

Sermon notes/follow-up

10/11/09

Rich Lusk

Luke 10:1-20 – “Mission”

Some book recommendations:

- Anything by Leslie Newbigin
- *Deep Church* by Jim Belcher (a friend of mine, Steven Cooper, served as associate pastor at Belcher’s church and plays a key role in this book; Belcher’s “third way” of doing church is about as close to my vision for TPC as anything I’ve read)
- *Jesus and Community* by Gerhard Lohfink – a classic
- *Resident Aliens* and *Where Resident Aliens Live* by Hauerwas and Willimon
- *Against Christianity* by Peter Leithart
- *Urban Shepherds*, a book on and by Restoration Academy in Fairfield

Reconsider the statistics I gave about Birmingham’s high percentage of Christians combined with our violent and corrupt city culture. If every church in Birmingham was a mosque and every Christian a Muslim, do you think that would be reflected in the culture? Why (in many cases, at least) are Muslims better at applying their faith in the public square than Christians?

I really believe that in a postmodern world, community is the key to mission. We will only be successful in evangelism if we have strong bonds of fellowship and friendship inside the church. The weirder and more counter-cultural our church is, the more friendly and hospitable we will have to be to even get a hearing.

A great anecdote along these lines is the story of “Doug and Mattie” as told in Belcher’s *Deep Church*, 199ff. Doug and Mattie went through a very hard time after their son was arrested and imprisoned for drugs. They had only been marginally connected to a church. But members of Belcher’s church began to reach out to them, sharing in their suffering, praying for them, waiting in line late at night for them so they’d be able to see their son in jail, etc. They were driven to ask, “Who does this kind of thing? What would motivate people who hardly know us to reach out with such kindness and compassion?” Doug and

Mattie were drawn in community via a small group Bible study. Belcher's associate pastor (my friend Steven) began meeting with their son in jail to do Bible study with him. Eventually, Doug became a leader in the church and Mattie started a prison ministry. Finally, their son joined the church from jail – they video taped him taking his membership vows (in his prison issue orange jump suit, of course) and played it that Sunday for all to see. He was still in prison but he had been set free.

(Chuck Colson says you don't really know what it is to sing "Amazing Grace" until you've sung it with a group of convicts in prison. I'm sure that's true. The story Belcher tells reflects the same deep grace of the gospel in action in the life of God's people.)

Developing a missional ecclesiology for the South:

<http://www.downshoredrift.com/downshoredrift/2009/03/developing-a-missiology-for-the-bible-belt-the-south.html>

I have been thinking a little about this lately. What does a proper missiology look like in the Bible Belt? Missiology is basically defined as the study of the mandate, message, and mission of the church as it relates to and proclaims the gospel among varying cultures, tribes, peoples, and nations. Church attendance and participation is falling in the South. Churches are dying. Less people are claiming to be Christian every year. It seems that many in the South have been inoculated against the real gospel because they have just had a taste and they think that what they have experienced is all that there is. Southern Baptist leaders are calling for a Great Commission Resurgence, but much of the rhetoric so far has been a call to try harder and do more evangelism. Considering that fact that the church is having less and less influence in the South and the South is a fairly distinct culture in the United States, what would an appropriate missiology look like for this part of the country? How do we make full-blown disciples of Christ in a Southern context?

Some questions come to mind:

- Do Christians in the South see our own land as a mission field? Are we aware of our own culture and the barriers and bridges to the gospel that exist in the South? What is unique about the South and its culture, both good and bad?

- Do we understand the gospel and how to relate the gospel to this culture in a way that produces disciples of Christ and not just cultural Christians?
- How has the gospel that has been preached in the South been different from the gospel preached elsewhere and what were the causes/effects of that difference?
- How has the history of the South affected the churches and the message?
- What affect has the division caused by the sin of racism had on the ability of the church (both white and black) to reach the South for Christ? How can we address that both theologically and practically? What would it take to begin to see multicultural missional churches spring up all over the South?
- What role have the twin idols of personal preference and consumerism had on the church and the spread of the gospel in the South?
- What does cultural Christianity look like in the South and how has the church fallen captive to it? What have the results been?
- How will the church in the South pass on a vital faith to future generations and reach the native population of this land with the gospel in the future, especially with the widening gap between the Biblical church and culture?

