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EVANGELISM

Works and Words: Why You Can't Preach the Gospel with Deeds

And why it's important to say so.

Duane Litfin [posted 5/30/2012 10:43AM]

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When it comes to the enduring question of word versus deed in the Christian's calling, the issue is always one of balance. How are Christians to think about the relative roles of *words* (proclaiming the gospel) and *deeds* (loving action) in what Christ has called his people to be and do? We need to set our scales to a balance that matches Scripture.

"Balance" may sound simple, but finding and maintaining our equilibrium on such a complex subject is never easy. It's like walking a tightrope. Only one direction will keep us upright and moving forward, and any number of missteps could lead us to fall off one side or the other. Misguided claims abound. Here's a prominent example.

How often do we hear these days, with passion and approval, the famous dictum attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary"? In this saying, the word-versus-deed question rears its head, stressing in this instance how important it is for Christians to "preach the gospel" with their actions. Let the gospel be seen rather than spoken, it's implied. Words may serve a useful backup role, but our actions must take center stage if we are to make a difference in the world.

At first blush, this sounds right. Except that it isn't.

According to those who know the relevant history well—the Franciscans—Francis never uttered these words. But more important, on its face this dictum represents a significant error. It's simply impossible to preach the gospel without words. The gospel is inherently verbal, and preaching the gospel is inherently verbal behavior.

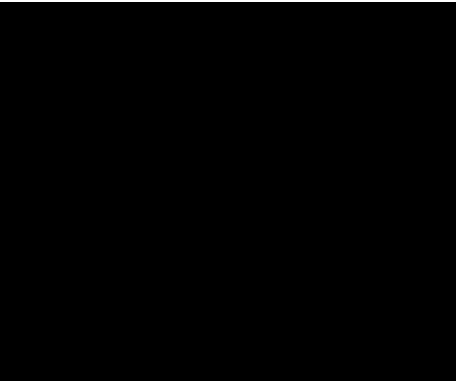
But perhaps we should lighten up, we may say. Let us view the phrase as a mere aphorism and avoid pressing its language too literally. According to this reading, the saying is a rhetorical trope designed to emphasize the importance of backing up our gospel words with Christ-following lives.

This is an immensely important and thoroughly biblical idea. If this is all our maxim is affirming, we should deem it useful indeed. But unfortunately, many seem to want to treat it very literally indeed, precisely because they see no difficulty in doing so. They will insist that the gospel can in fact be "preached" without words. Sometimes this is called an "incarnational" approach to evangelism whereby we "preach the gospel" by incarnating it in the world.

What should we make of this claim? Can we, or can we not, "preach the gospel" with our actions? Who's right, and does it matter?

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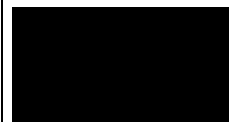
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