

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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MOTIVED BY THE MERCIES OF GOD

Serious thought, serious theology, serious worship, all of which constitute Biblical and Historic Christianity, are seriously missing in what is today called Evangelicalism. This is not to say that Evangelicalism is not taken up with some serious issues. Evangelicals continue to stress the place of God in our national life, our Judeo-Christian heritage, prayer in schools, the right to life, and the ever popular, family values. So why am I calling this a part of *worldly Christianity*? Because much of Evangelicalism is not driven by a passion for God's truth, but by the *culture* of the day. Much of Evangelicalism has become an informal religious establishment that, in the words of David F. Wells, "derives its power not from its theology but from its culture."¹ Without a theology that has God's truth, God's Word as its center, a civil religion (which is what Evangelicalism has largely become) also forfeits its theological heritage for a pot of cultural and political pottage. What is so distressing is that most Evangelicals appear to be completely oblivious to this capitulation to the culture of the day. There is another dimension to the kind of worldly Christianity that pervades so much of contemporary Evangelicalism – the role of entertainment in the church. Entertainment and what calls itself worship, have become not merely interspersed, but often indistinguishable. Evangelicalism has failed to recognize that modernity (that which characterizes our culture) is a pervasive reality that intrudes on virtually every aspect of life. From time to time, modernity is highly visible in certain forms of atheism or in the breakdown of sexual morality and the like, and Evangelicals are quick to point out the danger, and this is to be expected. But for the most part, modern culture is viewed a safe place in which to practice faith. "That means we are influenced by ideas we do not notice and therefore are not aware of their effect on us. Or, if we see the effect, we find it difficult to discover the cause."² Terms like *God, creation, spirituality, gospel, grace, love, sin* and even *Jesus* are empty apart from biblical content. Two examples come to mind. The first is that of the BioLogos Foundation, a group of professing Evangelicals who are committed to Darwinian evolution. They are adamant that humanity, along with the apes, evolved from a common ancestor, but they insist on calling this creation by evolution. Almost a century ago Warfield called such a position absurd. Creation by evolution is a contradiction of terms.³ Another example is Judy Collins's explanation of John Newton's hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Collins informs us, "*Amazing Grace* is a song about letting go, bottoming out, seeing the light, turning it over, trusting the universe, breathing in, breathing out, going with the flow; timing is everything, trust your instincts, don't push the river, ease on down the road, get on your knees, let your guard down, drop your defenses, lighten up..."⁴ Oh really? I always thought Newton was writing about the nature of salvation. And what is salvation? All are agreed that there is something wrong with human beings. While many can point to a variety of secondary causes, it is the Bible alone, which gets to the root of the matter. Humanity is fallen and the death sentence hangs over us all (Romans 3:23;

6:23a). Sin is rebellion against God (cf. Psalm 51:4). It is acting contrary to God's law (1 John 3:4). We are all rebels. Every human being is a sinner by nature and practice. Already polluted by sin and associated with the guilt of Adam, every person is also guilty of breaking God's law (1 Kings 8:45; Romans 3:10-19; 5:12). In this condition we sinners are already in the condemned cell and deserve and can expect nothing but God's wrath to be fully poured out on the day of judgment in final rejection and unending punishment (Mark 3:29; 9:43ff.; John 3:18-19, 36; Ephesians 2:3; Hebrews 10:27-39; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:7). Such is the plight of humanity in sin. It is also a dilemma, one that leaves every person with this question, "How can I be acceptable to such a holy God?" R. C. Sproul describes it this way. "When we are summoned to appear before the bar of God's judgment, we face a judgment based on perfect justice. The presiding Judge is himself perfectly just. He is also omniscient, fully aware of our every deed, thought, inclination, and word. Measured by the standard of his canon of righteousness, we face the psalmist's rhetorical question that hints at despair: "If you, Lord, should mark iniquities...who could stand?" (Ps. 130:3 NKJV). The obvious answer to this query is supplied by the Apostle Paul: "There is none righteous, no, not one..." (Rom. 3:10). God commands us to be holy. Our moral obligation *coram Deo* (before the face of God) is to live perfect lives. One sin mars that obligation and leaves us naked, exposed before divine justice. Once a person sins at all, a perfect record is impossible. Even if we could live perfectly *after* that one sin, we would still fail to achieve perfection."⁵ What we stand in need of is mercy – a theme which is at the very heart of the gospel. The *mercies of God* are highlighted over and over again in Romans.

