

PREACHING IN A POST-MODERN CLIMATE

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PREACHING THE GOSPEL AS THE KEY FOR CHRISTIANS

At the heart of Redeemer's ministry and its philosophy of preaching to post-modern audiences is the conviction that "the gospel" is not just a way to be saved from the penalty of sin, but is the fundamental dynamic for living the whole Christian life--individually and corporately, privately and publicly. In other words, the gospel is not just for non-Christians, but also for Christians. This means the gospel is not just the A-B-C's but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is not accurate to think 'the gospel' is what saves non-Christians, and then, what matures Christians is trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our mind, heart, and life by believing the gospel more and more deeply as our life goes on.

THE GOSPEL VS. RELIGION

The gospel is "I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey" while every other religion operates on the principle of "I obey, therefore I am accepted." Martin Luther's fundamental insight was that this latter principle, the principle of 'religion' is the deep default mode of the human heart. The heart continues to work in that way even after conversion to Christ. Though we recognize and embrace the principle of the gospel, our hearts will always be trying to return to the mode of self-salvation, which leads to spiritual deadness, pride and strife and ministry ineffectiveness.

For example, ministers derive more of their joy and a sense of personal significance from the success of their ministries than from the fact they are loved by God in Christ. Why? Their hearts are still operating on the principle--"if I do and accomplish all these things--then I will be accepted." (cf. Harold Abrahams in *Chariots of Fire*- "I have 10 seconds to justify my existence.") In other words, on one level, we believe the gospel but on another level we don't believe.

So why do we over-work in ministry and burn out? Yes, we are not practicing the Sabbath principle, but the deeper cause is unbelief in the gospel! Why are we so devastated by criticism? The person whose self-worth is mainly in his or her ministry performance will be devastated by criticism of the ministry record because that record is our very self and identity. The fundamental problem is unbelief in the gospel.

At the root, then, of all Christian failures to live right--i.e. not give their money generously, not tell the truth, not care for the poor, not handle worry and anxiety--is the sin under all sins, the sin of unbelief, of not rejoicing deeply in God's grace in Christ, not living out of our new identity in Christ. This means that every week in a different way the minister must apply the gospel of salvation by grace through faith through Christ's work. Thus every week the non-Christians get exposed to the gospel, and in its most practical and varied forms not just in a repetitious 'Four Spiritual Laws' way. That's what pragmatic post-moderns need.

THE SIN BENEATH THE SINS

Underneath our behavioral sins lies a fundamental refusal to rest in Christ's salvation and the drive instead to find our own. Martin Luther says the same. Here is an excerpt from Martin Luther *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520):

All those who do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in God's favor, grace and good-will, but rather seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep the [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined.

Comment: Luther says if you look to your moral performance as the basis of your relationship with God, then you are breaking the first of the Ten Commandments: "Have no other gods before me." If you fail to grasp and believe the gospel of free justification through Christ's work you violate the first command. How could this be? Again from Luther:

If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious and pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him through our works, then all [our compliance with the law] is pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false saviors. Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward [justifying faith]. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth...

Comment: Luther says that if we obey God's law without a belief that we are already accepted and loved in Christ, then in all our 'doing-good', we are really looking to something more than Jesus as the real source of our meaning, and happiness. We are trusting in our being a good parent, or being a good spouse, or our moral uprightness, or our spiritual performance, or our service to other people as our real "Saviors". If we aren't sure God already loves us in Christ, we will be looking to something else as our foundational significance and worth. This is why Luther says that we are committing idolatry (breaking the First commandment) if we don't thoroughly trust in Christ for our acceptability, even if we are otherwise totally moral and obedient to God.

And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured...

Comment: All people sin in general because we are sinners, but why do we sin in any particular instance? Luther indicates the first commandment is foundational to all the others. Why? Because we will not break commandment 2-10 unless we are in some way breaking commandment One and serving some idol. Every sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. At the moment we sin it is because we are looking to something to give us what only Jesus can give us. Beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

CASE STUDY - A LIE

What if you find that you have a habit of lying? What do you do about it?

Moralistic ways to stop lying: Fear: "I must stop doing this because God will punish me, he won't bless me." Pride: "I must stop doing this, because I'm a good Christian. I don't want to be like the kind of person who lies." In general, you will find that the more you simply lay Biblical principles on your heart, the more your heart resists it. (Rom.7:21--Paul says "When I [most] want to do good, evil lies close at hand.") The gospel way to stop lying: First, ask the question: "why am I lying in this particular situation?" The reason we lie (or ever do any sin) is because at that moment there is something we feel that we simply must have--and so we lie. One typical reason that we lie (though it is by no means the only one) is because we are deeply fearful of losing face or someone's approval. That means, that the 'sin under the sin' of lying is the idolatry of (at that moment) of human approval. If we break the commandment against false witness it is because we are breaking the first commandment against idolatry. We are looking more to human approval than to Jesus as a source of worth, meaning, and happiness. Under the sin of lying is the failure to rejoice in and believe in our acceptance in Christ. Under the sin of lying is a kind of heart-unbelief in the gospel (whatever we may tell ourselves intellectually.) As we will see below, anything you add to Jesus Christ as a requirement for a happy life is a functional salvation, a pseudo-lord, and it is controlling you, whether it be power, approval, comfort or control. The only way to change your habit of lying is to repent of your failure to believe the gospel, that you are not saved and acceptable by pursuing this goal and serving this master, but through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Consider this case study in light of this excerpt from the Belgic Confession (1561):

Therefore it is so far from being true that his justifying faith makes us remiss in a holy life, that on the contrary without it we would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.

Comment: Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do--whether obeying or disobeying--by pride ("self-love") or fear ("of damnation"). Mere moral effort without the gospel may restrain the heart but cannot truly change the heart. Mere moral effort merely 'jury rigs' the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior, out of self-interest. It would be possible to use fear and pride as ways to motivate a person to be honest, but since fear and pride is also the root for lying, it is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses. Luther was right. If you are obeying the law without deep joy in your acceptance in Christ, you are not loving God with all your heart. You are not obeying God for God. You are being moral so that you can put God in your debt, so he owes you a comfortable life. You are being moral so that you can feel secure in your uprightness. You are being moral in the service of self-salvation, out of the fear and pride that arise without an identity built on Christ in the gospel.

THE GOSPEL AND 'TRUE VIRTUE'

What makes people honest? Generous? Jonathan Edwards tackled this over the years in his "Miscellanies" and then in his moral philosophy works; "Charity and Its Fruits", "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World", and "The Nature of True Virtue". He also says many relevant things about this in "Religious Affections". The following is my summary of his "gist".

There are two kinds of moral behavior: "common virtue" and "true virtue" Let's take one virtue: honesty. "Common" honesty is developed two ways. 1) First it can be inspired by fear. There is the secular version--"be honest--it pays!" or "if you are not honest, society will not work". There is also the religious version-- "if you are not honest, God will punish you!" These are all versions of the same motive, namely, that it is impractical to be honest. 2) Second, it can be inspired by pride. There is the secular conservative version--"don't be like those terrible dishonest people who hurt others and have no virtue!" or the secular liberal version--"don't be like these greedy people who don't work for the common good". There is also the religious version--"don't be like these sinners, these bad people. Be a good godly person". These are all versions of the same motive, namely, that I am better than these people who lie.