I am surprised that this is not being talked about in our Southern Baptist seminaries or Bible colleges. It seems that our theologians and missiologists do little actual thinking in regard to our current context and how the church is to propel the gospel forward right here at home. I am afraid that the church in the South (the SBC in particular) is facing some difficult days. Are we even thinking about it? Are we giving thought to what it might take to reach a new generation? Are we exegeting our own culture? In a short amount of time, relatively speaking, we are going to see a great exodus from our churches as the generation that is keeping them open begins to die off. With the South holding the largest concentration of Southern Baptists, what does this mean for our national presence and global missions?

I am convinced that God is speaking to us if we will but listen. There is always hope for a people that truly turns to Him. We must first look within at our own hearts and strengthen what remains. Then, we must come to understand what the gospel really is and what it is actually saying about God, humanity, sin, and redemption. We must take a look at the church and our mission. We must discern critically the culture in which we live. We need to learn to think like missionaries and join God where He is working. It isn't impossible. But, the question remains:

have be so bought in to the lies of our culture that we are unable to extricate ourselves from its grip and speak prophetically to it? So I ask you: What would a missiology for the South that makes true disciples of Christ and plants missional churches look like? What would we need to change?

<http://www.downshoredrift.com/downshoredrift/2009/03/the-weakness-of-a-privatized-individualistic-gospel-moving-toward-a-southern-missiology-part-2.html>

[In my last post, I asked readers what they thought a missiology for the South might look like.](#) I appreciate the comments, Mike, Bob, Les, and Rick. I was hoping for a little more discussion, but, let's face it, I'm not talking about the latest political brouhaha amongst Southern Baptists or anything exciting like that. I'm just talking about the future of the church in the South over the next generation. Relatively meaningless, I know. :) At any rate, as I have been researching the theological weaknesses behind the evils of racism and segregation in the Southern Baptist South of the 1950's and 60's and how those weaknesses continue to affect us today (all for a book that I am trying to write), I have stumbled across an unexpected culprit that has caused me to raise my eyebrows a bit. In my reading, interviewing, studying, and praying, I have come to believe that a major reason that people could fill churches all across the South on Sunday and then treat others horribly just because of the color of their skin without feeling conviction was because of the gospel that was preached and believed. If your view of the "gospel" is that it is mostly a set of propositions that you agree with so that you can go to heaven when you die (i.e., eternal life) and salvation cannot be lost no matter what you do, then the commands of Scripture about loving others will be ignored when they bump up against a culture that ultimately gives you your identity, especially when that culture tells you that the "other" is inferior to you. What is there to fear? You're going to heaven. Of course, fear came in when you committed really bad sins like drinking alcohol, dancing, or broke any sexual taboos. So, belief and lifestyle were connected on some issues but not others, even though those other issues were just as biblical, if not moreso in some cases. This hypocrisy became a major theological problem and it is still embedded in the "gospel" we preach and the theology that we believe. We've never dealt with it adequately. We still face a theological separation between belief and behavior because we desire and offer heaven without the cross. Unfortunately, this

separation has weakened our churches to the point of impotence when it comes to standing against the world. This weak, cheap gospel of personal, individualistic salvation without discipleship is what allowed Southerners to be racists while they filled Southern Baptist churches. It is what allowed the Lutheran church in Germany to turn away from the Nazi brutalities toward the Jews and even accept them as necessary. It is also what allows us today to say that we believe one thing and live a completely different way and feel no shame or conviction. Isn't hypocrisy a great part of what the baby boomers rebelled against in the 60's? Didn't the church have a stake in that regarding how we treated others while claiming to follow Christ?

