

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### GLORYING IN THE CROSS

**T**here have always been people (inside as well as outside the church who) using their self-generated ideas, have judged what a *proper* God should be like. “I could never believe in a God who would send people to hell.” This is the kind of thing you will frequently hear people say. The Christian teaching that Christ had to suffer and die as an atoning sacrifice to propitiate the wrath of God is considered barbaric and repulsive. Martin Lloyd-Jones many years ago made this observation, “But perhaps the people who find the cross most offensive of all are those who on the surface seem to praise it most of all. I am thinking of the people who tell us that the cross is a very beautiful thing. They preach a lot about the cross, yes, but they preach it as something that is beautiful—so touching, so affecting, so moving. And yet, I would say that they, of all people, are the ones who feel the offence of the cross most of all. In fact, they feel it so much that they have got to turn it into something that it was never meant to be. They find it so offensive in its stark reality that they philosophize it into the most beautiful thing, a kind of aesthetic enactment, and so they sentimentalize the cross and talk about it with great pathos. These, of all people, are the ones who feel the offence of the cross. The truth is that we are face to face with the very position that has persisted throughout the centuries. We must examine the reason for this, but before we do so, let me say this. The test of whether someone is teaching the cross rightly or wrongly is whether it is an offence to the natural man or not. If my preaching of this cross is not an offence to the natural man, I am misrepresenting it. If it is something that makes him say how beautiful, how wonderful, what a tragedy, what a shame, I have not been preaching the cross truly. The preaching of the cross is an offence to the natural man. So it becomes the test of any man’s preaching.”<sup>1</sup> The most obvious example of what Lloyd-Jones is talking about is the TV celebrity personality Joel Osteen. I’ve highlighted Osteen’s approach to “preaching the gospel” already. Simply put, Osteen avoids anything that might offend his listening audience. Mike Horton, in a series of essays on Osteen, makes the following observations:

There is no condemnation in Osteen’s message for failing to fulfill God’s righteous law. On the other hand, there is no justification. Instead of either message, there is an upbeat moralism that is somewhere in the middle: Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful. ‘Don’t sit back passively,’ he warns, but with a gentle pleading suggests that the only reason we need to follow his advice is because it’s useful for getting what we want. God is a buddy or partner who exists primarily to make sure we are happy. ‘You do your part, and God will do his part.’ ‘Sure we have our faults,’ he says, but ‘the good news is, God loves us anyway.’ Instead of accepting God’s just verdict on our own righteousness and fleeing to Christ for justification. Osteen counsels readers simply to reject guilt and condemnation. Yet it is hard to do that successfully when God’s favor and blessing on my life depend entirely on how well I can put his commands to work. “If you will simply obey his commands, He will change things in your favor.’ That’s all: ‘...*simply* obey his commands.’

Everything depends on us, but it’s easy. One wonders if he has ever had a crisis of doubt or moral failure that stripped him naked in God’s presence. Osteen seems to think that we are basically good people and God has a very easy way for us to save ourselves—not from his judgment, but from our lack of success in life—with his help. ‘God is keeping a record of every good deed you’ve ever done,’

he says—as if this is *good* news. ‘In your time of need, *because of your generosity*, God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of.’

It may be ‘Law Life,’ but make no mistake about it; behind a smiling Boomer Evangelicalism that eschews any talk of God’s wrath, there is a determination to assimilate the gospel to law, an announcement of victory to a call to be victorious. Indicatives to imperatives, good news to good advice. The bad news may not be as bad as it used to be, but the good news is just a softer version of the bad news: Do more. But this time, it’s easy! And if you fail, don’t worry. God just wants you to do your best. He’ll take care of the rest.

So who needs Christ? At least, who needs Christ as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (Jn 1:29)? The sting of the law may be taken out of the message, but that only means that the gospel has become a less demanding, more encouraging law whose exhortations are only meant to make us happy, not to measure us against God’s holiness.

So while many supporters offer testimonials to his kinder, gentler version of Christianity than the legalistic scolding of their youth, the only real difference is that God’s rules or principles are easier and it’s all about happiness here and now, not being reconciled to a holy God who saves us from ourselves. In its therapeutic milieu, sin is failing to live up to our potential, not falling short of God’s glory. We need to believe in ourselves and the wages of such ‘sins’ is missing out on our best life now. But it’s still a constant stream of exhortation, demands, and burdens: follow my steps and I guarantee your life will be blessed.

