

Have we forgotten how to warn? (Part One)

The tragedy 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?**

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 manuscripts diligently removing any references to the terrors of God’s wrath. This ‘unseen editor’ is always on the lookout for anything which would disturb, afflict, crush, burden, alarm or frighten. It is tantamount to removing any content which would jeopardize the listener’s self-acceptance.

In terms of church history, since the Reformation, this kind of feel good preaching is a relatively late development. Its emergence within Evangelicalism is tied to the church growth movement which began in the 1960’s. Churches that have embraced the tenets of this movement tend to focus upon sensitivity and accessibility to the spiritual needs of seekers.

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 upon impenitent sinners. The ‘whole counsel of God’ certainly includes the holy living, sanctification and obedience which God requires for heaven. “Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:26-27).

Here the apostle Paul alludes to the very sobering texts in Ezekiel 3:17-21; 33:7-9 which describe the role of God’s man as an alert watchman who is required to give an urgent warning. If the watchman fails to warn the people of an imminent disaster, he will bear responsibility for their blood (their destruction), because he knew of the disaster, but did not warn the people.

So also, 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 brings 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.

In his book on the message of Jeremiah (*Death in the City*), Francis Schaeffer addresses apostasy in the western church today. He nails down the root problem—in Jeremiah’s day, as in our day, the religionists cried ‘Peace’ when God is threatening disaster (Jer 6:14). In other words, by championing a benign God who has no wrath and vengeance against sin, unfaithful preachers “heal the brokenness of the people superficially” (Jer 6:14). Sitting under comfortable preaching for any length of time tends to rock parishioners to sleep.

Without warnings aimed at consciences, carnal hearts will tend to reason presumptively: ‘No one is in doubt that I belong to my church and that I am a sincere person; therefore, I do not doubt I am fine with God.’ Warning and self-examination go together—it is hard to find one without the other. Self-love tends to neutralize serious self-examination by causing us to excuse our sin. By contrast, biblical warnings awaken the conscience.

In his work on the Puritans (*Quest for Godliness*), J. I. Packer explains why Puritan preachers ‘ripped up’ consciences. The application of the truth to the conscience is an inducement to self-judgment. The conscience is God’s deputy, God’s court within. Genuine faith involves the conscience. Thus, consciences should be on sharp alert in church, for the conscience signifies a man’s knowledge of himself. Genuine piety is inseparable from communing with the conscience in the presence of God (Ibid, pp. 68, 108-110).

Without biblical warnings being preached there is little accompanying self-examination and thus the urgency to repent of sin is all but absent. Warning involves God confronting a man’s conscience. God’s glory and sovereignty are inseparably joined to His moral majesty therefore His essential glory causes horror to the impenitent. This truth is lost in comfortable preaching. “And they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’” (Rev 6:16-17).

Why is it so necessary to warn and bring sternness into the pulpit? One of the primary reasons for warning is due to a foundational attribute of sin: self-deception. Thomas Watson, the most readable of the Puritans advises that we meditate on God’s severity against sin. Says Watson, the heart, out of self-love naturally refuses self-examination. For, the heart is the greatest impostor and highly accomplished at lying to self (*Heaven taken by Storm*, p. 32).

It is those who are not right with God who are also actively engaged in deceiving themselves. This is why the Epistles (which are filled with grace) also bring such acute warnings such as, “do not be deceived” (Eph 5:6).

A state of self-deception cannot be reversed without deep contrition (see Is 57:15; 66:1-2). That kind of repentance allows the force of the truth in God’s Word to enter the heart without being met by resistance. It is to take God’s side against one’s sin so fully as to abominate it, forsake it, and cease making provision for it.

Faithful ministers will preach repentance in this manner: by pressing down the truth upon

the conscience in cooperation with the Spirit's convicting work. These faithful and courageous 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. By contrast comfortable preaching runs against the grain of a Spirit's convicting work because it sends the message that all is well.

