

ATHEY CAN=T STOP IT, CAN THEY!@

Evangelist Johnnie Lavender

Rom. 10:12-15

Near the summit of Mount Pilatus, the imposing 12,400 foot peak which dominates the city of Lucern, Switzerland, is a spot where the geographic and atmospheric conditions are so arranged as to produce an almost perfect echo.

One day, a young father and his little daughter went with a group of tourists to the top of Mount Pilatus to experience this phenomenal echo. After a demonstration, the guide invited the various tourists to try the echo for themselves. One after another, the people stepped forward and called out some meaningless phrase or silly statement.

Finally, realizing this was an opportunity to teach his little girl an important lesson, the young father stepped to the edge of the precipice, and holding tightly to his tiny daughter's hand, cried, **A**Jesus Christ! The same yesterday, today and forever. @ And the echo responded, **A**Jesus Christ! The same yesterday, today and forever. @

The little girl listened breathlessly as the echo responded: forever, forever, forever, forever.

Finally, overcome by it all, she said, **A**Daddy! They can't stop it, can they? @ Knowing she had learned the lesson he wanted to teach, the father smiled and said, **A**No, daughter, they can't stop it! @

It's priceless, isn't it? How it gladdens our hearts, as we gather here today, to know we are associated with One who cannot be stopped. And yet, as we reflect on the past glories of Christ and his Kingdom, we cannot help but wonder if the continuing progress of the cause of Christ has been made, not *because* of us, but in spite of us.

To be sure, we have heard the voice of that One who thunders across the universe to whisper in

our ears, ¶The gates of hell shall not prevail against (you).@ Unfortunately, most of us never get anywhere near the gates of hell. Somewhere along the line we stub our toe on the status quo. Instead of busying ourselves with the great task of winning a perishing world to Jesus, we become involved in the thankless task of oiling the cogs of our ecclesiastical machinery.

We have forgotten that God did not call us to be religious janitors. He called us to be his spokesmen to perishing souls. He did not give us an oil can to be used in keeping this monster of machinery we call a church in good running order. He gave us his holy word and sent us forth to preach it with a burning heart.

I am afraid, however, that for some of us the burning heart has given place to a case of theological heartburn. Our preaching has organized, systematized, categorized, and, in some situations, anesthetized people, but it has not evangelized them! As a result, our cities are teeming with people outside of Christ.

I'm not a prophet of doom. I realize things are not always as bad as they can be made to appear. My brother-in-law is a successful physician. His income has allowed him the opportunity to collect art. His tastes turn toward the surrealistic. One of his more recent additions is a painting which features a splash of bright color in the upper left-hand corner with some black and white streaks descending across the canvas to what looks like a disintegrating orange in the lower right-hand corner. The painting is entitled, ¶Man Playing a Piano.¶ When Lucille and I first viewed this painting, I asked her what she thought. She said, ¶Well, it only goes to show things are never quite so bad as they can be painted!@

No, I'm not a prophet of doom. But I do believe it's high time us preachers ceased living in a fool's paradise (sadly content with the show of things) while all around us, political confusion, moral breakdown and personal despair are eating the vitals out of our churches and homes. And, if we are ever going to have a new generation tomorrow, we must have a regeneration today.

Talk about confusion. It's everywhere. A famous politician recently visited a defense plant. He stopped to talk to one of the machinists. Pointing to a young person standing at the next machine with cropped hair and baggy trousers, the politician said, ¶That's the trouble with young people today, you can't tell whether it's a boy or a girl. To which the machinist answered, ¶Well it's a girl, and she's my daughter. ¶Oh, the politician said apologetically, ¶I didn't realize you were her father. To which the worker replied, ¶I am not her father, I am her mother!@

Well, if the world is in a state of confusion it's because the church is. And, if the church is a state of confusion, it's because her ministers are. You see, preachers like us make churches like ours. And I have the uneasy feeling that churches like ours are inadequate for a world like ours. As Samuel Shoemaker says in his valuable book Revive Thy Church Beginning With Me, ¶Until something happens in us and to us, it will never happen through us. If we stay as we are, we shall go on producing what we have produced. @

I agree. We may become possessors of God's word. Purveyors of God's word. Passionate defenders of God's word. But with it all, we will be weighed and found wanting if, cursed with spiritual frigidity, we fail to become propagators of God's word.