David Fitch in [The Great Giveaway](#) says,

In our doctrine of salvation then, evangelicals must avoid commoditizing salvation into an individualist consumerist transaction, something we have been prone to. There is a reason why it sounds intrusive to ask a stranger the question "Do you know Jesus as personal savior?" We have privatized the relationship with Jesus so as to make him into a gnosticized faith that seems isolated from everyday life. We must un-privatize our faith in Christ and reconnect our relationship with God through Christ to a way of life that we can invite people into and a movement of God in history. Then we can ask, "Do you have a place where you can ask questions about life?" "Do you know a story that can make sense of your life?" When we do this, we focus away from scaring people out of hell to inviting people into a compelling way of life. We realize that making salvation about being saved from hell irrespective of being saved to new life cheapens it into a piece of individualist knowledge, bordering on Gnosticism, that does not take root in embodied lives.

In postmodernity, truth is about character. Religious truth can no longer be relegated to the realm of private feeling or preference. This is because modern science, which pushed it there originally, no longer reigns supreme. Truth is in the living. Any evangelism therefore that separates one's renewed legal status before God from the new life we have in Christ strips the gospel of its power for a postmodern evangelism. For the postmodern world, justification cannot be separated from sanctification and sanctification cannot be separated from a living people of God. The basis for a compelling Christian account of salvation in postmodernity is a changed life among a living community of Christ. (58-59).

What connects justification and sanctification? What connects faith and grace with a new way of life? I would submit that the concept of repentance makes this connection. When telling people how to be saved, Peter said, "Repent and be baptized . . ." (Acts 2:38). Another time he said, "Repent, then, and turn to God" (Acts 3:19). In both instances, the Greek word used is *Metanoeo*, which basically means to change one's mind. It denotes a turning around from going one way to going another. In the Christian sense, repentance means that we turn from our sins and the ways of the world and we turn to God through faith in Christ our righteousness. What is the result of this repentance? Our sins are wiped out. This does not mean that repentance saves us. We are justified by faith apart from observing the law (Rom. 3:28). But, repentance is the response to the grace of God and the gift of faith. Repentance is our turning from our old life and old way of thinking to Christ and His Lordship expressed in a new life (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Another time, when Paul was asked by the Philippian Jailer, "what must I do to be saved?" Paul responded, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved - you and your whole household." The Greek word for "believe" here is *pisteuo* which means to put trust in or have confidence in something. It is more than just mentally agreeing that something is true. It draws out an action of trust and confidence on our part. This kind of faith involves repentance, because if I am believing in Christ, or putting my trust and confidence in Jesus, then that implies that I am no longer putting my trust or confidence in other things. I trust in Jesus alone for salvation and life. I trust in Jesus alone for my identity, not my heritage, my skin color, my family, money, possessions, or titles. I entrust myself to Christ and I align myself with Him.

Repentance, or a turning to God from independence, sin, and being captured by the world, is what is missing in our proclamation and acceptance of the gospel. And, I would submit that it has been missing for a very long time. Jesus wants our whole life. He does not just tell us to turn away from drinking alcohol or having extramarital sex and then allow us to do whatever else we want and live according to whatever world system we find ourselves in. No, He wants our whole lives and His ways are higher than our ways. This is what the Sermon on the Mount is telling us. The Way of Jesus was higher than the way of the segregated South, but we were not able to see it because we were captured by our culture. Likewise, the Way of Jesus is higher than a consumeristic, materialistic, individualistic, self-seeking American culture, but we often cannot see that either because we are still captured by our own culture in

hidden ways. This is where the journey of discipleship comes in and it is not optional. Jesus only preached one gospel, which was the Gospel of the Kingdom - the good news of the inbreaking reign and rule of God. Our response to this message of the nearness of the Kingdom of God is to repent (turn from our present kingdom) and believe the good news (gospel) - Mark 1:15. Personal salvation is involved in that at the core, of course, but it is not the complete story - or, I should say that our understanding of salvation as merely forgiveness of sins and entrance to Heaven is not the complete story. God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ, but He also reconciles us to one another. Salvation is the establishment of a vertical connection between us and God, but the effect of salvation is a horizontal reconciliation between us and others through Christ. When the gospel has been poorly preached, or preached in an individualistic way, hypocrisy has been the result (even if many are personally saved) and the truth about God is maligned.