I. How does Christ's life and death on the cross relate to me?

- A. The problem is how to resolve the conflict between a just, holy God and a fallen, unjust people.
 - 1. The degree of our sinfulness is such that when judged by the standard of God's perfection and holiness, we are totally corrupt.
 - 2. Total depravity means that the extent of the power, influence, and inclination of sin affects the whole man (Romans 3:9-20).
- B. Biblically, a good deed not only externally keeps the law of God but proceeds from a heart that wants to honor and love Him.

II. How can an unjust person be justified or made just?

- A. God would have to sacrifice His justice to overlook our injustice.
- B. Jesus is the Lamb of God, without sin or blemish.
 - 1. Jesus had to live a just and obedient life for His death to mean anything.
 - 2. Forensic justification means that we are formally declared to be just when the Supreme Judge of heaven and earth says we are just.
- C. Biblically, the way an unjust person is justified is through imputation. (Rom. 5:12- 21)
- D. There is transference of our sins, whereby Christ takes upon Himself our unrighteousness and lack of justice.
 - 1. Transference of our sin can make us innocent, but it cannot make us just or righteous.
 - 2. It is righteousness (merited reward), not innocence that gets us into the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:20).
- E. Not only is our sin imputed to Christ, but the righteousness of Christ is transferred to our accounts, so that in God's sight we are now clean.
 - 1. Through our union with Christ, He is our Savior because He is the source of our righteousness.
 - 2. There is a real union with Christ that takes place through imputation.
 - 3. We must have this double transfer for God to declare us just.

F. The good news is that in Christ we are at the same time just and sinner – *simul justus et peccator*.

G. The only way we can ever receive the merit and righteousness of Christ is by faith and trust in His work of obedience.

H. Justification by faith alone really means justification by Christ alone. (Rom. 3:24-26) 'It is God who justifies' (Rom. 8:33); here is the uncompromising declaration of the Bible. It is impossible for us to justify ourselves; in fact, our sins condemn us. David, the writer of Psalm 143, wrestled with this problem and prayed about it. 'Do not bring your servant into judgment,' he asked God, 'for no one living is righteous [that is, will be justified] before you' (v. 2). Like others, David knew he could never attain to God's standard of obedience. There was no alternative for him but to seek mercy: 'O Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy' (v. 1) was his request. Only God could relieve him but he desperately needed a quick answer (v. 7); he was hopeful only because of the Lord's 'unfailing love' (v. 8) To enforce his plea for mercy, David expressed himself in the language of a court case (v. 2, quoted above). The point he made is a telling one. David did not want to enter into a court case against God; the evidence was all against David and he had no prospect whatever of obtaining a favorable verdict. And this is true with regard to everyone else. The reason is obvious: because we are all sinners, it is impossible for any of us to justify ourselves in the sight of God. How does God justify sinners then? He does it by grace. Here is the secret. 'Grace' means 'completely underserved'; it is free, wholly from God and without any human contribution. We are 'justified freely by his grace...by Christ Jesus' (Rom. 3:24). The apostle knew this was true from his own experience: 'I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man...The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly' (1 Tim. 1:13-14). It was the same grace that showed mercy to a swearing, rough drunkard like John Newton. Later, Newton expressed his wonderment in his now-famous hymn: 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!' Yes, only God justifies sinners and he does it in grace.⁶