It's not that evangelism has been tried and found wanting. It's been found difficult and not tried. Shoemaker says that when we begin talking about evangelism in many of our churches, we are reminded of a bachelor who married a widow with a baby. She goes out of the house, leaving the baby on his lap. There the critter is, but he doesn't quite know what to do with it! ¶Well, @as Shoemaker says, ¶He can learn! And so can we. @

There's not one of us here this afternoon who would deny the fact that the saving grace of Jesus Christ is the only cure for the heartache for humanity. But, how shall they hear without a preacher? And, if we are to be effective preachers, we need to refocus the aim of our preaching. Evangelistic preaching is not so much a matter of content, as intent. You need only read a few of the sermons of some of our famous evangelists to see that. It's not what they said, but how and

why they said it!

As you and I sit in our studies to prepare for our ventures behind the sacred desk, each of us should ask himself, ¶What am I after? What is the final purpose of my preaching?@ I happen to believe that every sermon we preach should, in one way or another, provoke the urgent question: ¶What must I do to be saved?@ And, if we do that, we must be ready with an answer to that question.

Every time we step into the pulpit, our hearers -- blighted by the secularism and skepticism of our age -- are asking three questions.

The first has to do with the authority of our message as they ask, ¶Says who?@

The second has to do with the relativity of our message as they ask, ¶So what?@

The third has to do with the fidelity of our message as they ask, ¶What=s it to you?@

Allow me, please, to offer some answers to these three questions so, in our preaching, we may cease to be sterile if, in fact, we have been sterile. The first question skeptical people are asking is

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¶Says who?@

Here they are asking questions about the authority of our message. No placid, mamby pamby, semi-Christian, pseudointellectual presentation of the gospel will suffice for them. ¶Have you any word from the Lord?@ is the question seeking souls are asking.

This is no time for us, the prophets of God, to be soft-pedaling our message. This is no time to be watering down the radical and challenging aspects of the gospel to suit the faithless few who stumble on the supernatural. We will never do Christ=s work today unless we dare to speak with authority.

Look at Peter preaching at Pentecost. See the authority of which he speaks. And why? Because

his preaching centered in the source of certainty -- Jesus Christ, himself! Preaching, to Peter, meant the authoritative proclamation of a few momentous events. Jesus Christ had come, had died, and had risen again. That was it! But, he was on solid ground. He was preaching Christ. And, believe it or not, that's what people want today.

During our recent ministry tour of Europe under the sponsorship of the Baptist World Alliance, I preached 147 times in 127 days in 10 different countries. It was a grand experience for Lucille and me. Our eyes and hearts were opened in a new way to the needs of a lost and dying world.

One of our opportunities was to hold a week of meetings in Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, Scotland. This is one of the great free churches of Europe. Its current pastor, J. Sidlow Baxter, has been invited to preach all over the world and he graciously agreed to set up our itinerary on the British Isles. After we had been introduced, Lucille stood and sang a beautiful song she had picked to explain the reason for our presence.

¶I am a stranger here within a foreign land,
My home is far away upon a distant strand,
Ambassador to thee from realms beyond the sea,
I am here on business for my King.

This is the message that I bring,
A message angels fain would sing,
Oh, be ye reconciled, thus saith our God and King,
Oh, be ye reconciled to God.¶

When she sat down there was a sweet sense of the Spirit's presence. The man who was in charge of the service stood and said, ¶Now that we know why these young people have come to Scotland, let us sing back to them our word of welcome.¶ And, oh, how they sang! It must be as the angels in heaven sing. I will never forget it.

¶Tell me the story of Jesus,

Write on my heart every word,
Tell me the story most blessed,
Sweetest that ever was heard. @

Too long some preachers have given their people a diet of personal opinion, served on a tray of uncertainty and spiced with a dash of oratory. But their listeners have not been moved to repentance. Nothing less than Christ in all his profound simplicity will do for people today. And many a young preacher, convinced he is God's gift to the intellectuals, has couched his sermons in fourteen-carat adjectives and gold-plated superlatives which have no power to draw people to the Savior.

