

# **“Woe Is Unto Me if I Preach Not the Gospel”**

**1 Cor. 9:16-17**

**Dub McClish**

## **Introduction**

The term *woe* is found numerous times in both Testaments. It is a favorite expression of the prophets to announce God's judgment upon nations, cities, or individuals. Our Lord frequently used it in crying out against the sinners and errorists among the Jews. (He used it seven times against the scribes and Pharisees in Mat. 23 alone [KJV].) Paul used it in 1 Cor. 9:16-17 in the sense that he recognized that he was under the threat of judgment from God if he failed in his responsibility to preach the Gospel.

## **Every Christian Is Under This Woe**

Although no one since Paul has received such a direct commission as he did (Acts 26:16-18), what he said of himself is no less true of every Christian. The commission to the apostles reaches far beyond them—“even unto the end of the world” (Mat. 28:20). As long as the world lasts, this commission to preach and make disciples is incumbent upon the Lord's people. Everyone who obeys the Gospel becomes a debtor to the untaught (Rom. 1:14). This debt is paid only as we pass the Gospel along.

The apostles and evangelists could not have evangelized their world by themselves, though they led in the effort. It took the effort of the “ordinary” saints when they were scattered abroad, preaching the Gospel as they went, to really begin the march of Truth throughout the world (Acts 8:4). In order for us all to profit the most from the meaning of Paul's “woe,” we must place ourselves under it with him. What elements are involved in faithfully preaching the Gospel?

## **I Must Preach the Gospel**

The word translated “preach” in Paul's statement is *euangelizomai*—to bring or announce the Gospel, to deliver the message of glad tidings to others. Notice, Paul did not write about “sharing” the Gospel, but “preaching” the Gospel. “What's the difference,” you say? To “preach” correctly implies that one is imparting an authoritative message to others who need it and who may learn from it, which is always the relationship between the saved and the lost. This statement is not one of self-righteousness, but one of simple fact. The saint has a message that the sinner must hear to be saved. To “share” implies a two-way exchange, a dialogue between

the parties involved. It further implies that each has a message equally needed by the other party, which is simply not the case between sinner and saint. The saint has what the sinner needs for salvation, but the sinner has no message of Truth and Light to impart to the saint.

Not only does Paul not use the phrase, *share the Gospel*, neither does any other New Testament writer use it to describe communicating the Word of God, whether to sinners or saints. I grow exceedingly weary and almost nauseous at the misuse and overuse of this word, *share*. Many men who are called "preachers" nowadays ought to be renamed "sharers." They do very little preaching. Rather, every time they get up they have something they must "share" with their listeners: they want to share a Scripture, an experience, or a lesson with us. This terminology has had such an impact upon members of the church that I once heard an announcer begin by saying, "I want to share a few announcements with you." *Preach* is a word of authority relating to the message of authority – the Gospel. *Share* is a milk-toast term for a milk-toast approach to whatever message is being delivered.

A recent issue of *The Regan Report* (a newsletter for communications executives), a writer observed that speakers who use the word *share* do not really do so at all. The report states of such: "They are being manipulatively humble and phonily democratic. They pretend that we have come for dialogue, but instead they speak and we listen with the foolish pretense that we are communicating with each other." If this is so regarding general public speaking, how much more true it is of Gospel preaching! From whence did the "sharing" concept arise? It came from romantics and psychologists who don't believe in the existence of truth in general or in the presentation of an authoritative message. In religion, it came from those who suppose one can sort of "sneak up" on sinners without really preaching the Gospel plainly.

Churches all over the land are languishing in Biblical beriberi and spiritual scurvy because they are hearing little Gospel preaching. Soft-soapers in their pulpits are "sharing" them to death, spiritually speaking. After all, the Lord could have said, "Go ye into all the world and share the Gospel with every creature." But the fact is, he said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). One reason, I'm convinced, that the church has lost its rapid growth rate of twenty-five years ago is because so many of our preachers stopped preaching and started "sharing."