Conclusion: A few years ago there was a popular automobile commercial that had this jingle: "This is not your father's Oldsmobile." Certain Church growth advocates have taken a cue from this by advancing a similar line of reasoning when it comes to the church—simply put, their message is, "The Church of the 21st century cannot mirror the Church of the 20th century" (much less the Church centuries past!).⁷ If the Church is going to grow, they argue, then it has to develop a market-driven perspective. The Biblical writers, however, did not share this mind set. As Douglas Webster has written: "One could hardly confuse the prophets' penetrating judgment of culture with a marketing report. Instead of looking to the marketplace to understand what appeals to the human heart, the prophets used the Word of God to penetrate prevailing cultural norms and expectations. They resisted the religious powers' accommodating efforts to reassure people that their greedy consumption, entertaining worship and striving for success met with God's approval."⁸ The Church growth crowd includes those who think that preaching (if any preaching is allowed) must be short, simple, uplifting and personally inspiring. Sermon topics are carefully and (very deliberately) selected to stress the personal and relational over the doctrinal. "A good sermon," according to one Church-growth pastor, "should make us laugh and cry."⁹ Notice that he did not say that it should make us think and act. In other words, the sermon should be designed to entertain, and by all means, it must be relevant. And what is considered irrelevant?...doctrinal themes that appear to the average person in the pew to be abstract and not very practical in the hands-on sense of the word. Like it or not we live in a culture that has elevated pride to the status of a virtue. Personal dignity (defined positively as a proper self-image or esteem) is considered essential to being a well-balanced person. But at the same

time people refuse to take responsibility for their actions. Victimization has been used to blame someone or something for individual failure and lapses. In this context the biblical teaching about sin, guilt, repentance, and accountability are quickly jettisoned. But disavowing our own personal culpability never frees us from the reality of our sin and guilt. The popular message that masquerades as the Gospel is that Jesus is a Savior from despair, disappointment or a lack of purpose. In this scheme the idea of sin in the biblical sense is totally missing. Accepting Christ becomes another way of personal fulfillment or as a solution to our emotional needs. But this is not the message of the cross. "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners! Jesus specifically said that He had not come to save those who want to exonerate themselves (Mk 2:17). Where there is no regeneration of sin and guilt, when the conscience has been abused into silence, there can be no salvation, no sanctification, and therefore no real emancipation from sin's ruthless power."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 76. This is the sequel to his *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993). I cannot recommend too highly these two books. I am deeply indebted to Wells' analysis of the present state of Evangelicalism.

² Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Regnery Gateway, 1990), p. 7.

³ *The Working of B.B. Warfield III* (rpt. Baker, 1976) "Whatever comes by "evolution" that certainly cannot arise by "creation"; and whatever is "created" certainly is not "evolved." The old definition of "creation" as the making of something *partim ex nihilo, partim ex material naturaliter inhabili – ex material inhabili supra maturae vires aliquid producere*, - is certainly the sound one. Unless the thing produced is above what the powers intrinsic in the evolving stuff are capable of producing (under whatever divine guidance), the product is not a product of "creation" but of "providence." And "providence" can never do the work of "creation." (p. 139).

⁴ As cited in James Adams, *A Call to Discernment: Distinguishing Truth From error in Today's Church* (Harvest House, 1987), p. 17.

⁵ R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker, 1995), p. 96.

⁶ Eryl Davis, *The Ultimate Rescue: Christ's Saving Work on the Cross* (Evangelical Press, 1995), p. 226.

⁷ Leith Anderson, one of the seeker-sensitive market driven advocates, made this analogy. He wrote, "Not that there's anything wrong with a 1954 Olds. It's just not a car for the 1990's. It had no seat belts, no air conditioning, no cassette deck, no radial tires, no pollution control equipment, and no cruise control. What was the state of the art in automotive technology forty years ago is now barely acceptable for basic transportation." *Dying for Change* (Bethany House, 1990), p. 13. Anderson's illustration is purely arbitrary and his reasoning seriously flawed. If pushed to its logical end, Anderson would be forced to admit that moral standards and ethical absolutes are also subject to change with the times as well.

⁸ D. Webster, p 70.

⁹ Ibid, p. 85.

¹⁰ John F. MacArthur, Jr. *The Vanishing Conscience* (Word, 1994), p. 34.