

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### Christ The Lord

**H**ave you seen the “Receive Jesus” ad on national television? This is how Gene Veith described it: “It has a rather cool-looking guy with a goatee and a black t-shirt against a white background. He says how life is hard. But that Jesus can make an amazing difference in your life. He tells viewers, wherever they are, to “receive Jesus.” It’s rather well-done, better than my description makes it sound. But the ad nowhere includes the Gospel! He doesn’t say anything about sin or forgiveness or who Jesus is or what He accomplished for us on the Cross. This is not uncommon, trying to be evangelistic while leaving out the evangel. Just telling someone to “receive Jesus” and encouraging a rote prayer to that effect without proclaiming the Gospel doesn’t make anyone a Christian, does it? I’m sure the makers of this ad do believe that Jesus died for sinners and that His death and resurrection grants forgiveness. So why did they go to all of the expense of this ad without saying that? I’m all for using the media like this for evangelism and salute the effort, but the Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners surely has to be in the message, doesn’t it?”<sup>1</sup>

It will, no doubt, come as a surprise for many people to discover that popular expressions like “ask Jesus to come into your heart” are never used as a synonym for believing. We are very prone, I think, to adopt ways of speaking about Christianity in general and the Gospel in particular that are quite foreign to the Scripture. The sad consequences of what happens when people embrace a pseudo-gospel about Jesus is illustrated by William Lobdell, a reporter for the L. A. Times. He describes his conversion: “In 1989, a friend took me to a Mariners Church, then in Newport Beach, after saying: ‘You need God. That’s what’s missing in your life.’ At the time, I was 28 and my first son was less than a year old. I had managed to nearly ruin my marriage (the second one) and didn’t think I’d do much better as a father. I was profoundly lost. The mega-church’s pastor, Kenton Beshore, had a knack for making Scripture accessible and relevant. For someone who hadn’t studied the Bible much, these talks fed a hunger in my soul. The secrets to living well had been there all along – in ‘Life’s Instruction Manual,’ as some Christians nicknamed the Bible. Some friends in a Bible study class encouraged me to attend a men’s religious weekend in the San Bernardino Mountains. The three-day retreats are designed to grind down your defenses and leave you emotionally raw – an easier state in which to connect with God. After 36 hours of prayer, singing, Bible study, intimate sharing and little sleep, I felt filled with the Holy Spirit. At the climactic service Sunday, Mike Barris, a pastor-to-be, delivered an old-fashioned altar call. He said we needed to let Jesus into our hearts. With my eyes closed in prayer, I saw my heart slowly opening in two and then being infused with a warm, glowing light. A tingle spread across my chest. This, I thought, was what it was to be born again. The pastor asked those who wanted to accept Jesus to raise their hands. My hand pretty much levitated on its own. My new friends in Christ, many of whom I had first met Friday, gave me hugs and slaps on the back. I began praying each morning and night. During those quiet times, I mostly listened for God’s voice. And I thought I sensed a plan he had for me: To write about religion for The Times and bring light into the newsroom, if only by my stories and example.” However, as he covered the sexual abuse stories that involved numerous Roman Catholic priests and the never ending parade of charlatans on TBN he became disillusioned. He concludes, “My soul, for lack of a better term, had lost faith long ago – probably around the time I stopped going to church. My brain, which had been in denial, had finally caught up. Clearly, I saw now that belief in God, no matter how grounded, requires at some point a leap of faith. Either you have the gift of faith or you don’t. It’s not a choice. It can’t be willed into existence. And there’s no faking it if you’re honest about the state of your soul. Sitting in a park across the street from the courthouse, I called my wife on a cellphone. I told her I was putting in for a new beat at the paper.”<sup>2</sup> The “Gospel” that Lobdell embraced was in fact no gospel at all. Jesus was presented as someone who will help solve your personal problems and give you a meaningful life. Lobdell describes his emotions as being engaged – not his understanding of Biblical truth about his