Further, I grow impatient with preachers who don't like to be called *preacher*. Some of our folks, in both pulpit and pew, are just too dignified and sophisticated any more to relate to this term. They delight in the word *minister*. It sounds so much sweeter and softer (perhaps

more “dignified”?) than *preacher*—and that's exactly what they want, sweetness and softness. Several years ago some wives of preachers expressed to my wife their unhappiness with their husbands being called “preachers”; they much preferred to be the wives of “ministers”! May I venture to suggest that our application of the term *minister* almost exclusively to preachers is an unscriptural application of a Scriptural term? The New Testament applies it in reference to all who serve God in various capacities, including unbelieving rulers and women (Rom. 13:4, 6; Mark 1:31). When Paul used the appellations, *minister of Christ* and *minister of the Gospel* to describe himself (Col. 1:7,23), he did not use them as synonyms for *preacher* or *evangelist*. He simply meant that he was a **servant** of Christ and of the Gospel. When he told Timothy to “make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5), he was simply urging him to show himself a faithful **servant** of Christ.

We need to recapture the concept as well as the correct use of the terms of Scripture on this matter. Our world and the church need far more than a sickeningly-sweet “sharing” of religious platitudes. They need far more than a class of sissified, sanctimonious “Ministers” (with a capital “M”) who often seem to care more for social and entertainment activities than they do the never-dying souls of men. In place of such “reeds shaken with the wind” (Mat. 11:7), saint and sinner alike need **preaching** done by **preachers** who **preach** the Gospel. If you wish to embarrass me by calling me some name you think I will not appreciate, you will have to find a term besides *preacher* or *evangelist*. Paul said, “Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.” May God give us more who will **preach** the Gospel and more who will settle for nothing less than hearing it preached!

### **I Must Preach Only the Gospel**

To escape the woe of God, Paul knew it was not enough to preach any message he might choose. Rather, the Gospel is what he and we must preach. This means that we must preach **only** the Gospel. Those who preach a changed and perverted Gospel have the curse of God resting on them (Gal. 1:7–9). It matters not if such preachers are the companions of presidents and rulers. It matters not how large their TV audience might be, how many books they may have written and sold, or how big a hospital or college they may have built. It matters not how big the church is where they preach or how fast the numbers are increasing. It matters not how big the crowds are at their crusades. The tragedy is compounded by the fact that those who follow such blind guides will be led to eternal destruction with them (Mat. 15:14).

We must preach only the Gospel because it alone is the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16) and the means by which we are begotten of God (1 Cor. 4:15). These statements and many others like them demand absolute purity in the Gospel message. In spite of this, many denominational pulpiteers waste their own time and the time and souls of their hearers with discourses on politics, philosophy, and psychology that display their dabbings in humanistic thought, but little or no knowledge of the Sacred Book.

In some cases, it is little better in our pulpits. Some preaching brethren seem to be far more enamored with wild, infidelic guesses of skeptical theologians than with what the Bible teaches. Others, both elders and preachers, are caught up in the *grow-at-any-cost* fads they have learned from denominational super-churches with their super-star preachers. Some of our men are as likely to take their "text" from Zig Zigler, Robert Schuller, or Norman Vincent Peale as they are from Paul, John, or Peter. The solid, plain, uncompromising preaching of the Gospel is insufficient to such promoters. They think the church will die if it doesn't build gymnasiums for basketball and volleyball tournaments and exercise classes. Without these its "outreach" program cannot exist. According to them, we must also get into the movie business (complete with popcorn) to win the souls of our neighbors. We now have one man who displays his talents at youth gatherings with an act he calls "Gymnastics to the Glory of God," and another who styles his act, "Magic for the Master." Another church has a "clown ministry." I've yet to find where the Lord's church is authorized by the Gospel to use such gimmicks and circus acts to attract people.

We have churches that have so loaded themselves with "ministerial staffs" that one can hardly think of a circumstance of life for which they have not a hired "minister"! One of the mushrooming congregations in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex boasts the following list of "ministers" in addition to "**The Minister**": Minister of Involvement, Minister of Education, Minister of Community Outreach, Minister of Youth, Minister of Singles, and Minister of World Outreach. Under another heading called "Special Ministries" (I suppose the one already named are merely "Ordinary Ministries") the congregation lists two other "ministries" that are responsible for "39'ers" and "Caring," respectively. A church in Atlanta, Georgia, that still has "Church of Christ" on its sign, has a "Minister of Socio-Economic and Political Affairs."

