

349 *Just a thought arising...*

One of my readers who occasionally gives me theologically based feedback made these comments, modestly starting with, ‘Just a thought arising...’

In the book of Acts, we get a sample of some of the early Christian preaching. Love does not get much of a mention. In fact, love is by no means a dominant theme in the NT, as some such as David Pawson have pointed out. The NT message is that there is a new deal available – believe, learn and obey.

The theme of love is strong in the OT, specifically covenant love, the love of God for his people. The horrors of the OT bring this out because, despite Israel’s unfaithfulness and outright rebellion, God continued to love them and work to bring them back to himself.

On reflection, most of the explicit references to love in the NT relate to God’s love for his people and how they should love each other. Grace is a key word in some books, but in its original context grace is a relational word. The patron extends grace to the loyal follower and the follower expresses grace back to the patron. This was very much the language of the NT world. Our English translations use different words for grace from above and grace from below. Love in this context is about loyalty to one’s own. That is not a vast distance from the OT.

Pawson would argue that since this is the case, we are wrong to preach a message with love at its heart. I disagree. How we present the message depends to a large extent on the cultural context of the listener. Jesus did talk about God doing good to both righteous and sinner. He deliberately demonstrated God’s inclusion of the excluded. He exhibited an abundant divine generosity. Forgiveness, both vertical and horizontal, is central. And in modern parlance, these things are best described as love on offer for all. You get to experience that love by entering in.

This stands alone (why not go back and reread it?), but it’s less than 500 words, so...

To me, this gives theological support to my feeling that communicating the gospel today must be culturally relevant. Leading with sin and God’s condemnation does not create open hearts; it confirms people’s preconceptions of Christians as being judgemental.

When we lived in Africa, we found David Pawson’s teaching tapes really helpful – as did many others worldwide – but his name has appeared here before, as author of *Leadership is Male*. The main thing I objected to^[153] was not his explaining his view, but how it was expressed: (paraphrase) ‘they’ say such and such but ‘they’ are being influenced by the world’s view; and so he provides (actual quote) ‘a clear, concise look at what the Bible teaches.’

Yes, of course Jesus is ‘the answer’, but we need to ‘communicate’ by our humble, selfless, service-centred lives; *then* we can tell them the gospel – the story of Jesus – and they can respond to God in their own way.