

How Can We Preach Sin in Today's Culture?

Preaching sin in today's culture is hard to do. Few aspects of the Christian message are so unacceptable in today's society. Of course, our gospel is not so much about human wickedness and failure as about God's love. The bright side of the coin is what God is, but what we are is the dark side of the coin and has to be recognized. The human predicament is not the first point to make, but it must be made all the same.

Michael Green lectures at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and is a well known evangelist in many parts of the world . He was for some years a Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall where he taught Evangelism, Apologetics and New Testament Studies and also helped Professor Alister McGrath launch the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics, which is now able to offer a Certificate validated by Oxford University itself. A few years ago he helped to grow and lead a start-up Anglican Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he was asked by Archbishop Bob Duncan to raise a small team and offer evangelism training in the emerging Anglican Province in N. America. Michael's previous experiences include being Principal of St John's College, Nottingham; Rector of St Aldate's Church, Oxford; Professor of Evangelism at Regent College, Vancouver; and Advisor to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on Evangelism. He has written numerous books including *The Books the Church Suppressed*, a repudiation of the Coptic Gospels on which the Da Vinci Code relied; *But Don't All Religions Lead to God*; *I believe in the Holy Spirit*; and *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Michael and his wife Rosemary live in Oxford, England.

I. Why is it so difficult?

Because the culture thinks that sin and salvation, heaven and hell seem out-dated and pessimistic relics of a bygone age. We are part of a world come of age and can leave such infantile things behind! Liberal Christians leave the problem out on the whole, while evangelicals major on individual guilt and redemption. But these words do not resonate today. 'Who has the right to tell me I am guilty?' they ask 'And why should I believe the Christian story of redemption when there are so many other religious systems to turn to, or better still be an agnostic?'

II. What does the Bible mean by sin?

The answer is complex. But Scripture does not major on particular sins, but on the state of sin, alienation from God in which we all live. The root of sin produces the fruits of sins. There is a fatal flaw in our human nature and it expresses itself in many ways . At the personal level these include anxiety about death, unfulfilled longing, moral guilt, a sense of frustration, a desire to be independent of God. At the societal level sin shows itself primarily in the radical selfishness everywhere, and the results that come from it. There is something basically wrong with human nature. A wrong relationship with God is the heart of our problem. *Hamartia* (singular) rather than *hamartiai* (plural) is them ain problem.

The NT has various words for this alienating disease , *hamartia*, missing the mark; *parabasis*, crossing the line; *akrasia*, inability to control ourselves; *anomia*, lawless raising our fist against God. But thee are four major ways of understanding sin the in N.T. and they help in interpreting it to our contemporaries.

1. Sin is an illness.
2. Sin is moral guilt.
3. Sin is an enslaving force.
4. Sin is existential alienation – there are just two ways to live, authentic or inauthentic existence. This fits the Bible like a glove

III. How can we proclaim this biblical understanding of sin today?

Have one foot in the Biblical revelation and the other in contemporary culture. Our job is to build bridges between the two. News items, pop songs, unsuspected cancers, famous people falling into disrepute all are grist for our mill. But reflect particularly on

1. **alienation** Countless people feel alienated from home, work, decision making , government etc. *We feel* alienated because *we are* alienated!
2. **emptiness** Many people feel deeply dissatisfied however great their achievements. Film-stars, writers, singers, artists often express it. This is a wide open way into the human heart.
3. **lack of meaning** is something so many people experience in life. No long-term purpose in lie. Most are very depressed by this ‘ Every existent being is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance ‘(Sartre)

4. **the quest for spiritual fulfilment** occupies many people. Fascinating, in an affluent age, as people find that possessions do not satisfy. Maybe this basic human experience is pointing us to something which lies beyond us waiting to be grasped. Examples from Solzhenitsyn, Plato and Gide.

5. **materialism** is the greatest failing of the West. This is a great way in to preach sin. See the rich fool in Luke 12. I find Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 very effective too. Materialism is false and addictive. It hardens our sympathies, is self defeating and does not last.

IV. Conclusion

These are some of the ways in which we can bring the human condition of alienation from God and bondage to our self-centredness home to people. We need a clear understanding of the biblical teaching, and an imagination which sees how this truth can be expressed in ways that connect with everyday experience.

Further reading : Michael Green *Compelled by Joy*