



CITYCHURCH
SAN FRANCISCO

A CHURCH FOR THE CITY



Centrality Of The Gospel

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The gospel is:

- you are more flawed and lost than you ever dared believe, yet
- you can be more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope at the same time, because Jesus Christ lived and died in your place.

Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9)

The irreligious don't repent at all. The religious only repent of sins. But Christians also repent of their righteousness. Moral and religious people are sorry for their sins, but they see sins as simply the failure to live up to standards by which they are saving themselves. They may go to Jesus for forgiveness-but only as a way to "cover over the gaps" in their project of self-salvation. But a Christian is someone who has adopted a whole new system of approach to God. They realize their entire reason for either irreligion or religion has been essentially the same and essentially wrong! Christians realize that both their sins and their best deeds have all really been ways of avoiding Jesus as savior.

... the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin... -Flannery O'Connor

A Christian says: "though I have often failed to obey the law, the deeper problem is why I was ever trying to obey it! Even my effort to obey it is just a way of seeking to be my own savior. In that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as Savior." To "get the gospel" is turn from self-justification and rely on Jesus' record for a relationship with God. "Lay your deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet. Stand in Him, in Him alone-gloriously complete."

The Two "Thieves" of the Gospel - Legalism and Liberalism

Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." These errors continue to "steal" the gospel from us. They are "legalism" and "liberalism". On the one hand, "legalists" have a truth without grace, for they say or imply that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "liberals" have a grace without truth, for they say or imply that we are all accepted by God regardless of what we decide is true for us. But those with truth without grace, do not really have the truth, and those with grace without truth, do not really have grace. In Jesus we behold the glory of the one "full of grace and truth". De-emphasize or lose one or the other of these truths, you fall somewhat into legalism or somewhat into license and you eliminate the joy and the "release" of the gospel. Without a knowledge of our extreme sin, the payment of the gospel seems trivial and does not electrify or transform. But without a knowledge of Christ's completely satisfying life and death, the knowledge of sin would crush us or move us to deny and repress it. Take away either the knowledge of sin or the knowledge of grace and people's lives not changed. They will be crushed by the moral law or run from it screaming and angry.

As Luther put it, the Christian is simul justus et peccator (simultaneously accepted, yet a sinner). We are more sinful than we ever dared believe, but through Christ we are more accepted than we ever dared hope. When the gospel dawns on the soul, it becomes a transforming power (Romans 1:17). Instead of seeing the law of God as an abstract moral code, Christians see it as a way to know, serve, and resemble their Master. Instead of obeying to make God indebted to them, they obey because they are indebted to him. Instead of being driven by an anxious sense of being unacceptable, they are empowered by grateful joy. The difference between these two ways of morality could not be greater. Their spirits, goals, motivations, and results are entirely different.

The Impact of the Gospel

One of the basic theological premises of City Church is that the gospel can change any one, any place. Part of the driving force behind City Church is the conviction that most people have not heard the gospel clearly, whether they have been raised in liberal churches or conservative churches. Many people are on "trajectories" of reaction to either their conservative or their liberal backgrounds or experiences. But the gospel is off the continuum altogether. When people actually hear the gospel, they are surprised and brought up short. There can be neither personal transformation nor social transformation without a grasp of it. The gospel transforms our hearts and thinking and approaches to everything. As you read the following, consider ways that the gospel might transform your ways of thinking through these areas. Some examples:

Approach to multi-culturalism:

- The liberal approach is to relativize all cultures.
- The conservative approach is to idolize some cultures.
- The gospel of grace leads us to be:
 - somewhat critical of all cultures,
 - morally superior to no individual,
 - hopeful about any individual, and
 - respectful and courteous to each individual.

Approach to the poor:

- The liberal elites tend to scorn the religion of the poor and see them as helpless victims needing their expertise.
- The conservative elites tend to scorn the poor as failures and weaklings.
- The gospel of grace leads us to be:
 - humble, without moral superiority knowing we were saved by grace,
 - gracious, remembering our former deserved spiritual poverty, and
 - respectful of believing poor Christians as brothers and sisters from whom to learn. The gospel alone can bring "knowledge workers" into a sense of humble respect for and solidarity with the poor.

Approach to difficult emotions:

- The moralizing say, "you are breaking the rules-repent."
- The psychologizing say, "you just need to love and accept yourself."
- The gospel leads us to say: "something in my life has become more important than God, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness". The gospel leads us to repentance, but not to merely setting our will against superficialities.

Approach to the physical world:

- The moralist is afraid of or indifferent to physical pleasure and wholeness, while the hedonist makes it an idol.
- The gospel leads us to see that God has invented both body and soul and so will redeem both body and soul. Thus the gospel leads us to enjoy the physical and fight against sickness and poverty. This is applied also to sex as well.

Approach to love and relationships:

- Liberalism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit.
- Moralism makes relationships into a blame-game and a never ending need to earn our love; often creates "co-dependency", a form of self-salvation through neediness.
- The gospel leads us to sacrifice and commitment, but not out of a need to convince ourselves we are acceptable. So we can love the person enough to confront, yet stay with the person when it does not benefit us.

Approach to suffering:

- Liberalism lays the fault at God's doorstep, claiming him to be either unjust or impotent.
- Moralism takes the approach of Job's friends, laying guilt on yourself. "I must be bad to be suffering."
- The gospel shows us that God redeemed us through suffering. That he suffered not that we might not suffer, but that in our suffering we could become like him.

Approach to self-control:

- Liberalism tells us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach.
- Moralism tells us to control our passions out of fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach.
- The gospel tells us that the free, perpetual grace of God "teaches" us to "say no" to our passions (Titus 2:13) if we listen to it. This is a whole-person based approach, starting with the truth descending into the heart.

Approach to ministry in the world:

- Liberalism tends to emphasize only amelioration of social conditions and minimize the need for repentance and conversion.
- On the other hand moralism will tend to place all the emphasis on the individual human soul. Moralistic religion will insist on converting others to their faith and church, but will ignore social needs of the broader community.
- The gospel leads to love which in turn moves us to give our neighbor whatever is needed-conversion or a cup of cold water, evangelism and social concern.

Approach to worship:

- Liberalism leads to a shallow understanding of "acceptance" without a sense of God's holiness and can lead to frothy or casual worship. (A sense of neither God's love nor his holiness leads to a worship service that feels like a committee meeting.)
- Moralism leads to a dour and somber worship which may be long on dignity but short on joy.
- But the gospel leads us to see that God is both transcendent yet immanent. His immanence makes his transcendence comforting, while his transcendence makes his immanence amazing. The gospel leads to both awe and intimacy in worship, for the Holy One is now our Father.

Summary

All problems, personal or social come from a failure to use the gospel in a radical way. All pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness comes from a failure to use the gospel in a radical way. We believe that if the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will look very unique. People will find both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility. For example, homosexuals are used to being "bashed" and hated or completely accepted. They never see anything else. The cultural elites of either liberal or conservative sides are alike in their unwillingness to befriend or live with or respect or worship with the poor. They are alike in separating themselves increasingly from the rest of society. Avoiding the excesses of the dispensationalist, charismatic, or mainline liberal churches (who all lose the balance of the gospel truth in different ways), a gospel-centered church will break stereotypes and shine brightly in the city.