

Have we forgotten how to warn?

The Terror of perishing under comfortable Preaching

By Jay Wegter

What is comfortable preaching?

Why is the message of the book of Jeremiah so relevant for today?

Why is there an epidemic of comfortable preaching today?

Is comfortable preaching an accommodation to selfism and consumerism?

Does selfism have its own particular species of spirituality?

When we say ‘comfortable preaching’ aren’t we actually talking about theological antinomianism?

Why does Scripture keep the duty of repentance constantly before us?

In this age of grace is God still a God of vengeance who commands His servants to warn?

Should pastors be ‘hypocrisy hunters’?

Is warning necessary in order to break the strangle hold of sin’s self-deception?

Why is mutual admonishment necessary for spiritual growth and health?

What is ‘comfortable preaching’?

INTRODUCTION: Comfortable, or feel good preaching is not what you might think. It is not the obvious error of the health, wealth, prosperity gospel. It is much more subtle. In order to grasp what it is, think of an invisible editor behind the scenes who combs through the preacher’s text/manuscripts diligently removing any references to the terrors of God’s wrath. This unseen editor is always on the lookout for anything in the sermon which would disturb, afflict, crush, burden, alarm or frighten. It is the removal of any content which would jeopardize the listener feeling good about him or herself.

In terms of church history since the reformation, this kind of feel good preaching is relatively a late development. Under the influence of comfortable preaching, church goers tend to not notice that anything is amiss. They reason as follows, because we are blessed with an expository pulpit, we do not doubt for a moment that the whole counsel of God is preached here.

Pastor Albert Martin gives a solemn warning to pastors and Bible teachers. He states that we are not discharging our duty as those called of God if we are not warning our hearers in the strongest language possible of God's vengeance of impenitent sinners—write out verses (Acts 20:26-27). The damage done by feel good preaching is primarily done by what is omitted. By avoiding any stern warnings from the pulpit, an indirect message is sent that if you are a faithful church goer the state of your soul must be good.

The inference made by these omissions of wrath and warning bring to mind one of the most devastating cautions I have ever heard. Pastor and author John O. Anderson (*The Cry of the Innocent*, a book about O.T. idolatry and present day abortion) declared that at times the only difference between a true and false teacher is that false teachers refuse to warn (Add material on Puritan warnings here). Sitting under feel comfortable preaching for any length of time tends to rock parishioners to sleep.

Without warnings aimed at consciences, carnal hearts reason as follows: No one doubts I belong to my church. I don't doubt I belong to God. Warning and self-examination go together. Without warning there is little self-examination and lack or call to repentance (see Howell Harris about no riveting call to self-examination and no insistence on the fruits of faith). Why is it so necessary to warn and bring sternness into the pulpit?

One of the primary reasons is because the foundational attribute of sin is self-deception. It is those who are not right with God who are also engaged in deceiving themselves (passages). This is why the Epistles bring such acute warnings such as, do not be deceived. A state of self-deception cannot be reversed without deep contrition. That kind of repentance allows the force of the truth in God's Word to enter the heart with no resistance. Faithful ministers press down the truth upon the conscience in cooperation with the Spirit bringing conviction. These ministers understand that seldom is deep repentance divorced from the sinner's trauma of discovering the depths of his own self-deception, rebellion, and complacency. Therefore, by contrast comfortable preaching runs against the grain of a Spirit's convicting work.

Christ did not awaken His sleeping hearers with conversational messages laden with soothing lyrical words. He uttered sharp pointed hard sayings that stuck in the craw of His listeners. His parables were like time bombs with a delayed fuse. They eventually detonated in the conscience. Our Savior flushed His hypocritical hearers out of their false refuges – so much so that they must either receive His message and be devastated, or hate the Divine Messenger Himself (see Luke 4).

