

the movement
GLOBAL CITY CHURCH PLANTING



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KELLER ON PREACHING IN A POST-MODERN CITY

by Tim Keller, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church

In this issue, The Movement presents the first part of a two-part article on communicating the Gospel in the urban world.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL AS THE KEY FOR CHRISTIANS

At the heart of Redeemer's ministry and its philosophy of preaching to post-modern audiences is the conviction that "the gospel" is not just a way to be saved from the penalty of sin, but is the fundamental dynamic for living the whole Christian life--individually and corporately, privately and publicly. In other words, the gospel is not just for non-Christians, but also for Christians. This means the gospel is not just the A-B-C's but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is not accurate to think 'the gospel' is what saves non-Christians, and then, what matures Christians is trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our mind, heart, and life by believing the gospel more and more deeply as our life goes on.

THE GOSPEL VS. RELIGION

The gospel is "I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey" while every other religion operates on the principle of "I obey, therefore I am accepted." Martin Luther's fundamental insight was that this latter principle, the principle of 'religion' is the deep default mode of the human heart. The heart continues to work in that way even after conversion to Christ. Though we recognize and embrace the principle of the gospel, our hearts will always be trying to return to the mode of self-salvation, which leads to spiritual deadness, pride and strife and ministry ineffectiveness.



For example, ministers derive more of their joy and a sense of personal significance from the success of their ministries than from the fact they are loved by God in Christ. Why? Their hearts are still operating on the principle--"if I do and accomplish all these things--then I will be accepted." (cf. Harold Abrahams in Chariots of Fire- "I have 10 seconds to justify my existence.") In other words, on one level, we believe the gospel but on another level we don't believe.

So why do we over-work in ministry and burn out? Yes, we are not practicing the Sabbath principle, but the deeper cause is unbelief in the gospel! Why are we so devastated by criticism? The person whose self-worth is mainly in his or her ministry performance will be devastated by criticism of the ministry record because that record is our very self and identity. The fundamental problem is unbelief in the gospel.

At the root, then, of all Christian failures to live right--i.e. not give their money generously, not tell the truth, not care for the poor, not handle worry and anxiety--is the sin under all sins, the sin of unbelief, of not rejoicing deeply in God's grace in Christ, not living out of our new identity in Christ. This means that every week in a different way the minister must apply the gospel of salvation by grace through faith through Christ's work. Thus every week the non-Christians get exposed to the gospel, and in its most practical and varied forms not just in a repetitious 'Four Spiritual Laws' way. That's what pragmatic post-moderns need.

THE SIN BENEATH THE SINS

Underneath our behavioral sins lies a fundamental refusal to rest in Christ's salvation and the drive instead to find our own. Martin Luther says the same. Here is an excerpt from Martin Luther *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520):

All those who do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in God's favor, grace and good-will, but rather seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep the [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined.

Comment: Luther says if you look to your moral performance as the basis of your relationship with God, then you are breaking the first of the Ten Commandments: "Have no other gods before me." If you fail to grasp and believe the gospel of free justification through Christ's work you violate the first command. How could this be? Again from Luther:

If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious and pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him through our works, then all [our compliance with the law] is pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false savior. Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward [justifying faith]. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth...

Comment: Luther says that if we obey God's law without a belief that we are already accepted and loved in Christ, then in all our 'doing-good', we are really looking to something more than Jesus as the real source of our meaning, and happiness. We are trusting in our being a good parent, or being a good spouse, or our moral uprightness, or our spiritual performance, or our service to other people as our real "Saviors". If we aren't sure God already loves us in Christ, we will be looking to something else as our foundational significance and worth. This is why Luther says that we are committing idolatry (breaking the First commandment) if we don't thoroughly trust in Christ for our acceptability, even if we are otherwise totally moral and obedient to God.

And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured...

Comment: All people sin in general because we are sinners, but why do we sin in any particular instance? Luther indicates the first commandment is foundational to all the others. Why? Because we will not break commandment 2-10 unless we are in some way breaking commandment One and serving some idol. Every sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. At the moment we sin it is because we are looking to something to give us what only Jesus can give us. Beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

CASE STUDY - A LIE

What if you find that you have a habit of lying? What do you do about it?