Edwards is by no means scornful of common virtue. Indeed, he believes in the 'splendor of common morality' (Paul Ramsay), which is the main way God restrains evil in the world. He does call it virtue and not sham. Nevertheless, there is a profound tension at the heart of common virtue. We just said that the main reason people are honest is due to fear and pride. But what is the main reason we are dishonest? Why do we lie? Almost always--it is out of fear or pride. So in common virtue, you have not done anything to root out the fundamental causes of evil. In 'common honesty' you have restrained the heart, but not changed the heart. You are doing an ingenious form of judo on yourself. (Judo depends on using the enemy's forward motion against him.) You have 'jury-rigged' the heart so that the basic causes of dishonesty are being used to make yourself honest. But this is quite a fragile condition. At some point you will find that honesty is not practical or humiliating and you will lie. Then you will be shocked. You will say, "I was not raised to do such a thing."

But the reason you did, was that all your life, through the sermons and moral training you had, you were nurturing the roots of sin within your moral life. This is true whether you grow up in a liberal-moral environment or a conservative-moral environment. The roots of evil are alive and well and protected underneath your moral-behavior progress. And some day they erupt and show themselves and we are shocked.

Luther told us that the essence of every sin is a desire to be one's own Savior and Lord in some particular way. It is to set up some idol which is the real way you are going to save yourself. It may even be a very 'religious idol' (cf. Judges 17:1-13). It may be a very religious life, but at the heart it is a way of using God as an object, rather than adoring him as being beautiful for who he is in himself. It is using obedience to God to achieve comfort, security, self-worth/status--therefore our 'virtue' is self-centered and conditional. It's a form of bargaining. It is using our virtue to put God in our debt--he now owes us. He must give us salvation and blessing. Therefore, our obedience is a way to save ourselves and control God. Edwards also understands 'common virtue' as an idolatrous effort at self-salvation, rather than a response to grace in which God is adored for his sheer beauty.

So Edwards says--what is true virtue? It is when you are honest not because it profits you or makes feel better, but only when you are smitten with the beauty of the God who is truth and sincerity and faithfulness! It is when you come to love truth-telling not for your sake but for God's sake and its own sake. But it particularly grows by a faith-sight of the glory of Christ and his salvation. How does 'true honesty' grow? It grows when I see him dying for me, keeping a promise he made despite the infinite suffering it brought him. Now that a) destroys pride on the one hand, because he had to do this for me--I am so lost! But that also b) destroys fear on the other hand, because if he'd do this for me while I'm an enemy, then he values me infinitely, and nothing I can do will wear out his love for me. Then my heart is not just restrained but changed. Its fundamental orientation is transformed.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL VS. RELIGION and IRRELIGION

THE "THIRD WAY"

One of the most important ways to get a hearing from post-modern people and to wake up nominal or sleepy Christians is to preach the gospel as a "third" distinct way from both irreligion and religion. Religion is "if I obey I will be accepted." Irreligion is "I don't really have to obey anyone but myself." The gospel is "since I am accepted, I will obey."

Religion is 'outside in': "if I work hard according to Biblical principles, then God will accept/bless me". The gospel is 'inside out': "because God has accepted/blessed me, I work hard to live according to Biblical principles". Religion (explicitly in other faiths and implicitly in legalistic Christianity) makes moral/religious observance a means of salvation. Even people who believe in the Christian God can functionally 'base their justification on their sanctification' (Lovelace). Thus a prime need is to distinguish between general 'religion' and gospel Christianity as well as overt irreligion. Why? (1) Many professed Christians aren't believers--they are pure 'elder brothers' (Luke 15:11ff.) and only making this distinction can convert them. (2) Many, many real Christians are elder-brotherish--angry, mechanical, superior, insecure--and only making this distinction can renew them. (3) Modern and post-modern people have rejected religion for good reasons and will only listen to Christianity if they see it is different.

But in Jesus day he preached against both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. At the heart of the gospel is the 'propitiation' of God's wrath by the substitutionary life and death of Christ, so that his children by faith no longer fear the judicial, retributive wrath of God ever again (Rom. 8:1). This cuts against not one but two alternatives--in NT times terms--both legalistic 'Pharisees' and liberal 'Sadducees'. Liberal Sadducees don't believe in a God of wrath who needs to be propitiated, but legalistic, Pharisees don't really believe in a God whose wrath has been propitiated. Sadducees don't feel the need to be justified; Pharisees are trying to turn aside God's condemnation with their own righteousness, functionally "basing their justification on their sanctification" as Richard Lovelace wrote. Sadducees are irreligious, much or most of the Bible not recognized as valid; Pharisees are highly religious, adding all sorts of rules and regulations to make the law of God do-able.

Legalism and leniency are therefore not just equally bad and wrong but they are basically the same thing. They are just different strategies of 'self-salvation'. Each kind of person is basically being their own Savior and Lord. In a local church, both a ministry that is loose about doctrine and winks at disobedience and sin and a ministry in which there is scolding and 'tightness'--lack any kind of spiritual power, authority, and joy that brings people into life change. They are both the same thing. The only way into a ministry that sees people's lives change, that brings a joy and power and electricity without authoritarianism--is a preaching of the gospel that deconstructs both legalism and leniency equally.

WHY-- IS THIS SO IMPORTANT TO REACH POST-MODERN PEOPLE?

One of the most important ways to get "Sadducees" to listen to a presentation of Christianity is to deconstruct Pharisaism. The way to get antinomians to listen to the law is to distinguish the gospel from legalism. Why? Modern and post-modern people have been rejecting Christianity for years thinking that it was indistinguishable from moralism (and in many of its incarnations it is indistinguishable!) Religious people who don't understand the gospel have to bolster their own sense of worthiness by convincing themselves they are better than other people. This leads them to exclude and condemn others. The vast majority of people in NYC who are hostile to Christianity don't know any other kinds of churches. Only if you show them there's a difference--that what they rejected isn't real Christianity--only then will they even begin to think and listen again and give it 'one more look'.

Non-Christians will always automatically hear gospel presentations as just appeals to become moral and religious--unless in your preaching you use the good news of grace against legalism.

Some claim that to constantly be striking a 'note of grace, grace, grace' in our sermons is not helpful in our culture today. The objection goes like this: "Surely Pharisaism and moralism is not a problem in our culture today. Rather, our problem is license and antinomianism. People lack a sense of right or wrong. It is 'carrying coal to Newcastle' to talk about grace all the time to post-modern people". But I don't believe that is the case. Unless you point to the 'good news' of grace the people won't even be able to bear the 'bad news' of God's judgment. Also, as noted, unless you critique moralism, many irreligious people won't know the difference between moralism and what you are offering.

THE TWO "THIEVES" OF THE GOSPEL.

Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us "off the gospel line" (Gal. 2:14) to one side or the other. These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind. These "thieves" can be called moralism on the one hand, and or relativism on the other hand.

The gospel opposes both religion and irreligion. On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth over grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace over truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us. But "truth" without grace is not really truth, and "grace" without truth is not really grace. Jesus was "full of grace and truth". Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or lose one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license and either way, the joy and power and "release" of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other. The real gospel gives us a God far more holy than a moralist can bear (since your morality is only a filthy rag before him) and far more loving than a relativist can imagine (since his love cost him dearly).

Since Paul uses a metaphor for being "in line" with the gospel, we can picture gospel renewal failing when we keep from walking "off-line" either to the right or to the left. However, before we start we must realize that the gospel is not a half-way compromise between the two poles--it does not produce "something in the middle", but something different from both. The gospel critiques both religion and irreligion (Matt.21:31; 22:10).

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter's racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living "not in line with the truth of the gospel". From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life-- spiritual, psychological, corporate, social--by thinking, hoping, and living out the "lines" or ramifications of the gospel. The gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. Notice, Paul did not say, "you are breaking the no-racism law!" though that is perfectly true. However, it is not the best way to think. Paul asks neither "what is the moral way to act?" nor does he say "we don't need to order our steps at all!" but rather he asks: "what is the way to live that is in-line with the gospel?" The gospel must be continually "thought out" to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring everything into line with the gospel.