Ahh, now we are getting to the crux of why comfortable preaching is so common. The courage required to preach divine judgment against sin as Christ did involves nothing less than a Spirit-engendered fear of God. What works against this reverential fear of God is the strong temptation for pastors to enter into an unspoken contract with their congregation. The content of that contract is as follows, "If you as our pastor pronounce us spiritually well, we will support your ministry, your goals, and we will laud you personally." By contrast the faithful minister cannot abide by this carnal contract knowing that if he does so (by way of compromise—i.e. comfortable preaching), he will break faith with God and cease to be consistently speaking for God. Is it any wonder that the faithful declaration of

the Word of God is so provocative (Luke 4)? (These Jews crowded in to hear the gracious words falling from His lips, and less than 15 minutes later they formed a mob to murder Him.)

The stern warnings of Scripture scandalize the presumptive safety of its hearers. After an encounter with Jesus the rich young ruler went away crestfallen; feeling terrible about himself. Of course this level of personal devastation we cannot permit today, for psychology has imbued upon us that feeling good about oneself is the touchstone of whether or not a message is useful. Nonetheless, God commands His servants not to hold back in declaring to people their sins (Isaiah 58). (Do not heal the wound slightly—and the wound of original sin is a terminal wound apart from the infinite power of God exerted in the gospel—Romans 1:16-17.)

This article is not meant to be a slight to pastors whose ministries are characterized by comfort and mildness. No, this article is a call to be true to those portions of Scripture which reveal who God is in His response to sin. Thus the plea to pastors and Bible teachers is to leave off their pragmatism and to be true to the portions of Scripture which incorporate a high level of severity. We must not shy away from preaching these themes full strength because they are the very means God often uses to alarm those who are complacent in their iniquity. (Add why doctrines which are naturally caustic to our pride and self-sufficiency such as human inability, bondage to sin, religious hypocrisy, the fury and vengeance of God against sin and sinners, eternal suffering of the impenitent, false assurance, etc. are actually conciliatory to repentance.) If we are to be faithful in preaching the whole counsel of God, we must stop apologizing for the hard sayings in Scripture, for they have a very precise purpose which must not be neglected. We must not be like duplicitous auto brokers who conceal the fine print in a sales contract (include here Edwards on the horrors of unbelieving Zion dwellers). (Include here what Christ says will happen to His Apostles and disciples if they preach the unvarnished truth. We must ask would this same persecution follow them if they only preached a mild feel good message?)

Why is the message of the book of Jeremiah so timely today?

Every lover of the OT has been repeatedly arrested by the horrific, even ghastly imagery found in the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations (cannibalism, etc.). With the invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the predicted holocaust finally arrives—for the impenitent Jews who have rejected the prophets continued warnings. Jeremiah's tear-filled 'postmortem' of the holocaust in the book of Lamentations continues to shock and scandalize our sensibilities down to this very day. Francis Schaeffer's book about the destruction of Jerusalem, *Death in the City* is a potent and timely reminder of what happens when delayed judgment suddenly strikes the unwary. Though written half a century ago, Schaeffer's book is gripping expose of the apostate mind. The nations that have rejected God are poised for divine judgment (Minor Prophets). The apostate's mindset is manifested by smugness and apathy—even as they are teetering on the edge of a precipice of eternal destruction. This was true in Jeremiah's day as it is in our day. Historically this presumptuous sentiment has been expressed as, "It can't happen here." In the

case of Jeremiah's audience; in rejecting the prophet's warning, the nation of Judah reasoned, "it can't happen here" was joined to the false assurance that it will never happen here because, "We have the temple of the Lord" (the temple of the one true God.) God would not dispossess the only nation on earth that had His temple standing in it. After so many calls to repentance, when divine judgment ultimately fell upon the nation of Judah, the apostates of Jeremiah's day reacted in speechless horror and amazement. Then in Jeremiah's day, as now, there was a plethora of feel good preachers. These false prophets had ministries characterized by smooth words of encouragement and comfort and 'rosy' prophecies; they offered the promise of peace and domestic tranquility—but did not warn or call to repentance. According to the false prophets, the international scene with its foreboding potential of hostile Chaldean invaders was but a temporary scare that God would soon alleviate. That is the heart-wrenching tragic reality of the false prophets' message—it was cast in spiritual language—as if from God Himself. But, those who take up the Word of God and who refuse to warn in a time of danger are guilty of counseling rebellion against the Lord. The feel good preachers of Jeremiah's day were popular, and when we think of them there is a clear association with the woe upon false shepherds that Christ pronounced 600 years later, "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you."