Moralistic ways to stop lying: Fear: "I must stop doing this because God will punish me, he won't bless me." Pride: "I must stop doing this, because I'm a good Christian. I don't want to be like the kind of person who lies." In general, you will find that the more you simply lay Biblical principles on your heart, the more your heart resists it. (Rom.7:21--Paul says "When I [most] want to do good, evil lies close at hand.") The gospel way to stop lying: First, ask the question: "why am I lying in this particular situation?" The reason we lie (or ever do any sin) is because at that moment there is something we feel that we simply must have--and so we lie. One typical reason that we lie (though it is by no means the only one) is because we are deeply fearful of losing face or someone's approval. That means, that the 'sin under the sin' of lying is the idolatry of (at that moment) of human approval. If we break the commandment against false witness it is because we are breaking the first commandment against idolatry. We are looking more to human approval than to Jesus as a source of worth, meaning, and happiness. Under the sin of lying is the failure to rejoice in and believe in our acceptance in Christ. Under the sin of lying is a kind of heart-unbelief in the gospel (whatever we may tell ourselves intellectually.) As we will see below, anything you add to Jesus Christ as a requirement for a happy life is a functional salvation, a pseudo-lord, and it is controlling you, whether it be power, approval, comfort or control. The only way to change your habit of lying is to repent of your failure to believe the gospel, that you are not saved and acceptable by pursuing this goal and serving this master, but through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Consider this case study in light of this excerpt from the Belgic Confession (1561):

Therefore it is so far from being true that his justifying faith makes us remiss in a holy life, that on the contrary without it we would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.

Comment: Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do--whether obeying or disobeying--by pride ("self-love") or fear ("of damnation"). Mere moral effort without the gospel may restrain the heart but cannot truly change the heart. Mere moral effort merely 'jury rigs' the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior, out of self-interest. It would be possible to use fear and pride as ways to motivate a person to be honest, but since fear and pride is also the root for lying, it is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses. Luther was right. If you are obeying the law without deep joy in your acceptance in Christ, you are not loving God with all your heart. You are not obeying God for God. You are being moral so that you can put God in your debt, so he owes you a comfortable life. You are being moral so that you can feel secure in your uprightness. You are being moral in the service of self-salvation, out of the fear and pride that arise without an identity built on Christ in the gospel.

THE GOSPEL AND 'TRUE VIRTUE'

What makes people honest? Generous? Jonathan Edwards tackled this over the years in his "Miscellanies" and then in his moral philosophy works; "Charity and Its Fruits", "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World", and "The Nature of True Virtue". He also says many relevant things about this in "Religious Affections". The following is my summary of his "gist".

There are two kinds of moral behavior: "common virtue" and "true virtue" Let's take one virtue: honesty. "Common" honesty is developed two ways. 1) First it can be inspired by fear. There is the secular version--"be honest--it pays!" or "if you are not honest, society will not work". There is also the religious version--"if you are not honest, God will punish you!" These are all versions of the same motive, namely, that it is impractical to be honest. 2) Second, it can be inspired by pride. There is the secular conservative version--"don't be like those terrible dishonest people who hurt others and have no virtue!" or the secular liberal version--"don't be like these greedy people who don't work for the common good". There is also the religious version--"don't be like these sinners, these bad people. Be a good godly person". These are all versions of the same motive, namely, that I am better than these people who lie.

Edwards is by no means scornful of common virtue. Indeed, he believes in the 'splendor of common morality' (Paul Ramsay), which is the main way God restrains evil in the world. He does call it virtue and

not sham. Nevertheless, there is a profound tension at the heart of common virtue. We just said that the main reason people are honest is due to fear and pride. But what is the main reason we are dishonest? Why do we lie? Almost always--it is out of fear or pride. So in common virtue, you have not done anything to root out the fundamental causes of evil. In 'common honesty' you have restrained the heart, but not changed the heart. You are doing an ingenious form of judo on yourself. (Judo depends on using the enemy's forward motion against him.) You have 'jury-rigged' the heart so that the basic causes of dishonesty are being used to make yourself honest. But this is quite a fragile condition. At some point you will find that honesty is not practical or humiliating and you will lie. Then you will be shocked. You will say, "I was not raised to do such a thing."

