

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 20, Number 36

September 11, 2005



## The Old and the New

*Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor. I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead. There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit. (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16)*

In his brief but informative commentary on Ecclesiastes Derek Kidner observes:

"This paragraph...portrays something familiar enough in public life: the short-lived popularity of the great. It shows the faults on both sides, beginning with the stubbornness of the man who has been too long in the saddle—who is out of touch and out of sympathy with the times, forgetting what it is like to be young, and fiery, and hard-up, as he once was himself...So it may come to it that a better man supplants him—and he is better if he has the right qualities, whatever his lack of years or standing...Yet he too will go the way of the old king, not necessarily for his faults, but simply as time and familiarity, and the restlessness of men, make him no longer interesting...It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements."<sup>1</sup>

Whether in families, professional organizations, or even in churches, Solomon depicts the nearly inevitable process of human behavior. Especially in churches a distinct tension grows as a pastor's tenure turns into long years. On one side the church benefits from the man's experience and his personal friendship/knowledge of them and their families. On the other side of the tension is the human inclination to become bored and disenchanted with the man. "Predictable" can be at the same time

both a blessing and a curse. Some churches seem more inclined to this problem than others. Have you ever known of a church that seems programmed to change pastors every five or ten years, regardless of the qualities of the man presently in the position?

There is an equally challenging tension in the man who fills the office. At a point in time he begins to think he has taught the church everything that he can teach them. Either his own tiring spirit or their growing and callous attitude of taking him for granted—or both—lead to a "business as usual" acceptance of things as they are, not as Scripture teaches that they should be. "For the perfecting of the saints" (Ephesians 4:12) indicates that saints are not perfect in their knowledge or in their personal discipleship. The function of a pastor is to inspire, nudge, and motivate members of the church, as well as the collective church culture itself, to constantly evaluate self and make the necessary changes to mold their lives more into the image of a New Testament "saint." When churches and individual members begin to give a "Ho-hum" response to the gospel and think that they are as godly as they need to be, the signs are clear for change! No believer is ever as godly as he/she needs to be. When we stop growing and improving, we stagnate, becoming prime targets for spiritual failure. There is no such thing in any area of human behavior as remaining constantly the same. If you believe in the resurrection of the body, even death does not leave us in such a fixed state of rigidity.

Does the gospel really change people? Should the pastor expect that the people in the congregation will listen to his preaching and actually make observable changes in

<sup>1</sup> Kidner, Derek, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1976) 51-52.

the way that they live and deal with life's challenges? I answer an *emphatic yes*. When either the people in the pew or the man in the pulpit become so complacent as to reject the need for growth and change, the signs are clear that it is time for change.

There is no indication in the passage that the "old king" is a bad man. His fault seems to be that he has become too entrenched in his outlook and has lost touch with his culture. A fresh outlook and a man in touch with his congregation (employer, or kingdom with equal applicability), even with his frightening lack of experience, may be more effective than the stubborn old man who has become so sure of himself that he has lost touch with his culture.

In counseling young preachers I emphasize the need for constant and engaging eye contact while the man is in the pulpit delivering his message. A preacher who closes his eyes, looks at walls and floors, or for that matter who stares in the direction of the congregation, but never fixes his eyes on anyone in the congregation, demonstrates by his lack of engaging eye contact that he is not in touch with his congregation. His preaching efforts will fail, for there is no mental energy going back and forth between the man in the pulpit and the people in the pew. By engaging eye contact the preacher carries on an intimate conversation with the people in the pew. By observing their eyes, the gateway to the soul, not only does the preacher speak to the people, but the people speak to the preacher without uttering a sound. The wise preacher listens to his congregation and interacts with them in this manner. "What happens if I sense that the people are not with me?" a preacher might ask. To him I would reply, "If they are not with you, nothing you say will edify them. Look for the quickest possible way to end the message, and try to learn from the failure so that in your next message you will be able to reach them effectively." Sometimes the ineffective preacher thinks if he tries harder, speaks longer, or otherwise prolongs the failure that he can redeem the message. In most cases prolonging an ineffective message merely prolongs the misery for both preacher and congregation. We cannot always assess on a given occasion why a sermon crashes to the ground and fails. It may be the preacher's fault for lack of prayerful and

engaging study or preparation for the message. Despite the protest of slothful preachers, God doesn't pour word for word messages into preachers' mouths. The preacher who boasts "I never give thought to my sermon; I simply walk into the pulpit and say whatever comes to mind" will typically soon demonstrate to his congregation that he gave no thought to what he said. Jesus told the apostles in a special commission not to give thought, but the occasion was defending their faith against adversaries, not preaching the gospel. Paul admonished Timothy to study intently and constantly to ensure that his words were informed and edifying (2 Timothy 2:15).

Preaching the gospel is far more than a simple speech that explains a passage based on the context and grammatical structure of the passage. It is molding the intent of the message into words that invade the life and mind of the congregation so compellingly as to command their attention and inspire change. In spiritual matters this challenge is far more than a motivational speech. It must come with a divine anointing that drives it to the deepest elements of a person's mind and emotions.

No pastor should conduct his ministry as if he were the only preacher necessary for his congregation. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, defines an effective pastor as the man who leaves the congregation, regardless of the time spent with them, more spiritual and more capable of doing spiritual business than when he went to them. Inherent then in a godly pastor's "job description" is the reality of an eventual exit! Until—not if—that time comes, he should strive with every sermon and every effort in his pastorate to grow the people more into the spiritual maturity of a New Testament believer/church than they were the last week when he preached to them. In this way no preacher should ever consider another preacher his "competitor." Rather he is to be his own greatest competitor. With every sermon he should strive to preach more clearly, more inspiringly, and more powerfully than in his last sermon.

The human traits described by Solomon exist, but spiritually mature folks should grow beyond them so as to view their church, including pastor and people, as God's instrument, not their own private entertainment committee.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.  
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