

## The Word, not Gimmicks

Jesus told Martha that hearing His Word was the one thing needful. That should be an effective warning against a number of modern false approaches to church work.

One modern assumption is that those who proclaim the Gospel first have to take down barriers that people put up against the Word of God. However, what barriers are so powerful that they defeat God's Word? God said (Isa 55:8-13):

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways’, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth: and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so My word will be that goes out of My mouth. It will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and it will prosper in the thing for which I have sent it. For you will go out with joy, and be led out with peace. The mountains and the hills will break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn, the cypress tree will come up, and instead of the briar the myrtle tree will come up, and it will serve as a name for the Lord, as an everlasting sign that will not be cut off.”

There aren't any barriers mentioned in this passage, are there? Both Hebrews and Paul refer to the Word as quick and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword. It is the sword of the Spirit.

So if the Word of God is not weak, is it unable to accomplish its purposes? Must effective workers in the church supplement it with programmes and efforts to dress it up to look more attractive? Paul simply relied on preaching. He wrote:

“We also thank God without ceasing for this reason, that when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you received it, not as the word of men; but as it truly is, the Word of God, which is also working effectually in you who believe” (1 Ths 2:13).

“Whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” How then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? Moreover, how are they to believe in Him of whom they have not heard? How are they to hear without a preacher? How are they to preach unless they are sent? As Scripture has said: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” ...Therefore faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ. (Rm. 10:13-15,17).

Many expensive programmes come and go in some churches over the years. No one opens the manuals a pastor paid. “The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the Word of the Lord remains for ever” (1 Pt 1:24-25).

Some modern church leaders think that the church needs to be just like a shopping mall to be successful. It needs to fit in with modern standards of entertainment. However, did Jesus found any principles of entertainment-evangelism?

“I have given them Your word, but the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, any more than I belong to the world” (Joh 17: 14).

Some modern exponents like to give high praise to people who built their churches from nothing to thousands on Sunday, and they list the marvellous things they have done to cause their churches to grow. However, Paul gave all the credit to God for his success:

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow” (1 Cor 3:6).

Modern experts produce many expensive programmes, make lists of spiritual gifts, and tell people how to develop them, and encourage methods like cell-groups. It doesn't really matter who leads them. If just one of these methods worked, wouldn't just one be enough? Luke tells us what multiplied and grew in the New Testament church. According to Paul, an increase in teaching leads to an increase in believers. In Acts there is no record of increase in programs. Jesus spoke of the Word of the kingdom multiplying, like yeast in dough, so that it is impossible to stop it.

“The Word of God kept on spreading, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem was growing very large.

Even a large number of the priests came to believe and obey the Word” (Ac 6:7).

“But God's Word continued to spread and win many followers” (Ac 12:24).

We should be sceptical about services that use a piano and guitar to attract people more, attempts to drop the liturgy, omit the creed, drop the Lord's Supper, push songs in the styles of pop-singers, turn Law and Gospel sermons into Law messages, and all attempts to pretend that the services are not Lutheran. Paul was very clearly against the use of deception to cause a church to grow.

“At least we do not peddle an impure Word of God like many others, but in Christ we stand before God and speak a message that both is sincere and comes from God” (2 Cor 2:17).

“But we have renounced the secret ways that are shameful. We are not using trickery, nor are we falsifying God’s Word. Rather, by clearly revealing the truth, we recommend ourselves to everyone’s conscience before God” (2 Cor 4:2).

In the Bible the Word of God is the sole reason why a church grows. Without that, love and friendship won’t convert people. God knows more about the subject than we do.

“He who despises the Word will be destroyed, but he who fears the commandment will be rewarded” (Prv 13: 13).

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ‘As I live, says the Lord God, surely because My flock has become a prey, and My flock has become food for every beast of the field, because there has been no shepherd, nor have My shepherds searched for My flock, but the shepherds have been feeding themselves and have not fed My flock, — therefore, O shepherds, hear the Word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I shall require My flock at their hand. I shall cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds will feed themselves no more. For I shall deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them’” (Ezk 34:7-11).

These days, false leaders seem well fed from devouring the sheep. The Bible is clear about that.