We must work to reconnect our sanctification to our justification. Not confuse the two, but reconnect the two. Perhaps this is what James meant when he said that faith without works is dead. Justification is by faith and sanctification is by that same faith. We must also work to embed our experience of salvation and its effects within the community of Christ. The Church is vitally important as a witness to who Christ is and a nurturer of the Christ-life within us. We must experience the Christian life in community with other believers, or I dare say, not at all.

An individualistic gospel. A crossless gospel. A lack of Biblical discipleship in the midst of community. Propositions believed apart from their truth being embodied in lifestyles and community. An acceptance that Jesus is the Truth while abandoning that He is the Way or the Life as we turn to other things. All of this joined together to dramatically affect our witness. We ended up innoculating ourselves against the real gospel by believing a watered down version. Individuals personally believed a message about Jesus dying for their personal sins, which was good, but if discipleship and the cross was left out, what was the cost? What else was lost from the Gospel of the Kingdom, the "full message of this new life" ([Acts 5:20](#))? To be faithful witnesses to Christ in our current situation, we must reconnect the faith of the individual with the life of the community with the fruit of repentance expressing itself in good works. This can be done without moving toward a "works righteousness" by simply calling people to respond to God in faith AND repentance and to leave their old life behind and embrace all that God has for us and calls us to in Christ. It is called being a follower of Christ, which implies that I am leaving my old

life and going where Jesus goes. We need the prophetic and the apostolic as well as the evangelist and the pastor/teacher to articulate this message. I realize that I am coming across as really negative here. That is not my intention. It is not my goal to disparage everything that Evangelicals and Southern Baptists have believed and taught over the past few generations. Not at all. I am very grateful for my gospel heritage. There has been much good and many, many people have been reconnected to God and others. It is because of our fidelity to Scripture that renewal is even possible. We would not have that if those before us had not preserved the integrity of the Bible for us. But, it is in reading the true Scriptures that we are able to discern the truth about our present predicament. Yes, the true gospel has been taught and lived by many people and has been expressed in many churches. God has worked in powerful ways. Again, I do not mean to come across as condemning or negative. Rather, I am trying to get to the root of the malaise that grips us in our communities and our churches. Scripture guides us here. For so many, Jesus is an add on to the life they've always wanted. He is a means to an end. This is what I am speaking against and I hope to point a way forward to the positive message of the new life that Christ has for us. But, for many, as my friend David Phillips said, deconstruction is needed before reconstruction can take place. Repentance implies a turning away and a turning to. How can we repent if we don't know what we are turning away from or what we are turning to? It is not my intention to tear down people or cause unnecessary discomfort, but it is necessary for us to open our eyes and see that perhaps we have been embracing half-truths with devastating consequences. If I am wrong about this, I will bear the results. But, I don't think I am. We must exchange a truncated, personalized gospel for the real thing, the Gospel of the Kingdom - the reign and rule of God in all of life. If this is believed and lived out in community, could you imagine the results? That is something to be positive about!

On being missional in the Bible-belt:

<http://gospeldrivenchurch.blogspot.com/2009/09/missional-in-bible-belt.html>

In The Jollyblogger's archives is a good post called [Eclipse of the Gospel in the Church](#). In it David Wayne builds off this Marcus Honeysett quote:

"At some point in the life of most local churches a critical point is reached when the core fellowship of those committed to gospel vision are outnumbered by a fringe who are there for quite different reasons, be it spiritual comfort, kids activities, personal support, or whatever. Regardless of the particular type of church government, all fellowships struggle to maintain focus around core vision when the fringe, be they believers or not, outnumber the gospel-oriented core. It is very hard to maintain focus, or alter any aspect of church life to reflect the gospel needs of a fresh generation, when the majority are committed to maintaining their comfort. When this happens "Christians" have been replaced with "churchgoers" who assume they are Christians."

Um, yep.

Expanding this beyond an individual congregation, I would say this is a predicament for all gospel-centered churches in areas where the inordinately attractional church is king, particularly in the Bible Belt, where Christianity is "cultural" and the church with the most toys wins.