sin, God's holiness and the Redemptive work of Christ. The mega-church that he was involved in was a typical Willow Creek clone. Sin, in particular, if mentioned at all, is down played or repackaged. Instead, as Sargeant observed, "they often frame this discussion in terms of how sin harms the individual, rather than how it is offensive to a holy God. Sin, in short, prevents us from realizing *our* full potential. As sinners, Bill Hybels (the founding pastor of Willow Creek) suggests, we break through the 'moral guard rails' and 'ethical fences' that God has established for our own good. If people would only follow God's moral guidance, they would lead healthier, fuller lives that would culminate in eternal salvation...they are also eager to present this message without giving any unnecessary offense. For example, when asked whether 'confrontational evangelistic programs intimidate more people than they convert,' more than four out of five seeker church pastors surveyed (81 percent) agreed with the statement. In short, confrontation is uncivil—and ineffective. Thus, seeker church advocates are committed to developing a nonconfrontational way of presenting the Gospel. Instead of railing about eternal damnation, Hybels explains in one of his seeker messages the consequences of rejecting God: 'You'll miss the reward your heart yearns for, which is to be affirmed from the Father who is in heaven. You don't want to miss His rewards. You don't want to miss His compensations, because they're rich. They're soul-satisfying.' It is just this sort of angle on the Christian faith that induces sociologist Stephen Warner to summarize the overall thrust of Hybels's preaching as 'upbeat.' 'It's a Salvationist message,' says Warner, 'but the idea is not so much being saved from the fires of hell. Rather, it's being saved from meaninglessness. It's more of a soft sell.'"<sup>3</sup> At this time of year, as our thoughts turn to the events surrounding our Lord's Advent, let's be sure that we don't fall prey to turning the message of Christmas into the kind of distorted gospel that Lobdell accepted. We can do this by noting how Jesus addressed the subject of confessing our faith in Him.

## I. CONFESSING CHRIST

There are a number of references in the New Testament that speak of *publicly* confessing saving attachment to Jesus Christ (cf. Matthew 10:32; John 12:42; I John 2:23; 4:2, 3, 15). G.T. Purves points out that as opposition to Jesus increased and the critical period of His life drew near, "He evidently felt it necessary to draw out by means of a public confession the vague, latent faith of such of His followers as might be true disciples."<sup>4</sup>

- A. **What is Confession?** This does not simply refer to mouthing certain words--Judas could have done that.<sup>5</sup> The Greek verb HOMOLOGEŌ, along with its strengthened form EXHOMOLOGEŌ, the noun HOMOLOGIA and the adverbial HOMOLOGOUMENŌS mean "to speak the same together," or "to agree with or to avow." It involves making public what is inside one's self, so that all may share.<sup>6</sup>
- B. **What is Confessed?** The word is sometimes used *generally* of revealing one's intent (cf. Matthew 7:23) or consent as by general agreement (cf. I Timothy 3:16). It may come as something of a surprise to learn that there are only four references to *confessing* or *declaring our sins* (Matthew 3:6 and the parallel passage in Mark 1:5; Acts 19:18; James 5:16 and, of course, 1 John 1:9). This is not to say that this kind of confession is unimportant. But, as Moulton has written, "the Christian life is not centered round confession of sin; it is centered round confession of faith in Christ. This is where the main New Testament emphasis lies."<sup>7</sup> *Confession of faith* always centers on Christ. This is done openly and as an expression of faith (Romans 10:9-10). This public declaration *always* is associated with certain distinctive beliefs (cf. Hebrews 3:1; 4:14; 10:23; I Timothy 6:12). The final sense in which confession is used is in reference to *praising God*. This is Paul's point in Romans 14:11 and 15:9. The writer to the Hebrews echoes this same theme in 13:15.

## II. THE OBJECT OF CONFESSION

*Whosoever shall confess Me.* We are called upon to *publicly* confess saving attachment to Christ. This is both a *duty* and a *privilege*. "To follow Jesus still seems often like entering on an unknown and perilous way. Therefore the need of open, positive, avowed, committed, consecrated faith is as great as ever."<sup>8</sup> Jesus has been exhorting His disciples; not to fear men—but to trust God and this trust will be demonstrated in confessing Christ. Writing in a period when the social gospel threatened to obscure the message of the cross, J. Gresham Machen took pen in hand and wrote these words about the nature of true confession: "In order, therefore, that the purity of the Church may be preserved, a confession of faith in Christ must be required of all those who would become Church members. But what kind of confession must it be? I for my part think that it ought to be not merely a verbal confession, but a credible confession. One of the very greatest evils of present-day religious life, it seems to me, is the reception into the Church of persons who merely repeat a form of words such as 'I accept Christ as my personal Saviour,' without giving the slightest evidence to show that they know what such words mean. As a consequence of this practice, hosts of persons are being received into the Church on the basis, as has been well said, of nothing more than a vague admiration for the moral character of Jesus, or else on