The main problem, then, in the Christian life is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel, we have not "used" the gospel in and on all parts of our life. Richard Lovelace says that most people's problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel--a failure to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther says, "The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine ...Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually." (on Gal.2:14f).

So "religion" just drains the spiritual life out of a church. But you can "fall off the horse" on the other side too. You can miss the gospel not only through legalism but through relativism. When God is whoever you want to make him, and right and wrong are whatever you want to make them--you have also drained the spiritual life out of a church. If God is preached as simply a demanding, angry God or if he is preached as simply an all-loving God who never demands anything--in either case the listeners will not be transformed. They may be frightened or inspired or soothed, but they will not have their lives changed at the root, because they are not hearing the gospel. The gospel shows us that God is far more holy and absolute than the moralists' god, because he could not be satisfied by our moral efforts, even the best! On the other hand, the gospel shows us that God is far more loving and gracious than the relativists' god. They say that God (if he exists) just loves everyone no matter what they do. The true God of the gospel had to suffer and die to save us, while the god of the relativist pays no price to love us.

The gospel produces a unique blend of humility and boldness/joy in the convert. If you preach just a demanding God, the listener will have "low self-esteem"; if you preach just an all-loving God, the listener will have higher self-esteem. But the gospel produces something beyond both of those. The gospel says: I am so lost Jesus had to die to save me. But I am so loved that Jesus was glad to die to save me. That changes the very basis of my identity--it transforms me from the root. Legalistic churches reform people's behavior through social coercion, but the people stay radically insecure and hyper-critical. They don't achieve the new inner peace that the grace of God brings. The more relativistic churches give members some self-esteem and the veneer of peace but in the end that is superficial too. The result, Archibald Alexander said, is like trying to put a signet ring on the wax to seal a letter, but without any heat! Either the ring will affect the surface of the wax only or break it into pieces. You need heat to permanently change the wax into the likeness of the ring. So without the Holy Spirit working through the gospel, radically humbling and radically exalting us and changing them from the inside out, the religion either of the hard or soft variety will not avail.

THE 'TWO THIEVES' IN APPLICATION.

So we see that we must move away from the typical 'conservative evangelical' preaching which basically says: "Irreligion and immorality is bad; moral living is very good; Christianity is best." Of course it is better to not rob and kill, whether you are a Christian or not! But gospel preaching is careful to show the 'dark side' of morality, so that non-Christians (who see the dangers of religiosity and self-righteousness) will realize the gospel is something else, and so that Christians will not be trapped in the lifelessness of moral self-effort. The following are some examples of how to treat subjects contrasted with both religion and irreligion. (They are often called 'moralism' and 'relativism' below.)

a. Discouragement. When a person is depressed, the religious say, "you are breaking the rules--repent." On the other hand, the irreligious say, "you just need to love and accept yourself". But (assuming there is no physiological base of the

depression!) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say: "something in my life has become more important than Christ, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness". The religious will tend to work on behavior and the irreligious will tend to work on the emotions, but the gospel works on the heart.

b. Suffering. Moralistic persons have a major problem when suffering strikes them. Why? The whole point of moralism is to put God in one's debt. Moralistic people feel that God owes them a safe life because of their goodness. So when suffering hits us, the moralistic heart is forced to either feel terrific anger toward God (if you feel you have been living up to moral standards) or terrific anger toward yourself (if you feel you haven't been living up.) You will either think "I hate God" or "I hate myself" or you will swing back and forth between both poles. Relativistic/hedonistic persons are more likely to become bitter against life or God, since they don't feel they deserve troubles in life. The gospel approach to suffering is different. On the one hand the gospel humbles us without being mad at God. Jesus, the very best person who ever lived suffered terribly. This demolishes the idea that good people should have good lives and bad people have bad lives. If God himself was willing to become involved in terrible suffering of life out of love--then we should not think ourselves exempt. On the other hand, the gospel affirms us out of feeling guilty or mad at ourselves. Jesus suffered and died for us, 'while we were yet sinners.' The trouble we are experiencing at the moment might be designed to 'wake us up', but it can't be a quid pro quo punishment for our sins. Jesus got the punishment for our sins. If we realize that we are accepted in Christ, then (and only then) will suffering humble us and strengthen us rather than embitter and weaken us. As others have said: Jesus suffered, not that we might not suffer, but that when we suffer we could become like him.

c. Witness to non-Christians. The liberal/pragmatist approach is to deny the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. The conservative/moralist person does believe in proselytizing, because "we are right and they are wrong". Such proselytizing is almost always offensive. But the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. a) First, we are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. b) Second, we are freed from fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have the favor of God by grace. c) Third, there is a humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. d) Fourth, we are hopeful about anyone, even the "hard cases", because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were likely people to be Christians. d) Fifth, we are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness. All these traits not only create a winsome evangelist but an excellent neighbor in a multi-cultural society.

d. "Right living". Jonathan Edwards points out that "true virtue" is only possible for those who have experienced the grace of the gospel. Any person who is trying to earn their salvation does "the right thing" in order to get into heaven, or in order to better their self-esteem (etc.). In other words, the ultimate motive is self-interest. But persons who know they are totally accepted already do "the right thing" out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God's sake, and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes "doing the right thing" a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end.

PREACHING THAT IS CHRIST-CENTERED

MORALISM VS. CHRIST-CENTERED EXPOSITION.

We have said that you must preach the gospel every week--to edify and grow Christians and to convert non-Christians. But if that is the case, you cannot simply 'instruct in Biblical principles.' You have to 'get to Jesus' every week.

For example, look at the story of David and Goliath. What is the meaning of that narrative for us? Without reference to Christ, the story may be (usually is!) preached as: "The bigger they come, the harder they'll fall, if you just go into your battles with faith in the Lord. You may not be real big and powerful in yourself, but with God on your side, you can overcome giants." But as soon as we ask: "how is David foreshadowing the work of his greater Son"? We begin to see the same features of the story in a different light. The story is telling us that the Israelites can not go up against Goliath. They can't do it. They need a substitute. When David goes in on their behalf, he is not a full-grown man, but a vulnerable and weak figure, a mere boy. He goes virtually as a sacrificial lamb. But God uses his apparent weakness as the means to destroy the giant, and David becomes Israel's champion-redeemer, so that his victory will be imputed to them. They get all the fruit of having fought the battle themselves.

This is a fundamentally different meaning than the one that arises from the non-Christocentric reading. There is, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: is it basically about me or basically about Jesus? In other words, is it basically about what I must do, or basically about what he has done? If I read David and Goliath as basically giving me an example, then the story is really about me. I must summons up the faith and courage to fight the giants in my life. But if I read David and Goliath as basically showing me salvation through Jesus, then the story is really about him. Until I see that Jesus fought the real giants (sin, law, death) for me, I will never have the courage to be able to fight ordinary giants in life (suffering, disappointment, failure, criticism, hardship). For example how can I ever fight the "giant" of failure, unless I have a deep security that God will not abandon me? If I see David as my example, the story will never help me fight the failure/giant. But if I see David/Jesus as my substitute, whose victory is imputed to me, then I can stand before the failure/giant. As another example, how can I ever fight the "giant" of persecution or criticism? Unless I can see him forgiving me on the cross, I won't be able to forgive others. Unless I see him as forgiving me for falling asleep on him (Matt.27:45) I won't be able to stay awake for him.