Surely, such shows a woeful respect of persons. Ought they not to have a "Minister of the Middle-aged," a "Minister of the Couples," a "Minister of Men," a "Minister of Women," a "Minister of the Rich," Minister of the Not-So-Rich," and others as well? "That's unfair," you say,

"because there are no such distinctions as men and women, rich and poor; we're all one in Christ." Exactly! But neither are single folks, young people, the aged, or other such identities, given special attention in the Gospel. Such classifications represent a specialization concept that is all right in the practice of medicine and law, but that the Lord never ordained such for His church. It tends toward segregation of various groups within the local church. It implies a deficiency in the Gospel and the church as given by Christ.

To some it is no longer enough to preach the Gospel, obey it, and let the church grow as God gives the increase. They must artificially stimulate growth. They must help God out of a jam—His church is not growing! These folks are running in a circle. They are applying social/entertainment services and psychological manipulation to religion, which have a strong appeal to people, especially secular, worldly people. When the crowds start coming, the manipulators say, "God must be pleased; look at how He has made us grow!" So they do some more manipulating and bigger crowds come, which spurs more manipulating. But God is not giving such growth. It is their own scheming and promoting that produces it. Almost any enterprise, secular or religious, could swell its numbers by similar promotions. Those churches that boast of rapid and bountiful numerical growth by such means have little more of God and his Gospel in them than a high-powered social or business operation. Church growth that is thus artificially stimulated can only produce artificial growth. Woe unto all who are not content to preach **only** the Gospel!

### **I Must Preach All the Gospel**

Paul reminded the Ephesian elders, "I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). He had earlier told them, "I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable" (Acts 20:20). Our Lord promised the apostles that upon His departure from them He would send the Spirit of Truth who would guide them into all the Truth and declare unto them the things that were to come (John 16:13). Only when men preach the inspired Scriptures in their fullness are their hearers able to be complete and furnished completely unto every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Only when we have **all** the Gospel do we have "all things pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3). A Gospel "in part" is a defective Gospel; it is not the Gospel at all. Our age is cursed not only with those who are preaching outright error and falsehood, but with many others who are preaching only a measure of the Truth. Few preachers or religious groups professing faith in the Christ exist that are not

preaching some points of the Truth. However, this is insufficient — we must settle for nothing less than Gospel wholeness.

This problem is a growing one with a triple thrust in the church of the Lord. We have an increasing number in probably most local churches who want to parade almost nude in public, drink alcoholic beverages, commit suicide by smoking, visit the bars and dance halls, and live in their God-forbidden marriages. We see another group in most congregations who may be morally respectable, but they're stingy as Ebenezer Scrooge, they forsake the assembly at will, and/or they have a tongue that can curl a porcupine's quills. These folks give the preacher or elders no problem as long as the sermon subject is "baptism," "the Lord's Supper," or "prayer." They get very testy, however, if the preaching reflects the whole counsel of God, thus condemning the sins they count precious. These folks will not long tolerate hearing all of the Gospel.

In times past such would either repent or leave the church altogether. Nowadays, however, it is more common for them to stay and try to oust the preacher who dares to make them feel guilty when they come to worship. It matters not how unloving of the Truth or how unscriptural these critics have been, either in their lives or in their tactics to cast out the preacher, they must be kept and spared! "We can't afford to lose their contributions!" Those who do not want to hear the whole Gospel preached are exercising more and more dominance in the local churches, and more and more faithful preachers are being fired because of their ungodly influence.