Wayne follows up:

That seems to be the nature of the beast when it comes to the church. The Exodus people of Israel quickly forgot their redemption and pined for their leeks and onions and devolved into complaints and idolatry. So much so that God had to let a generation die out before they could enter the promised land. And, if you read through the history of Israel it's easy to see how quickly the pattern that Honeysett describes here happens. The people of God forget or jettison their identity as redeemed people, and they jettison a redemption-driven agenda for other agendas. The church in Corinth is a good New Testament example of this.

It's probably just something we have to accept and accept that getting the gospel into the church is an even greater priority than getting it into the world. I remember vaguely hearing Tim Keller talk about Redeemer in Manhattan. Redeemer is well known around the world as a leading light in gospel based, missionally driven ministry, yet if I remember correctly Keller said there were probably only a third or a little more at his church who were really getting the whole gospel-missional thing . . .

So the point is that our first and greatest battle is to gospelize the church.

We are in a weird -- but frequently exhilarating -- position where the gospel is scandalous even to Christians.

So many of our brothers and sisters want the compartmentalized spirituality (putting in their religious time on Sunday mornings), the six steps to such-and-such messages, and the superficiality of apathy towards real community, that missional thinking and living, gospel-saturated and Jesus-centered messages, and the demands of relational intimacy freak them out. This stuff is a foreign language to them, and I see it constantly in the so-called "Christian South," where "everyone" is a Christian, "everyone" goes to church.

Once upon a time, reading on a Nashville church shopper's blog, I noticed a commenter urging her to look for a church that focused on Jesus. Her reply was, "I've already found Jesus."

This is the default mode of Bible Belt Christianity. I've got my ticket punched, just give me the show now. I need a dynamic speaker on Sunday mornings, a rockin' band on the stage, a full service childcare facility, a big youth group, a coffee bar near the sanctuary, etc. I've got Jesus already; give me something that matters to me now, something "relevant," something applicable.

And there is a never-ending appetite for this stuff because this stuff doesn't fix or fulfill anything. Seven steps to conquering conflict in your marriage won't eradicate conflict. So there's always demand for seven more steps next time around.

What I find especially ironic about the churches catering to gospel-unawakened Christians is that they claim they exist for the unchurched. They are the ones actually reaching lost people, they say. The data does not support this, of course. The number of megachurches has increased; the number of Christians has decreased. This does not compute. And when folks like Sally Morgenthauer start looking at the research, what they find is that the attractional machine, which purports to be for the lost and unchurched, basically just ends up attracting Christians from smaller or less "exciting" churches.

Should missional church pastors care? Do we want these folks?

Speaking for myself, yes. Except, I want to *win* them. They're no fun as they are. ;-) But frankly, as they are, they don't want what we've got anyway. To the cultural Christian, there is nothing attractive about a small church that expects relational community, practices regular neighborhood service, highlights the cost of discipleship in every message, has a minimalist menu of programs to partake from, and gives most of its money away (precluding a "nice" facility and assorted bells and whistles). But I want to reach them. All Christians are family. I love the big-C Church dearly.

There are some who would say the missional communities should just write off their attractational brothers and sisters and focus on reaching the lost. I defy false dichotomies. And while I never poach (I've never invited members of other churches to mine before they themselves have first expressed interest in visiting), I pray and preach AND BLOG and try to live a life of witness so that my church-ed brothers and sisters will begin to crave the gospel and gospel-centrism in their congregations.

The more church-ed converts gospel-centrism receives -- we're talking about revival here, by the way -- the greater impact for the kingdom among the lost and "least of these" there will be, in the Bible Belt and beyond.

If indeed cultural evangelicalism in the Bible Belt is dying, what do we do about it?

We sometimes find ourselves wondering: can God use the church? The church seems too messed up to be able to fulfill the mission given to her. After all, the church is made up of people like you and me – and we know we are weak and deeply flawed!

But when we ask the question, 'Can God use us?' we need to focus on the 'God' part and not the 'us' part. God most certainly can use us! If God can turn rocks into sons of Abraham, then he can use us to grow the family of Abraham, warts and all. Don't let the failings of the church lead you to doubt the power and promises of God! Our confidence and hope are not in ourselves but in him.

