

What did Jesus Teach? James E. Smith

Recently I attended a panel discussion on church growth. The young preachers who led the discussion presented many solid ideas for building the church numerically. One assertion, however, struck me as “off the mark.”

As he discussed the role of preaching in “filling the pews” one of the panelists asserted that the top three subjects that appeal to a modern audience are marriage, parenting and finances. No documentation was given. Then as if to offer a rationale for preaching more on these three subjects the preacher asserted that these were the top three subjects addressed by Jesus in his teaching ministry. Again, no documentation was offered. Now this assertion was wrong logically and factually.

Logical Disconnect

Logically, even if it were true that the top three subjects addressed by Jesus were marriage, parenting and finances, that would not be justification for a preacher spending a disproportionate amount of time of these subjects. Jesus lived and died under the old covenant. It was not until the resurrection and ascension that foundations of the gospel were complete. Only then could the fullness of the gospel be preached. The last time I read the great commission that is exactly what Jesus told his disciples to preach.

In the last forty days Jesus was on earth he taught his disciples what was most important for them to know and to teach. He spoke about the kingdom of God, the coming age of the Holy Spirit, and witnessing throughout the world (Acts 1:3-8). Finances, parenting and marriage did not make the curriculum of the forty-day seminar.

Everything Jesus taught was true. But he focused on teaching concerning the kingdom of heaven (Mt 4:17). When he sent forth his disciples, he told them to focus on the message that the kingdom is at hand (Mt 10:7; Lk 10:11).

Jesus told his disciples that he had only introduced them to his message. The Holy Spirit was to come to finish the job. The Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth (Jn 16:13). Therefore, what the apostles taught in sermon and epistle is as much the teaching of Jesus as the words that came directly from the lips of the Master. There is no logical reason that we should classify the sermons of Jesus topically in order to construct a preaching plan for our congregations. We need to preach the entire message of Christ not just those subjects upon which he focused during his 3.5 years of earthly ministry.

I have another problem with the thesis of the panelist. Church growth gurus are telling us that our services are to be seeker oriented. Some are even saying that church services are not for Christians! They are designed for the “unchurched,” that euphemistic concession to political correctness that we use nowadays to designate the lost. So we employ music that the “unchurched” can gyrate to and praise choruses that are gospel anemic in order to fill the pews. We use modern technology and every Madison Avenue strategy to pack’em in. But when do the lost hear the gospel? Not in the song service! Not in the sermon! Even communion meditations often miss the mark in terms of explaining why we observe the Lord’s Supper each week.

What is the purpose of bringing the “unchurched” to church if they go home without a Savior? What shall it profit a man if he has an ideal marriage, raises outstanding children, and has his finances in order, but loses his soul?

Factually Wrong

Were the top three subjects addressed by Jesus marriage, parenting and finances? I decided to take the time to check the assertion of the panelist. I took a red letter edition of the NIV and looked at every red letter verse in the four Gospels. I classified each according to its primary teaching aim as indicated by context. This was no easy task. Some verses address more than one subject. For example, Jesus may refer to prayer and faith in one verse. Under what heading should the verse be classified? For statistical purposes I assigned one topic to each verse.

I eliminated from the study those few red letter verses where the disciples are merely repeating something Jesus said earlier. Here are some of the results of my study.

In the four Gospels there are 1,854 red letter verses in which Jesus is directly speaking. Of these 341 are comments that clearly have no direct teaching value. For example, Jesus often engaged in casual conversation with his disciples or with those in his audience. Removing these non-teaching verses left 1,513 verses to be analyzed.

I found that the Gospel of Matthew had the most red letter teaching verses both in terms of raw numbers (1,071) and percentage (55%) of the total material in the book. The top ten subjects addressed in the teaching of Jesus are these: eternal life and salvation (46 vv; 3.04%); prayer (48 vv.; 3.17%); persecution (54 vv; 3.57%); judgment and hell (61 vv; 4.03%); predictions, especially about his disciples and himself (67 vv; 4.43%); hypocrisy (73 vv; 4.82%); second coming (79 vv; 5.22%); fate of Jerusalem and the evil generation that rejected Jesus (119 vv; 7.87%); Jesus' identity and mission (129 vv; 8.53%). The subject that Jesus spoke about most was the kingdom (159 vv; 10.51%)—its nature, entrance requirements and nearness.

For the record, I found sixteen verses which had the primary teaching emphasis on marriage and divorce (1.06%), and forty-three verses (2.84%) that addressed treasure and greed. Frankly, I could not find anything that Jesus said that had the primary intention of teaching on the subject of parenting. Perhaps the panelist was counting all the passages where Jesus referred to his heavenly Father!

Why would a panelist at a state-wide gathering make the outlandish assertion that Jesus' teaching majored in the subjects of marriage, parenting and finances? Even allowing for a difference of opinion on the classification of some of the verses that I examined, these subjects would not come close to representing the thrust of Jesus' teaching. It seems to me that in the interest of church growth we are taking our cues from Oprah rather than Jesus.