Christ did not awaken His spiritually sleepy 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, and change OR hate the Divine Messenger Himself (see Luke 4:16-30).

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. Thomas Watson enjoins his readers with the following alarm: lack of a fear of God is the cause of wickedness. Even among the churching, few fear God because they lack the knowledge of God. Therefore, they presume upon His mercy because they are not associated with the truth that God has mercy solely upon those who fear Him (Luke 1:50) (Watson, *Religion our True Interest*, pp. 13-14).

What works against this reverential fear of God is the strong temptation for a pastor to enter into an 'unspoken contract' with his congregation. Who doesn't wish to be liked? The content of that contract from the congregation's side is as follows, "If you as our pastor infer that we are 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 only), he will break faith with God and cease to be consistently speaking for God. Preaching the unvarnished truth will sooner or later get you in trouble. Is it any wonder that the faithful declaration of the Word of God is so provocative? We may recall our Lord's experience in Luke 4 when He preached in Nazareth.

The Jews at the synagogue in Nazareth crowded in to hear the gracious words falling from Christ's lips, but less than 15 minutes later they formed a mob to murder Him. When truth is aimed at the conscience, it never produces complacency. The stern warnings of Scripture *scandalize* the presumptive safety of the hearer. It is intensely painful and traumatic to be flushed out of a false refuge; but necessary for salvation. Why? Because the heart of sinful man operates at a level of deceit 'past finding out' ("who can understand it?"—Jeremiah 17:9).

Faithful ministers understand this anatomy of the heart, that sinners are attracted to false refuges in order to justify their love of sin. Biblical truth addressed to the conscience is essential because religious unbelievers have settled for half measures short of gospel faith and repentance.

After an encounter with Jesus the rich young ruler went away crestfallen; feeling terrible about himself (Lu 18:23). Of course this level of personal devastation *we cannot permit today*, for psychology has imbued its values upon us—namely that feeling good about oneself is the

touchstone of whether or not a message is balanced and useful. Nonetheless, God commands His servants not to hold back in declaring to people their sins (Is 58:1; Mic 3:8). *Do not heal the wound slightly* (Jer 6:14—for the wound of original sin is a terminal wound apart from the infinite power of God exerted in the gospel (Rom 1:16-17.)) The nefarious nature of sin must be exposed.

This article is not meant to be a slight to pastors whose ministries are characterized by gospel comfort and mildness and the benefits of divine grace. No, preaching comfort in God is required as well as preaching warning (Is 40:1). 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 any form of pragmatism that would cancel out a willingness to warn our listeners. Let us 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. These doctrines of God's fury, hot jealousy, and vengeance against sin are naturally caustic to our pride and self-sufficiency. Preaching human inability, bondage to sin, religious hypocrisy, the wrath of God against sin and sinners, eternal suffering of the impenitent, and false assurance are actually conciliatory to repentance (J. I. Packer, *Introduction to John Owen's Death of Death in the Death of Christ*).

If we are to be faithful in preaching the whole counsel of God, we must stop apologizing for the hard sayings in Scripture. For, like a physician's scalpel they have a very precise surgical purpose which must not be neglected. We must not be like duplicitous auto brokers who conceal the fine print in a sales contract.

Insistence upon holiness from our hearers will cost us—not only in self-denial, but also in the guarantee that we will be misunderstood by some. In no uncertain terms, Christ states what will happen to His Apostles and disciples if they preach the unvarnished truth. They will at times be misunderstood and hated; even slain (Jn 15:18-16:4). This begs the question: would this same element of persecution follow them if they only preached comfortable messages?

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

Every diligent student 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. The impenitent Jews who have rejected the prophet's continued warnings are cut down and cast into the streets, left to decay and be eaten by scavengers (Jer 16:4).

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 a gripping expose of the apostate mind. The nations that have

rejected God are poised for divine judgment. But even more arresting, the nation that knew God, but has abandoned Him is poised for a holocaust of unspeakable proportions.

