

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## THE MESSENGER AND THE MESSAGE

Despite the lame efforts of those involved in the so-called Emergent church, who cheerfully discard distinctive doctrines essential to the gospel (and thus to evangelism), the Bible stresses the indispensable necessity of evangelism. But Biblical evangelism has to do with a Biblical gospel, one that has as its focus the Person and Work of Christ. Much that passes for Evangelism today is anything but what the Bible teaches. To begin with, Biblical evangelism is not driven by pragmatic concerns, i.e., the end justifies the means. Just get people to make a decision for Christ – it does not matter how you get them to do it – simply *close the sale*.

In ways too numerous to mention, much of today's Evangelicalism has trivialized God's Word in a headlong pursuit for relevance. People no longer attend church to hear God's Word—oh, the Scriptures are often appealed to—but citing Bible verses is not the same as preaching the Word of God. Preaching has fallen on hard times. I do not mean to imply that there is no shortage of *preaching* that is popular. Witty and anecdotal stories that aim to entertain more than anything else, saturated with sappy and trivial “principles” that seek to motivate people with practical and informative hints for living—these things abound in our pulpits. Michael Horton hit the nail on the head when he wrote: “This is the greatest problem, from my own experience, with the preaching we hear today. There is such a demand to be practical—that is, to have clever principles for daily living. But the danger, of course, is that what one hears on Sunday morning is not the word of God. To be sure, the scriptures are read (maybe) and there is a sermon (perhaps), but the message has more in common with a talk at the Lions Club, a pop-psychology seminar, prophecy conference or political convention than with the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified, the heavenly truth ‘from above.’”<sup>1</sup> David Neff, executive editor of *Christianity Today* (a magazine, I might add, that has not always been sensitive enough to these concerns in recent years), perceptively pointed out: “We are living in a time when evangelicals choose their churches based on music style or specialized ministries rather than doctrine or biblical content.”<sup>2</sup> Preaching, in churches that minimize doctrine (and this is the trend in most mega-churches), tends to be something other than Apostolic preaching. “It is not the job of the Christian preacher,” said John Piper, “to give people oral or psychological pep talks about how to get along in the world; someone else can do that. But most of our people have no one in the world to tell them, week in and week out, about the supreme beauty and majesty of God.”<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, the present-day infatuation with pop-psychotherapy that characterizes so much of contemporary evangelicalism ignores what Piper says—and as Os Guinness warns this constitutes “an open challenge to historic Christian orthodoxy.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say, “The recovery movement has taken not only America but evangelicalism by storm. In the form of Christian (and not so Christian) books, programs, small groups, and counseling centers, it represents the highest floodwater mark of the therapeutic on the church so far. Twelve-step this and that have been given the authority of the apostolic twelve themselves, and the result has been hailed as renewal... The triumph of the therapeutic has finally transformed psychology from a mere discipline to a worldview and a way of life. Triumphant as a social revolution, the therapeutic has gained a self-evident status and a taken-for-granted cultural authority that is rarely questioned. *Diagnosis* and *therapy* are as obvious to twentieth-century Americans as *demons* and *witches* were to seventeenth-century Americans. In law they replaced crime and punishment. In religion they

have replaced sin and redemption.”<sup>5</sup> Many times you will hear evangelicals claiming that they are simply integrating the insights of psychology with the Bible (Spoiling the Egyptians is how they defend this approach).<sup>6</sup> However, the end result of this in actual practice is that the Bible is made subject to secular and secondary sources of knowledge. Noted Christian psychologist Wm. K. Kilpatrick confesses, “Whatever reconciliation I managed to effect between psychology and Christianity, however, was always at the expense of Christianity... True Christianity does not mix well with psychology. When you try to mix them, you often end up with a watered-down Christianity instead of a Christianized psychology. But the process is subtle and is rarely noticed. I wasn’t aware that I was confusing two different things. And others in the church who might have been expected to put me right were under the same enchantment as I... These attempts to make common cause with psychology are examples of ‘Christianity and.’ It’s a strong temptation to those who fear that Christianity by itself isn’t enough. The trouble is that ‘Christianity and’ edges real Christianity aside or prevents it from taking hold.”<sup>7</sup> Michael Horton concurs and declares, “But what we see today in so much of the literature and preaching of Christian pop psychology is not *integration* of biblical-theological and natural-scientific knowledge, but a replacement of biblical views of humans, God, and salvation with purely secular notions, baptized with non-contextual verses from the Bible.”<sup>8</sup> We should not conclude that simply because a person has had a dramatic conversion and are compelled to share their testimony with others, that this somehow means they are *sent* of God. The messenger is *sent* with a message from God, one that focuses on the context of the gospel and *not* on the experiences of the messenger. In addition, the message is not the result of some mystical subjective sensation that the messenger perceives to be the voice of God, rather it conforms strictly to the inscripturated Word of God. Furthermore, as Jer. 23:16-22 makes clear, the very real possibility exist that God totally disapproves of what might appear to be “anointed ministers” who attract large crowds, but are in fact frauds.

