

Vision for Redeemer: A Gospel-Driven Church¹
By Rev. Brian T. Cochran

Introduction

Imagine with me that you just got a brand new sailboat. It is a beautiful boat with all of the latest technology. It has your GPS navigational system, it tracks the weather for you and all of the various wind and water currents. It tells you where you are and where you need to be. Well imagine then that you are taking it out for a sail for the first time. You untie the boat and go flying out of the harbor with the wind at your back. And then after a long morning and afternoon of sailing along the coast, the wind dies down and disappears leaving you dead in the water. And then the next thing you know, your highly advanced navigational devices start to tell you that a storm is coming and that you better get back to the harbor. And so you begin to try to get back, but you can't because you don't have the wind to give you the power that you need in order to get where you need to be.

This illustration, which I have to give credit to my former professor Michael Horton for, illustrates how the law and the gospel function in the Christian life.² The law is like the navigational instruments of your sailboat that tell you where you are and where you need to be. God's law is good in that it commands you and tells you what direction you need to go. The wind then is the Gospel. The Gospel is what gives you the power that you need. The law is indeed good since it tells you where you need to be, but it can't get you there. Paul says that the gospel is *the power of God for salvation* (Rom. 1:16). When Paul said this, he didn't just mean that the gospel is the power of God unto conversion. He meant that it is the power of God for salvation in the fullest sense of the term. We never graduate from the gospel. Christians need the gospel throughout the Christian life.

And often Christians, when they are first converted, have that sense of exhilaration that comes with sailing out of the harbor for the first time with the wind of the gospel at one's back. But then they stop hearing the gospel because many churches today have bought the lie that once we know the gospel we just need to know what to do. "We need deeds not creeds" in the words of one popular pastor. We no longer need good news, we need good advice. But you see when the gospel disappears in the Christian life, it's like the wind that disappeared in our illustration. And there we sit, dead in the water, struggling with whatever paddle we can find to paddle our way through the Christian life in our own strength, which inevitably results in self-righteousness or despair.

This illustration in a nutshell is the elders and my vision for this church. We want a gospel-driven church, one where we are reminded every week of what God's law demands of us, how

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² The inspiration of this vision comes from Michael Horton's article "Why the Marks of the Church Need the Mission" available at www.wscal.edu/conference/missionalandreformed/why_marks_need_the_mission.php. Also see his book *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009).

Christ has fulfilled those demands on our behalf and died for our sins, and how we can respond with a life of gratitude. This is why all of our morning services are structured as guilt, grace and gratitude. Both *the law and the gospel*, deeds and creeds, are proclaimed but never to be confused. Both have their role in the Christian life. The law shows us our guilt. The gospel shows us God's grace in Christ and then the law shows us how we are to be thankful to God for our salvation. And so, consider with me then what a gospel-driven church looks like.

Gospel-Driven Worship

The Gospel is the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is not that God helps those who help themselves, but that God helps those who are dead in sins and trespasses and can do nothing to help themselves and God rescues them from spiritual death and makes them alive in Christ. Jesus Christ came and perfectly obeyed all of God's law on our behalf, and died on the cross for our sins, satisfying the just wrath of God towards us. Paul says, "*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21). And God raised him from the dead on the third day and he ascended to the right hand of God the Father Almighty, where he rules all things for the sake of the church until he comes again in glory.

This is the Gospel. This is the good news. It isn't about your subjective experience of God, it is about the *objective* work of Christ. And the salvation that he won for us is received by faith alone as Paul tells us, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9). The glory belongs to God alone for our salvation.

Well if this is the message, we have to at least get it right first. Some churches get both the message and the methods of delivery wrong. But once we get the message right, then we need to know how we can properly pass on the faith. And what we must learn is that the nature of the message determines the method. All of our methods must be shaped by the message so that the message *and* the methods complement each other rather than contradict each other.

Well where can we look in in the Bible to find not only God's message but also his methods? One of the clearest passages for this is Romans 10:

Rom. 10:5 For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. 6 But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 or " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 14 But how are they to call on him in

whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

In case you missed it, the method is PREACHING the good news. And the method is suited to the message. You see if the message is that we are saved by our own works and that we must seek and find God on our own, then the method is no longer preaching, it's pragmatism, i.e. whatever works. All methods are possible if we have to get people to go and find God. And if that means entertaining them with movies, music and social activities, we'll try anything so that they "experience" God. But Paul says, "*the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) or " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)"* (Rom. 10:6-7).