The epidemic of comfortable Preaching Today

Today the ostensibly orthodox churches of evangelicalism are flooded with feel good preaching and preachers who are not warning, imploring, cautioning, and pleading in their sermons. Pastor Albert Martin exposes this error when he states that it is impossible to discharge our duty as preachers and Bible teachers if we do not implore our listeners to flee the wrath to come (Acts 20). Pastor Martin declares that the doctrine of the full reality of eternal hell must be preached if we are to understand the seriousness of sin. And, the disaster and hatefulness of human sin must be preached if we are to understand the actual nature of the atonement. These three doctrines, eternal hell, damnable sin, and the nature of the atonement stand or fall together. This triad is unbreakable. To abandon or ignore the scriptural doctrine of eternal hell as taught by Christ is to hold to a Christ other than the Christ of Scripture (Martin).

But today our pulpits are too delicate, squeamish, and cowardly to preach eternal hell the way our Savior did. Pragmatism is the rule of the day. And, its origin is found in our humanistic culture which has been imbibed by Christianity, therefore, the transcendent holiness of God has slowly been evicted from the church (see Wells). Anthropocentrism (HVP) is no longer standing outside the door of the church; it has entered the church dressed in Christian garb. And it is ravaging the people of God. The cultural value of boundless individual expression is clearly antithetical to the truth of what we owe God. In the battle between theism and humanism the value of unbridled individualism has won out. It is shored up by 100 plus years of psychology. The real you is no longer the idolatrous defiled worshipping heart in need of regeneration and cleansing but the real you is now the self with its yearnings and felt needs. Out of this distorted anthropology of selfism comes a distorted theology that psychologizes our lost position making our greatest need fulfillment, integration, and the ordering of self (see 10 Great Ideas). Thus the

spate of feel good (comfortable) preachers would not see their truncated preaching originating from any desire to deceive, no, these preachers are simply scratching the cultural itch of selfism, but they are doing so in Christian language.

We reiterate that it is impossible to be faithful to the full counsel of God and neglect the truth of the destiny of the impenitent. In my own experiences with this rising generation this author has found that there is an ethos in place which is consistent with the values inherent in postmodernism, namely that the ordering of the disordered self is the highest value (Wells). Our lost corrupt reprobate condition has been psychologized; it is now the wayward self in need of ordering—(as if) and desirous of a spiritual co-pilot in order to successfully navigate our spiritual journey. Jesus is the congenial mascot who is up to the task. Feel good preaching offers a feel good Jesus in order to feel good about ourselves. This is more subtle than one might think.

Comfortable preaching is an accommodation to selfism and consumerism

Needless to say the spiritual consumerism of cultural Christianity fits hand in glove with this selfism. And since self is the fixed authoritative reference how the self feels about anything has become the canon or measuring stick of its usefulness. Is it any wonder the dread of God, His fury, vengeance, retribution, and wrath and the terror of His judgement are regarded as outdated, even regarded as artifacts from a bygone era of bigotry, authoritarianism, and judgementalism? But has God changed? Is He so friendly now that He has toned down His vengeance towards sin and sinners? Has He laid aside His commitment to His own holiness? The greatest expressions of which are His law, the cross, and hell. Feel good preaching sends the message that God has backed way off on His vengeance and has even been willing to assimilate our postmodern values.

Selfism has its own psychologized species of spirituality

This author has also noticed the following in the rising generation. In the culture of selfism the affliction of the conscience is considered heretical and patriarchal; a disgusting power play that is graceless and which represents legalism and judgmentalism. This is an outgrowth of a psychologized view of anthropology, for in that view of man the conclusion is anything that makes me feel bad must be bad. We can see how easily the reverse or flip side of that equation can quickly take a person down the road of sinful passion. For if it makes me feel good it must be good has created a personal staircase to hell for millions. No wonder the evangelical landscape is littered with horror stories of gross immorality. The feel-good metric for what is useful in teaching must automatically eliminate the affliction of the conscience as legalistic and graceless.