But the reason you did, was that all your life, through the sermons and moral training you had, you were nurturing the roots of sin within your moral life. This is true whether you grow up in a liberal-moral environment or a conservative-moral environment. The roots of evil are alive and well and protected underneath your moral-behavior progress. And some day they erupt and show themselves and we are shocked.

Luther told us that the essence of every sin is a desire to be one's own Savior and Lord in some particular way. It is to set up some idol which is the real way you are going to save yourself. It may even be a very 'religious idol' (cf. Judges 17:1-13). It may be a very religious life, but at the heart it is a way of using God as an object, rather than adoring him as being beautiful for who he is in himself. It is using obedience to God to achieve comfort, security, self-worth/status--therefore our 'virtue' is self-centered and conditional. It's a form of bargaining. It is using our virtue to put God in our debt--he now owes us. He must give us salvation and blessing. Therefore, our obedience is a way to save ourselves and control God. Edwards also understands 'common virtue' as an idolatrous effort at self-salvation, rather than a response to grace in which God is adored for his sheer beauty.

So Edwards says--what is true virtue? It is when you are honest not because it profits you or makes feel better, but only when you are smitten with the beauty of the God who is truth and sincerity and faithfulness! It is when you come to love truth-telling not for your sake but for God's sake and its own sake. But it particularly grows by a faith-sight of the glory of Christ and his salvation. How does 'true honesty' grow? It grows when I see him dying for me, keeping a promise he made despite the infinite suffering it brought him. Now that a) destroys pride on the one hand, because he had to do this for me--I am so lost! But that also b) destroys fear on the other hand, because if he'd do this for me while I'm an enemy, then he values me infinitely, and nothing I can do will wear out his love for me. Then my heart is not just restrained but changed. Its fundamental orientation is transformed.

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PREACHING IN A POST-MODERN CITY:: A CASE STUDY I

by Tim Keller, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church

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PREACHING THE GOSPEL VS. RELIGION and IRRELIGION

THE "THIRD WAY"

One of the most important ways to get a hearing from post-modern people and to wake up nominal or sleepy Christians is to preach the gospel as a "third" distinct way from both irreligion and religion. Religion is "if I obey I will be accepted." Irreligion is "I don't really have to obey anyone but myself." The gospel is "since I am accepted, I will obey."

Religion is 'outside in': "if I work hard according to Biblical principles, then God will accept/bless me". The gospel is 'inside out': "because God has accepted/blessed me, I work hard to live according to Biblical principles". Religion (explicitly in other faiths and implicitly in legalistic Christianity) makes moral/religious observance a means of salvation. Even people who believe in the Christian God can functionally 'base their justification on their sanctification' (Lovelace). Thus a prime need is to distinguish between general 'religion' and gospel Christianity as well as overt irreligion. Why? (1) Many professed Christians aren't believers--they are pure 'elder brothers' (Luke 15:11ff.) and only making this distinction can convert them. (2) Many, many real Christians are elder-brotherish--angry, mechanical, superior, insecure--and only making this distinction can renew them. (3) Modern and post-modern people have rejected religion for good reasons and will only listen to Christianity if they see it is different.

But in Jesus day he preached against both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. At the heart of the gospel is the 'propitiation' of God's wrath by the substitutionary life and death of Christ, so that his children by faith no longer fear the judicial, retributive wrath of God ever again (Rom. 8:1). This cuts against not one but two alternatives--in NT times terms--both legalistic 'Pharisees' and liberal 'Sadducees'. Liberal Sadducees don't believe in a God of wrath who needs to be propitiated, but legalistic, Pharisees don't really believe in a God whose wrath has been propitiated. Sadducees don't feel the need to be justified; Pharisees are trying to turn aside God's condemnation with their own righteousness, functionally "basing their justification on their sanctification" as Richard Lovelace wrote. Sadducees are irreligious, much or most of the Bible not recognized as valid; Pharisees are highly religious, adding all sorts of rules and regulations to make the law of God do-able.

