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Christuslose Christendom, ander-Christus-Christendom, sondelose Christendom, kennislose Christendom ...

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In 2008 het daar 'n belangrike boek in Amerika verskyn: **Christless Christianity**. Die skrywer is **Michael S Horton**, professor in dogmatiek in die United Reformed Church van Noord-Amerika. **Christless Christianity** is deel van 'n trilogie. Die ander twee is The Gospel-driven life en The Gospel commission. 'n Uittreksel uit **Christless Christianity** volg aan die einde van hierdie artikel.

Met die titel **Christless Christianity** vat Horton die probleem van die kerke in Amerika saam.

'n Christuslose Christendom is helaas nie net Amerika se probleem nie, maar ook die van Suid-Afrika. Reeds in 1996 het Johan Cilliers sy boek **Die uitwissing van God op die kansel** (met as subtitel: **Ontstellende bevindinge oor Suid-Afrikaanse prediking**) geskryf, waarin hy aantoon dat meer as 90% van die preke wat oor 'n paar jaar oor die radio uitgesaai is, ten diepste Christus-loos was. Dit was vir my 'n enorme skok. Na aanleiding van die boek van Cilliers het ek 'n artikel in Die Kerkblad van 22 September 1999 geskryf met die opskrif **Wat preek ons: Is dit Christus alleen?** U kan dit hier gaan lees: <http://www.enigstetroos.org/pdf/WatPreekOns.pdf>

Na aanleiding van die boek van Horton die volgende gedagtes van my:

- Dit gaan nie daaroor dat Christus se Naam glad nie genoem word nie. Die probleem is dat die Christus wat verkondig word, nie die Christus van die Skrif is nie. Dit is nie Christus as Verlosser van ons sondes nie, maar net 'n Christus as Gelukbringer of 'n Christus as Adviseur, wat jou net so bietjie advies gee hoe jy self jou lewe kan regruk. Dit is ten diepste 'n Christus sonder kruis en sonder opstanding. Daarom kan 'n mens ook praat van **'n ander-Christus-Christendom**.
- Die probleem van 'n Christuslose Christendom het sy oorsaak en oorsprong in **'n sondelose Christendom**. Ons het nie meer sondes nie - net foute en dan ook foute wat ons self, met Christus se advies, kan regstel. Ons ken nie meer die erns van ons sondes nie (dat God Hom verskriklik daarvoor vertoorn en dit tydelik en ewiglik wil straf); ons ken nie meer ons totale onvermoë om self te kan betaal en los te kom van die mag nie. Die feit van die saak is: **'n sondelose Christendom** het Christus as Verlosser nie nodig nie. In sy skitterende werk **The cross in the New Testament** behandel **Leon Morris** die kruis van Christus telkens teen die donker agtergrond van ons sonde en doemwaardigheid!
- Die Christuslose Christendom en sondelose Christendom het ook alles te make met **'n kennislose Christendom**. Ons gaan te gronde as gevolg van 'n gebrek aan kennis - kennis van Christus. Waar die belydenisskrifte en die Kategismusprediking vroeër 'n besondere plek in die Gereformeerde kerke ingeneem het, is die belydenisskrifte vandag onbekend en onbeminde. Ons kan daarom ook praat van 'n **'n belydenislose (Kategismuslose) Christendom**. Ons ken nie meer ons enigste Troos in lewe en in sterwe, Christus, nie en daarom spreek die Kategismus ons nie meer aan nie.

Onlangs was daar 'n baie mooi konferensie (From embers to a flame). Dit het gehandel oor hoe daar nuwe lewe in die kerk kan kom. Op hierdie konferensie – so verstaan ek, ek was nie self daar nie,

maar ek het wel die boek bekom – is **tereg** op die volgende dinge gehamer as geheim vir 'n nuwe lewe:

- Gebed en
- prediking, Christus-prediking.

Dit is alles baie mooi en waar, maar het ons die **kennis** om Christus te kan preek:

- **Ken** ons Christus – die absolute noodsaak van sy werk - teen die agtergrond van ons sonde? Het ons nog die **sondekennis waarvan ons Heidelbergse Kategismus praat?**
- **Ken** ons Christus nog soos wat Hy Hom in sy Woord aan ons openbaar as die enigste Saligmaker, die enigste Een wat ons verhouding met God kan herstel en ons heel kan maak? Weet ons dat sy kruis nie net verlossing van die skuld van ons sondes nie, maar ook verlossing van die mag van die sonde behels? Ja, weer ons nog van die **verlossingskennis van die Heidelbergse Kategismus?**
- **Ken** ons nog die geheim van dankbaarheid: dat ons dankbaarheid 100% gewortel is en konstant gewortel moet wees in die kruis en opstanding van Christus? Weet ons dat ons sonder Hom geen vrugte kan voortbring nie. Dit is immers die **dankbaarheidskennis van die Heidelbergse Kategismus.**
- **Ken** ons die Skrifte van die Ou en Nuwe Testament? Het ons die kennis, die vermoë om die Christus van die Skrifte te verkondig? Kan ons nog regtig eksegeese doen en Skrif met Skrif vergelyk?