As this false anthropology becomes increasingly monolithic in evangelicalism the loss of the knowledge of God's transcendence will continue unabated. But how has this blight come upon the evangelical church? At least five factors have contributed to this sad state. 1) the marginalizing of theology—thus the net loss of the knowledge of God's transcendent holiness. By this we don't primary mean there are no doctrinal classes offered at a church. What we mean

is that laymen are no longer theologizing. 2) Next, there is an absence of catechizing. The absence of practical theology in home life and in the life of the church has left our young people as undefended sheep amidst a culture of hungry wolves. 3) Third, there is an almost complete neglect of the Great Commission mandate to make disciples and bring each church member to completion or maturity in Christ. 4) Without number 1 through 3 in place we have no ability to stand for our Lord in a media-saturated society which channels and conducts its values to us through entertainment. 5) And, finally, if the church does not expose the error of unbridled individual expression then that error will demand expression within church culture. If we do not constantly teach what we owe God and imbue upon our hearers the reality of His absolute claim upon us then the ideological conclusion will be this: the God of the Bible is an angry, perfectionistic, demanding, intrusive, foe of personal freedom and fulfillment.

Thus it is impossible for these five influences listed above to stay in place and at the same time retain the truth of God's transcendent holiness. The compromise will show up as a lack of fear in God accompanied by an entirely congenial Christ who is imminent only and not transcendent. As David Wells has reminded us so often, it is impossible to retain the knowledge of God's transcendent holiness if we do not regularly experience the trauma of repentance. The formula given by Isaiah in chapter eight is a timeless principle so needed today. Only the dread of God produces the proper reverential fear of God necessary to drive us deep into the God-ordained refuge for sinners: the sanctuary we have in Christ (Is 8). As R. C. Sproul has said "only God can save you from God."

Antinomianism and its partners in crime

Selfism's partner in crime is antinomianism. It has become a magnet for/within cultural Christianity and spiritual consumerism namely because from this/its vantage point God requires so little of a penitent. Bonhoeffer labeled the antinomian mindset as cheap grace—that is grace without the demands of discipleship, without self-denial and taking up one's cross. Under the thrall of antinomianism normal healthy biblical admonishment is redefined as legalism. Laxness is redefined as charity and grace. In the contemporary church, honesty about one's sin (like the self-identification confessions in Alcoholics Anonymous, "Hi, I am Jim and I am an alcoholic") is revered more than obedience. As a consequence an ethos develops in which professed Christians are happy to give their brethren a free pass in view of their sins and then call it grace. Where is the conjunction of truth and grace, of love and reproof (see Proverbs)? Timothy's charge by Paul to reprove, rebuke and exhort with all long suffering is regarded as graceless. We are back to a view of the unencumbered self in which security, therapy, and felt needs become the functional 'holy of holies' in the new spirituality. Gone are the signs of deep repentance and contrition (Is. 57; 66). In this hyper grace setting there is no beating of the breast, no traumatic deep contrition. After all we're just being human (imperfect). Grace becomes sin's permission assured of sin's remission.

Why does the Word of God continually keep the duty of repentance before us?

We won't hear much in the way of affliction over sin from feel good pulpits. The urgency of repentance has evaporated. Spiritual apathy and laid back complacency is the rule of the day. What a contrast this is to men like Martin Lloyd-Jones. Pastor Jones was masterful at preaching the burden of the text in such a way that every listener understood that the sermon was a personal appointment with God. Therefore it was said that after his Sunday message his believing parishioners would greet each other only briefly, for their sense of urgency to repent was so great that they hurried home to their prayer closets to do business with God.

This is almost entirely missing today. Pastors are too timid and gentrified to transfer the burden of the text to the conscience of their hearers. Pastors who sternly warn are rare today. R. C. Sproul has given a devastating diagnosis in view of this tendency: "In evangelicalism the transcendent holiness of God has been systematically hidden from the church." But what a terrible disservice this is to the people of God to conceal from church goers God's true disposition towards sin.

Is God still a God of Vengeance?

