



Preach the Gospel, Then Get Your Hands Dirty:
A Round Table Conversation on Our Divisive Times
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Adam Mixon: This is Adam from the Ministry Collaborative. I'm sitting here with my colleagues Mark Ramsey, Beth Daniel, and Adam Borneman, and we are reflecting on our times, and the challenge that exists in preaching and being faithful to the Gospel, when there are competing voices on the left and right, trying to figure out where to stand. Several episodes ago, Mark Ramsey made a statement about "Showing me where to stand so that I can move the world." That is really, I think, the foremost challenge of preaching right now, is figuring out where to stand. When so much of what we say and preach can be co-opted and taken out of context, how do we stand in a way that's faithful to the Gospel, and where our language can't be politicized or weaponized for this group or that group? But how and where do we stand and be faithful to the Gospel and to be faithful to Jesus?

It's a real struggle, especially in my tradition, that's socially progressive but theologically conservative, to align with issues that support and guard – protect – human life and interest, but also maintain my high view for Scripture. It's an uneasy place to stand, and it's left a whole lot of us feeling kind of homeless, not comfortable in the shouting edges. How do we maintain our sense of identity and call and purpose and our integrity, when they are powerful forces pulling, or demanding, of us to affirm their causes? One way or another, you're gonna be wrong, and you're gonna let somebody down, and you're gonna be labeled. And then the travesty of it all is to settle into the place where we're silent and we end up saying nothing at all, which kinda, is not what preaching it is, right?

Adam Borneman: So maybe the best way to think out loud with you all about this is a few recent conversations I've had with clergy colleagues around the country. One of them comes to mind in particular, over lunch a couple weeks ago. And this is a young woman, really gifted pastor at a, probably, a pretty mixed congregation in terms of political leanings and theology and that sort of thing. But she herself is relatively progressive, and she was worrying that she hadn't been forceful enough on some of the headline issues out there. And it was a great comfort to her that I was able to re-affirm to say, "It sounds to me like you're preaching the Gospel, and that these other things are going to just be ripple effects from that."

So, one of the reasons I say that is: we need each other for these conversations. We really do. We need pastors and other people who are in preaching positions to have these types of honest conversations about the things you describe, Adam, because there is a cost to this, no matter what your context is. And the cost seems sort of inevitable. We've heard from colleagues everywhere who didn't say the right thing, or said too much of one thing and not enough of the other, and just get hit on the way out the door. So, we need each other in this, and to remind each other that it is sufficient to preach the grace and mercy of God in Christ – not to the exclusion of things that are happening our communities, but certainly not the other way around.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. I'm glad you said that, Adam, and I'm sensing something else under the surface. It feels like we're wrestling with whether or not the Gospel should react to, or is preaching the gospel more of an imperative, that is an articulation of God's response to the human condition? I've been flooded with people telling me, "If you're not preaching about this, then you're not doing it right"; or, "If you're not saying something about that, you're not doing it right." And my inclination is that the Gospel

speaks to all of these things without speaking to one of them particularly (if that makes sense). And that's not, like, a pat, kind of, brush off; but there's something about the Gospel that responds to human suffering that can't be dragged to the left or the right. And that seems like the place where we need to have the courage, and a faith to anchor in. Otherwise, again, we just become tools of the one or the other. That's what I'm hearing under the surface: like, what is this Gospel that we preach? Is it a reaction, or is it God's response?

Beth Daniel: You know, I think the reality that we have to name is that we're living in a very divided, high pressure, high temperature political time. I think everyone can say that. But I think the Kingdom of God, and where our hope lies, has to be bigger than the American political system. It has to be. I think we're dreaming too small if we're putting our hope in any party or any policies, as if that will fix the brokenness that we say Jesus came, because we couldn't fix it ourselves. And yet, here we are, whether it's said or unsaid, putting in our hope in things that will not deliver for us. That does not mean that it doesn't matter, and we don't work for good. Not at all. But the root of our hope, and the impetus of our faith, and the motivation and the strength that we put into working for the betterment of all, has to come from something deeper than we can come up with – whether ourselves, or through a campaign. It's not weak to say, "Preach the gospel." Preach the gospel, then get your hands dirty. But get that in the right order.

Mark, I just want to point to an article that you did recently on the choice of faithfulness today, and I think you touched on it. There was a great part in there between Barth and Niebuhr. You could see both sides of, "Hey, how much do we bring the world into the pulpit?" And "How are we criticized when we do or when we don't?" I'd love you to speak a little more about your motivation for writing that piece for us.

Mark Ramsey: Yeah. Thanks. The motivation was the same conversations we're all having with pastors and with congregation members struggling with this. I put the Barth-Niebuhr thing in the context of Fannie Lou Hamer and her struggle which, I think, in some ways, is a corrective and answer to both Barth and Niebuhr. Basically, in the 30's, Barth preached or taught for an hour in Germany, and never once mentioned Hitler. And when called out for that, he goes, "I have the joy of preaching Jesus Christ. Why should I waste any time on a nothing?"

And Reinhold Niebuhr, a peer theologian of his, was enraged by that. Niebuhr was all about realism, and, "How dare you not confront the powers that be." Fanny Lou Hamer literally put her body and her soul in the middle of this, but was not speaking as a partisan. She was speaking as a Christian, and she brought that to it in an abrupt and confrontational way.

The reason I wrote about it was because, I don't think we're going to solve this, but if you ask pastors or congregation members to bring up one or two things that's bothering them right now, this political divide and the struggle comes up with it.