Ons gebrek aan kennis het ook alles te make met ons gebrek aan **kennis** van die **Ou Testament**:

- Weet ons dat ons die Nuwe Testament en die werk van Christus eers dan werklik verstaan, as ons dit lees in die lig van die Ou Testament? Weet ons nog dat Skrif met Skrif vergelyk – die ken, verstaan van die Bybel – alles te make met lees van die Nuwe Testament in die lig van die Oue? Luister na Christus het alles te make met luister na die Ou Testament.
- Weet ons dat wie Christus se stem nie wil of kan hoor in die Ou Testament nie, sy stem ook nie sal hoor in die Nuwe Testament nie? Immers, Christus sê Self dat die Ou Testament van Hom getuig. Wie daarom die Christus-openbaring van die Ou Testament ontken, ontken wat die Nuwe Testament self sê, ontken wat Christus self in die Nuwe Testament sê (Lk 24:25-27; Mt 22:41-46) en hoor (= luister na) daarom ook nie die Stem van Christus daar (in die Nuwe Testament) nie.
- Weet ons dat, toe die Heilige Gees uitgestort is in Handeling 2, die eerste handeling van Christus deur sy Gees was om te preek, om Christus te preek – en dit, ja dit uit die Ou Testament?

Leon Morris toon so wonderlik-mooi aan: **Bekering is Christus**. Want bekering is:

- **deur** Christus (Hy moet ons bekeer) en
- **tot** Christus (die bekering bestaan in lewe uit Christus se kruis en opstanding).

Dit is waaroor omkeer (omkeerstrategie – liever bekering) in die GKSA ook sal moet gaan. Net Hy kan nuwe lewe gee in die kerk en in die gesin en in die samelewing.

Daar is in die afgelope tientalle jare boeke vol geskryf en stapels beskrywingspunte en deputaterapporte uitgewerk oor sake soos wie in watter amp moet staan en oor watter liedere gesing en nie gesing mag word nie – maar vir die kruis van Christus was daar in die afgelope dekades min tyd en die kennis oor Hom skraal. **Ek kan nie onthou dat ek al ooit 'n diepgaande diskussie oor die kruis op poslyste, of so gehoor het nie.** So het die duiwel daarin geslaag om die kerk weg te hou van Christus af.

Ons wil Christus gaan verkondig, maar ons is soldate sonder die wapenrusting van Efesiërs 6 – want Christus is die wapenrusting van Efesiërs 6. Of weet ons dit nie dat Efesiërs 6 oor Hom gaan nie? Weet ons nie dat Hy die swaard van die Heilige Gees is nie?

Ons wil Christus gaan verkondig. Dit is regtig baie mooi. Maar ons sal moet weet:

- Die evangelie van die Skrif is nie na die smaak van die moderne mens en jeug nie: **Maar ek maak julle bekend, broeders, dat die evangelie wat deur my verkondig is, nie na die mens is nie.** (Gal 1:11).
- Die evangelie dat die mens 'n nul en Christus alles is – dit is beslis is nie populêr nie en dit spreek die verbruiker definitief nie aan nie.
- Die evangelie wat die mens in sy diep sondigheid laat sien, in sy totale onmag om sy lewe (huwelik, kerk, samelewing) te kan verander – die natuurlike mens wil dit nie hoor nie.

Ja, predikers, jong, moderne dominees, ampsdraers:

- Uit die Skrif behoort julle eintlik, eintlik te wéét: **Christus** (en dan natuurlik die volle Christus) én prediking – juis dit is wat Christus Self beveel.
- Uit die Skrif behoort julle eintlik óók te wéét: **Christus én prediking** – juis hierdie dinge soek die moderne mens nie.

Maar hier lê die grootste probleem: Van hierdie waarheid van Galasiërs 1:11 wil baie moderne predikers self nie weet nie. Hulle is verbruikersgerig: Wat wil die mark hê, wat wil die consumer hê? Waarvan sal my kliënt (die jeug, my lidmate, die moderne mens) hou? Ja, sy Naam word wel genoem – maar die Naam kry 'n ander inhoud. En die middel wat Christus self voorskryf, die prediking – nee, dit word nie hoog aangeslaan nie.