The theme of His wrath, fury, vengeance, and retribution are seldom dealt with in a thematic way. The crushing suffering and torment that awaits the impenitent is hidden or neglected from the pulpit. The result of this avoidance of the wrath of God in preaching is nothing short of disastrous. For where the fear of God is weak there is a low inducement to deep repentance, watchfulness, self-examination, and urgency in dealing with personal sin. And, accompanying that spiritual lethargy is an absence of mutual edification in speaking to one another about specific sin and admonishing one another about sin. In feel good preaching there is almost a complete disconnect between love and warning and between caring and admonishment. It's time we hear from our pulpits again, that salvation is from sin. Do not be deceived, those who continue in sin will not live with the Holy One. You can't keep your sin and have heaven too. That is a very rare message today in our hyper grace churches. By abandoning the warnings which Christ preached so consistently the sheep are lulled into presumption and moral laxity as if stern warnings about sin are completely incompatible with grace. Concerning this trend David Wells has warned that those with little interest in hearing about the transcendent holiness of God will have little interest in receiving holiness from God. That is the implication of marginalizing the holy nature of God. Divine grace has been pushed through the filter of the therapeutic so much so that man's lost condition and alienation from his Creator and exposure to eternal wrath have been psychologized. What is most tragic is that this has taken place within the pale of orthodoxy.

EMAIL: Actually your question reveals a deep problem right at the heart of cultural Christianity. And I am not implying that you are a cultural Christian. The real issue is in our culture of self-ism, feeling good has trumped the necessity of living by what the Puritans called, "the force of truth." Thus, today rejoicing is more tied to mood alteration than to the force that divine truth is to have upon the soul. Buoyancy of heart, diversions, escape, denial, stimuli, etc. are a world apart from the depth of joy that can only come from knowing that you are the object of Christ's

particular, limited, focused, wrath-quenching atonement. As Pastor Al Martin has pointed out so vividly: the doctrine of hell is intimately tied to one's understanding of the doctrine of sin, which is intimately tied to the doctrine of the nature of the atonement. The three parts of this 'triad' stand or fall together. What has become surprising to the rising generation is that the fear of God is a boundless source of true joy. The reason is this, to fear God (with all the accompanying justice, threats, promises, moral cause and effect, etc.) drives us deeply into Christ--deeply into the refuge that God has provided. And from that refuge in Christ (the 'split Rock') we find a perfect 'observation tower' from which to study, and adore all of God's attributes. From that refuge from wrath which God has provided, we find the only vantage point from which we can see clearly the reality of His transcendent holiness, justice, and wrath—and the beauty of the cross. Only against this background of reverential fear can we truly exult in grace, mercy and compassion as we should. Holiness and happiness are inseparable. It is the dishonoring and trampling of the law of God that made the cross necessary. Our current rising generation has been steeped in psychology and postmodern relativism. Combine that with the unquestioned cultural value of unbridled individual expression, and you will get a radically different anthropology--an anthropology which replaces the truth of our corrupt idolatrous idol-worshipping heart with a different *real you*--the self--and self's yearnings and felt needs. Self becomes the *real you* and becomes the 'holy of holies' which must not be violated by the invasive afflicting judging crushing feelings of real guilt which come from the law of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit. As a result an equation develops: whatever makes me feel bad must be bad. Thus the hard truths which Christ preached are marginalized. And where they are marginalized they are being categorized as judgmental, legalistic, authoritative, etc. Brethren, the situation is dire; cultural Christianity has gobbled up the transcendence of God as such a terrifying rate that I wonder at times if the knowledge of God's transcendent holiness will be ever be recovered by mainstream evangelicalism. Maybe next time we can talk more about how to speak about the fruit of the Spirit, peace, and rejoicing.

Why should pastors be hypocrisy hunters?

WHY WE NEED REGULAR DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS ON THE MORTIFICATION OF SIN: (add Christ's terrifying warnings from Matthew about the eternal judgment of the impenitent.) It is through personal discipleship that we set the bar high for personal holiness and obedience. From the pulpit only this cannot be done. The regular trauma of deep repentance (the polar opposite of feeling good about oneself) is precisely what is necessary to retain our knowledge of God transcendent in holiness.

