

CONVICTION: A SERMON THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR

Edited and posted by Bob Young

I spend much of my time thinking about and praying about how to take the message of Jesus into all the world. I challenge churches and Christians to think evangelism, discipleship.

I have the privilege of spending more time in mission work than in local church ministry.

But, as I give mission reports and preach in local churches, I ask myself, what is the most important sermon the local church could hear?

These are challenging times, defining times. Without overstating the case, unprecedented times are upon us. The great need for preachers, churches, Christians is clarity. Without clarity we will not endure. Clarity will eventually force us to let go of non-essentials and carefully define priorities.

Defining times need a defining message. That defining message centers in Jesus.

Who are we? Do we know who we are?

What does the Bible say about our identity, who we are called to be as Christians in this time of human history? Only if we clearly understand who we are in Christ will we be able to “live above the fray.” Even in a world where the influence of Christianity seems to be waning, Christians can live faithfully.

Preaching is misunderstood in our day. A common thought is that anyone can preach. Preaching is not speech-making; it is not giving a nice little talk. Preaching is in a different category. Preaching is a word from God for his people at this moment in history. Preaching speaks for God—God’s specific word in a specific moment. Not just any word, not what tickles the fancy of the preacher, not a favorite topic, not personal experiences.

Christians live in the world but are not of the world. Christians run into problems when they do not understand the difference between “in” and “of.” We are in it but not of it.

Our worldview, the way we look at life, the way we respond to life, the way we respond to issues in life, the way we respond to everything around us, does not come from our moment in history, our context, our culture, our politics, our background, our neighborhood, or our nation. Those do not frame or form our thinking. Our worldview—principles and values—is framed and formed by what God says.

Therefore, we do not look for the culture or society to tell us who we are. We bring a clear sense of identity and hope to the culture and to society. We do not bring that hope by aligning ourselves with political parties or people. We bring that hope by being true to our identity in Christ.

Paradoxically, the key to making a difference in this world is to understand we are not of this world. The key to impacting our world is to understand we are members of a contrast community. We are members of another Kingdom; we have a higher loyalty. We are pilgrims and strangers here, and our kingdom vision is to have an impact at this moment in history without becoming absorbed in it.

Let me show you how this works. I start in the Old Testament, in the book of Daniel. Moving forward in history half a millennium to the early centuries of Christianity, I consider the challenge of living as a Christian during severe persecution. Finally, I come to our own day.

Daniel. If we do not get our identity right, we will embrace idolatry. What was Daniel’s power to refuse the surrounding culture and society, to escape false expectations? Daniel in his integrity was firm. Why? How? He knew who he was. If you abandon who you are, the world around you will shape your identity and behavior. Identity determines behavior. Identity determines behavior regardless of the circumstances. That is the power of identity.

Who you think you are determines your behavior. If you are confused, somebody else will tell you who you are and how to behave. In this world is nothing to give the Christian a biblical identity. This world is not our home. This is not where we belong. This is not who we are.

Authentic followers of Jesus Christ are the most relevant people at any moment in human history. We are living out what human beings were born to be. One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is to point them to God as the source of their identity – not circumstances, not culture, not experience.

The early church. Six hundred years after Daniel, Christ followers faced the same challenges as Daniel. Who are we? Where do we fit into this world? The answer? We do not!

Too often today Christians assume that bad things happen because our country and society is sinful. We condemn ourselves. The church has not been faithful to its identity. Many are cultural Christians and fail to be salt and light.

Too many Christians believe that their favorite newscaster is the 67th book of the Bible. We are more passionate about certain issues than we are about God. This culture and this world are not neutral—they distract us from Kingdom priorities that transcend world events.

Daniel made a decision that charted the trajectory of his life. Without this decision, we would not be reading the book of Daniel. Daniel and his friends would have been absorbed into Babylon. But Daniel resolved—a decision that will not be changed. Daniel entrusted his situation to God who moved on the king's heart to show Daniel favor. Early Christians made decisions that charted the trajectory of their lives. Without their decisiveness, we would not have large chunks of the New Testament.

Application!

There is a difference between convictions and beliefs. Convictions are resolutions. Convictions are the things I am willing to die for; they merit the entirety of my life.

Faithfulness is not the result of “feeling our way through life.” Too many respond to God only if there is some type of emotional splash. Convictions do not depend on a favorable environment.

Decide. No need to see which way the wind is blowing, what other people are saying. Are we committed to walking with God or not?

To thrive in Daniel's Babylon, first-century Rome, or in the 21st century world, requires conviction, making hard challenging choices, difficult decisions. Lack of conviction cannibalizes commitment.

Thriving in today's culture and society requires remembering who we are in Christ Jesus. Let God orchestrate the world. Make Kingdom choices without compromise. Simply obey.

The key to our impact is not in changing the politics of the world; it is in being who God made us to be. Never waver. “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” “Crucified with Christ; nevertheless, we live.” “Not I but Christ lives in me and I live daily through the Son of God who loves me and gave Himself for me.”

The world is waiting to see who we are, transformed from glory to glory, reflecting God's glory. We are called to glorify God. But we will not discover that until we surrender ourselves completely to Jesus. All or nothing. Decision, resolution. That is how convictions work! God is calling his people to be an alternate Kingdom community in a world that will never get it right, because Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.