Die Christuslose Christendom verkies die moderne mens en sy metodes bo Christus en sy metode:

- Die mens kom ter sprake en nie **Christus** nie. Dit gaan om die mens se behoeftes en nie wat Christus nodig ag nie.
- Christus se heilsmiddel, **sy metode**- die prediking - is outyds.

So lyk die kerk van die Christuslose Christendom.

'n Artikel wat 'n stuk uit Horton se boek is, verskyn by [Christless Christianity:: Getting in Christ's Way](#) . Ek plak die artikel hier in:

Christless Christianity: Getting in Christ's Way – M Horton

Only in Christ is discipleship the consequence of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, rather than its own contribution to human redemption.

What would things look like if Satan actually took over a city? The first frames in our imaginative slide show probably depict mayhem on a massive scale: Widespread violence, deviant sexualities, pornography in every vending machine, churches closed down and worshipers dragged off to City Hall. Over a half-century ago, Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, gave his CBS radio audience a different picture of what it would look like if Satan took control of a town in America. He said that all of the bars and pool halls would be closed, pornography banished, pristine streets and sidewalks would be occupied by tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The kids would answer "Yes, sir," "No, ma'am," and the churches would be full on Sunday ... *where Christ is not preached*.

Not to be alarmist, but it looks a lot like Satan is in charge right now. The enemy has a subtle way of using even the proper scenery and props to obscure the main character. The church, mission, cultural transformation, even the Spirit can become the focus instead of the means for "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). As provocative as Barnhouse's illustration remains, it is simply an elaboration of a point that is made throughout the story of redemption. The story behind all the headlines of the Bible is the war between the serpent and the offspring of the woman (Gen. 3:15), an enmity that God promised would culminate in the serpent's destruction and the lifting of the curse. This promise was a declaration of war on Satan and his kingdom, and the contest unfolded in the first religious war, between Cain and Abel (Gen. 4 with Matt. 23:35), in the battle between Pharaoh and Yahweh that led to the exodus and the temptation in the wilderness. Even in the land, the serpent seduces Israel to idolatry and intermarriage with unbelievers, even provoking massacres of the royal family. Yet God always preserved that "seed of the woman" who would crush the serpent's head (see 2 Kings 11, for example). The story leads all the way to Herod's slaughter of the firstborn children in fear of the Magi's announcement of the birth of the true King of Israel.

The Gospels unpack this story line and the epistles elaborate its significance. Everything is leading to Golgotha, and when the disciples-even Peter-try to distract Jesus away from that mission, they are being unwitting servants of Satan (Matt. 16:23). "The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers"-not simply so that they will defy Judeo-Christian values, but "to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:4-5).

Satan lost the war on Good Friday and Easter, but has shifted his strategy to a guerilla struggle to keep the world from hearing the gospel that dismantles his kingdom of darkness. Paul speaks of this cosmic battle in Ephesians 6, directing us to the external Word, the gospel, Christ and his righteousness, faith, and salvation as our only armor in the assaults of the enemy. In Revelation 12, the history of redemption is recapitulated in brief compass, with the dragon sweeping a third of the stars (angels) from heaven, laying in wait to devour the woman's child at birth, only to be defeated by the ascension of the promised offspring. Nevertheless, knowing his time is short, he pursues the child's brothers and sisters. Wherever Christ is truly proclaimed, Satan is most actively present. The wars between nations and enmity within families and neighborhoods is but the wake of the serpent's tail as he seeks to devour the church, employing the same tried and tested methods: not only martyrdom from without, but heresy and schism from within. In the rest of this article, I want to

suggest a few of the ways we are routinely tempted toward what can only be called, tragically, "Christless Christianity."

Denial: The Sadducees

The modern spirit has been dedicated to shifting authority from the outside (the church or the Bible) to the inside (reason or experience). Kant said the one thing he could always trust was his moral intuition, which led to the irrefutable fact of "the starry heavens above and the moral law within." The Romantics said we should trust our inner experience. In fact, was it not the desire to usurp God's throne that motivated the rebellion of Lucifer as well as Adam and Eve?