In the Old Testament we are continually told that our good works are not enough, that God has made a provision. This provision is pointed to at every place in the Old Testament. We see it in the clothes God makes Adam and Even in Genesis, to the promises made to Abraham and the patriarchs, to the Tabernacle and the whole sacrificial system, to the

innumerable references to a Messiah, a suffering servant, and so on. Therefore, to say that the Bible is about Christ is to say that the main theme of the Bible is the gospel--Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

So reading the Old Testament Christocentrically is not just a "additional" dimension. It is not something you can just tack on - to the end of a study and sermon. ("Oh, and by the way, this also points us to Christ".) Rather, the Christocentric reading provides a fundamentally different application and meaning to the text. Without relating it to Christ, the story of Abraham and Isaac means: "You must be willing to even kill your own son for him." Without relating it to Christ, the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel means: "You have to wrestle with God, even when he is inexplicable-even when he is crippling you. You must never give up." These 'morals-of-the-story' are crushing because they essentially are read as being about us and what we must do.

A BASIC OUTLINE FOR CHRIST-CENTERED, GOSPEL-MOTIVATED SERMONS

The following may actually be four points in a presentation, or they may be treated very quickly as the last point of a sermon. But more generally, this is a foundational outline for the basic moral reasoning and argument that lies at the heart of the application.

The Plot winds up: WHAT YOU MUST DO.

"This is what you have to do! Here is what the text/narrative tells us that we must do or what we must be." The Plot thickens: WHY YOU CAN'T DO IT.

"But you can't do it! Here are all the reasons that you will never become like this just by trying very hard." The Plot resolves: HOW HE DID IT.

"But there's One who did. Perfectly. Wholly. Jesus the---. He has done this for us, in our place." The Plot winds down: HOW, THROUGH HIM, YOU CAN DO IT.

"Our failure to do it is due to our functional rejection of what he did. Remembering him frees our heart so we can change like this..."

Discussion:

a) In every text of the Scripture there is somehow a moral principle. It may grow out of because of what it shows us about the character of God or Christ, or out of either the good or bad example of characters in the text, or because of explicit commands, promises, and warnings. This moral principle must be distilled clearly. b) But then a crisis is created in the hearers as the preacher shows that his moral principle creates insurmountable problems. The sermon shows how this practical and moral obligation is impossible to meet. The hearers are led to a seemingly dead end. c) Then a hidden door opens and light comes in. The sermon moves both into worship and into Christ-application when it shows how only Jesus Christ has fulfilled this. If the text is a narrative, you can show how Christ is the ultimate example of a particular character. If the text is didactic, you can show how Christ is the ultimate embodiment of the principle. d) Finally, we show how our inability to live as we ought stems from our rejection of Christ as the Way, Truth, and Life (or whatever the theme is). The sermon points out how to repent and rejoice in Christ in such a way that we can live as we ought.

Case Study #1

If I preached a sermon on "honesty", I could show the forms of dishonesty and how harmful it is, and how we need to ask God to help us be honest. But if I stopped there (and merely called people to ask forgiveness for lying and try harder to be honest), I would only be playing to the heart's natural self-righteousness. I would be essentially supporting the growth of 'common morality' in the people. Those who would be convicted by the sermon would feel guilty and burdened. Those who had not lied lately would be smug. I should admit that nearly every sermon I ever preached on honesty/lying up in my first 15 years in the ministry was like this! Even though I knew (via Ed Clowney) that I had to preach Christ and not moralism from every text, I really just made Jesus an 'add-on'. I didn't apply him as Savior to the actual sin of lying, but to the aftermath only. My sermon would go like this:

I. Here are all the ways we lie, and why they are forbidden.

II. We should not lie, because Jesus told the truth and kept his promises. (Jesus as Example)

III. If we do lie, Jesus will forgive us and help us do better. (Jesus as God-of-gaps)

In other words, I used Jesus as an example, and then as someone who forgives us when, though we try very hard, we sometimes fail. This essentially tells people to sanctify themselves. It implicitly appeals to fear and/or pride as motives for honesty.

But in gospel analysis we ask the question: "why do you lie in a particular situation?" The usual reason we lie is because there is something we feel that we simply must have (besides Jesus) to survive and be truly happy, and so we lie. It is usually a good reputation, or saving face, or approval, or some other thing. I first came to understand this when I realized that my wife and I tend to 'fudge' the truth in very different circumstances. I realized that the underlying reason that I lied/deceived was a fear of people's disapproval.

Using "Luther-ist" analysis, I was trusting in the approval of people rather than in Christ as my functional trust, as my main hope. But anything you add to Jesus Christ as a requirement for a happy life is a functional salvation, a pseudo-lord, and it is controlling you, whether it be power, approval, comfort or control. So the only way to change your habit of lying is to (not just try harder) but to apply the gospel--to repent of your failure to believe the gospel, and see that you are not saved by pursuing this thing (which you are lying to get), but through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Alternatives:

What are the alternatives? Type #1- On the one hand, there is a "Christ as Example" or 'moralistic' sermon that says-- "please try harder or God will be very unhappy!". Type #2- On the other hand, there is a "Christ as God-of-Gaps" or 'relativistic' sermon that says--"we all fall down but God loves us anyway!" (Many people today in the Reformed camp smell that 'church growth' theory has led us to more 'relativistic' sermons in the evangelical world. But are we just to go back to the moralistic ones?)

Instead we must do "Christ-as-Savior" or 'gospel' sermons. Unlike "Type #2" sermons, they begin with deep, below the surface repentance, not a superficial application of "Jesus loves you anyway". Unlike "Type #1" sermons, they end with rejoicing, since the thing we must repent of is always a failure to enjoy, delight in, and relish the grace and provision of Christ's work. So this is how I learned to preach sermons on lying--or on anything else. No matter what the issue, if we call people to "try harder", we actually push them deeper into slavery, but when we always solve the problem by applying the gospel, then both a) non-Christians get to hear it every week in multiple perspectives, and b) Christians get to see how it really works in every aspect of life.

Sum:

Only "Christo-centric" preaching can really lead the hearers to true virtue, gospel holiness. Typical preaching only distills "Biblical principles" which do not see the text in its redemptive-historical context. Thus it is only natural that the application part of such a sermon will tend to merely exhort people to conform to the principles. Only Christo-centric preaching can produce gospel holiness.

Case Study #2

A Sermon on Abraham and the Sacrifice of Isaac.

1. We must put God first in every area of life, like Abraham did. (This is where the traditional sermon ends!!)
2. But we can't! We won't! So we should be condemned.
3. But Jesus put God first, on the cross-- His was the ultimate and perfect act of submission to God. Jesus is the only one that God ever said--"Obey me and as a result I will send you to hell." Jesus obeyed anyway--just for truth's sake, for God's sake. The only perfect act of submission.
4. Only when we see that Jesus obeyed like Abraham for us! Can we begin to live like Abraham. Let your heart think like this-

Only when I see God has already accepted me can I even begin to try to live like Abraham. I'd never even start down this road--of Abraham-like obedience. Otherwise I'd not even keep it up. I'd be so discouraged by my failures. But God has already set his love on me, prior to my obedience. Without knowing that, I'd never have the heart to start or keep going.

Only when I see God's already accepted me can I deal with the real reasons I fail to live like Abraham. I put "Isaacs" ahead of Christ because I think they will give me more security and worth than he will. Only by joying in my acceptance will these Isaacs lose their power over me. Without doing that, I'd not have the ability to make any progress at all.

