

For the Bible Tells Me So

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'Many of you were brought up to believe this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. And this is where our trouble began.'

Those were the words of influential pastor, Andy Stanley, preached in a recent sermon. His point: Christians should not declare that the gospel is true simply because the Bible says it is, because our modern culture does not care about the authority of Scripture. 'If the Bible is the foundation of your faith, here's the problem,' he went on. 'It's all or nothing. Christianity becomes a fragile, house of cards religion.'

These would be worrying statements if they were made by a teenage youth pastor, never mind a globally significant megachurch leader, and the backlash towards Stanley was swift. He quickly wrote a blog stating that he does, in fact, believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God. It's impossible, however, to ignore the warning bells of a much bigger trend in Christian evangelism: what's more important – the message or the method? And in a world becoming increasingly hostile to the Bible's message, how far do we bend over backwards to help them receive it?

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A Generation of Apatheists

Andy Stanley should be commended for his earnest desire to reach post-Christians, the so-called de-converted who have once known God but have now abandoned Him and His church. His heart is clearly moved for them, and we need more people who carry a burden like he does. His problem, of course, is how he seems to be trying to win them over. They're not a generation of atheists but a generation of apatheists – they simply don't care what God says or wants. The supposed authority of a holy book doesn't impress them at all, and so he's trying another approach: it doesn't really matter if the Bible is historically and scientifically accurate or not. This, though (to borrow his own phrase) is where his trouble began.

No person can enter the kingdom of God on their own terms, and the harder we try to present something they're happy with, the less likely they are to experience genuine repentance. In a generation that celebrates ambiguity, we cannot soothe scepticism by encouraging people to doubt God's word but trust God. 'Christianity has lost its appeal,' Stanley lamented at the beginning of his now-infamous preach, and those five words reveal much of the problem.

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The Gospel isn't 'Appealing'

The Christian message is not like Coca-Cola or Adidas – you don't reinvent or repackage it when its popular appeal starts to decrease or set up focus groups to find out how people want it marketed to them. By nature, people will not like the gospel or the Bible, because it points a finger at the human condition. Think of Paul's eloquent message to the philosophers of Athens, recorded in Acts 17. He spoke in terms they understood, he didn't reference Scripture, and he even quoted their own colleagues to make his point. And yet they cut him off in the middle of his sermon. Why? He began to speak about repentance, judgment and the resurrection of Jesus. Paul knew exactly what he was doing, and he knew the effect those words would have, but he had to proclaim them. The only chance those intellectuals had of being born again was to hear the inconvenient, unpalatable truth.

I remember having a conversation with a man who'd just fixed my car. I told him I was a pastor, and that I try to help people. 'Well, I need help,' he blurted out, and began to explain how his life had been derailed by sin. The problem was that he'd been to church meetings and was very sceptical. We spoke for a while, and I told him that he needed to be born again and have his sins forgiven, because that's what the Bible says. He then shared his biggest obstacle with me: 'I know what you're going to say. If I come to God, I'm going to have to change my life, and stop doing the things I'm doing.' In that moment, I had a choice to make. I was so desperate to see this precious man come to Jesus and find life, but he had to do it in the right way. I had to tell him the truth. Yes, I said, he would have to change his life; God would receive him as he was, but he would not be able to stay that way. He walked away, unwilling to change.

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I fear that this modern method, for all its good intent, would've encouraged my friend to come to God in a way that suited or appealed to him: 'Don't worry about what the Bible says – just come and try this out. You'll like it.' But at what cost? He would be happy as long as he liked it, but what about when he got uncomfortable, like, say, when God showed him sinful patterns that needed to change? He would have no Biblical boundaries and would fold like a cheap deckchair at the first mention of radically changing his life. You see, it's all there in the Bible, as clear as day: *'Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish."*' Those were the words of Jesus, recorded in Luke 14:28-30. The context? The cost of being one His disciples. The Bible says it far more clearly than many modern Christians dare to.

The Gospel is Powerful

I believe that many modern pastors and preachers are placing too great an emphasis on receiving a favourable response from those they're trying to reach. In doing this, they may be neglecting the most important part of the entire equation, and that is the power of the Holy Spirit. God instructs us to speak His whole truth, regardless of the response, and promises us that the Holy Spirit will be in and with us, to empower the message. In Acts, a powerful lady named Lydia gets born again through a conversation with Paul, and Luke describes the moment like this: *'The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.'* Somewhere along the line, the western church seems to have forgotten that the power of God opens a heart, not the power of an ambiguous outreach method that an unconvinced culture will accept.

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Our job is not to put aside the Bible and workshop a more streamlined message for a modern generation, but to speak the truth in love to every generation. That truth has been passed down over thousands of years by faithful saints, and they found it in the Bible. If proclaiming it means fewer converts, so be it. The true converts will stand firm. And if it means being ridiculed for preaching the increasingly unpopular Bible, so be it – our Lord Himself had many reject Him, but God was pleased with Him.

So for all the respect and appreciation I have for Andy Stanley and his sincere dedication to reaching people, I believe he's wrong about the Bible. When we uphold those God-breathed words as they are, they have the power to change lives. So let's proclaim them unashamedly and unapologetically.