Whenever we determine what really matters by looking within ourselves, we always come up with law. Some would object, "Not law, but love." However, in the Bible, the Law simply nails down what it means to love God and our neighbor. Long before Jesus summed up the Law in this way (Matt. 22:39), it was delivered by the hand of Moses (Lev. 19:18, 34), and Paul reiterated the point (Rom. 13:8-10). We were created in the image of God, without fault, entirely capable of carrying out God's moral will of making all of creation subservient to God's law of love. The Fall did not eradicate this sense of moral purpose, but turned us inward, so that instead of truly loving God and our neighbor, we suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. The fall did not even mean that people became atheists, but that they became superstitious: using "God" or "spirituality" and their neighbors for their own ends.

The Enlightenment philosophers were right when they recognized that morality is the common denominator of humanity. Yet they concluded from this that whatever came to us from the outside—the reports of historical miracles and redemption—was the least essential to true religion. "All we need is love" and "All we need is law" make exactly the same point. Duty, love, or moral and religious experience lay at the heart of all the world's religions—their insides—while the historical packaging (stories, miraculous claims, creeds, rituals) are the outer shell that can be tossed away.

Kant distinguished these in terms of pure religion and ecclesiastical faith. The former has to do with our moral duty. The latter consists of doctrines of sin, the incarnation and atonement, justification, supernatural rebirth, the particular historical claims concerning Christ, as well as the official practices of the church (such as baptism and the Supper). The story of the death and resurrection of Christ, for example, could be accepted only to the extent that it represented a universal moral truth (like self-sacrifice for others or for one's principles). Taking it at face value actually undermined pure morality. If you look to someone else's sacrifice to save you, then you won't be as prone to fulfill your own duty yourself. One sect dealt with guilt by throwing children into volcanoes to pacify the gods, while Christianity says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son ..." (John 3:16). Yet once religion is refined of such "superstitions," the residue left over is a pure morality that will at last lead us to build a tower reaching to the heavens. Trust your insides; doubt everything external to you. That was the lesson of the Enlightenment.

The problem, of course, is that we have an outside God and an outside redemption. Everything inside of us is the problem. The good news, however, is that the God who is completely other than we are became one of us, yet without succumbing to our selfish pride. He fulfilled the law, bore its judgment, and rose again as our solution to the curse of sin, death, and condemnation. Furthermore, he sent his Spirit to indwell us, making us new from the inside out, until one day our very bodies are raised. In one sense, of course, the Enlightenment was right: the law is in us by nature, since we are created in God's image. The gospel is surprising, good news that has to come to us from the outside. Everyone knows that we should treat others the way we would like to be treated ourselves: the Golden Rule does not by itself provoke martyrdom. It does not need witnesses and heralds. In fact, it did not require the incarnation, much less the atonement and resurrection.

So it's not surprising that the world would think that "all we need is love," and we can do without the doctrine, since the world thinks it can do without Christ. Doctrine is where the religions most obviously part ways. Doctrine is where things get interesting-and dangerous. As the playwright Dorothy Sayers said, doctrine isn't the dull part of Christianity, rather, "The doctrine is the drama." Jesus was not revolutionary because he said we should love God and each other. Moses said that first. So did Buddha, Confucius, and countless other religious leaders we've never heard of. Madonna, Oprah, Dr. Phil, the Dali Lama, and probably a lot of Christian leaders will tell us that the point of religion is to get us to love each other. "God loves you" doesn't stir the world's opposition. However, start talking about God's absolute authority, holiness, wrath, and righteousness, original sin, Christ's substitutionary atonement, justification apart from works, the necessity of new birth, repentance, baptism, Communion, and the future judgment, and the mood in the room changes considerably. If postmodernism is simply a revival of modern romanticism (experience as sovereign), then it's not very postmodern after all.

Historians often point out that for all of their differences, pietism and rationalism converged to create the Enlightenment. The heirs of modernity looked inward, to autonomous reason or experience, rather than outward, in faith and repentance toward a God who judges and saves. With Friedrich Schleiermacher, father of modern Protestant liberalism, the emphasis fell on Jesus as the supreme example of the kind of moral existence that we can all have if we share in his "God-consciousness." So while Christianity may represent the purest and fullest realization of this principle, other religions are in their own ways attempts to put this universal religious and moral experience into words. We just say things differently, but we are experiencing the same reality. Where Kant located the essence of religion in practical reason (moral duty), Schleiermacher located it in religious experience, but either way the self is made the measure of truth and redemption is something that we find within ourselves, even if it is "Christ in my heart." Revivalism, which is the mother of both Protestant liberalism and Evangelicalism, pressed the "deeds over creeds" and "experience over doctrine" thesis to its limits.