the basis of a vague purpose of engaging in humanitarian work. One such person within the Church does more harm to the cause of Christ, I for my part believe, than ten such persons outside; and the whole practice ought to be radically changed. The truth is that the ecclesiastical currency in our day has been sadly debased; Church membership, as well as Church office, no longer means what it ought to mean. In view of such a situation, we ought, I think, to have reality at least; instead of comforting ourselves with columns of church statistics, we ought to face the facts; we ought to recall this paper currency and get back to a standard of gold.”<sup>9</sup>

### III. THE MANNER OF CONCESSION

This is to be done *before men*, i.e., publicly. Confession is the genuine fruit of faith. Why is this important? After all, as we are frequently told, religious faith is intensely personal and private. Keep it to yourself, is the advice often given. But Jesus *demand*s otherwise. He calls for open allegiance. He calls for faith being demonstrated or exhibited in every circumstance of life.<sup>10</sup> In II Timothy 2:19 the Apostle Paul declares, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.” We must not only positively identify ourselves with Christ, we must likewise manifest and avoid anything that would bring the name of Christ into disrepute.

### IV. THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONFESSION

*Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him shall the Son of man confess before the angels of God.*<sup>11</sup> Please note that Jesus gives no allowance for those who choose to take a so-called middle of the road position. “Jesus makes the entire position of men in the world to come, whether for weal or woe, to depend upon their relationship to and attitude toward him in this present world. Is this a claim which any mere man might have made? Do we not encounter here essentially the exclusiveness of Acts 4:12, ‘And in none other is there salvation; for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved?’ And thus we also hear Jesus speaking with unqualified sovereign authority and self-assurance: *Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).*”<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is credited with being the first person to announce “God is dead.” This is the context of that famous remark. “The madman – haven’t you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, ‘I’m looking for God! I’m looking for God!’ Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. ‘Has he been lost, then?’ asked one. ‘Did he lose his way like a child?’ asked another. ‘Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to the sea? Emigrated?’ Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Where is God?’ he cried; ‘I’ll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I! We are his murderers. ...Hasn’t it got colder? Isn’t night and more night coming again and again? ...Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? – Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!’” It is true that Nietzsche opposed Christianity – but what often is overlooked is the *kind* of Christianity that he found so repulsive. It was a Romanticized form of Christianity that he was early on in his life exposed to – and he positively hated it. The fact of the matter is that he actually admired Jesus and listed him as one example of his understanding of the *Urbarmensch* – Superman.<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche reacted against a form of Christianity that had been culturally corrupted. David Wells perceptively noted, “Nietzsche, the proponent of deep and unrelenting unbelief, was among the first to anticipate these changes. He noted the disappearance of God in the modern period. He declared that God had died, or, more precisely, that he had been murdered. He actually had in mind something a little different from what he is usually assumed to have meant, however. He was speaking of the passing of a world in which meaning and values had been rooted in the transcendent. He saw a world in which human beings were wresting sovereignty for themselves, and hence a world in which there were no longer ultimate values but only present possibilities – possibilities that were fluid, open, and unstructured by the divine or by an absolute moral order. This is the world that we describe under the rubric of secularization. Nietzsche never imagined that this brave new world would be idyllic. He understood that it would be filled with the clashing of egos and the thrashing of vice and decay. It would be a world without limits or constraints, a world in which power would provide the only path through the painful contortions of life.”<sup>14</sup> The *Jesus* that Lobdell *asked into his heart*, turned out to be *another* Jesus – one that left him disillusioned and disappointed. Mike Brown recently addressed this by saying, “As American Evangelicalism increasingly becomes the new Liberalism and persistently preaches an alternative gospel, what else is our culture and redemption. Lines from classic Christmas carols no longer make