I have two further thoughts. One is: preaching as hard, and the pulpit needs to feel like a safe, welcoming space so we can let ourselves go. And right now, I think that's less and less possible. The second thing is: it's what, Adam, you said, to begin with, you have a high view of Scripture. I take that to mean that we seek to listen and understand and follow Scripture before anything else. That's not a solution, but, wow, is that a place to start for me: that I have to conform to Scripture; I don't have to make Scripture conform to the times. I would love to do that latter, because the world that I conjure, I

can fool myself into thinking it's the world God conjures. If Scripture isn't correcting me with every breath, I'm probably not reading Scripture right.

Adam Borneman: Yeah, and that reminds me, too, of just the massive significance of exegeting your own context very carefully, because verses like, "Put not your trust in princes", or "my kingdom is not of this world", those types of notions land very differently depending on the context you're in. That either becomes a massive wave of confirmation bias for disengaging and not paying attention to the world out there, or it can be quite a convicting statement of, "we're a people who puts too much trust in princes, who thinks the kingdom is of this world." So, that's part of this deep, theological work and this Scriptural work is also the work of doing a deeper investigation and assessment of the context you're in, and being incredibly clear eyed about it.

Adam Mixon. Yeah. Borneman, I think you saying that reminds me of some trouble I got in some years back, in forcing that issue. That challenge to aligning or ignoring the power structures that we live in, it cuts both ways, and it rips away the foundations of any hints of nationalism or whatever that would corrupt our preaching of the Gospel. And that's for good and for bad. I remember being in one of my denomination's conventions, and being called to speak about church and state. Of course, they wanted me to use the famous line in Amos, in alignment with how Dr. King used it in his famous speech, about "justice flowing like waters, righteousness like a mighty stream."

And while I was studying I was, like, "Wait a minute. He wasn't talking to a secular government. He was talking to God's people. Oops." This conversation needed to begin with God's people. Yeah, which means that, again, preaching is hard; but this is the Word that we've been given. And when we tie ourselves to the systems – Beth, that you said that the Gospel we preach is larger than – we limit the power and the efficacy of that message. Again, people have good motives for co-opting things, and bad motives, but whatever their motives are, it's wrong.

Mark: Yeah, I have two of the thoughts about, particularly, the act of preaching, but it's leading in a congregational setting in whatever form, and whatever role people have. One is: you've got to bring people along, even if it's hard. It could be awkward. It'll slow things down. There is no singular leader in a church, other than Jesus Christ, which means we have to engage people and listen to them and then, slowly, persistently, try to merge the Gospel into those conversations and see what happens.

The second thing is, and this is not meant to round off the rough edges of this, but a survey that was just published of over a thousand Trump and Harris voters two years ago. They asked all the political questions, but then they asked a question: "What was the most important thing that happened in your life during the last year?" And for Trump voters it was, in order: a medical issue, a money worry, and the death of a family or friend member. For Harris voters, the most important thing in the last year: first was a medical issue, second was, uh, financial worries, and third was the death of a family or friend. The headline of this article was "We May Not Be as Polarized as We Think We Are." There are clearly hot, hot button issues all around. But if we reduce our congregational conversations to the hot buttons, we're missing something in commonality with others. Everybody is walking in to a church service probably worried about somebody they love, and something that's going to happen, and maybe something either in themselves or someone they love who is facing a pretty dire situation. There's a commonality there that, if we rush past that to simply get to the rest of it, I don't think we're looking at the whole person as the whole person.

Beth: I think that ties in with what, Adam, you said at the very beginning, too. You used the example of someone being theologically conservative, politically progressive. And I think that is, just, Exhibit A of how complex reality is. Because, I think we throw those words around to understand each other, and divide people into nice little categories. Again, that language of just reducing God, reducing the Gospel, and now reducing people to who they vote for, and then making all kinds of assumptions about what they believe, I think we can probably...we're all kind of a mixture of that. And if you're standing in the pulpit or doing ministry and the only thing you're reflecting is the campaign platform of one party or the other, I think we're doing it wrong. And here's the great thing: I think most of us are not doing that. Most of us are just trying to wrestle with how do we minister to people who are conservative in some ways, progressive in the others? But we have to encourage that our hope is in things unseen, and not in any political party. How do we remind them that Paul says, "We hope for things unseen, and that takes patience. And then, when you have that kind of hope, it will not put you to shame."

Like, how do we start using that language instead of the language of, "if we can just make it through the next election"; "if we can just get this person elected"; "if we can just work on this campaign, then everything will be OK." You know, I'm British. We change our prime ministers like people change their socks, because we're always disappointed. We're constantly disappointed with what they can give and what they can deliver, because they can't give people what they actually need. And so, we'll just keep changing them. We have to think God-sized, not politics-sized.

Adam Mixon: There's something of what both you, Mark and Beth, are tugging at that, again, just resonates with me. Again, under the pressure to preach this or to say something about that. I pastor Black people in a poor neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama. And to have all these outside folks saying, "you got to say something about this", "you got to say something about this", "you got to do this, or you..."

I'm like, "Yo. We live in this. This is not new, or somehow foreign." But what I've discovered, again, is that there is something about the Gospel that remains relevant, regardless of all of that external pressure. So if I'm gonna center myself, that's where I'm gonna center myself. So, thank you for the sermon prompts, but no thank you. Whatever series I've been preaching, I'm going to persist in working through that series. And where those points of context arise because it's meeting people where they are living, then God's will be done. But I am not gonna bow to that, and make a job that's already hard even more difficult. I'd rather please God and disappoint some folks.