The message of the book of Jeremiah reveals that the apostate's mindset is manifested by smugness and apathy—even as they are teetering on the edge of a precipice of temporal carnage and 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, apostate Judah reasoned, "It can't happen here." This self-delusion 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) (Jer 7:4). Surely God would not dare to 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 (Jer 11:11). Then in Jeremiah's day, as now, there was a plethora of comfortable 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 (Jer 28). But their refusal to preach the Word of the Lord in warning their hearers is designated by Jeremiah as "making people trust a lie," and "counseling rebellion against the Lord" (Jer 28:15-16).

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 the offer of comfort is 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" (Lu 6:26).

Jeremiah's message is highly relevant because carnal security is so dominant in American churches today. The thrust of Jeremiah's message is to cut down humanistic optimism. The prophet's hearers are under the judgment of God, yet they want a message that is light and breezy. So also the western world has the Word of God, and knows the commandments of God, yet has departed from the Lord. Francis Schaeffer provides a shocking analysis, if you preach the uncompromising Word of God to a post-Christian world, you will end up like Jeremiah (he was persecuted for 'eroding morale') (Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, pp. 66-71).

The epidemic of comfortable preaching today

Today there are countless ostensibly orthodox evangelical churches that 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 (Mt 23:33; Lu 3:7; Acts 20:26-27).

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. David Wells observes that Protestant orthodoxy has been altered to fit an atmosphere of “pleasantness and light.” Churches are filled with those who wear a happy face, but who have no religious passions. Modernity has twisted Evangelicalism to the point where interest in the truth of God is severely lacking. The therapeutic and managerial have replaced love of the truth (David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, pp. 28-29).

Wells indicates that Evangelicalism’s new value system is a reflection of the church growth movement’s pragmatism: i.e. remove the barriers to conversion, and you’ll get the numbers. McGavran’s formula for church growth is applied sociology. Raw pragmatism intrudes into churches where the confessional and the theological have faded. When theology is not at the center, managers and marketers will conduct the “business” of the Church (Ibid, pp. 69-71). A man-centered perspective is no longer an external threat, 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 condition—making our greatest need to be fulfillment, integration, and the ordering of self.

Author Mark Shaw gives this chilling caution: “Worship or sermonizing that gets people feeling good about themselves or self-satisfied in their lofty words and thoughts about God is a worship of glory that damns our souls and divides us from God” (Mark Shaw, *Ten Great Ideas from Church History*, p. 26).

The spate of feel good preachers would not regard their truncated preaching as originating from any desire to deceive, no, these ministers are simply scratching the cultural itch of selfism, but they are doing so in Christian language. But, according to Scripture, true comfort comes in a much different manner. There is trauma in retaining the Scriptural, theocentric God of grandeur. The radical reconstruction of self by God’s revealed doctrine is needed or the knowledge of the Holy One will not sink in. The cost of retaining the knowledge of God is ongoing repentance (Wells, p.115).

“And rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the Lord your God, for He is

gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil” (Joel 2:13).

Objective truth in redemptive history is the revealer of who God is. God’s redemptive presence in truth and holiness are found only on His terms, not ours. We must have God transcendent in holiness, or we do not know Him. Modernity is appalled by the great things of God. Addiction to modernity can only be opposed by a mind steeped in the Word of God (Ibid, pp.116-118).

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.

Our lost corrupt reprobate condition has been psychologized; it is now the wayward self in need of ordering. The sovereign Lord and Judge of all is reduced to a spiritual co-pilot who is available to help you successfully navigate your spiritual journey. Jesus is the congenial mascot who is up to the task. By what it does not say, comfortable preaching offers a feel good Jesus in order for us to feel good about ourselves. This is far 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 point—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 judgmental-ism?

But has God changed? Is He so friendly and congenial 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 eternal hell? Comfortable preaching sends the message that God has backed way off on His vengeance against sin 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 judgmental-ism. 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 of 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. "It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread. Then He shall become a sanctuary" (Is 8:13-14a).