden. The burden is to see both preaching to build up the faith of believers, and to win souls to Christ, recovered in churches. The burden is to see both preaching the gospel publicly in church, and privately in homes, recovered. The burden is to see the gospel of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" proclaimed faithfully, from any passage of Scripture. The burden is to see all the nations reached out to by every local church that is faithful to the teaching of Scripture.

It is not up to us to judge the efficacy of the gospel efforts of other Christians. However, if faith comes by hearing the gospel preached, there could not have been true faith in those who responded to a false gospel. If that had been the case, what a waste of time, effort and opportunities in the preaching of those Christians! And how many people have been misled into thinking they are saved when they are actually unregenerate! We who know better cannot afford to be slack in reaching out to unbelievers with the gospel. It is not our business to sit in judgement upon others. It is our business to be busy in the Lord's work.

We are thankful for the recovery of the public preaching of the gospel in many churches. But where is the regular preaching of the gospel from house to house? One church can accomplish only that much. Ten churches doing the same thing would multiply the effect ten fold. A hundred churches would multiply the effect a hundred fold. Consider the effect of the efforts of the hundred churches over the whole year - wouldn't that be significant? Consider next the hundred churches not doing that - wouldn't that be a pity? And a pity it has been, since this has not been done extensively! Remember that we are not talking about the number of converts made, but the effect of gospel preaching which may, or may not, include conversions. Much as we desire to win many souls to Christ, it is God who gives the increase.

We can only cry out to God to move His people to capture the vision of carrying out the Great Commission in its fullness, and whole heartedly. O Lord, have mercy on us, Your people!

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