Legalism and leniency are therefore not just equally bad and wrong but they are basically the same

thing. They are just different strategies of 'self-salvation'. Each kind of person is basically being their own Savior and Lord. In a local church, both a ministry that is loose about doctrine and winks at disobedience and sin and a ministry in which there is scolding and 'tightness'--lack any kind of spiritual power, authority, and joy that brings people into life change. They are both the same thing. The only way into a ministry that sees people's lives change, that brings a joy and power and electricity without authoritarianism--is a preaching of the gospel that deconstructs both legalism and leniency equally.



WHY-- IS THIS SO IMPORTANT TO REACH POST-MODERN PEOPLE?

One of the most important ways to get "Sadducees" to listen to a presentation of Christianity is to deconstruct Phariseeism. The way to get anti-nomians to listen to the law is to distinguish the gospel from legalism. Why? Modern and post-modern people have been rejecting Christianity for years thinking that it was indistinguishable from moralism (and in many of its incarnations it is indistinguishable!) Religious people who don't understand the gospel have to bolster their own sense of worthiness by convincing themselves they are better than other people. This leads them to exclude and condemn others. The vast majority of people in NYC who are hostile to Christianity don't know any other kinds of churches. Only if you show them there's a difference--that what they rejected isn't real Christianity--only then will they even begin to think and listen again and give it 'one more look'.

Non-Christians will always automatically hear gospel presentations as just appeals to become moral and religious--unless in your preaching you use the good news of grace against legalism.

Some claim that to constantly be striking a 'note of grace, grace, grace' in our sermons is not helpful in our culture today. The objection goes like this: "Surely Phariseeism and moralism is not a problem in our culture today. Rather, our problem is license and antinomianism. People lack a sense of right or wrong. It is 'carrying coal to Newcastle' to talk about grace all the time to post-modern people". But I don't believe that is the case. Unless you point to the 'good news' of grace the people won't even be able to bear the 'bad news' of God's judgment. Also, as noted, unless you critique moralism, many irreligious people won't know the difference between moralism and what you are offering.

THE TWO "THIEVES" OF THE GOSPEL.

Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us "off the gospel line" (Gal. 2:14) to one side or the other. These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind. These "thieves" can be called moralism on the one hand, and or relativism on the other hand.

The gospel opposes both religion and irreligion. On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth over grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace over truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us. But "truth" without grace is not really truth, and "grace" without truth is not really grace. Jesus was "full of grace and truth". Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or lose one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license and either way, the joy and power and "release" of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other. The real gospel gives us a God far more holy than a moralist can bear (since your morality is only a filthy rag before him) and far more loving than a relativist can imagine (since his love cost him dearly).

Since Paul uses a metaphor for being "in line" with the gospel, we can picture gospel renewal failing when we keep from walking "off-line" either to the right or to the left. However, before we start we must realize that the gospel is not a half-way compromise between the two poles--it does not produce "something in the middle", but something different from both. The gospel critiques both religion and

irreligion (Matt.21:31; 22:10).

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter's racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living "not in line with the truth of the gospel". From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life-- spiritual, psychological, corporate, social--by thinking, hoping, and living out the "lines" or ramifications of the gospel. The gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. Notice, Paul did not say, "you are breaking the no-racism law!" though that is perfectly true. However, it is not the best way to think. Paul asks neither "what is the moral way to act?" nor does he say "we don't need to order our steps at all!" but rather he asks: "what is the way to live that is in-line with the gospel?" The gospel must be continually "thought out" to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring everything into line with the gospel.

The main problem, then, in the Christian life is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel, we have not "used" the gospel in and on all parts of our life. Richard Lovelace says that most people's problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel--a failure to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther says, "The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine ...Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually." (on Gal.2:14f).