This means, of course, that Christ is not the unique God-Man, but the most divinized human being. The gospel is not what Christ did for me, outside of me, in history, but the impression that he makes on me, the nobility that he stirs up within me, to experience the same God-consciousness and love. Sin is not a condition from which I need to be saved, but actions that I can keep from doing with sufficient motivation and instruction. Christ's death is not an atoning sacrifice that satisfies God's just wrath, but an example of God's love that moves us to repentance. Hence, "What would Jesus do?" is the main question, not "What has Jesus done?" The inside takes priority over the outside.

Distraction: The Pharisees

In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees were scrupulous. The outside mattered, but in a legalistic way. They believed in the resurrection, the last judgment, the truthfulness of the miracles reported in the Bible's historical narratives, and were so eager for the messianic age that they wanted everybody to get their house in order. Only when God's people obey the law in all of its details (even the rabbinical rules designed to guard against violating the actual prescriptions of Moses) would the Messiah visit Israel and vindicate his people in the last judgment.

Now what could be wrong with a call to moral renewal and national righteousness? But the Pharisees were distracted from the real point of the kingdom. Expecting a king who would overthrow Roman rule and reestablish the Mosaic theocracy, they missed the real identity of the Messiah and his kingdom under their noses. The disciples themselves were also distracted, routinely changing the subject whenever Jesus spoke of the cross as they neared Jerusalem. They were thinking inauguration day, with the last judgment and the consummation of the kingdom in all of its glory. Jesus knew, however, that the only route to glory down the road was the cross up ahead. For

all their emphasis on external righteousness and behavior, they too affirmed salvation from inside: by moral effort.

Jesus contrasts the false piety of the Pharisee with the genuine faith and repentance of the citizen of his kingdom in his famous parable in Luke 18:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. (vv. 9-14)

Jesus told the Pharisees, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). While Jesus basically seems to ignore the Sadducees, since they probably viewed each other as irrelevant, he warns repeatedly of "the yeast of the Pharisees," which is "their hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1).

In the parable that Jesus tells, the Pharisee even prayed, "I thank you that I am not like this tax collector." The only thing worse than his hypocrisy and self-righteousness was that he pretended to give God a little credit for it. We have all witnessed awards ceremonies in which recipients acknowledged the many people without whom such success could not have been possible. This is quite different, however, from being a beneficiary of the estate of someone who, at the very moment of drafting the bequest, was treated as an enemy. Christless Christianity does not mean religion or spirituality devoid of the words "Jesus," "Christ," "Lord," or even "Savior." What it means is that the way the names and titles are employed will be removed from their specific location in an unfolding historical plot of human rebellion and divine rescue and from such practices as baptism and Communion. Jesus as life coach, therapist, buddy, significant other, founder of Western civilization, political messiah, example of radical love, and countless other images can distract us from the stumbling block and foolishness of "Christ and him crucified."

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has the devil (Screwtape) catechizing his minion (Wormwood) to keep the Christians distracted from Christ as redeemer from God's wrath. Rather than clumsily announce his presence by direct attacks, Wormwood should try to get the churches to become interested in "Christianity and...": "Christianity and the War," "Christianity and Poverty," "Christianity and Morality," and so on. Of course, Lewis was not suggesting that Christians should not have an interest in such pressing issues of the day, but he was making the point that when the church's basic message is less about who Christ is and what he has accomplished once and for all for us, and more about who we are and what we have to do in order to justify all of that expense on his part, the religion that is made "relevant" is no longer Christianity. By not thinking that "Christ crucified" is as relevant as "Christ and Family Values" or "Christ and America" or "Christ and World Hunger," we end up assimilating the gospel to law. Again, there is nothing wrong with the law—the moral commands that expose our moral failure and guide us as believers in the way of discipleship. However, assimilating the good news of what someone else has done to a road map for our own action is disastrous. In the words of Theodore Beza, "The confusion of law and gospel is the principal source of all the abuses that corrupt or have ever corrupted the church." When God's Law (and not our own inner sentiment) actually addresses us, our first response should be, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," not the reply of the rich young ruler, "All this I have done since my youth."

Another way we distort the proclamation of Christ in the "Pharasaic" mode is by what has sometimes been called "the assumed gospel." This is often the first stage of taking our eyes off of

Christ. Even where Christ is regarded as the answer to God's just wrath, this emphasis is regarded as a point that can be left behind in the Christian life. The idea is that people "get saved" and then "become disciples." The gospel for sinners is Christ's death and resurrection; the gospel for disciples, however, is, "Get busy!" But this assumes that disciples are not sinners, too. There is not a single biblical verse that calls us to "live the gospel." By definition, the gospel is not something that we can live. It is only something that we can hear and receive. It is good news, not good advice. The good news is that, "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the Law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe," since sinners "are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, received through faith" (Rom. 3:21-25).