You see these sorts of methods where we come to worship to express ourselves and to reach up to God by serving him is totally backwards. It contradicts the message of "*the righteousness based on faith*" (v. 6). Paul says the method is preaching because in preaching we don't ascend to God, God descends to us. Paul says, "*But what does [the righteousness based on faith] say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)"* (v. 8).

And so when you come to church, in the words of Michael Horton, "Don't just *do* something, *Sit* there!" Now this is obviously hyperbole in order to prove a point. You will be asked to stand in our worship service. When I ask you to stand in the service please don't hold this statement against me. You will be asked to sing, pray a corporate prayer of confession, confess the Apostle's creed, and pray the Lord's prayer. You will do something. But we never want to eclipse the work of God in our worship. He is the one who primarily and most importantly does something in our worship.

This is what a Gospel-Driven worship service looks like. In worship, God primarily serves us. We don't serve him. Now I realize that to say that might be alarming to some of you. But remember the words of our Lord Jesus: "*For even the Son of Man came **not to be served but to serve**, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45). And remember what Paul said to the men of Athens, "*The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served **by human hands**, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything*" (Acts 17:24-25).

I remember when John Piper first pointed these passages out to me in his writings and he said, "DON'T SERVE GOD." It took me back, since all of my life I was asked, what are you doing to serve God? But you see when you approach worship as though you are serving God and giving him something, you miss the point. In worship, God serves us and we respond with thanksgiving in our hearts.

This is why Paul goes on to say, "*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the*

mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Rom. 11:33-35).

And so when you come to our church on Sunday, you can expect to be served a spiritual feast of Word and sacraments. That is my study up there overlooking the sanctuary. It is not my office because I am not a CEO of a corporation. I am a Minister of the Word in God’s church. You might look at it as my kitchen. I go in there every week and prepare a spiritual meal for you to eat. I do this because Jesus said, “man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). I am called deliver that Word so that God’s people might receive spiritual nourishment.

God has determined the methods for us and we should not seek to be wiser than God. He descends to us in our worship through the preaching of the Word and through the Lord’s Supper and baptism. Through these God appointed means, we meet with our Triune God.

And so you will notice also that in our worship you will often hear God speak to you in the service. If you look at our order of worship, you’ll notice that the flow of our service looks like a dialogue. God speaks to us in the “Call to Worship” and in the “Lord’s Greeting” from his Word and we respond with prayer and praise. God speaks to us in the his law being read from his Word and we respond with confession of sin. God speaks to us in the “Assurance of Pardon” from his Word and we respond with a hymn of thanksgiving. God speaks to us in the reading and preaching of his Word and we respond with song and prayer. God speaks to us in the visible Word of the Lord’s Supper and baptism and we respond with thanksgiving. Finally God blesses us in the “Benediction” from his Word and we respond with a parting song of praise.

And from our gathering together on the Lord’s Day in worship we are strengthened by the spiritual feast that God serves us so that we can then go out and serve each other in the church and serve our neighbors in the world in our various vocations. After Paul finishes unfolding the gospel once again in Romans 1-11 (cf. Rom. 1:16), and concludes with his praise for God in that beautiful doxology I just read from Rom. 11, in the very next chapter Paul says, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Rom. 12:1-2). The “*therefore*” roots his imperatives in chapters 12-16 in the indicatives of the gospel, *“the mercies of God.”*

Paul shows us that our spiritual worship is always a response to having first heard the message of God’s mercy in Christ. In fact he spends the first eleven chapters of Romans reminding them of this gospel before he gets to any application. The structure of the book is guilt, grace and gratitude. And then when he does get to the application, the focus is on our being transformed by the Word so that we can serve the body of Christ. He talks about the gifts that have been given to each member in the church for the purpose of serving one another.

In the words of Martin Luther, “God doesn’t need your good works, your neighbor does.” And so we first come to church to be served by God in Word and sacrament but then we are to take

the gifts of grace that have been given to us and share Christ's bounty with others. Peter tells us, "*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace*" (1 Pet. 4:10). The means of grace (God's gifts for us) comes before the means of service (our gifts for others), but both are important. Deeds without creeds is a zeal for God without knowledge. But creeds without deeds is knowledge of God without zeal, and thus is a dead faith. And so notice with me then our vision for gospel-driven discipleship. Being served by God is intended to overwhelm you and overflow in service to others as disciples of Christ.