So "religion" just drains the spiritual life out of a church. But you can "fall off the horse" on the other side too. You can miss the gospel not only through legalism but through relativism. When God is whoever you want to make him, and right and wrong are whatever you want to make them--you have also drained the spiritual life out of a church. If God is preached as simply a demanding, angry God or if he is preached as simply an all-loving God who never demands anything--in either case the listeners will not be transformed. They may be frightened or inspired or soothed, but they will not have their lives changed at the root, because they are not hearing the gospel. The gospel shows us that God is far more holy and absolute than the moralists' god, because he could not be satisfied by our moral efforts, even the best! On the other hand, the gospel shows us that God is far more loving and gracious than the relativists' god. They say that God (if he exists) just loves everyone no matter what they do. The true God of the gospel had to suffer and die to save us, while the god of the relativist pays no price to love us.

The gospel produces a unique blend of humility and boldness/joy in the convert. If you preach just a demanding God, the listener will have "low self-esteem"; if you preach just an all-loving God, the listener will have higher self-esteem. But the gospel produces something beyond both of those. The gospel says: I am so lost Jesus had to die to save me. But I am so loved that Jesus was glad to die to save me. That changes the very basis of my identity--it transforms me from the root. Legalistic churches reform people's behavior through social coercion, but the people stay radically insecure and hyper-critical. They don't achieve the new inner peace that the grace of God brings. The more relativistic churches give members some self-esteem and the veneer of peace but in the end that is superficial too. The result, Archibald Alexander said, is like trying to put a signet ring on the wax to seal a letter, but without any heat! Either the ring will affect the surface of the wax only or break it into pieces. You need heat to permanently change the wax into the likeness of the ring. So without the Holy Spirit working through the gospel, radically humbling and radically exalting us and changing them from the inside out, the religion either of the hard or soft variety will not avail.

THE 'TWO THIEVES' IN APPLICATION.

So we see that we must move away from the typical 'conservative evangelical' preaching which basically says: "Irreligion and immorality is bad; moral living is very good; Christianity is best." Of course it is better to not rob and kill, whether you are a Christian or not! But gospel preaching is careful to show the 'dark side' of morality, so that non-Christians (who see the dangers of religiosity and self-righteousness) will realize the gospel is something else, and so that Christians will not be trapped in the lifelessness of moral self-effort. The following are some examples of how to treat subjects contrasted with both religion and irreligion. (They are often called 'moralism' and 'relativism' below.)

a. Discouragement. When a person is depressed, the religious say, "you are breaking the rules--

repent." On the other hand, the irreligious say, "you just need to love and accept yourself". But (assuming there is no physiological base of the depression!) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say: "something in my life has become more important than Christ, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness". The religious will tend to work on behavior and the irreligious will tend to work on the emotions, but the gospel works on the heart.

b. Suffering. Moralistic persons have a major problem when suffering strikes them. Why? The whole point of moralism is to put God in one's debt. Moralistic people feel that God owes them a safe life because of their goodness. So when suffering hits us, the moralistic heart is forced to either feel terrific anger toward God (if you feel you have been living up to moral standards) or terrific anger toward yourself (if you feel you haven't been living up.) You will either think "I hate God" or "I hate myself" or you will swing back and forth between both poles. Relativistic/hedonistic persons are more likely to become bitter against life or God, since they don't feel they deserve troubles in life. The gospel approach to suffering is different. On the one hand the gospel humbles us without being mad at God. Jesus, the very best person who ever lived suffered terribly. This demolishes the idea that good people should have good lives and bad people have bad lives. If God himself was willing to become involved in terrible suffering of life out of love--then we should not think ourselves exempt. On the other hand, the gospel affirms us out of feeling guilty or mad at ourselves. Jesus suffered and died for us, 'while we were yet sinners.' The trouble we are experiencing at the moment might be designed to 'wake us up', but it can't be a quid pro quo punishment for our sins. Jesus got the punishment for our sins. If we realize that we are accepted in Christ, then (and only then) will suffering humble us and strengthen us rather than embitter and weaken us. As others have said: Jesus suffered, not that we might not suffer, but that when we suffer we could become like him.