When the gospel-that is, Christ as Savior-is taken for granted, we are no longer being constantly converted from our hypocrisy and self-trust to faith and love. Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, we thank God that we are not like others, but we are really trusting in our own "discipleship." The Pharisees were disciples too, and they had their disciples. But only in Christ is discipleship the consequence of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, rather than its own contribution to human redemption.

Jesus himself said, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). When he was rebuked by his disciples for raining on their parade by talking about the cross, Jesus said, "It is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (John 12:27). When Philip asked Jesus to show them the way to the Father, Jesus said that he is the Way (John 14:8-14). Similarly, Paul told the Corinthians that he was not only single-mindedly determined to preach Christ alone, but "Christ crucified," although it is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks," since it is the only good news capable of saving either (1 Cor. 1:18, 22-30; 2:1-2). In other words, Paul knew (the super-apostles were always providing concrete evidence) that preachers could use the name of Jesus, but as something or someone other than the vicarious sacrifice for sinners.

The Greeks love wisdom, so show them a Jesus who is smarter at solving the conundrums of daily living and the church will throng with supporters. Jews love signs and wonders, so tell people that Jesus can help them have their best life now, or bring in the kingdom of glory, or drive out the Romans and prove their integrity before the pagans, and Jesus will be laureled with praise. But proclaim Christ as the Suffering Servant who laid down his life and took it back up again, and everybody wonders who changed the subject.

The church exists in order to change the subject from us and our deeds to God and his deeds of salvation, from our various "missions" to save the world to Christ's mission that has already accomplished redemption. If the message that the church proclaims makes sense without conversion; if it does not offend even lifelong believers from time to time, so that they too need to die more to themselves and live more to Christ, then it is not the gospel. When Christ is talked about, a lot of things can happen, none of which necessarily has anything to do with his doing, dying, rising, reigning, and return. When Christ is proclaimed in his saving office, the church becomes a theater of death and resurrection, leading to genuine lives of witness, love, fellowship, community, and service-yet always requiring forgiveness and therefore always coming back to the good news concerning Christ.

Today, we have abundant examples of both tendencies: denial and distraction. On one hand, there are those who explicitly reject the New Testament teaching concerning Christ's person and work. Jesus was another moral guide-maybe the best ever-but not the divine-human redeemer. However, evangelicals are known for their stand against Protestant liberalism. On the other hand, many who affirm all the right views of Christ and salvation in theory seem to think that what makes Christianity truly relevant, interesting, and revolutionary is something else. Distractions abound. This does not

mean that Jesus is not important. His name appears in countless books and sermons, on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and billboards. Yet it has become something like a cliché or trademark instead of "the name that is above every name" by which alone we are saved.

Jesus Christ as the incarnate God in the merciful service of redeeming and reconciling sinners is simply not the main theme in most churches or Christian events these days. And what happens when we stop being reminded of who God is and what he has achieved in human history for a world in bondage to sin and death—in other words, when doctrine is made secondary? We fall back on our natural religion: what happens inside, that which we always know intuitively: law. "Deeds, not creeds" equals "Law, not gospel." For all their theoretical differences, liberals and evangelicals end up sounding a lot like each other. Evangelicals who say that they believe in Christ end up reducing Christ to a moral example just as thoroughly as liberals, not by outright denial but by distraction. The goal of this article is not to brand contemporary Christians "Sadducees" and "Pharisees," but to point out that one doesn't have to deny Christ and the gospel in order to end up with Christless Christianity. In fact, one can appeal to Christ and "make Jesus the center" in a way that drifts back toward "pure religion" (morality) and away from "ecclesiastical faith" (doctrine).

Today, partly in response to the appalling lack of genuine discipleship in a post-Christian era, many Protestants like Stanley Hauerwas and Brian McLaren encourage us to recover the Anabaptist legacy, which, as I mentioned, focused on Jesus as moral example. In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren explains, "Anabaptists see the Christian faith primarily as a way of life," interpreting Paul through the lens of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount rather than vice versa. The emphasis falls on discipleship rather than on doctrine, as if following Jesus' example could be set against following his teaching. What happens when the Sermon on the Mount is assimilated to a general ethic of love (i.e., pure morality), and doctrine (ecclesiastical faith) is made secondary? Christ himself becomes a mere example to help people become better non-Christians. In fact, McLaren writes, "I must add, though, that I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts." "I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus." It is no wonder, then, that McLaren can say concerning liberal Protestants, "I applaud their desire to live out the meaning of the miracle stories even when they don't believe the stories really happened as written." After all, it's deeds, not creeds that matter. McLaren seems to suggest that following Jesus (pure religion) can exist with or without explicit faith in Christ (ecclesiastical faith).