The second thrust is from preachers who are unwilling to preach the whole Gospel any more. It is not so much that these men are preaching blatant error, as it is that they are not preaching all the Truth. The deficiency is not in what they **do** preach, but in what they **avoid** preaching. The messages written by preachers I read in some of the church bulletins would be welcomed in either denominational or secular publications and they would fit right in. Some such articles have more denominational terminology in them than they have Scriptural terminology. The same can be said for some of that which is coming from our pulpits. There are far too many who are content to be quiet about the morass of worldly behavior and humanistic thinking that is among us. Such "semi-Gospel sharers" (as distinguished from Gospel preachers) would not think of exposing a false teacher. They would be more likely to embrace and shield the errorist and rebuke as "unloving" those who would expose him. Paul included both of these emphases in his powerful prophecy: "For the time will come when they will not endure the

sound doctrine; but, having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Further, we have some churches and colleges that are so far gone that they have intentionally sought out these "semi-Gospel sharers" to fill their pulpits or lecture, platforms, respectively. The cardinal sin to them is for anyone (except the Lord and His faithful ones, of course) to be offended by what is preached. They wouldn't knowingly let a plain-spoken Gospel preacher within a mile of their pulpit or platform. Yet these same churches and schools willingly accept and invite false teachers and factionists who have been disfellowshipped or who can no longer be used by faithful brethren. These are they who accept and condone unscriptural marriage situations. These are they who would not consider withdrawing from the blackest form of sin, but would boldly censure any brother who would dare try to get the elders and preacher to stand for the Truth and preach the Gospel in its fullness. Withholding part of the Gospel may leave hearers in sinful behavior and the loss of their souls. We must preach the Gospel in its fullness or we labor with the woe of God upon us!

### **I Must Preach the Gospel in the Right Spirit**

There is a right and a wrong manner in and a right and a wrong motive from which one may preach the Gospel, even when it is faithfully proclaimed. Paul wrote, "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: the one do it of love...but the other proclaim Christ of faction, not sincerely" (Phi. 1:15-17). What exemplary elements characterized the preaching of the Gospel by the apostles and other faithful men of their time?

**Urgency:** Paul Commanded Timothy to "Preach the word; be urgent in season, out of season..." (2 Tim. 4:2). This sense of urgency led Paul to serve the Lord "with tears, and with trials," to teach "publicly and from house to house," and to incessantly admonish men "night and day with tears" (Acts 20:19-20, 31). Those who publicly preach are not really ready to preach who feel no urgency about the message they deliver. The old advice to men who are thinking they want to preach still rings true: "You shouldn't preach if you can keep from it." When we teach a friend or neighbor, they must see in us a genuine urgency over the matters we are studying. It deserves our most earnest presentation. We dare not rob the Gospel of its power by teaching or preaching it in a "ho-hum," lackadaisical manner. Woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel urgently!

**Simplicity:** The Gospel is simple in its essentials. Admittedly, it is vastly complex and deep in some of its parts simply because it from the mind of God. However, men tend to

complicate the simplest things of the Gospel. Some of our brethren have decided that simple, understandable language (as the Koine Greek was in the first century) is too common. They feel compelled to make it more respectable and sophisticated, as they view it. The following is an example:

Christianity, as grounded on a past event and its interpretation, has generally held that in some way the original Christological assertions by the church have normative value for Christianity in any era.... On the other hand, Tillich's implicit understanding that the function of the assertions or symbols in the normative element results in mere description with no criteria for evaluating between more or less fruitful Christological claims.

The foregoing paragraph is from a paper presented by Royce Clark at a meeting of theologians in 1973. At the time he was assistant Professor of Religion at Pepperdine University. Such a corruption of the Gospel is not only unfortunate—it is blasphemous. It communicates little, except its author's ineptness to communicate the Gospel—and his liberalism. Contrast this gobbledygook with Paul's simply-worded Gospel message in Athens (Acts 17:23–31). Please note that Paul was speaking to the highest class of philosophers of his day (v. 18). Yet, he spoke in simple, direct, understandable terms.

Paul certainly had the ability to speak in "excellency of speech or of wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:1). But he determined simply to preach Christ and Him crucified (v. 2). Although he spoke with more languages than any of the Corinthians who possessed the gift of tongues, he said, "I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that I might instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor. 14:18–19). Both Peter and Jude warn that one of the traits of false teachers is their "great swelling words" (2 Pet. 2:18; Jude 1:16).