Only when I see that God has accepted me can I really want to live like Abraham for the right, non-destructive reason. As I sit and listen to this sermon about Abraham, I realize I may try to obey God so that he will give me a happy life and family. But if I obey like that, I'm really not obeying him for his sake. I'm using the Law of God to control him, not praise him. Without joying in, seeing, resting in Christ's obedience for me, I'll never be obeying for the right reason, nor even truly obeying at all.

Case Study #3

A Sermon on the power of sexual/beauty's attraction in our culture. I. What you must do: The power of physical beauty over us must be broken. Look at the devastation in our society and in our lives. 1) It distorts women's view of themselves (add eating disorders) 2) it demoralizes aging people, 3) it distorts men's lives, by making them reject great spouse-prospects for superficial reasons (add pornography). What must we do? Don't judge a book by its cover. Be deep. Don't be controlled. II. But you can't: You know quite well we won't be able to. Why? 1) First, we desire physical beauty to cover our own sense of shame and inadequacy (Genesis 3). "When you look good you feel good about yourself" really equals "...you feel yourself to be good." 2) Second, we are afraid of our mortality and death. Evolutionary biologists and Christians together agree that the drive to have physical beauty is a desire for youth. We'll never overcome our problem by just "trying". III. But there was one who did. There was one who was beautiful beyond bearing yet willingly gave it up (Phil.2). He became ugly that we might become beautiful (Is.53). IV. Only now we can change. Only as we see what he did for us will our hearts be melted and freed from the belief that we can judge a book by its cover. Only when we can be in him will we be freed from our sense of shame and fear of mortality.

THE NEED TO INCLUDE NON-CHRISTIANS IN SERVICES.

1. The either/or premise of evangelism and spiritual formation

There is a premise in much modern church-growth literature to the effect that you can't minister to Christians and non-Christians effectively in the same service. If this is the case, then a church has to either settle for being an outward facing, aggressively evangelistic church or an heavy discipling, teaching church. The evangelistic churches stress messages in their services that appeal to non-Christians but bore the Christians. The teaching churches stress the messages in their services that appeal to Christians but confuse, bore, or offend non-Christians. Some churches using the Willow model often try to do no spiritual formation (preaching to Christians) in the same services where they evangelize non-Christians. But this approach continues to have a pretty severe follow-up problem. Many seekers stay in the seeker services long term, never

getting fed stronger meat. (And since the majority of attenders at the seeker services are usually Christians, the believers get stuck in elementary Christianity as well.)

But it is impossible to combine Christians and non-Christians in a major way unless the preacher and leaders understand that the gospel is not just the way people are justified, but also the way they are sanctified. The typical approach to the gospel is to see it is the "A-B-C's" part of Christian doctrine only, the minimum truth required to be saved. Then it is understood that we make progress in the Christian life through the application of other (more advanced) Biblical principles. If that is the case, then of course we cannot do both evangelism and spiritual formation at the same time. However, the Reformers, especially Luther, understood that the gospel is not only the way we are saved, but it is always the solution to every problem and the way to advance at every stage in the Christian life. (This is why the first of his 95 Theses were that "all of life is repentance.")

A simple example. If you are preaching a sermon on the subject of honesty, and you use the gospel on the Christians you are doing something that both interests and profits non-Christians. When you always solve Christian's problems with the gospel, then non-Christians a) get to hear it every week in multiple perspectives, and b) get to see how it really works in the Christian life. Both of these are extremely important for post-modern non-Christians.

2. Post-modern non-Christians need to be integrated

We live in an increasingly "post-modern" society. The older modern society rejected revelation as a source of truth, but still honored reason/science as a source of truth. "Post-moderns" are more deeply secular and skeptical of any kind of truth at all. I propose that the old "modern" times were more amenable to the segregation of Christians and non-Christians, but our current situation would be better addressed by having a "mixed" audience in the services. In a "mixed" group, when the preacher speaks somewhat more to non-Christians, the Christians present learn how to share the faith. This is extremely important today. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Christians to just share the gospel without doing apologetics. The old canned quickie training programs cannot prepare a Christian for dealing with the range of intellectual and personal difficulties people have with the Christian faith. They need to hear the preacher week in and week out dealing winsomely and intelligently with the problems of non-believers. This is excellent "training". On the other hand, when the preacher speaks more to Christians, the non-Christians present come to see how Christianity "works". More deeply secular "po-mo" non-Christians tend to decide on the faith on more pragmatic grounds. They do not examine in a detached intellectual way. They also are much more likely to make their commitment through a long process of mini-decisions. They will want to try Christianity on, see how it fits their problems and how it fleshes out in real life.

"CENTERED-SET" AND "BOUNDED-SET" CHURCHES

1. Creating 'centered set' communities with preaching

I am taking 'missional' from the Gospel and Our Culture Network books, especially *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by Darrell L. Guder (Eerdmans, 1998). Essentially, the burden of the book is that, with the end of 'Christendom' in the West, **every** church in North America must consider itself now 'on the mission field'. Evangelism and mission can no longer be considered a department of the church nor something done by the church somewhere else. Now every aspect of the church – its worship, teaching, service – must be 'missional'. Though the seeker-sensitive church movement was a sincere effort to do this, it 'sold out' to modernity in different ways than did the old liberal mainline religion. [The 'Gospel and Our Culture' network has been inspired by the writings of Leslie Newbiggin. Its writings are generally edited by Craig Van Gelder of Calvin Seminary, George R. Hunsberger of Western Seminary, and Darrell L. Guder of Columbia Seminary (Decatur, GA). Besides its patron saint Newbiggin, the movement draws heavily from Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, Douglas John Hall. By and large, this is a group with more mainline sensibilities who are in reaction to both the old mainline liberalism and the church growth/'seeker sensitive church' movement. They consider the former to have been a sell-out to the Enlightenment and now proven to be impotent and bankrupt. On the other hand, they also consider that the evangelical church growth/Willow Creek movement is an over-adaptation to modernity. They see it as sold out to technique, consumerism, individualism, and its allergy to historical rootedness. Thus both becoming obsolete. Unlike other critics of church growth, however, they do not simply call people to return to traditional ministry models that were appropriate for 'Christendom' – a church culture. Instead, they call for a new ways of conceiving and doing church as being on a mission field-'missional church'. Reformed evangelicals should learn a lot from these writings. They do rely on a much more redemptive-historical understanding of the Bible and of the kingdom. However, they conceive of the kingdom as evangelism-plus-social justice and seem to ignore (or disagree with) the concept of cultural transformation.]

How, then, can we move ahead to a new 'missional' church? One key to this is the 'bounded' and 'centered' set concept.

In mathematics, there are two different ways to define a 'set'. One is a 'bounded set'. A point is in the set if it is related properly to (i.e. if it is inside) the boundary. Another is the 'centered set'. A point is in the set if it is related properly to (i.e. if it is in alignment with or moving toward) the center of the set. Organizations that are 'bounded sets' put great emphasis on the lines of demarcation 'around the circle' – at all points. 1) A person cannot work with or be part of the organization in any meaningful sense without the rite of initiation and the adoption of extensive standards which set the person apart. 2) Differences between members and the outside world are emphasized. 3) Membership is defined in terms of common beliefs and policies and folkways that are pretty extensive. Organizations that are centered-sets put more emphasis on central goals and commitments. 1) A person can work with the organization as long as it shares basic goals and is willing to work for them. 2) Differences between members and the outside world are not emphasized. 3) Membership is defined in terms of active participation toward common tasks and goals.