c. Witness to non-Christians. The liberal/pragmatist approach is to deny the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. The conservative/moralist person does believe in proselytizing, because "we are right and they are wrong". Such proselytizing is almost always offensive. But the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. a) First, we are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. b) Second, we are freed from fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have the favor of God by grace. c) Third, there is a humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. d) Fourth, we are hopeful about anyone, even the "hard cases", because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were likely people to be Christians. e) Fifth, we are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness. All these traits not only create a winsome evangelist but an excellent neighbor in a multi-cultural society.

d. "Right living". Jonathan Edwards points out that "true virtue" is only possible for those who have experienced the grace of the gospel. Any person who is trying to earn their salvation does "the right thing" in order to get into heaven, or in order to better their self-esteem (etc.). In other words, the ultimate motive is self-interest. But persons who know they are totally accepted already do "the right thing" out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God's sake, and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes "doing the right thing" a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end.

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PREACHING IN A POST-MODERN CITY:: A CASE STUDY I

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PREACHING THAT IS CHRIST-CENTERED
MORALISM VS. CHRIST-CENTERED EXPOSITION.

We have said that you must preach the gospel every week--to edify and grow Christians and to convert non-Christians. But if that is the case, you cannot simply 'instruct in Biblical principles.' You have to 'get to Jesus' every week.

For example, look at the story of David and Goliath. What is the meaning of that narrative for us? Without reference to Christ, the story may be (usually is!) preached as: "The bigger they come, the harder they'll fall, if you just go into your battles with faith in the Lord. You may not be real big and powerful in yourself, but with God on your side, you can overcome giants." But as soon as we ask: "how is David foreshadowing the work of his greater Son"? We begin to see the same features of the story in a different light. The story is telling us that the Israelites can not go up against Goliath. They can't do it. They need a substitute. When David goes in on their behalf, he is not a full-grown man, but a vulnerable and weak figure, a mere boy. He goes virtually as a sacrificial lamb. But God uses his apparent weakness as the means to destroy the giant, and David becomes Israel's champion-redeemer, so that his victory will be imputed to them. They get all the fruit of having fought the battle themselves.

This is a fundamentally different meaning than the one that arises from the non-Christocentric reading. There is, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: is it basically about me or basically about Jesus? In other words, is it basically about what I must do, or basically about what he has done? If I read David and Goliath as basically giving me an example, then the story is really about me. I must summons up the faith and courage to fight the giants in my life. But if I read David and Goliath as basically showing me salvation through Jesus, then the story is really about him. Until I see that Jesus fought the real giants (sin, law, death) for me, I will never have the courage to be able to fight ordinary giants in life (suffering, disappointment, failure, criticism, hardship). For example how can I ever fight the "giant" of failure, unless I have a deep security that God will not abandon me? If I see David as my example, the story will never help me fight the failure/giant. But if I see David/Jesus as my substitute, whose victory is imputed to me, then I can stand before the failure/giant. As another example, how can I ever fight the "giant" of persecution or criticism? Unless I can see him forgiving me on the cross, I won't be able to forgive others. Unless I see him as forgiving me for falling asleep on him (Matt.27:45) I won't be able to

stay awake for him.

In the Old Testament we are continually told that our good works are not enough, that God has made a provision. This provision is pointed to at every place in the Old Testament. We see it in the clothes God makes Adam and Even in Genesis, to the promises made to Abraham and the patriarchs, to the Tabernacle and the whole sacrificial system, to the innumerable references to a Messiah, a suffering servant, and so on. Therefore, to say that the Bible is about Christ is to say that the main theme of the Bible is the gospel--Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

So reading the Old Testament Christocentrically is not just a "additional" dimension. It is not something you can just tack on - to the end of a study and sermon. ("Oh, and by the way, this also points us to Christ".) Rather, the Christocentric reading provides a fundamentally different application and meaning to the text. Without relating it to Christ, the story of Abraham and Isaac means: "You must be willing to even kill your own son for him." Without relating it to Christ, the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel means: "You have to wrestle with God, even when he is inexplicable-even when he is crippling you. You must never give up." These 'morals-of-the-story' are crushing because they essentially are read as being about us and what we must do.