There is nothing especially postmodern about any of this, of course. It is simply the legacy of the Enlightenment and its moralistic antecedents. If following Jesus' example of love (never mind his exclusive claims, divisive rhetoric, and warning of judgment) is the gospel, then, of course there will be many Buddhists and liberals who are better "Christians" than many of us who profess faith in Christ. As Mark Oestricher, another Emergent church writer, relates, "My Buddhist cousin, except for her unfortunate inability to embrace Jesus, is a better 'Christian' (based on Jesus' description of what a Christian does) than almost every Christian I know. If we were using Matthew 26 as a guide, she'd be a sheep; and almost every Christian I know personally would be a goat." Yet at the end of the day, "radical disciples" will burn out, too, and realize that they, like the rest of us, are hypocrites who fall short of God's glory and need someone outside of them not only to show the way but to be the way of redemption. Although McLaren himself does not deny the Christ confessed in the creeds, he believes that what is most important about Jesus Christ is his call to discipleship, which allows us to participate in his redeeming work, rather than his unique, unrepeatable, completed work for sinners two thousand years ago.

In his book, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, Dan Kimball, pastor of Santa Cruz Bible Church, announces the goal of the emerging church movement: "Going back to a raw form of vintage Christianity, which unapologetically focuses on kingdom living by disciples of Jesus." If we are allowed to pick and choose whatever we like from the New Testament (again, hardly a uniquely postmodern trend—Thomas Jefferson had his own edited version, the moral Jesus of love minus the Christ of "ecclesiastical faith"), we will always gravitate toward ourselves and our own inner experience or morality, away from God: the external authority of his law and redemption announced in his gospel. Emergent Christians recognize the hypocrisy of evangelical consumerism with remarkable insight, and properly recoil at the images of Christians one finds in *The Simpsons'* character Ned Flanders. However, they forget that before Emergent there was the "Jesus Movement" that turned into the megachurch movement that they recognize as deficient.

For all of their reactions, the "post-evangelical" emerging folks seem to follow the well-worn path of their revivalist forebears in seeing the church primarily as a society of moral transformers who preach themselves rather than Christ. Like many emerging church leaders (in continuity with my evangelical pastors growing up), Kimball invokes Francis of Assisi's famous line: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." "Our lives will preach better than anything we can say." But doesn't this mean to preach ourselves rather than Christ? The gospel that we preach is good news because it is not the story of our discipleship, but of Christ's obedience, death, and resurrection in our place. The good news is not, "Look at my life" or "look at our community"; it is the announcement that in Christ God justifies the wicked. Yes, there is hypocrisy, and because Christians will always be simultaneously saint and sinner, there will always be hypocrisy in every Christian and in every church. The good news is that Christ saves us from hypocrisy, too. But hypocrisy is especially generated when the church points to itself and to our own "changed lives" in its promotional materials. The more we talk about ourselves, the more occasion the world will have to charge us with hypocrisy. The more we confess our sins and receive forgiveness, and pass this good news on to others, the more our lives will be authentically changed in the bargain. With all due respect to St. Francis, the gospel is only something that can be told (i.e., words), a story that can be declared. When our lives are told within that larger story, rather than vice versa, there is genuine salvation for sinners and mission to the world.

Kimball writes that the "ultimate goal of discipleship ... should be measured by what Jesus taught in Matthew 22:37-40: 'Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul.' Are we loving him more? Love others as yourself. Are we loving people more?" This is not a revolutionary, new message; it is the imperative preaching that many of us have always heard growing up in Evangelicalism.