Traditional churches were 'bounded sets'. It used to be very clear to what belonging to a church meant. You could move nearly any place in the country and the churches of the same denomination would be highly similar, because denominations

were bounded sets. Many traditional and conservative evangelical churches are extremely 'bounded set' in their mentality. One of the main ways this expresses itself is in the way bounded-set churches use 'jargon' – almost a tribal dialect. On the one hand, it is the almost casual use of pieties such as, "it was a blessing" and "praise the Lord for that" and "we just ask for traveling mercies now". The outsider immediately realizes that he or she could not pray or talk out loud without revealing that they are outsiders. It would take months to learn the dialect. On the other hand, the bounded-set mentality is expressed when doctrinal distinctives (baptism, charismatic gifts-views, approaches to tithing, eschatology) are stressed and expounded in Sunday services.

Liberal, mainline churches have almost completely abandoned membership standards and firm boundaries of any kind in an effort to be more 'inclusive.' But in general this has not worked. If a community is not going to be primarily defined by its boundary (we are united in being different from the 'Other'), then it must be united by some common cause or goal (i.e. a centered-set mentality.) A liberal church that is not united by any common belief in God or salvation can only seek to rally around very nebulous goals such as doing charitable deeds in the community. As 'centered-sets' most liberal churches fail.

Another version of the 'centered-set' is the heavily seeker-driven churches spawned by the Willow Creek movement. Many of these experimental works have been so loath to talk about boundaries at all (and often they reject the very idea of membership) that it difficult to see how the church is becoming a radical kingdom counter-culture. Some seeker churches are rightly criticized as buying into American popular and consumer culture, not challenging materialistic, individualistic life-styles, etc. No need to go into all that here. The point is that a church must somehow express both the bounded-set concept and the centered-set concept in its life and structure.

Alan Roxburgh's chapter "Missional Leadership: Equipping God's People for Mission" in *Missional Church*, ed. D.Guder, 1998 insists that churches in North America must be both bounded-sets and centered-sets. His diagrams are helpful but they still leave open how this is to be practically realized. At Redeemer we basically see the Ministry Community Meeting and our cell-system as the key to our 'bounded-set' community (though we expect non-Christians in the small groups) and we see the worship and preaching as the key to our 'centered-set' community (though we expect to train and shape Christians mightily in the worship.) In short, the preaching aims at both Christians and non-Christians and creates a 'centered-set' environment in which non-believers feel somewhat welcomed and included and where their faith can be 'incubated.'

2. Creating 'centered set' communities with Christ-centered, gospel-centered sermons

Normal preaching should be evangelistic preaching. Ordinarily, 'edificational' preaching is more oriented to behavior ("you must obey Christ in this way and this way") while 'evangelistic' preaching is usually oriented toward belief ("you must believe in Christ in this way and this way"). But this misses the unity of the human soul. Edwards in his *Affections* argues persuasively that, essentially, "if truly believe, it changes behavior, and if you are not behaving properly, it is because of unbelief." A person may say, "I know God cares for me, but I am still petrified with fear." No. If they are running in fear, it is because they don't 'know' God's care.

Therefore, any failure in behavior in Christians is due to unbelief. The antidote to unbelief is a fresh telling of the gospel. So, if a sermon is Christ-centered in its exposition and application, and if it is oriented toward a) dismantling the unbelief systems of the human heart, and toward b) re-explaining and using the gospel on the unbelief – then it will be highly illuminating to non-Christians even when it is aimed primarily to Christians. Preaching that cannot both edify and evangelize at once is choosing behavior over belief or belief over behavior.

3. Practicals

- ◆ *Theology.* Preaching Christ-centered, not moralistic sermons. Even epistles are put into the overall 'narrative' or story of Christ. Key: Solve all problems with the gospel. That way non-believers hear the gospel each week, yet believers have their issues and problems addressed. Example: Thou shalt not lie.
- ◆ *Logic.* Do not assume that the people out there all have the same premises. Never exhort point "D" if it is based on "A, B, and C" – without referring to A, B, C. Constantly lay 'groundwork' statements about the authority of the Bible, or the reasons we believe, etc.
- ◆ *Apologetic sidebars.* Try to devote one of the three or four sermon points more to non-believers. Keep in your head a list of the 10 or so biggest objections people have to Christianity. More often than not the particular Scripture text has some way to address them.
- ◆ *Application.* You have to literally address non-Christians AND Christians, almost doing dialogue with them. "If you are committed to Christ, you may be thinking this – but the text answers that fear." or "If you are not a Christian or not sure what you believe, then you surely must think that this is narrow-minded – but the text says this, that speaks to this very issue."
- ◆ *Demeanor.* The young secularists of NYC are extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of 'artifice' to them. Anything that is too polished, too controlled, too canned – seems like salesmanship. They will be turned off if they hear the preacher use non-inclusive gender language, or make cynical remarks about other religions, or use tones of voice that they consider artificial, or use a lot of insider evangelical tribal jargon.
- ◆ *Respect for doubt.* Always treat people's typical doubts about Christianity with respect. Never give the impression that 'all intelligent people think like me.' Stop to say: "I know this Christian doctrine sounds outrageous."
- ◆ Continual address *concerns of the wider community*, not just of the Christians.

- ◆ Show how the grace of God favors the poor, outsiders.
 - ◆ Artistic excellence.
 - ◆ Use the gospel to solve Christian's problems – this shows non-Christians how the gospel works.
 - ◆ Celebrate deeds of justice and mercy and common citizenship in the community.
 - ◆ Ground teaching in cultural references and authorities your listeners trust.
- It is critical to 'keep up' in order to preach in New York City. In general, my audience does not trust the Bible very much, and so I need to generously document and support my points with corroborating opinions from all the books and periodicals that the professionals of New York City read. If I read what they read, then a) I can use the Bible to answer the questions that are on their minds, not my mind, b) I can show how often 'the Bible already was teaching this' long before this contemporary authority said it. Some keys to reading non-fiction:
 - In general, periodicals are more important than books. If you always read Books and Culture, The New York Review of Books, The New York Times Book Review, The Wilson Quarterly you will be able to stay on top of the trends of thought without buying 99% of the books! (Another helpful spot is the "Arts and Ideas" section of the Saturday New York Times.) So for example, Andrew Hacker in the New York Review of Books recently reviewed 3-4 of the latest crop of books on homosexuality by gay scholars. He showed the new trend – all of the works are moving away from the concept of homosexuality being an involuntary, inborn condition. After I read this very thorough review article, I probably will not need to buy any of the books. And reading these reviews helps you identify truly seminal works or works you realize you need to buy to close a gap in your own knowledge.

THE GOSPEL PREACHED FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES

Doctrinalist	Christ's substitutionary work	He lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died. Rest in his finished work." Faith in truth	Evangelism/ Theological training <u>Preaching</u>
Culturalist	Kingdom now but not yet	Receive the kingdom! Reversal of worlds values. Salvation came to world thru losing power; now receive it by surrendering your will and identifying with poor and powerless. Repent, change Lords	Generosity/ Reconciliation <u>Doing justice</u>
Pietist	Grace vs. works/performance	Accept your acceptance. You are more sinful than you dared believe but more loved and accepted in Christ than you dared hope. Rely on Grace	Problem-solving, personal/church renewal <u>Counseling</u>

When anyone hears someone say, "we need to preach the gospel every week" there will be a fear of being repetitive. And indeed there is a danger of this unless we understand the gospel in Biblical perspectives.

1. The gospel in three biblical perspectives

The word *evangelion* ('the gospel') or *evangelizdomai* ('declare the gospel') occurs so often in the New Testament (virtually every author uses it) that "clearly the term gospel is a kind of code word for many New Testament writers that summarizes something very basic regarding what the early Christians thought Christian faith was all about." [James V. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love: New Testament Resources for a Missional Hermeneutic*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series (Trinity Press: Harrisburg, PA, 1998), p.31]. But what is that 'very basic' core of Christian faith?