I love the story of the country preacher who enjoyed using big words in his sermons. His favorite was the word phenomenon. One of his laymen approached him after a sermon in which he had used it often and asked, APastor, what does that word phenomenon mean? @ The pastor thought for a moment and then replied, AWell, as you drove your horse and buggy to church this morning, do you remember going by a green pasture surrounded by a white fence? @ AYes. @ AWell, @ the preacher went on, Athat was no phenomenon. And, do you remember that over in the corner of that pasture there was a black cow eating that green grass? @ AYes. @ AWell, that was no phenomenon either. Then, do you recall that in another part of the pasture there was a bluebird sitting on a brown thistle singing a song? @ AYes, @ the man said. AWell, @ the pastor continued, Athat was no phenomenon either. But, if some Sunday morning on your way to church, you pass that green pasture surrounded by that white fence and you see that black cow sitting on that brown thistle singing like that bluebird -- that=s a phenomenon! @

I suppose there=s a place for big words. I like to use them myself, sometimes. But as James Denny points out, ANo man can, at one and the same time, give the impression that he himself is clever, and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save! @

There was a time in history when there was only one man in the whole world who was preaching

Christ. Suppose he had fallen prey to the temptation which has snared so many of us and had substituted his words for God's word? Suppose he had stopped preaching Christ? Thank God, he didn't. John the Baptist made it his specialty to become an authority on the one person who could save a lost and dying world. ¶Behold the lamb of God@was his only theme. And, oh, how he preached it. There was certainty in what he said.

People want that kind of preaching today. People want more than a religious commentary on current events. This is no time to be offering a reduced, milk-and-water, undemanding, half Christianity. Preach Christ with the authority which comes from preaching Christ and you will find people kneeling in homage at his feet. As James Stewart says, ¶What our churches need today are men who, knowing the world about them and the Christ above and within them, will set the trumpet of the gospel to their lips and proclaim his power to save.¶

¶I came to town,@wrote John Wesley in his Journal, ¶and offered them Christ.¶ And that is what we must do today.

In the midst of one of his sermons Spurgeon held up a book. ¶Here is the latest novel. Its day will pass.¶ And he dropped it on the floor. ¶Here is the latest book of science. It, too, will pass.¶ And he let it fall. He held up a third book and said, ¶Here is a recent commentary on social events. *It* will pass.¶ And he let it drop with a thud. Then, picking up his pulpit Bible and holding it high, he cried, ¶Here is the word of God which endures forever!¶

Spurgeon was right. People are interested in one thing: Do you know about God? Do you have a word from the Lord? All too often we rely on our own resourcefulness. We try, as it were, to open a rosebud with a hammer. It can't be done. But let the dew and sunshine of God's *creative* love fall on a rosebud, and it will open into a blossom of incredible beauty. You and I have been called to be dispensers of the dew and sunshine of God's redemptive love. And, if we do our job, if we are faithful in showering his love on the human soil of those souls under our watch care, they, too, will flower into beautiful expressions of what God wants them to be. People *alive* -- in

and by and through Christ.

God help us to preach with the authority of Christ because -- in answer to the skeptical question, Says who? -- thus saith the Lord is still the only adequate answer. It is still the message people want, people need and to which people will respond.

¶They tell me the story of Jesus is old,
They ask that I preach something new.
The babe in a manger, who became the man on a cross,
For the wise of this world will not do.
But the story is old as the sunlight is old,
It is new, every morn, all the same.
It will never grow old. It will never grow old
While sin lives unvanquished and death rules the world.
The story of Jesus will never grow old.¶

So What?

The second question people are asking today is, ¶So what?¶ It's a question about the relativity of our message. They are asking, ¶What's this got to do with me?¶ If, in a purely mechanical sense our sermons are lacking, it may be at this point. We may have lost contact with the common man and his problems with sin.

During a crusade in the city of Topeka, Kansas, I met a wonderful layman whom I came to love. He was so very real. One night he came up to me at the close of the service and said, ¶Johnnie, I had a great victory today. I didn't say damn once!¶

I must admit that, at that time, not saying damn once in a day, didn't strike me as much of a victory. Since then, I've been faced with a few problem people which have tempted me to say it myself, more than once! The whole point of the story is that the folks who slip into our services Sunday after Sunday are people who, for six days, have been engaged in hand-to-hand combat

with stern reality. They want to know how God=s message applies to them. ¶Not my brother, nor my sister, but it=s me, oh Lord, standin= in the need of prayer.¶

We do them wrong and we mock their struggle when we preach in vain abstractions. Our sermons must drive home the fact that God=s love is for all people, in all ages, and in all attitudes of circumstance and sin. That when God says, ¶whosoever will may come@he not only means the whole wide world, he also means that seemingly insignificant soul sitting on the end of the aisle, four rows back!

