

Negative Preaching

by Bryan Gibson

I'm hearing more and more people express distaste for what they call "negative preaching." I've even heard some say that in the Sunday morning assembly, the sermon should always be a positive message of encouragement. Frankly, I've never tried to classify sermons as either positive or negative, because as you'll see in just a moment, what is negative to some is overwhelmingly positive to others.

Don't get me wrong, a balanced approach is certainly in order, as indicated by the following passages: "Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2); "we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel...we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her children...we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children" (1 Thessalonians 2:2, 7, 11). Yes, preaching will comfort and encourage (Acts 11:23; 1 Corinthians 14:31), but it will also warn and rebuke (Colossians 1:28; Acts 20:31), sometimes even sharply rebuke (Titus 1:13). Simply "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2), and you can't help but incorporate all these elements into your preaching. The Old Testament prophets preached that way; Jesus and His apostles preached that way; and faithful gospel preachers will still preach that way today.

For those who have little regard for "negative preaching," would you have a problem if Paul's Epistle to the Colossians was read in the assembly? That's what they were supposed to do (Colossians 4:16), and if they complied, they sure heard some "negative" things, especially about false teachers (see chapter 2). What about the letters from Jesus to the seven churches of Asia (Revelation 2-3)? Plenty of warnings and rebukes in those letters, that's for sure.

Worried about offending someone? Is that the chief objection to "negative" or corrective preaching? The fact is, corrective preaching will offend some, but not the "one who is poor and of a contrite spirit and who trembles at My (God's) word" (Isaiah 66:2). For that person, "negative preaching" is truly a positive experience, much like what is described in the following passage: "in humility correcting those in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

To all my fellow-preachers, please don't abandon corrective preaching, the kind of preaching that rebukes all forms of sin, that calls people to repentance, and that warns of eternal consequences if they don't. Do it "in love" (Ephesians 4:15), "in humility" (2 Timothy 2:25), and "with all longsuffering" (2 Timothy 4:2), but by all means do it. "Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you" (Titus 2:15).

To everyone else, love the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10), in whatever form it may come to you—instruction, admonition, comfort, exhortation, correction, warning, rebuke, etc. You need it all, and so does the world around you.