

Preach the Gospel at all times—use words always

By Bob Young

Christians use lots of quotes. Preachers use them in sermons; writers use them as illustrations. No problem! Quotes are quite helpful and make points memorable. But what if the quotation is not accurate or has no historical foundation. Christians who are committed to truth certainly want to be cautious about spreading false information.

With the selection of Pope Francis, one very clever and popular quote I hear more and more is, **“Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”**

Allow me to set the records straight—the historic record and the biblical record. The quote is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi and seems to say that proclaiming the Gospel by example is more virtuous than proclaiming it verbally. I dislike the quote for several reasons. First, it creates a preaching-practice dichotomy, seeming to force a choice between speech and action. Second, the idea that the gospel can be preached without words is not true. Third, it is unbiblical and biased, subtly suggesting that those who "practice the Gospel" are more faithful than those who preach it. Finally, Francis of Assisi never said it. There is no record of the quotation from his disciples or from early or later biographers. It does not appear in any of his writings. The truth is that Francis was a powerful preacher. He was known as much for his preaching as for his lifestyle. Francis did not depend only on his actions to proclaim the gospel. The popularity of the quote likely tells us more about the spirit of our age than of any historical reality.

No one is against making sure your deeds match your words. We Christians want to live out the grace and truth of the Gospel. But it is simply impossible to preach the Gospel without words. The Gospel is inherently verbal and preaching the Gospel requires verbal behavior. The idea of proclaiming the Gospel only by “deeds” is not biblical. Paul writes to the Romans (10:14): “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?” Peter is talking about example being added to God’s Word, not the absence of proclamation (1 Peter 3:1-2).

It is true that some Christians may talk about the gospel too much and live the gospel too little. But the increasingly frequent misuse of the quotation likely parallels a postmodern assumption that words have finally lost all meaning. It ignores the high value that God puts on preaching—in the prophets, in his Son Jesus who came preaching and teaching, and in the first century church. The gospel is a message. It is news about a person and life events upon which history turns. Justin Taylor observes that “the Good News can no more be communicated by deeds than can the nightly news.”

Mark Galli has suggested a different quotation: “Preach the gospel—use actions when necessary; use words always.”

[Note: for an excellent related article “Words and Works” written by Duane Litfin, see <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/may/litfin-gospel-deeds.html>]