Vance Havner, the famous southern preacher, says,¶Too many sermons are preached in the objective case and the biliary mood.¶ I don=t know about that, but I do know that if our preaching is going to reach people today, it will be because we preach in the second person, present tense. That is to say, you need Christ, now! Using the literary ¶we=ve sinned, we need God, we need to be saved -- has made our preaching painfully impersonal.

I=’m not suggesting that, as preachers, we can ever forget we are nothing more than sinners saved by grace. As Richard Baxter points out, we must always remember, ¶We preach as a dying man to dying men.¶ Each time we mount the pulpit stairs we would do well to pause and breathe a secret prayer,¶God be merciful to me, a sinner!¶

But, having done that, we need to remember a sermon is not like a firecracker which is set off for the noise it makes. A sermon is like a hunter=s gun and, at the pulling of the trigger, we should look to see our target fall.

One of the miracles of the gospel is that it becomes most universal when it is couched in language which is most personal. A crowd has no conscience to be stirred. No heart to be broken. No soul to be saved. Wesley, Spurgeon, Wakefield, Moody knew that. Thus, they learned to preach to a crowd. As Bonnell observes,

¶They conquered (the crowd) by ignoring it. Instead of forgetting the individual in the crowd,

they forgot the crowd in the individual.@

Evangelistic preaching if different from evangelical preaching. The evangelist, be he a pastor or itinerant preacher, is one who impresses upon his people the good news that the gospel is for them. That Jesus is a personal Savior for a personal sinner. That while his love is broad enough to encompass the whole wide world, it is personal enough to applies to them. ¶Come unto me all ye that labor,@he said, ¶and I will give you rest,@

The evangelistic preacher is one who, with fervent heart, is constantly pressing home the urgent need for action. That now is the accepted time. That yesterday is already a dream. Tomorrow is but a vision. But, every today lived with Jesus Christ can make every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

What=s It To You?

And then, allow me to suggest an answer to the third, and most penetrating, question folks are asking today, ¶What=s it to you?@ It=s a question about the fidelity of our message. ¶Why do you care about me and my problems?@

There=s only one place to find the answer to that question, and it=s on our knees. For, it=s not until regularly we come face-to-face with the worth of a soul, that we shall see what God sees in every sinner, the possibility of a saint! It=s not until then that we will be able to convince people we are more than professionally interested in them. That we are personally concerned about them as persons and their personal needs.

A Skid Row bum who had been hit by a car, was taken to the county hospital. As they washed him up and ¶prep@him for surgery, a young intern looked at him and said, ¶Just another worthless bum.@ The man stirred when he heard those words and said, ¶I may be a bum, Doc, but I am not worthless. Jesus died for me, too.@

Oh, how we need to regain that driving, consuming passion which first called us to do the work of a minister. How we need to see again the pitiful plight of those outside of Christ, ¶Bound who should conquer. Slaves who should be kings.¶ For we will never really know the thrill and romance of preaching until, through *our* poor stammering tongues, as we lifted up Christ on his cross, we see God at his best meeting man at his worst.

My heart was thrilled and stirred within me as I read of the great revivals of yesterday. I was humbled as I saw the compassion of the men God chose to lead them. There was John Knox who cried, ¶Give me Scotland, or I die.¶ Some of us seem to pray, ¶Give me a good church, or I'll move.¶ We must learn to preach like Knox and Moody and Peter of old -- with earthquakes in our souls -- believing the whole world is on fire and we are the only ones who can put it out!

That won't be easy. Great living always comes at a great price. But,

¶It is great to be out where the fight is strong,
Out where the heaviest troops belong,
In this fight with God for man.

Oh, it sears the body and wracks the brain,
It pierces the heart 'till man's friend is pain,
Does this fight with God for man.

But it's great to be out where the fight is strong
Out where the heaviest troops belong
In this fight with God for man.¶

When God had a job to do, the Bible says, ¶The word became flesh.¶ And, if we are to do the job to which we have been called, the word must become flesh again -- in us! Wesley said, ¶Give me two-hundred men who fear nothing but sin, love nothing but God, are filled with nothing but the Holy Spirit, and I will set this empire on fire.¶

There are many more than two-hundred of us here this afternoon! The question is, **¶Do we fear nothing but sin? Do we love nothing but God? Are we filled with nothing but the Holy Spirit?@** If so, there=s enough power in this room to change the course of history and win this generation for Jesus. God grant that, by his grace, we shall do just that!