Lamentably, it seems that many of our preachers and members are more adept at using denominational jargon than they are Scriptural terminology. Some have discarded *good works* in favor of "ministries." Many don't like *evangelism*; *outreach* is their choice term. Others erroneously substitute "witnessing" for personal evangelism and as indicated earlier, "sharing" for preaching the Gospel. False doctrinal concepts are always conveyed by unscriptural terms or by the unscriptural use of Scriptural terms. Novel doctrine always requires the employment of novel terminology. The Lord gave us the very words of the Gospel through his Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). One cannot love the Truth very much who feels uncomfortable with its own terms. Paul's warning is ever current:

"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve in his craftiness, your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity that is toward Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3).

Woe is unto us if we fail to preach the Gospel simply!



**Love:** Any lesser motive than genuine love would have soon failed the Lord, His apostles, and their faithful contemporaries, given the offenses and personal perils their preaching provoked. Paul's statement of love's essentiality in 1 Cor. 13:1-3 will forever stand. Although one should speak fluently (even in angelic language), prophesy dynamically, possess all knowledge and faith, and even sacrifice himself, if he lacks love, all of these marvelous talents and traits are worthless.

Let us be sure we understand what *love* means and does not mean as applied to preaching. Since our Lord and His apostles preached God's Word lovingly, we can track the meaning of preaching done in love by their lives. Love does not connote softness or sweetness. Much of the preaching of Jesus and the apostles was neither soft nor sweet. Love does not mean fear of offending one's hearers. The early inspired preachers frequently offended their listeners. Love does not mean compromising with or ignoring error, nor silence in the face of evil or error. It does not mean withholding Truth in the name of kindness. All of these are seen in our loving Lord and in his apostles. Love, in fact, demands rather than prevents the proclamation of Truth in a plain, straightforward, uncompromising manner. Does one love others if he compromises or withholds the Truth from those he is teaching, allowing them to believe a lie or practice some evil and be damned? If all preachers bowed to the pressures of some brethren and their definition of "loving" preaching, no sinner would even find out he was lost and in need of a Savior, much less what to do about it! Woe is upon us if we preach not the Gospel in love — as the Gospel defines *love*.

**Boldness:** Luke uses this term or a form of it, to describe the preaching of the apostles and others no fewer than eight times in the book of Acts. Paul uses it eleven times in his letters in reference to his own behavior or to that which he urges upon others. To be bold is not to be cowardly and fearful. To be bold is not to be timid and unduly reserved. To be bold in preaching the Word is to speak up and speak out with it. Boldness means to stand one's ground in the face of threat or danger. To be bold is to risk offending others for the sake of trying to save them. To be bold is to risk ridicule and reprisal, even from brethren, friends, and family. To be bold is to be "not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ" (Rom. 1:16). Boldness is the natural outgrowth of love, urgency, and simplicity combined.

When a large number of the Lord's people became fearful that they had been too bold in approaching others with the Gospel a generation ago, the dramatic growth of our congregations began to dwindle. The growth of the past will not be rekindled on any solid or permanent basis

by borrowing the gimmicks of false teachers and their errors in practice, as many seem to think. It will not be done by mouthing, or hearing mouthed from pulpit and classroom, polite little speeches, or by religio-psychological pep talks. It will not be done by our trying to appear to worldlings that we have little or no objection to their fornication, drinking, dishonesty, selfishness and general denial of God in their utter secularism. It will not be done by our leaving the impression with those in the denominational world that their souls are secure in their errors of doctrine and practice. If I read the New Testament rightly, the only kind of growth that pleases the Lord and that is true, lasting growth, is that which comes from a bold, unfettered, uncompromising preaching of the Gospel. The world must hear the Gospel boldly declared by us or both we and the world are doomed.

### **Conclusion**

We must preach the Gospel, **only** the Gospel, **all** the Gospel, **in the true spirit** of the Gospel. Woe is unto us if we fail to do so! However, when we have done so, we must leave it with our hearers. We dare not soften it or sweeten it to appeal to the vanities and vices of men. To do so will not save the sinner and it will condemn any saint who dares to do it.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the 1st Annual Denton Lectures, hosted by the Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX, Nov. 14-18, 1982. I directed the lectureship and edited and published (Valid Pub., Inc.) the book of the lectures, *Studies in 1 Corinthians*.]

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