Holy Scripture consistently reminds us of how utterly serious it is to carry a sinful flesh; the remnants of a sin nature. Indwelling sin and temptation must be constantly mortified if we are to be of any real use in serving the Lord (see 2 Pet 1). On a very regular basis we must hear from the pulpit and from our disciplers precisely how indwelling sin is to be restrained. According to the Word of God, how is it to be held in check? Instruction in this matter is of utmost importance, for the flesh is capable of horrific acts of truancy. The Williams translation

of the N.T. captures the intent of the Greek when it states in Romans chapter eight that those who are of the Spirit do not allow the flesh to set the standard for their behavior. The entire principle of co-crucifixion and co-resurrection must be set before our hearers continually. Out of this radical identification with Christ comes the power, motivation, and rationale to daily present ourselves back to God without reservation.

The built-in self-deceptions inherent in the flesh

The flesh is very sly—it promises that if we sow to its desires that it will make us happy, fulfilled, and free. How we need both the promises and the warnings of the gospel to fortify us and urge us to live lives consecrated to Christ our Lord. But, the Scriptural details of mortifying the deeds of the flesh provide the ‘how to’ in terms of how indwelling sin is to be restrained and put to death. The deficit associated with comfortable feel good preaching is that it tends to discount the sacrifices believers need to make in order to grow in personal holiness. The inference is that grace covers everything therefore strictness (self-denial, self-watch, close attention to personal discipline, constant mortification of sin) in our Christian walk (see Watson, Heaven taken by Storm) is optional and not really essential to timely progress in our sanctification.

How serious are the potential dangers of backsliding and lapsing in our Christian walk? Is it possible to turn our freedom into an opportunity for the flesh (Gal 5)? Are frequent warnings about this pitfall needed? What does it mean to make our election and calling sure? Is that mandate to be preached only once a decade when we come to the book of 2 Peter? What are the ‘fruits of faith’ and why should we insist upon them in our walk? What is the place of self-examination? When we examine ourselves, how do we know if we pass or fail the test? Is assurance of salvation really tied to whether or not we are living holy lives? Can we know that we are walking in obedience and are pleasing God? Why do we need to pursue Christian character with all of our might in order to be useful, stable, hopeful, and fruitful? (See 2 Peter 1). Each one of these questions has a level of discomfort with it, and yet also a level of great joy as well. That of course is the paradox: when we are holy we are happy; but when we are happy, we are not always holy. Antinomianism tends to gloss over these questions with generalizing hyper-grace answers. True genuine fellowship exists to nurture disciples and to move one another toward spiritual maturity. This means that in addition to encouraging one another, we will also have to admonish each other. Fellowship exists also to deal with sin in our lives. We exhort and admonish one another in sermonizing ways (see Col 3; Eph 5, 4, etc.) in order to keep raising the bar of holy obedience to the level set by our Savior in Scripture. That means what Paul commanded Timothy must in part be found in our conversations: reprove, rebuke, exhort, implore, warn, correct, encourage, etc.

There can be no vibrant healthy spiritual growth without mutual admonishment

This full spectrum of accountable, life on life, soul care is almost completely missing in our psychologized church age. I do appreciate the sometimes gritty ‘trench work’ of my close

Christian friend who likens admonishment to bunker-buster ordnance. Like a reinforced concrete bunker, our hearts keep their bosom idols concealed and insulated from the gaze of our brethren. But, when we welcome access and accountability to the personal lives of one another, something remarkable takes place. We ask ‘bunker buster’ questions which are designed to help our brother bring his heart idols out into the light of day where they can be smashed—repented of, forsaken. These questions can cover a multitude of areas: “Have you been viewing illicit images lately?” “Have you been neglecting your prayer life?” “Do you find yourself complaining a lot and talking negatively about others?” “Do you frequently make comparisons between yourself and others in order to feel better about yourself?” “Do you find that you are demanding with God?” “How would you describe your level of contentment?” “Is Christ on the outer edges of your ‘happiness equation’?”

ADD HALF PAGE FROM MY JEREMIAH SUMMARY NOTES: (forgives for His Name sake.) Add how hard it is to take Christ entirely for righteousness and to have His blood cover the conscience completely so that the verdict of Calvary is the verdict of conscience. This is above the power of nature. Our default position is to choose to recline upon our dead works in order to placate an accusing conscience.