## I. APOSTOLIC EVANGELISM HAS ITS EMPHASIS ON THE PERSON AND SUPREMACY OF CHRIST JESUS (I Cor. 1:1-9)

### A. The Gospel should be preached with great frequency *in the church*. There are *two* reasons for this:

(1) It is a false assumption, which says that if people regularly attend church they must be Christians. Lloyd-Jones has written: “Because such people assume that they are Christians, they tend to resent preaching which assumes that they are not Christian, though it is what they need most of all. This again can be illustrated by a story. I knew a lady who left a certain chapel after listening to the preaching of a new minister for about a year. She gave her reason for doing so. She said, ‘This man preaches to us as if we were sinners.’ That was terrible! She was made to feel uncomfortable and forced to examine herself and to see herself truly; and she did not like it. She had been attending that church for nearly thirty years; but she showed that she was antagonistic to the Truth when really faced with it in a direct, personal way. She liked general expositions of Scripture, and sermons based on the Scriptures for believers; they did not hurt her, they did not trouble her, they did not examine her, they did not convict her. She reveled in that, but she did not like preaching when it became personal and direct.”<sup>9</sup> I have also seen this attitude time and time again.

(2) Believers need to be constantly reminded of what Christ has done for them. “To preach Christ,” says Mark Lutherbach, “means to tell my people every week that Jesus has died and is risen, and if they are in Him nothing they say or do will change the Father’s love for them or modify their standing before God at all. They cannot improve it by being good and they cannot harm it when they stumble in sin. They need this message more than any other in times of adversity and temptation, when they stumble in sin and when they grow self-righteous. There is a pretty dominant paradigm in our time that the gospel is for the lost. Well this is a half-truth in reality. Why? Because the gospel is very much for the saved as well!

Every day I need to preach the gospel to myself and live by it afresh. The whole of my Christian life is a response to the gospel. Because Jesus died and rose again, everything is different."<sup>10</sup> Note how in the space of the first nine verses the Apostle makes reference to Christ *ten* times. In this same passage the *nature of the gospel* is underscored as being rooted in the sovereign grace of God.

## II. APOSTOLIC EVANGELISM WAS NOT BASED ON HUMAN WISDOM AND ABILITY (I Cor. 1:10-16)

One of the major problems in the church at Corinth was that of faction and division. They exalted certain ministers and, in some cases, had been mesmerized by certain preachers who preached a flowery, sensational, superficial message that drew attention to the preacher and not the gospel. The Apostle rejected any preaching that relied on a certain style or method to be effective (depending on the wisdom of human speech, v. 17). Paul refused to cater either to rationalistic tendencies of the Greeks or the empirical tendencies of the Jews in his preaching.

## III. APOSTOLIC EVANGELISM FOCUSES ON THE GLORY OF GOD (I Cor. 1:26-31)

Note again the Apostles' emphasis on the supremacy of grace in the gospel, not only in its presentation, but also in man's response to it. Paul's gospel forces us to confess that we are helpless sinners. Preaching that does not confront people with their awful sinfulness is not Apostolic. Again, listen to the wisdom of Lloyd-Jones: "What the natural man needs above everything else is to be humbled. This is essential before we can do anything with him. The ultimate trouble with the natural man is his pride."<sup>11</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** What do we learn from this passage of St. Paul? Richard Belcher summarizes: "How could we possibly preach any other gospel than the gospel of grace which centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ? How could we possibly seek to gear the gospel of grace to human power, human ability, human strength or human wisdom? How could we possibly, as recipients of this glorious salvation by grace, boast within ourselves over the fact that we are saved while others were lost? How could we possibly stand in God's presence and glory as if we were saved because of something God saw within us? How could we possibly exalt any human instrument which brought the message of salvation to us as the Corinthians were doing? How could we possibly do anything except bow in humility and reverence before our great God of Grace, giving Him glory and praising Him eternally for saving the likes of us? How could we possibly present this gospel in any manner that would be inconsistent with its central person (Christ) and its undeniable nature (grace)?"<sup>12</sup> We do not need to integrate the Bible with insights from psychology – and we certainly do not need to be preaching this rubbish to Christ's sheep. John Piper asked, "What is it that our people in the pews need? People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow... It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God."<sup>13</sup> Jer. 2:13 says, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken Me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." Jer. 6:16 says, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, as where the good way is and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." Not so long ago A. W. Tozer wrote; "The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic. The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our religious thinking."<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> M. S. Horton, Modern Reformation (Mar./Apr., 1993), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Christianity Today (June 14, 1999), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, The Supremacy of God in Preaching (Baker, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Os Guinness, No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Ages (Moody, 1992), p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 116-117.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes it is claimed (by Evangelicals who should know better) that the writers of Scripture did not have the advantage we have today with all the *new* information we have at our fingertips. Richard Mouw, the President of Fuller Theological Seminary has gone on record as saying, "We do know more about the human psyche today than our Christian forebears," and he concludes that secular therapy must be incorporated into a larger Biblical worldview; cf. his Consulting the Faithful (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 74. The major problem with Mouw's analysis is that *much* of what secular psychology advocates (i.e., homosexuality is normal) is clearly condemned in Scripture; cf. the excellent discussion on the subjects of homosexuality and divorce as they are commonly addressed in our culture in Noel Weeks, The Sufficiency of Scripture (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), pp. 167-182.

<sup>7</sup> Wm. K. Kilpatrick, Psychological Seduction: The Failure of Modern Psychology (Thomas Nelson, 1983), pp. 20-25.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Horton, ed. Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church? (Moody Press, 1992), p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones, Preaching & Preachers (Zondervan, 1975), p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> M. Lauterbach, Viewpoint: A Look at Reformation & Revival in Our Time (July/Sept., 1999), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> R. P. Belcher, Preaching the Gospel: A Theological Perspective (Richbarry Press, 1986), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> J. Piper, The Supremacy of God in Preaching (Baker, 1990), pp. 9-11.

<sup>14</sup> A. W. Tozer, The Knowledge of The Holy (Harper & Row, 1961), p. 6.