The Internet Monk on being gospel-driven, kingdom-oriented, and missional:

Jesus makes things very complicated for American Christians. If you simply follow him around in the Gospels, you are going to get into trouble. Why? Because he isn't just talking evangelism. He's talking about a whole life of Kingdom-dominated, life-transforming discipleship. You see, Jesus is proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God ([Mark 1:14-15](#)), and at the heart of it are two things that are fairly challenging to all of us in the materialistic, prosperous west.

1) The announcement that a climactic time has arrived, and the present age has come to its fulfillment point. In other words, a new world, a new creation, is arriving with Jesus. Something happens. "Personal Savior?" I don't think so.

2) The call is not simply to believe some short form outline of "How to get saved," but to **repent** and believe the good news. There is a reorienting/rebirthing of life at fundamental levels. Big questions get asked and answered: What is your God like? Who is your neighbor? How does the Kingdom look when you live in it? Will you follow Jesus to the cross?

These concerns are present in the epistles, but the Gospels go far beyond the epistles in putting the Kingdom in front of us, because everything Jesus says and does is dominated by this Kingdom he is announcing.....and his actions and words make it very clear what kinds of changes must take place. The disciples are blown away by it all, and that's our cue to get our helmets on as well.

So when you read the Gospels, Jesus is including the excluded, healing the hopeless, remaking Israel, reaching out to the pagan, overturning the religious professionals, redefining all the predictable terms, shocking those who know all the answers and, in general, making it unmistakably clear that the Kingdom isn't just about forgiveness and "heaven," but about the life we are living- and will live- in the Kingdom here, now and in the future.

Most of our study of the early chapters of the Gospels ignore what Jesus is doing, and leave the impression that Jesus wandered around Galilee proving that he was the Son of God, so that when he died we would get the whole, "God's Son died for your sins" thing. We don't seem to get the purpose of all of this. It's not the warm-up act for the cross: it's the Kingdom. It's what Jesus came to bring, and to give to us. It's a Kingdom

with a crucified and risen Messiah, but it's always a Kingdom where believing and belonging mean revolution.

In fact, Jesus is teaching, eating, doing miracles, staging prophetic announcements and performances, shocking the authorities, teaching on a reborn/remixed Israel, training disciples, telling stories and all the rest for the express purpose of saying that if God is here now, and his Kingdom is present now, then YOUR life is going to be deeply transformed. God himself is going to give your life an entirely different definition and direction.

When you break down Mark's Gospel, it is fascinating to see how discipleship becomes the focus AFTER Jesus brings the cross into view ([Mark 8:31](#), [Mark 9:31](#), [Mark 10:33-34](#)) In chapters nine and ten, the disciples are following Jesus to Jerusalem, and he's made it plain what is going to happen. But they are debating with one another which of them is the greatest, and asking really contemporary questions like this whopper: [Mark 10:32-37](#) 32 And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, 33 saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. 34 And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise." 35 And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

It's pretty safe to say that "..we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" wasn't what Jesus had been working toward in the lives and hearts of these men. But this is typical of what Christianity becomes without the Cross, the Kingdom and Discipleship. It becomes a way for us to get "whatever we want" from God.

Listening to the first part of the Gospel story is vital if we are going to understand what Jesus was presenting in "the Gospel" of the Kingdom. It is vital that we will hear, so we will stop trying to find ways to get out of it, and make Christianity into a way to get the best seats for the entertainment and fun that we want so much.

Let me be honest. Currently setting atop the New York Times Bestseller List is "1. YOUR BEST LIFE NOW, by Joel Osteen."

Joel Osteen and thousands upon thousands of other Christian teachers, authors and pastors, are telling Americans how to get their “best life now.” This has about as much to do with the Kingdom of Jesus Christ as we see it in the Gospels as a Big Mac, fries and a shake have to do with a healthy dinner.

