

Preach Only The Gospel? By Steven Harper

Every so often, we may hear someone make the plea, “Preach only the gospel, and leave everyone else alone.” Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said that? From my experience, it is usually stated when someone has pointed out some error in the doctrine and/or practice of some religious group, or pointed out erroneous thinking or false teaching being promoted by someone. I have been asked, more than once, “Why don’t you just preach Jesus? Why do you think you have to tell everybody else where they’re wrong?”

It is a sad thing to hear such a plea, if only because it demonstrates ignorance of what the gospel really is all about, and more so of what exactly is being asked. The plea is most often made when one doesn’t like what is being taught — from God’s word — and the listener is offended by its exclusive message and the fact he or she may be condemned by those same words; maybe the listener is just afraid someone else will be offended by those same words and, in our current society, offending someone seems to be the highest offense!

But let’s stop and consider the request. What if we preached “only the gospel”? First, let us note that the gospel message is about the fact Jesus died for our sins, was buried and then raised from the dead (1Cor. 15:3-4), that His death purchased the church He established (Acts 20:28) and His resurrection certified He was whom He claimed to be (Rom. 1:4), and the confession of that serves as the very foundation of the church (Matt. 16:18). If that is the gospel, then can we preach just that and not offend anyone? Let’s think about this for a minute.

I Can’t Preach About God, Lest I Offend the Atheist. The gospel message is about God so loving the world that He “gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16) — a favorite passage of many sincerely religious people. But this teaching assumes God exists; if I am to “preach only the gospel, and leave everyone else alone,” I would still offend some because atheists deny the existence of God and preaching the gospel would rightly infer God exists — something no committed atheist would tolerate. To preach God would be offensive to him!

I Can’t Preach Jesus as the Christ, Lest I Offend the Jews. An obvious part of teaching the gospel is the fact I must teach Jesus was who He claimed to be: the Messiah. Throughout the New Testament, we find time after time a short statement that says Jesus did something “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord” (Matt. 1:22). Those things that were spoken by the Lord through the prophets concerned the coming Messiah; if Jesus fulfilled those things, then He would necessarily be the Christ. Jesus also made the claim to be that Messiah (John 4:25, 26). But if I “preach only the gospel,” I would still offend some; Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah would take offense, so I can’t really “just preach the gospel only” and not offend.

I Can’t Preach Jesus as the Only Savior, Lest I Offend the Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus — and Many Americans. I also could not preach that Jesus is the only way to heaven because Buddhists and Hindus teach that heaven is attained by reaching supreme enlightenment and eventual nirvana, while the Islamists believe that it is through good works and following the Qur’an that one gets to heaven. According to recent polls, many Americans believe salvation and heaven may be obtained if one is “good enough.” Though Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6), and though the apostles taught “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), I could not teach that lest I offend those who believe salvation may be obtained by other means.

I Can’t Preach ‘One Church,’ Lest I Offend Those in Denominations. As was noted earlier, Jesus died for our sins and that death purchased the church He came to establish — one church. Note that when He answered Peter after Peter declared his belief that Jesus was

the Christ, the Son of God, He said, "...on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Note that Jesus said He would build "My church" — singular; not "churches," but "church." One.

But if I preached that today, many would be offended because they believe there is not just one church but literally hundreds, if not thousands — and all are acceptable to God. Many today believe one should "join the church of your choice" rather than taking the time to find the church for which Jesus died. To preach there is only one church today is, in fact, confusing to many. They look around and see the many denominations and cannot believe that there would be only one church. Often, when one hears the message of "one church," they are stunned and ask, "How can so many people be wrong?" Many are highly offended when you tell them Christ died for only one church, and had always intended to establish only one church.

I Can't Preach About Sin, Lest I Offend the One Who Still Lives In Sin. As was noted earlier, the gospel message teaches that Jesus died for our sins; if that is true, I can't really "just preach the gospel and leave everyone else alone" because preaching the gospel would still be offensive to many who still live in sin and would be condemned by that message. God's word tells us, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and that many things such as sexual immorality [fornication, adultery, homosexuality], covetousness, and pride are condemned by God (Rom. 1:18-32), and many would be offended to hear that! Just try to preach publicly that homosexuality is a sin, and you will be quickly reminded by many of how 'bigoted' and 'closed-minded' you are, and how offensive that message is!

The reality is, I could not preach about sin at all, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and surely someone out there would be offended by me telling them they are in sin. I couldn't even preach about sin to believers, because God's word tells us even disciples still sin (1John 1:8-10), and someone might be offended if I point out that they, even as a disciple, have sinned. I don't even have to speculate on this point, for I have experienced that very situation more than once! Believe it or not, some supposed disciples get offended when they are told that their actions are called 'sin' by God!

So, where does that leave us? Some want me to "preach only the gospel, and leave everyone else alone," but as we have seen, even that is still going to offend someone. If I can't even preach what is contained in the gospel message, what, exactly can I preach? I believe the following line is exactly what I would be able to preach and not offend: "_____."

That's it: nothing. If I preach nothing, no one would be offended, right? The problem with that is, I also would not be preaching to them the words by which they could be saved (Acts 11:14), and I would not be preaching the words by which faith is made possible (Rom. 10:17). If I didn't preach the gospel, many would be happy, though — including the devil.