In our desperate search for simplicity, it is easy to overlook the great variety of ways that the 'gospel' is used in the Bible. The most obvious example is how Paul makes 'gospel' almost synonymous with 'justification by faith', while the gospel writers almost seem to make it synonymous with 'the kingdom of God'. We have to be careful that we do not elevate one perspective on the gospel over all others, nor that we assume the perspectives contradict one another. We must have an outline of the gospel that encompasses the way all the Biblical writers speak.

a. The gospel is news rather than ethical instruction ("THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST" Mark 1:1) The 'normative' perspective: What happened?

The term Greek term "ev-angelion" distinguished the Christian message from that of other religions. An 'angel' was a herald or messenger that brought news of some historical event that had already happened, and that radically changed the listeners' condition. The most common examples in Greek literature are "evangels" about a victory in war or the ascension of a new king. When Christians chose *evangelion* to express the essence of their faith, they passed over words that Hellenistic religions used, such as "illumination" (*photismos*) and "knowledge" (*gnosis*) or that Judaism used such as "instruction" or "teaching" (*didache*) or "wisdom" (*sophia*). [Brownson, p. 46] Of course, all of these words were used to describe Christianity, but none achieved the centrality of "gospel". What does that mean?

First, it means that the gospel is news about what God has already been done for you, rather than instruction and advice about what you are to do for God. The primacy of his work, not our work, is part of the essence of faith. In other religions, God reveals to us how we can find or achieve salvation. In Christianity, God achieves salvation for us. The gospel brings news primarily, rather than instruction.

Second, it means that the gospel is all about historic events, and thus it has a public character. "It identifies Christian faith as news that has significance for all people, indeed for the whole world, not merely as esoteric understanding or insight." [Brownson, p. 46] In other religions, the stories of miracles and other special events in the lives of the founder are not essential. Whether or not Buddha did Miracle X, that does not affect whether the 8-Fold path to enlightenment works or not. But if Jesus is not risen from the dead, Christianity does not "work". The gospel is that Jesus died and rose for us. If the historic events of his life did not happen, then Christianity does not "work" for the good news is that God has entered the human "now" (history) with the life of the world to come.

This public, historic aspect of the gospel is especially seen when the term "the gospel of Christ" or "of Jesus Christ" is used. Often the word "gospel" and the life and work of Christ are essentially synonyms. Particularly significant is how Luke links "gospel" to "Jesus". In Acts 5:42, it reads, literally, "they never stopped... evangelizing Christ Jesus". Obviously, Jesus is not the object of their evangelism (they are not trying to convert him!) But the word "evangelizdomenoi" means, all by itself, 'to preach the gospel' or literally "to gospelize". So in the places in Acts where it says, literally "they evangelized Jesus", the English translations have to render it "they told the gospel about Jesus Christ" or "they told the good news that Jesus was the Christ" (cf. NIV Acts 5:42). But the Greek construction clearly has a stronger meaning than that. Its intentional redundancy aims to say that the good news they preached was Jesus. His very life, and all his works, is what saves us. To declare Jesus and to declare the gospel is the same thing. Jesus does not bring the gospel – he is the gospel, because the gospel is that God has broken into history and accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. (You will find this same construction repeatedly. See Acts 8:35, 10:36, 11:20.) We can also see the terms "gospel of Christ" or "gospel of Jesus Christ" in Mark 1:1; 1 Cor. 9:12,18; 2 Cor. 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Gal. 1:7, and so on. (Compare also Rom. 1:9-"The gospel of his Son".)

Summary: So the gospel is news about what God has done in history to save us, rather than advice about what we must do to reach God. The gospel is news that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in history has achieved our salvation. We do not achieve it, only accept it. Jesus does not just bring good news; he is the good news.

The gospel is that Jesus lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died, in your place, so God can receive you not for your record and sake but for his record and sake.

b. The gospel is grace to the weak rather than power to the strong. ("THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM" Matt. 4:23)

The 'situational' perspective: How did it happen?

We also see that the gospel is not simply that Christ has come into history to save us, but also it is how he accomplishes that. The answer is: through a new, deep structure or 'paradigm' that completely contradicts the way of the world. God's saving purposes are effected through the crucified and risen Christ. Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. And those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost. In short, Jesus pulls off 'the great reversal'. "The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man... puts himself where only God deserves to be; God... puts himself where only man deserves to be." [John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.160]

This pattern so contradicts the thinking and practice of the world, that it creates an 'alternate kingdom', an 'alternate city' (Matt. 5:14-16) in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, wealth. The gospel reverses the place of the weak and the strong, the "outsider" and the "insider." It is an advantage, spiritually speaking, to see one's weakness; it is a severe danger, spiritually speaking, to be successful and accomplished. And when we finally understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation (either that of psychological fulfillment, or of social transformation, or of spiritual blessing, or of all three) in power, status and accomplishment. That destroys their power in our lives. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, thus liberates us from bondage to other power of material things and worldly status in our lives. We begin to live a new life without much regard to them.

Many Christians 'reduce' the gospel to the good news of individual forgiveness of sins. But clearly, the gospel writers are talking about something much more than that. The "gospel of the kingdom" is a phrase used numerous times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The 'Great Reversal' of the cross means that the gospel proclaims and creates a reversal of the values of the world. For example, the gospel is especially welcomed by the poor and for the poor (Luke 4:18- *He has anointed me...*

to preach the gospel to the poor." Cf. also Luke 7:22.) Preaching the gospel and healing people's bodies are closely associated (Luke 9:6). The gospel creates a people with a whole alternate way of being human. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition – all these things are marks of living in the world, and are the opposite of the mindset of the kingdom (Luke 6:20-26).

What is the 'kingdom of God'?

- Sin, the resistance of God's authority and kingship, leads to the 'unraveling' of the fabric of creation. Relationships with God, with other races and classes, with individuals, with one's own true self, and with physical nature itself – all 'come apart' and disintegrate where God is not recognized as King.
- The kingdom of God is the entrance into the world of God's ruling power – and that power will heal and 're-weave' all of creation back together, spiritually, psychologically, socially and even physically. The kingdom of God means, first of all, Jesus is Lord of your salvation, not you! So the kingdom means salvation is of sheer grace. But the kingdom also means he is Lord of everything else. Relationships between races and classes, between individuals, and between man and God are healed and re-woven into one fabric again to the degree that they come under the authority of Jesus, through his Word and Spirit. God reveals that his redemption will entail the complete healing of creation, including social justice, the reunification of all humanity, and the end of physical decay and death (Is. 11:1-10.) Everything in the world is properly understood only if we see: 1) it was created good, 2) it is fallen and marred by sin, 3) it will be redeemed in Christ.

What is the relationship of the gospel to the kingdom?