Have you ever thought about this? We are living in the most fabulously wealthy, excessively entertained and unimaginably prosperous nation in the history of the world. We have a standard of living, and a level of comfort, that much of the rest of the world cannot imagine. We have so glutted ourselves with pleasure, comfort and excess that we are morphing into a nation of fat kids hooked up to video games being fed pizza by the servants.

Yet Christian pastors like Osteen are preaching on how YOU can GET MORE. MORE!! Better! How YOU can have your “best life now.” Having a great life in this culture of ours is a major concern of Christians. It’s insane. It’s as if God has lost his mind, and American Christians think it’s great. Jesus is the savior of the world, and his Kingdom is going to last forever, but we want a God who will sign the invoice for a Humvee, a cabin by the lake, and breast enhancements for Mom’s birthday.

Tens of millions will buy Osteen’s book that includes descriptions of how God helped him get a great parking place, how his children want to lead his Lakewood Church to a bigger facility than the \$82 million Campaq Center, and how God’s blessing almost always manifests itself in a great new house for people of faith. This is the Kingdom of Jesus....The American dream for white yuppies in suburban Texas.

Osteen’s book is on the top of the best-seller list because thousands of Christians are convinced that this God of increasing American prosperity is the God of the Bible. They are clueless, even with their Bible’s open, because their pastors have found ways to shut Jesus up and make him the servant of the American dream.

How can we break the news to these folks? They are wrong. So wrong, so deeply wrong, that their religion of “Lord, give us whatever we want...now,” has almost nothing in common with what Jesus is saying and doing in the Gospels. The Kingdom he is bringing overturns this nonsense. The Jesus of the Gospel proclaims the promises of prosperity, real estate and parking places to be empty. If we will listen. He’s just as discomfiting now as ever, unless we render him the harmless servant of our desires.

Rather than telling us about your best life now, Jesus talks over and over about persecution, sacrifice, voluntary poverty and laying down the

images and symbols of success for the lasting worth and influence of the Kingdom of Jesus. People who believe the Father of Jesus Christ gives life meaning don't hand him a list of goodies and demand that he fork over the stuff. They read the Beatitudes, and the Lord's Prayer, and the example of Jesus with their hearts open to what these things mean in their most obvious sense. No games or exceptions.

Osteen and other American evangelicals believe there is a crisis afoot over whether God is good enough for Americans to believe in him. Jesus demonstrated the goodness of God by including the outcasts and accepting the last, lost, least and overlooked. Evangelicals want God to make their life great...now. Jesus called us to a life of giving someone else a taste of the life they had missed; a life of finding our Joy in the Spirit, not in the flashy trash of the culture. There is joy in the Kingdom of heaven, Jesus said. Joy over one sinner who repents.

It is the older brother of the prodigal son who insists that his Father hasn't done anything for him lately. The Father invites that son to a resurrection celebration for his reclaimed and restored son. The joy of the Father was there to be had, but entering into it meant entering into the "work" of the Father.

That is what Jesus was doing. [John 5](#) makes it very clear: we are invited to see the Father doing what we see Jesus doing in the Gospels. Then we are invited to that Kingdom and to that same discipleship. Living the life. Making the sacrifices. Repenting. Reaching across the barriers. All of life pointing to Jesus, and to his Kingdom now and from now on.

We are getting a lot wrong. Our ministry should look like the ministry of Jesus. Our "Christianity" should grow right out of those first chapters of Mark. Our goal should be lives that embrace what Jesus shows us during those months in the dusty, desperate villages of Galilee. We need to return to the Gospels believing they matter, and quit avoiding the tensions created by Jesus as he lived the ultimate "purpose-driven" life in the real world.

If our theology has disposed of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry and teachings (before the Passion,) then lose your theology. Pick up the book and read again, and don't skip the hard parts.

<http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/imonk-101-jesus-joel-and-the-hard-parts-of-the-gospel>

Mark Galli on evangelical confusion over moral and spiritual renewal:
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/october/13.23.html>

A few excerpts:

A couple of years ago, I received a flier in the mail:

A new flavor of church is in town! Whether you prefer church with a more traditional blend or a robust contemporary flavor, at [church name], we have a style just for you! Casual atmosphere, relevant messages, great music, dynamic kids' programs, and yes, you can choose your own flavor! The "flavors" were described with phrases intended to attract the unchurched: "Real-life messages," "Safe and fun children's program," "Friendly people," and the marketing *coup de grace*, "Fresh coffee and doughnuts!"

