

## Do they teach that at College?

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'Grasp the Gospel' is the theme of our conference for 2008. I suppose one could be pedantic about the title – do we grasp the gospel, or does it grasp us; greet us, grab us, cause us to gasp? That's probably the better way round but, as we live in the face of declining church numbers and a smorgasbord of spiritualities, surely we do need to get a firmer grasp of the gospel – to understand it, imbibe it, handle it aright in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, live it as the powerful news it is for imprisoned people and the dangerous news that it is for injustice and unrighteousness.

But where do we learn this, or does it just come naturally? In a real sense there must be the natural ability to grasp this gospel if it has grasped us; to live it out because it lives so vitally in us, but so often that seems to be missing.

In addressing this primarily to leaders I would suggest that it's often missing in us. Busy church life, tiredness and fear can all cause us to opt for a safe life rather than step out in the adventure of the fullness of the gospel. If we're conscious of needing to communicate relevantly to this culture we're likely to work hard at the words of the gospel. We've probably for some time got hold of the fact that works, in the community, are a fundamental expression of the good news. But how much do we long for, believe for, work for the wonders that so clearly demonstrate the love and care of the good news of God? That takes courage, determination and, above all, faith – and that's costly.

More than that, how do works, words and wonders interrelate? That will be one of the questions we'll examine at the conference but, apart from that, and practical experience, where do we learn that kind of thing? Where can we find help to understand how these things work together? More radically, how does a passion to grasp a gospel of words, works and wonders get inculcated?

Surely this is the kind of thing that we need to be getting to grips with during our ministerial formation, studying at our training colleges & being encouraged to step out in faith. But this kind of thing is not taught there. Yet, surely, when a woman or man takes up ministry in a local church this should be fundamental to that ministry. In a post-modern society (I've done it! I've broken the promise I made myself not to use that term!), where there's an accent on experience, church leaders must know how to grasp the gospel in as complete a way as possible; in such a way that we can introduce people to a God who can impact their bodies and emotions as well as their spirits.

I haven't met many Ministers (and I'm thinking here mainly of Baptist Ministers, of which I have most knowledge) who left college with the fire of God in their bellies and a faith that believed God for the miraculous, nor with a sound understanding of what church leadership is all about and actually how to be a leader. I've met many who have a strong grasp of theology – and that's very positive, but it needs to be partnered by personal spiritual formation including a strong faith that has begun to grasp the gospel and believe God for expressions of the Kingdom in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (ch.1 v.5), "...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction".

I suppose, if I'm honest, there's only one hesitation that I have about seeing people leave college with that kind of strong, expectant faith, and that is seeing them placed in small, difficult churches that don't want to change, where their faith gets slowly strangled out of them until the main purpose in life is just to hold themselves together. But that says something else about the way we allow churches to call Ministers and the way we allow newly trained Ministers to be placed in such churches on their own. But, come to that, it says something about the fact we don't seem to have the authority to allow or disallow anything! However, I mustn't wander down the road of carping!

Please, let's do everything we can to grasp this wonderful, life-changing gospel, whether it is colleges inspiring their students as they study there, or us helping one another to live with a faith that sees God at work in works, words and wonders.