A *TIME* story in 2006 observed that Osteen’s success has reached even more traditional Protestant circles, citing the example of a Lutheran church that followed *Your Best Life Now* during Lent, of all times, ‘when,’ as the writer notes, ‘Jesus was having his worst life then.’ Even churches formally steeped in a theology of the cross succumb to theologies of glory in the environment of popular American spirituality. We are swimming in a sea of narcissistic moralism: an ‘easy-listening- version of salvation by self-help.

This is what we might call the false gospel of ‘God-Loves-You-Anyway.’ There’s no need for Christ as our mediator, since God is never quite as holy and we are never quite as morally perverse as to require nothing short of Christ’s death in our place. God is our buddy. He just wants us to be happy, and the Bible gives us the roadmap.<sup>2</sup>

In his second NY Times best seller *Life Every Day*, Osteen declares, “The question is: ‘How? What must I do to become a better me?’ In my first book, *Your Best Life Now*, I presented seven steps to living at your full potential.’ But with *Becoming a Better You*, he wants to go a little deeper. ‘I’m hoping to help you look inside yourself and discover the priceless seeds of greatness that God has placed within you. In this book, I will reveal to you seven keys that you can use to unlock those seeds of greatness, allowing them to burst forth in an abundantly blessed life.’ Remember, God has put in you everything you need to live a victorious life. Now, it’s up to you to draw it out...What does it mean to become a better you? First, you understand that God wants you to become all that He created you to be. Second, it is imperative that you realize that God will do His part, but you must do your part as well. To become a better you, you must:

1. Keep pressing forward.
2. Be positive toward yourself.
3. Develop better relationships.
4. Form better habits.
5. Embrace the place where you are.
6. Develop your inner life.
7. Stay passionate about life.”<sup>3</sup>

Simply put, Osteen avoids mentioning the Cross of Christ. The Apostle Paul on the other hand, gloried in the cross. Why? Spurgeon declared, “You may well desire to know, for there are many nowadays who do not glory in it, but forsake it. Alas that it should be so! but there are ministers who ignore the atonement: they conceal the cross, or say but little about it. You may go through service after service, and scarce hear a mention of the atoning blood; but Paul was always bringing forward the expiation for sin: Paul never tried to explain it away. Oh the number of books that have been written to prove that the cross means an example of self-sacrifice, as if every martyrdom did not mean that. They cannot endure a real substitutionary sacrifice for human guilt, and an effectual purgation of sin by the death of the great

substitute. Yet the cross means that or nothing. Paul was very bold: although he knew this would make him many enemies, you never find him refining and spiritualizing: the cross and the atonement for sin is a plain matter of fact to him. Neither does he attempt to decorate it by adding philosophical theories. He pronounces an anathema on all who propose a rival theme – *But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.*<sup>4</sup>

## I. THE CONTEMPORARY THERAPEUTIC GOSPEL

“This therapeutic gospel,” writes David Powlison, “accepts and covers for human weaknesses, seeking to ameliorate the most obvious symptoms of distress. It takes human nature as a given, because human nature is too hard to change. It does not want the King of heaven to come down. It does not attempt to change people into lovers of God who embrace the truth of who Jesus is, what He is like, what He does. We find our miracle substitute in the wonders of technology and entertainment. Middle-class felt needs are less primal. They express a more luxurious, more refined sense of self interest:

- A. I want to feel loved for who I am, to be pitied for what I’ve gone through, to feel intimately understood, to be accepted unconditionally no matter what I do.
- B. I want to experience a sense of personal significance and meaningfulness, to be successful in my career, to know my life matters, to have an impact.
- C. I want to affirm that I am OK, to feel good about myself, to have a sense of self-confidence, to assert my opinions and desires no matter how I may be living my life.
- D. I want to be entertained, to feel pleasure in the endless stream of performances that delight my eyes and tickle my ears and warm my belly.
- E. I want a sense of adventure, excitement, action, and passion so that I experience life as thrilling and moving.”<sup>5</sup>

## II. THE APOSTOLIC CROSS-CENTERED GOSPEL

The Apostles’ message was very specific. Charles McIlvaine noted, “Such passages of the Apostles arise to your minds, as, ‘We preach Christ *crucified*’; ‘I determined not to know anything among you (while declaring unto you the testimony of God) save Jesus Christ and him *crucified*’; ‘God forbid that I should glory save in the *cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ’; ‘For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.’ They preached Christ – but as *Christ crucified*. They said continually, like John the Baptist, ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world’, but it was the ‘Lamb *slain*’ – Christ *in his death* – bearing ‘our sins in his own body on the tree’; that they pointed to. They rejoiced in everything pertaining to their Lord, from his birth at Bethlehem to his present glory at the Father’s right hand, but the one thing in which they rejoiced so supremely was his cross.”<sup>6</sup> Regarding Galatians 6:14, Bruce pointed out, “For one who makes the cross his supreme, indeed his solitary, ground of boasting all the accepted standards of social life are necessarily turned upside down: a total ‘transvaluation of values’ has taken place. Not only does he no longer know any one (by ‘worldly standards’): he has made a radical reassessment of everything in the light of the cross.”<sup>7</sup>