sense to people. Consider the lyrics from hymns such as “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” or “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” “*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail th’ Incarnate Deity.*” “*O Come, Thou Branch of Jesse’s stem, Unto Thine own, and rescue them! From depths of hell Thy people save, And give them victory o’er the grave.*” I mean, does your average adult in America even know what those lines mean? Worse yet, does the average professing Christian adult? When the Church loses its saltiness in the world by failing to preach the law and the gospel faithfully, what else is an affluent culture like ours to do with Christmas? It can only turn to what it knows by nature: Pelagianism, in one form or another. And world peace has always been considered obtainable to Pelagians. The corruption of the human heart (if such a thing even exists) is a mere flesh wound that can be overcome with our reason, will-power, and acts of random kindness. Christmas, then, becomes an opportunity to evolve as the human race. And Jesus in the manger fits perfectly into this worldview. “Let’s Keep Christ in Christmas?” Who wants to take him out? Our sentimental culture looks at the manger scene and says, “Oh, I get it! Jesus is the Prince of Peace because he is so meek and mild. Look at him there in the manger. He’s not threatening anyone. He is not judgmental. He is peaceful and tolerant. If we would just remember him throughout the year and try to be more like him, the world would be a better place. What a wonderful Christmas story!” No one will argue the fact that the world would be a much better place if everyone was more like Jesus. The problem is that the human heart *can’t* be more like Jesus on its own (see Romans 1-3). The point of Christ’s coming into the world was not to provide us with moral teachings and an example of love that transcends his death and provides an opportunity for world peace. Rather, the point of his coming was to MAKE peace between us and God, to rescue sinners from God’s wrath by fulfilling the demands of the law through his life, death, and resurrection. Christmas *happened* in history because God fulfilled his promise to our first parents, Adam and Eve, to send the Prince of Peace who would crush the Serpent’s head. Really, to celebrate Christmas is to celebrate God’s fulfillment of his promise to send the Savior and Second Adam, that which the whole Old Testament is all about.”<sup>15</sup> Candidly, if the kind of “gospel” Lobdell was exposed to is the only Gospel, then Nietzsche was right. God is dead and we have killed Him. But be of good cheer, the *real* Gospel is very different and Christ the Lord reigns. He is not dead, but has conquered death by His life and death.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> URL to article: [http://www.geneveith.com/evangelism-the-gospel/\\_4067/](http://www.geneveith.com/evangelism-the-gospel/_4067/).

<sup>2</sup> <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/21/local/me-lostfaith21?pg=6>

<sup>3</sup> K. H. Sargeant, Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000) p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> G. T. Purves, The Sinless Christ: The Presbyterian Pulpit (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1902), p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson provides some helpful analysis of how the slogan “Jesus is Lord” is practically useless unless it is framed in a specific Biblical, theological world-view that takes in a personal/transcendent God, the revelation of the Scripture, and most importantly, an understanding of who Jesus is. See his The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism (Zondervan, 1996), pp. 99-100.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Harold K. Moulton, The Challenge of the Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied In Depth (Bagster, 1977), p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> G. T. Purves, The Sinless Christ (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1902), p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> J. G. Machen, What Is Faith? (Rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Listen to the wise words of John Calvin: “As to the where, when, how often, in what way, and to what extent, we are to confess our faith, this is difficult to define with any exact rule, but we must look to the occasion, that none of our people fail in his calling at his time. We must ask the Lord, the Spirit of discretion and fortitude, and with His direction we shall know what is expedient, and boldly carry through what we are sure is laid upon us.” Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries I (rpt. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 309.

<sup>11</sup> Literally this reads, “Who shall confess in Me (HOMOLOGĒSEI EN EMOI) . . . in him will I also confess (HOMOLOGĒSŌ KAGŌ EN AUTŌ). The use of the preposition EN is in keeping with the Aramaic, cf. J. H. Moulton, A Grammar of the New Testament Greek II (T&T Clark, 1976), p. 463.

<sup>12</sup> N. B. Stonehouse, Origins of the Synoptic Gospels: Some Basic Questions (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> This is from his book Thus Spake Zarathustra (1883). Nietzsche saw the Superman as the answer to the nihilistic rejection of all religious and moral principles that would be consequent on a widespread acceptance that God is dead. The Superman being the exemplar of true humanity. Although he explicitly denied that any Supermen had yet arisen, he mentions several individuals who could serve as models. Among these models he lists Socrates, Jesus, Julius Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Napoleon. [http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/philosophy/nietzsche\\_philosophy.html](http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/philosophy/nietzsche_philosophy.html).

<sup>14</sup> D. F. Wells, God In The Wasteland (Eerdmans, 1994) p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> <http://michaelbrown.squarespace.com/the-latest-post/2009/12/16/which-christ-in-christm...>