A BASIC OUTLINE FOR CHRIST-CENTERED, GOSPEL-MOTIVATED SERMONS

The following may actually be four points in a presentation, or they may be treated very quickly as the last point of a sermon. But more generally, this is a foundational outline for the basic moral reasoning and argument that lies at the heart of the application.

The Plot winds up: WHAT YOU MUST DO.

"This is what you have to do! Here is what the text/narrative tells us that we must do or what we must be." The Plot thickens: WHY YOU CAN'T DO IT.

"But you can't do it! Here are all the reasons that you will never become like this just by trying very hard." The Plot resolves: HOW HE DID IT.

"But there's One who did. Perfectly. Wholly. Jesus the---. He has done this for us, in our place." The Plot winds down: HOW, THROUGH HIM, YOU CAN DO IT.

"Our failure to do it is due to our functional rejection of what he did. Remembering him frees our heart so we can change like this..."

Discussion:

a) In every text of the Scripture there is somehow a moral principle. It may grow out of because of what it shows us about the character of God or Christ, or out of either the good or bad example of characters in the text, or because of explicit commands, promises, and warnings. This moral principle must be distilled clearly. b) But then a crisis is created in the hearers as the preacher shows that his moral principle creates insurmountable problems. The sermon shows how this practical and moral obligation is impossible to meet. The hearers are led to a seemingly dead end. c) Then a hidden door opens and light comes in. The sermon moves both into worship and into Christ-application when it shows how only Jesus Christ has fulfilled this. If the text is a narrative, you can show how Christ is the ultimate example of a particular character. If the text is didactic, you can show how Christ is the ultimate embodiment of the principle. d) Finally, we show how our inability to live as we ought stems from our rejection of Christ as the Way, Truth, and Life (or whatever the theme is). The sermon points out how to repent and rejoice in Christ in such a way that we can live as we ought.

Case Study #1

If I preached a sermon on "honesty", I could show the forms of dishonesty and how harmful it is, and how we need to ask God to help us be honest. But if I stopped there (and merely called people to ask forgiveness for lying and try harder to be honest), I would only be playing to the heart's natural self-righteousness. I would be essentially supporting the growth of 'common morality' in the people. Those who would be convicted by the sermon would feel guilty and burdened. Those who had not lied lately



would be smug. I should admit that nearly every sermon I ever preached on honesty/lying up in my first 15 years in the ministry was like this! Even though I knew (via Ed Clowney) that I had to preach Christ and not moralism from every text, I really just made Jesus an 'add-on'. I didn't apply him as Savior to the actual sin of lying, but to the aftermath only. My sermon would go like this:

- I. Here are all the ways we lie, and why they are forbidden.
- II. We should not lie, because Jesus told the truth and kept his promises. (Jesus as Example)
- III. If we do lie, Jesus will forgive us and help us do better. (Jesus as God-of-gaps)

In other words, I used Jesus as an example, and then as someone who forgives us when, though we try very hard, we sometimes fail. This essentially tells people to sanctify themselves. It implicitly appeals to fear and/or pride as motives for honesty.

But in gospel analysis we ask the question: "why do you lie in a particular situation?" The usual reason we lie is because there is something we feel that we simply must have (besides Jesus) to survive and be truly happy, and so we lie. It is usually a good reputation, or saving face, or approval, or some other thing. I first came to understand this when I realized that my wife and I tend to 'fudge' the truth in very different circumstances. I realized that the underlying reason that I lied/deceived was a fear of people's disapproval.

Using "Luther-ist" analysis, I was trusting in the approval of people rather than in Christ as my functional trust, as my main hope. But anything you add to Jesus Christ as a requirement for a happy life is a functional salvation, a pseudo-lord, and it is controlling you, whether it be power, approval, comfort or control. So the only way to change your habit of lying is to (not just try harder) but to apply the gospel--to repent of your failure to believe the gospel, and see that you are not saved by pursuing this thing (which you are lying to get), but through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Alternatives:

What are the alternatives? Type #1- On the one hand, there is a "Christ as Example" or 'moralistic' sermon that says--"please try harder or God will be very unhappy!". Type #2- On the other hand, there is a "Christ as God-of-Gaps" or 'relativistic' sermon that says--"we all fall down but God loves us anyway!" (Many people today in the Reformed camp smell that 'church growth' theory has led us to more 'relativistic' sermons in the evangelical world. But are we just to go back to the moralistic ones?)