- On the one hand, we could say that the gospel 'brings' the kingdom. It brings us into it (see Col 1:13-14; John 3:5) in that it brings us under the ruling power of God. Luke tells us in 16:16 that the gospel brings or proclaims a kingdom – a new order of life – that we need to 'press into'. People who are converted by the gospel "see" a new kingdom (cf. John 3:3.) Also, it transforms people so that they live according to the great reversal of the cross. Living lives of sacrificial service – devoid of self-justification in relationships or in our use of money or in attitudes toward other races and classes or in our work and vocation – goes a long way toward re-weaving the fabric of society and communities. Once we see that we are sinners saved by grace alone, our old patterns are broken up, and live lives of sacrificial service rather than self-aggrandizement (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9). Also, the gospel thereby creates a 'kingdom community' – a counter-culture, the church – in which we are 'royal priests' showing the world what the future kingdom will look like (1 Peter 2:9-10). We 'model' how all of life – business practices, race relations, family life, art and culture – are healed and re-woven by the King.
- On the other hand, the in-breaking kingdom of God (to restore all of creation) is the gospel! Twice Luke actually says that the kingdom is the gospel message (Luke 4:43; 16:16). The fact that Jesus has broken into history to redeem all of life and give us a new order is great news. Why? We said above that looking for salvation to anything but the grace of Christ sets up an 'idol' or a 'power' or a 'false savior-king'. Human society is miserable under the influence of these idol-powers: such as sex, money, power, or race. When we understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation by any other means. That destroys the power of these false savior-kings over us. The declaration of the gospel of grace is therefore always a declaration of the kingdom. A new savior is a new king. For example, Paul says that Peter's racism was "not in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal.2:14). If we are saved by grace alone – but we continue to be racists, we continue to bow to a false savior-king; we continue to look to our race and culture to justify ourselves over others. But the gospel is the gospel of Christ's kingdom. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, tears down our pride and thus liberates us from bondage to other powers in our lives and our society.

Summary: Second, we see that the gospel of free grace is necessarily a 'gospel of the kingdom' which effects the way we live in society and in the world. The gospel is not just (as is often thought) the message of how you can get individual forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. But we cannot separate this second 'perspective' from the first. If we are not saved wholly by Christ (not ourselves) then the kingdom of God is not good news! It is not good news to be told, simply: "God has created a mini-society of freedom and justice based on his laws. Join up!" That would make the message of Christianity a burdensome one of instruction on how to live (Perspective #1) not a message of grace. But also, separated from the other perspectives, the kingdom of God would simply never 'work'. What makes people able to change their mindset from 'worldly' to 'kingdom' is the existential experience of justification and sonship (Perspective #3), not just being told to live unselfishly.

The gospel is: the way up is down, the way to power is give up power and serve, the way in to God is to go to the margins in repentance and faith. The gospel is God loves to work through the weak, the marginal, the poor.

c. The gospel is of faith rather than of merit or performance. ("THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION" Eph. 1:13)

The 'existential' perspective: In whom does it happen?

While the gospels (especially the 'Synoptics' – Matthew, Mark, and Luke) stress the gospel of the kingdom, the epistles, and especially those of Paul, show how it is additionally "the gospel of your salvation" (Eph. 1:13).

Paul, better than any other Biblical writer, explores the meaning of the 'gospel of Christ' for the individual believer. He tells us that the gospel "*reveals a righteousness from God*" (Rom. 1:17). Here and in Galatians 2 Paul specifically identifies the gospel with the teaching that we receive not just pardon and forgiveness but also the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). This is received by faith in the finished work of Christ, not by good works or our merit.

If we think of the gospel as only pardon or forgiveness of sins, we will trust in God for our past salvation, but will trust in our own present strivings and attainments for our present relationship with God. But the "*hope of the gospel*" (Col. 1:23) is that "*now he has reconciled you by Christ's body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*" (Col. 1:22) The gospel offers not just forgiveness for our bad record, but also complete acceptance through Christ's perfect record. Christ did not only die in our place but lived a perfect life in our place. Therefore we do not simply get forgiveness for sins from Christ, but also complete acceptance. His perfect past and record now (in God's sight) becomes ours.

Thus the entire Christian life is a life "*lived (in a continual present progressive) by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" (Gal. 2:20) On the one hand, this certainly means we can only enter a relationship with God by the deliberate act of trusting in his work and rejecting any trust in our own. (Rom. 4:5 – *Now to the one who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited to him as righteousness.*) But, on the other hand, (as the present progressive of Gal. 2:20 indicates) we must continually remind ourselves of our status as legally righteous, adopted children of God. Galatians is written to Christians who are losing their grip on the doctrine of free justification and may be 'returning to the bondage' (Gal. 5:1) to false savior-gods (Gal. 4:8). Whenever we lose our grip on the gospel of salvation-by-faith-not-works, and we fall back into some form of works-righteousness, we return to fear and bondage.

Through the gospel we can say: "I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey." But the human heart operates on the 'religious' principle: "I obey, therefore I am accepted". The gospel, then, differs from both religion and irreligion. You can, of course, seek to be your own 'lord and savior' by breaking the law of God. But you can also do so by *keeping* the law to earn your salvation. Disbelief in the gospel of grace is therefore not only the main thing that keeps the unconverted from God. It also is the main cause of spiritual deadness, fear, and pride in Christians, because our hearts continue to act on the basis "I obey, therefore I am accepted." They look to things to 'save' us (such as our family, our moral record, our work, and so on.) They become more central to our hope and identity than God, which returns us to fear and bondage. So we do not 'get saved' by believing the gospel and then 'grow' by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. The gospel is the way not only to meet God, but to grow into him. Only by deepening and renewing our understanding of the gospel do we overcome our character flaws. Only profound knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes the law of God a thing of beauty instead of a burden. Then we can use it to delight, resemble, and know the one who saved us – rather than to get his attention or procure his favor. Then we can run the race "for the joy set before us" rather than "for the fear coming behind us".

The gospel is that you are more wicked and flawed than you ever dared believe, and more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope at the same time. Unconditionally loved and radically humbled. Simul justus et peccator.

2. The Importance of All the Perspectives

These three perspectives are important to "keep together". There are today different 'parties' that have isolated and focused on one aspect of the gospel – this usually leads to difficulties and imbalances. The 'classic evangelical' position is 'the gospel of Christ' – which all by itself leads to a ministry almost strictly of apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship. The implications for worship: a very sermon/teaching oriented service. This is the position of the evangelical world of the last 50 years. If you 'came up' in InterVarsity or Campus Crusade, or in one of the older confessional churches or independent Bible churches – that is what you heard.

The 'progressive evangelical' position is the 'gospel of the kingdom' – which all by itself leads to a ministry mainly of community-building and social justice. The implications for worship: often more liturgical. This position is gaining a lot of steam, and is uniting former liberals, who are recognizing the bankruptcy of former ways, and former classical evangelicals, who are recognizing the individualism of their former ways. This group is strong at seeing the church as a 'counter-culture' modeling the kingdom, and strong on calls to engage with modern culture. The problem is – they often reject the very idea of legal, forensic justification (as too individualistic). I wonder if that might not lead to a 'communal' legalism in the end. Will calls to join the 'reign of God' lead anyone to sing 'my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee?'

The 'revivalist evangelical' position is the 'gospel of sonship'. Among charismatics and others in the revival tradition (since Jonathan Edwards) – there is this basic idea. Most of the time, the Christian church is moribund and lacks the power of the Spirit. In times of revival, however, the nominalism, legalism, and works-righteousness of the church falls away and there is a recapture of the gospel of free justification and sonship. Then Christians are renewed, as they recapture their identity as children of God, and non-Christians are attracted in. This position – all by itself, leads to a ministry emphasizing prayer, personal renewal, and lots of personal counseling. The implications for worship: often more on the charismatic, contemporary, informal style. This view has historically been in tension with both the classic view (which sees it as too oriented to 'feelings') and the kingdom view (which sees it as too individualistic).

But not only should these perspectives be 'combined' – it must be seen that they interpenetrate and contain one another. Put another way: if you push down deep enough into any of the perspectives, you find the other two! For example: if you push down into the gospel of sonship far enough, you will discover that we need to care for the poor. My new identity in Christ, when perfected, must remove class pride and racism. For example: if you push down into the gospel of the kingdom far enough, you will see that the cross does not only liberate from the power of social idols, but personal idols, which are always rooted in self-righteousness.