### A. BOASTING: NEGATIVELY

The word *glory* is KAUCHAOMAI and its basic meaning is to boast or brag in the sense of vaunt. Over and over again in the OT self-boasting is something that is described as a fault. Men will be boastful (2 Tim. 3:2); they are boastful (Rom. 1:30); your boasting is not good (1 Cor. 5:6); the circumcisers want to boast in your flesh (Gal. 6:13). Those who boast of their riches (Ps. 49); you who boast in the law (Rom. 2:23); a man who boasts of non-existent gifts is like clouds without rain (Prov. 25:14); is not this great Babylon which I have made? (Dan. 4:30); the horn had a mouth uttering great things (Dan. 7:8, 20). Do not boast (1 Sam. 2:3; Ps. 75:4); let us not be boastful (Gal. 5:26); do not boast of wisdom, strength or riches (Jer. 9:23-24); let no one boast about men (1 Cor. 3:21). Why do you boast of evil? (Ps. 52:1); do not boast about tomorrow (Prov. 27:1): boasting about future success is evil (Jas. 4:16): too many soldiers. lest

Israel boast (Judg. 7:2); let not him who puts on his armour boast like him who takes it off (1 Kings 20:11).

## **B. BOASTING: POSITIVELY**

Boasting is excluded by the principle of faith (Rom. 3:27); no one may boast before God (1 Cor. 1:29); the boastful will not stand before you (Ps. 5:5); why boast, as if you have something you did not receive? (1 Cor. 4:7); where is not your boasting? (Judg. 9:38); Abraham has no reason to boast before God (Rom. 4:2); salvation is not of works, lest any one should boast (Eph. 2:9). Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord (Jer. 9:23-24; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17); I will boast in the Lord (Ps. 34:2); in God we boast (Ps. 44:8); we will boast in the name of the Lord (Ps. 20:7); I boast in things regarding God (Rom. 15:17).

Osteen's "gospel" is devoid of even mentioning the cross – how could he possibly boast in something he is silent about?

**CONCLUSION:** The therapeutic gospel according to Joel Osteen is no gospel at all. In fact, it is a soul-damning gospel. Osteen urges people to tap into the "seeds of greatness that God has placed in each of us." God, according to Osteen, wants each of us to reach our full potential and achieve all that we can be. Osteen's message is rooted and grounded in human achievement, in boasting in what we can accomplish. Christ and His Cross play no part in Osteen's Satanic gospel. Regretfully, Osteen is not the only one preaching this popular gospel. My friend, Paul Wells, recently wrote, "In our day and age, Christianity has become fuzzy about its central beliefs. The lines that separate the Christian faith from well-meaning sentimentality, new age mysticism, or even other religions are increasingly vague. Methods are what matter, better communication, more attractive packaging to sell this fine product, or so we are told. It is not, however, the medium that provides the answer to the problem of unbelief, but the message. If the whole counsel of God in the atonement is lost, so is Christianity. Because 'not only is the doctrine of the sacrificial death of Christ embodied in Christianity as an essential element of the system, but in a very real sense it constitutes Christianity. It is this which differentiates Christianity from other religions.' It is vitally important today that the gospel be, and become once again, the gospel of the cross in the fullest sense of the word. The good news is not a message of love that allows us be ourselves for ourselves. It saves us from ourselves for God the creator and meets our deep needs as people naturally alienated from him. The truth is not 'in us,' nor is it 'out there' somewhere. The gospel of the cross allows us to find out who we really are—God's creatures saved by grace, redeemed by Christ's death, made new in him, at peace with him, and dependent daily on his love and care."<sup>8</sup>

## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones, The Cross: God's Way of Salvation (Crossways, 1986), p. 44-45.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wscal.edu/faculty/wscwritings/horton.osteen/glorystory.php>

<sup>3</sup> Joel Osteen, Becoming a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day (Free Press, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, "The Cross Our Glory" available at <http://home.att.net/~sovereigngrace/crossourglory2.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001842.cfm>

<sup>6</sup> C. P. McIlvaine, Preaching Christ: The Heart of Gospel Ministry (rpt. Banner of Truth, 2003) p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, Galatians: New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 1982) p. 271.

<sup>8</sup> P. Wells, Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of The Atonement (Christian Focus, 2006) p. 248.