Instead we must do "Christ-as-Savior" or 'gospel' sermons. Unlike "Type #2" sermons, they begin with deep, below the surface repentance, not a superficial application of "Jesus loves you anyway". Unlike "Type #1" sermons, they end with rejoicing, since the thing we must repent of is always a failure to enjoy, delight in, and relish the grace and provision of Christ's work. So this is how I learned to preach sermons on lying--or on anything else. No matter what the issue, if we call people to "try harder", we actually push them deeper into slavery, but when we always solve the problem by applying the gospel, then both a) non-Christians get to hear it every week in multiple perspectives, and b) Christians get to see how it really works in every aspect of life.

Sum:

Only "Christo-centric" preaching can really lead the hearers to true virtue, gospel holiness. Typical preaching only distills "Biblical principles" which do not see the text in its redemptive-historical context. Thus it is only natural that the application part of such a sermon will tend to merely exhort people to conform to the principles. Only Christo-centric preaching can produce gospel holiness.

Case Study #2

A Sermon on Abraham and the Sacrifice of Isaac.

1. We must put God first in every area of life, like Abraham did. (This is where the traditional sermon ends!!)
2. But we can't! We won't! So we should be condemned.
3. But Jesus put God first, on the cross-- His was the ultimate and perfect act of submission to God. Jesus is the only one that God ever said--"Obey me and as a result I will send you to hell." Jesus obeyed anyway--just for truth's sake, for God's sake. The only perfect act of submission.
4. Only when we see that Jesus obeyed like Abraham for us! Can we begin to live like Abraham. Let

your heart think like this-

Only when I see God has already accepted me can I even begin to try to live like Abraham. I'd never even start down this road--of Abraham-like obedience. Otherwise I'd not even keep it up. I'd be so discouraged by my failures. But God has already set his love on me, prior to my obedience. Without knowing that, I'd never have the heart to start or keep going.

Only when I see God's already accepted me can I deal with the real reasons I fail to live like Abraham. I put "Isaacs" ahead of Christ because I think they will give me more security and worth than he will. Only by joying in my acceptance will these Isaacs lose their power over me. Without doing that, I'd not have the ability to make any progress at all.

Only when I see that God has accepted me can I really want to live like Abraham for the right, non-destructive reason. As I sit and listen to this sermon about Abraham, I realize I may try to obey God so that he will give me a happy life and family. But if I obey like that, I'm really not obeying him for his sake. I'm using the Law of God to control him, not praise him. Without joying in, seeing, resting in Christ's obedience for me, I'll never be obeying for the right reason, nor even truly obeying at all.

Case Study #3

A Sermon on the power of sexual/beauty's attraction in our culture. I. What you must do: The power of physical beauty over us must be broken. Look at the devastation in our society and in our lives. 1) It distorts women's view of themselves (add eating disorders) 2) it demoralizes aging people, 3) it distorts men's lives, by making them reject great spouse-prospects for superficial reasons (add pornography). What must we do? Don't judge a book by its cover. Be deep. Don't be controlled. II. But you can't: You know quite well we won't be able to. Why? 1) First, we desire physical beauty to cover our own sense of shame and inadequacy (Genesis 3). "When you look good you feel good about yourself" really equals "...you feel yourself to be good." 2) Second, we are afraid of our mortality and death. Evolutionary biologists and Christians together agree that the drive to have physical beauty is a desire for youth. We'll never overcome our problem by just "trying". III. But there was one who did. There was one who was beautiful beyond bearing yet willingly gave it up (Phil.2). He became ugly that we might become beautiful (Is.53). IV. Only now we can change. Only as we see what he did for us will our hearts be melted and freed from the belief that we can judge a book by its cover. Only when we can be in him will we be freed from our sense of shame and fear of mortality.