Gospel-Driven Discipleship

Jesus didn't tell us to go and make converts only to leave them outside the church fellowship to fend for themselves in the world. Rather, Jesus commanded us, saying, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" (Matt. 28:18-20).

The gospel proclamation is intended to bring about disciples and fellowship with other believers in the church. John writes, "*that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ* (1 John 1:3). It is a fellowship which arises out of and is strengthened every week through the preaching of the gospel. You see, some Christians look at the church as a social club. It is the place where we get together with other people who like the things we like and happen to be Christians. And so, what sort of club would you like to see at our church? the knitting club? the snow boarding club? the fishing club? the cooking club? the book club?

Now these might all be fun things for us to participate in with each other, but they cannot be the *basis* of our fellowship with each other. The tendency to miss the point of the church is always a besetting temptation on the part of Christians in every generation. You see, we may not be all that interested in each other outside church. We may not share common interests. Furthermore, people might visit our church who like things that we don't like and does that mean that we would refuse them into our fellowship? No, because the basis of our fellowship is our fellowship with the Triune God. We love each other because we all share in one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father of us all (Eph. 4:4-6). Some of us might share a few other things in common, but we ALL as Christians share this in common.³

And because we don't always share the same interests with others, we will, as sinners, butt heads from time to time. And what we need in order to maintain the unity of the faith is the law to remind us of where we need to be, and the gospel then which motivates us to love our brother or sister because of the love and grace that has been given to us as sinners. The love of God in Christ, proclaimed in the gospel, compels us. And as we seek to love and serve one another, as disciples of one Lord, Jesus says that he will be with us to the end of the age. The way that Jesus is with us is by his Spirit which is the Helper that he promised to give to the church in John 14-

³ For a great article on this topic see W. Robert Godfrey's article, "The Christian Club," available at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/christian-club/>.

15. All of God's people have been given the gift of the Spirit and possess various spiritual gifts that are to be exercised so that we might grow into maturity in Christ.

This is what discipleship is: It is the entire body of Christ growing together in unity into the full maturity of Christ, in love for God and each other. It is the nurture of believers in the church. In Eph. 4, Paul speaks of these things: *“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:4-16).*

This is what a healthy growing body of disciples looks like. The whole body is nourished by Christ its Head who sits enthroned above and sends forth His Spirit who then gives us the various gifts of the Spirit. Notice that Paul says, *“he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”* (Eph. 4:11-12). Christ has set apart his servants, the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers. The church is *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord”* (Eph. 2:20-21).

Where the foundation laying work of the apostles and prophets ended, the evangelists, pastors and teachers take over. And these ministers are not left by themselves to run the show. They work together with other Spirit filled believers. God has not only given the church ministers, he has also given the church elders to shepherd the flock and deacons to minister to the temporal needs of the body.

Furthermore, the entire Spirit filled body is called to serve one another so that *“when each part is working properly. . . the body grows so that it builds itself up in love”* (Eph. 4:16). Elsewhere in Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12, Paul focuses on the gifts of all believers, gifts of encouragement, gifts of service, gifts of hospitality, and other gifts. Every one is actively involved in the work of the ministry, but not to the point of diminishing the gifts of the special offices which Christ has ordained. These special offices are ordained by God. God serves his church through these men. And they have been gifted by God for the equipping of the saints. Some hold the special office of minister, elder or deacon, while everyone in the church holds the general office of believer.

But every member of the body, even the smallest member is important for the whole body to function properly (1 Cor. 12:14-21).

Back in the day when I went on my first short term mission trip to Ecuador, I will never forget an illustration that our leader gave. He was cutting the lawn one day and he was bare foot. You probably already realize the mistake he made. Anyway, as he was cutting the lawn he didn't realize that there was a dip in the lawn where the grass had grown up to the level of the other grass. Not knowing this dip was there, he lost his pinky toe when the lawn mower went into the dip, exposing the blades. Thus, he lost his pinky toe. He survived of course, and he figured it would be no big deal. 'What use is a pinky toe anyway?', he thought. Well it just so happened that a few months later he was playing basketball and as he was running down the court for a fast break, he blew out his calf muscle. When he saw the doctor, the doctor said that it was due to the missing pinky toe. Because he was missing the smallest of his toes, it was causing the other parts of his body to work harder than normal and this was why he injured himself. Even the smallest parts of a body are important. We are all called to use our gifts for the good of the body of Christ.