For all of its incisive critiques of the megachurch movement, how different is the Emergent message from Rick Warren's call to "Deeds, Not Creeds"? These voices are right to remind us of what the law requires, and how Jesus in both his teaching and example exhibited the deepest demands that love places upon us. But if this is the good news, then we are all in trouble. As I grow in my holiness-realized in greater love for God and neighbor—I am actually more aware of how far I fall short. Therefore, on good days, I might answer Kimball's question with cautious optimism, on other days it might lead me to despair. But the gospel is the good news that I need on any day, leading me away from myself to Christ "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Many conservative evangelicals and emerging "post-evangelicals" display their common heritage in an American revivalist tradition that Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as "Protestantism without the Reformation." In a recent issue of *TIME* on Pope Benedict's critical relationship with Islam, conservative Catholic scholar Michael Novak was quoted as saying concerning the pontiff, "His role is to represent Western civilization." There are a lot of evangelical leaders who seem to think that this is their job, too. The mission of the church is to drive out the Romans (i.e., Democrats) and make the world safe for democracy. The Emergent movement's politics are different: they lean left rather than

right. For many reared on the "Christian America" hype of the religious right, this may seem like a major shift, but it's just a change in parties rather than a deeper shift from moralism to evangelical mission. The Emergent sociology is different, too: Starbucks and acoustic guitars in dark rooms with candles rather than Wal-Mart and praise bands in bright-lighted theaters. Yet in either case, moralism continues to push "Christ crucified" to the margins.

We are totally distracted, on the right, left, and in the middle. Children growing up in evangelical churches know as little as unchurched youth about the basics of the Christian faith. They increasingly inhabit a church world that is less and less shaped by the gospel through Christ-centered catechesis, preaching and sacrament (the means that Jesus instituted for making disciples). The songs they sing are mostly emotive, rather than serving to make "the Word of Christ dwell in [them] richly" (Col. 3:16), and their private devotions are less shaped by the practices of corporate prayer and Scripture reading than in past generations. Nothing has to change on paper: they can still be "conservative evangelicals," but it just doesn't matter because doctrine doesn't matter-which means faith doesn't matter. It's works that counts now, so get busy!

So now people are called to be the "good news," to make Christ's mission successful by living "relationally" and "authentically." Where the New Testament announces a gospel that changes lives, now the "gospel" is our changed life. "We preach not ourselves but Christ" (2 Cor. 4:5) has been exchanged for a constant appeal to our personal and collective holiness as the main attraction. Church marketing guru George Barna encourages us to reach out to the unchurched on the basis of our character: "What they are looking for is a better life. Can you lead them to a place or to a group of people that will deliver the building blocks of a better life? Do not propose Christianity as a system of rules but as a relationship with the One who leads by way of example. Then seek proven ways to achieve meaning and success." I am not at all implying that we shouldn't follow Christ's example or that the church shouldn't have models and mentors. What I am suggesting is that discipleship is teaching others, and teaching them so well that even when we falter as role models, the maturity of their own discipleship will not fail because it is grounded in Christ and not in us.

No matter what we say we believe about Christ's person and work, if we aren't constantly bathed in it, the end result will lead to H. Richard Niebuhr's description of Protestant liberalism: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross." According to University of North Carolina sociologist Christian Smith, the working religion of America's teens-whether evangelical or liberal, churched or unchurched-is "moralistic, therapeutic deism." And the answer to that, according to many megachurches and emerging churches is "do more; be more authentic; live more transparently." This is the good news that will change the world?

Christless Christianity can be promoted in contexts where either the sermon is a lecture on timeless doctrine and ethics or Christ gets lost in all the word studies and applications. Christ gets lost in churches where activity, self-expression, the hype of "worship experiences" and programs replace the ordinary ministry of hearing and receiving Christ as he is given to us in the means of grace. Christ gets lost when he is promoted as the answer to everything but our condemnation, death, and the tyranny of sin, or as the means to the end of more excitement, amusement, better living, or a better world-as if we already knew what these would look like before God addressed us in his law and gospel.

Back to Barnhouse's illustration. Of course, Satan loves war, violence, injustice, poverty, disease, oppression, immorality, and other displays of human sinfulness. And of course he is displeased whenever a cup of cold water is offered to a thirsty man in Christ's name. However, what he spends most of his time plotting is the displacement of Christ from the focal awareness, ministry, and mission of the church. Keeping unbelievers blind and believers distracted is his main strategy. Genuine renewal only comes when we realize that the church is always drawn to distractions and

must always be redirected to Christ, always one generation away from becoming something other than the place in the world-the only place, in fact-where the finger points away from us to Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

1 [Back] The quotations from Brian McLaren are taken from his work, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004) pp. 61, 206, 214, 260, 264. The quotation from Mark Oestreicher is found in Dan Kimball's *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for a New Generation* (Zondervan, 2003), p. 53. The direct quotation from Kimball is from the same book, p. 26. The quotation from Francis of Assisi is taken from pp. 185 and 194 of Kimball's work. The *TIME* magazine article on Pope Benedict is from the November 27, 2006, issue, p. 46. George Barna's quotation is from his book *Grow Your Church from the Outside In* (Ventura: Regal, 2002), p. 161.