And ultimately we are equipped for the work of the ministry when we come to church on the Lord's Day to hear Christ our head, proclaimed in the gospel. 1 John 4:19 tells us, "*we love because he first loved us.*" The motivation of our love for others is the love of God in Christ towards us.

It is gospel-driven love. But we can't just hear the gospel and do nothing for our brothers and sisters. John goes on to say, "*We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother* (1 John 4:19-21). Notice in this passage that the law and the gospel are present and both are necessary in the Christian life. The law commands us to love our brother, but the motivation comes from the reminder that God first loved us. This is what gospel-driven discipleship looks like. Finally, notice with me what gospel-driven witness looks like.

Gospel-Driven Witness

In 1 Peter 3, Peter tells us "*in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God,* (1 Pet. 3:15-18). Peter tells us to "*always be prepared*" to give a reason for the hope that we have (1 Pet. 3:15). And if we suffer in sharing our hope, we are to remember the gospel. Christ suffered for us that he might bring us to God, therefore we should be willing to suffer in order to bring others to God.

Now when it comes to having hope, we need the gospel. Following Paul's logic in Rom. 10, we might ask the following questions: How will you give a reason for your hope unless people ask

you for the hope that you have? And how will people ask you for a reason for your hope unless you have hope? And how will you have hope without hearing about the hope that awaits you? And how will you hear about the hope that awaits you without a preacher? And how will you have a preacher unless one has been sent to preach to you? Now you might think I am stretching Rom. 10 a bit, but not only does faith come by hearing as Paul tells us in Rom. 10, hope comes by hearing as well. Paul tells us in Rom 8, *“Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience”* (Rom. 8:24-25). So hope does not come by seeing.

I would submit to you then that just like faith hope comes by hearing. We need to hear about the hope that we have in Christ, which is proclaimed in the gospel. The Spirit creates hope in our hearts when we hear the message of hope. The message of hope is the good news of Christ’s work on our behalf. He died for our sins and rose the third day and he has gone to prepare a place for us. You can expect me to preach Christ’s work on your behalf from beginning to end. I will point you to Christ’s work for you in the past (his life, death, resurrection and ascension) and to Christ’s work for you in the future (his glorious return). On the basis of the gospel I will exhort you to live a godly life in the present as you look to Christ and depend on the Spirit’s strength.

This message creates and sustains our hope so that we then go out into the world and live hope filled lives. And what happens when we live hope filled lives? People ask us for a reason for the hope that is in us when we demonstrate hope even in the worst circumstances such as cancer, the loss of our home, the loss of a loved one, or anything else. Now that is not to say that we don’t grieve in those times of suffering. Indeed, we experience terrible sufferings in this troubled life. Even Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb (John 11:35). But we do not grieve as the world grieves. We grieve as those who have hope (1 Thess. 4:13-14).

So my whole point is this: the gospel drives our witness in the world. On Sunday we are reminded of our guilt in and of ourselves, and in a new and fresh way we hear of the grace that has been given to us in Christ, and we can’t help but respond with gratitude in the way that we live our lives so that people ask us why we live the way that we do. And then it is our great delight to share with them the good news of salvation in Christ. It is a chain of events that starts with the gospel proclaimed.

So come to church on Sunday and be served a spiritual feast by God in worship, offering thanksgiving to him as you would at any meal. And as you hear the gospel proclaimed it will strengthen you to then serve one another in the church and your neighbors in the world. And as you serve your neighbors through your various vocations, always be ready to give a reason for the hope that you have.

Conclusion

This is our vision for Redeemer Reformation Church. It is that we would have a gospel-driven church, where God serves us so that we can then serve the church and the world in the city of Regina.

May God grant us the grace to be a light in this world, a city set on a hill where others will see our good works and give glory to our Triune God (Matt. 5:14-16).

And thanks be to God that on the rock of Christ, whom we confess with Peter and all the apostles, Christ will build his church and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt. 16:16-18). To God alone be the glory!