What pagan could resist?

I poke fun, yes, but I also recognize two realities. First, we must not mock the desire to reach the unchurched. Second, any evangelical worth his or her evangelistic salt has from time to time succumbed to the cultural pressure, in personal conversations or creating outreach programs, to say things that make the gospel seem small.

In our better moments, we recall with the apostle Paul that it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that reaches the world. But we often find ourselves thinking the theology of one character in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, who said, "If you want to get anywheres in religion, you got to keep it sweet."

There are various ways that we "keep it sweet" — that is, try to make the gospel inviting to as many as possible. The results have been mixed. Who hasn't met a new believer who came to faith in Jesus Christ, miraculously, through the most superficial means? For God's mercy on our often foolish attempts at contextualization, we should be ever thankful.

This doesn't excuse us from the hard task of self-criticism as we seek to be more faithful. In fact, in the last couple of decades, our self-criticism has practically become an addiction. But it is worth rehearsing some of the more devastating critiques of our movement—both to recall the wonder of God's mercy, and to put into context our various efforts at reform.

Historian Mark Noll addressed one concern in his *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, writing, "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind." He was arguing not for mere intellectualism but for a use of the mind that would, in the end, give us a greater vision of God.

Theologian Ron Sider aimed wider in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Sider was called up short for not clearly defining *evangelical* and for sometimes relying on questionable statistics, but overall his outrage over evangelical morals and lifestyle is commendable. God forbid that we should ever not be scandalized by nominal Christianity!

And then there are the titles that suggest not just flaws but something much more serious: Frank Viola and George Barna's *Pagan Christianity?* and Michael Horton's *Christless Christianity*. Yikes!

Such sweeping critiques hinge on what the critic means by *evangelical*. Some use strict definitions that include a complex set of beliefs and behaviors, and so define evangelicals as a step above the ordinary mortal. Others use loose definitions in which the word seems to mean nothing more than "nice religious person." Evangelicals by these definitions fare pretty badly when compared with the rest of the world.

In this article, I lean toward the looser definition. We might feel better about ourselves as a movement if we restrict the word to the most committed—that would eliminate the problem of nominalism anyway. But talk to any evangelical pastor of any evangelical church, and they will tell you that the broad definition is what they work with week in and week out: people who think of themselves as "Bible believing" or "born again" or "evangelical" or "saved" and yet, except for the committed few, have beliefs and behaviors that fall far short of New Testament ideals. And if we as pastors, teachers, missionaries, parachurch leaders, and thought leaders—we who write most of the material decrying our movement—are honest with ourselves, we will admit that the enemy we've found is often us.

Such critiques are not merely subjective estimates of our spiritual state by a few disgruntled insiders. Our movement has also come under the rigorous scrutiny of sociologists of religion. Their studies confirm our suspicions.

Wade Clark Roof, in his *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, described Christianity in the U.S. as he saw it 10 years ago: "... the drift over time, and still today, is in the direction of enhanced choices for individuals and toward a deeply personal, subjective understanding of faith and well-being."

When he focused on our movement, he made the same point: "Evidence that the appeal of popular evangelicalism lies primarily in its attention to personal needs, and not dogma or even strict morality, is supported by careful analysis of national surveys. Psychological categories like 'self,'

'fulfillment,' 'individuality,' 'journey,' 'walk,' and 'growth' are all very prominent within evangelical Christianity."

Many other studies say the same thing, but the most important is Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Published in 2005, it is already a classic.

Smith and Denton conducted extensive interviews with 267 American teenagers, and concluded that a new religion had emerged in America whose chief tenets are as follows:

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith and Denton noticed that this "de facto creed" was particularly prominent among mainline Protestant and Catholic teenagers, "but is also visible among black and conservative Protestants."

Since the authors found that this faith is learned from parents, they conclude, "We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."

This analysis resonates deeply with American evangelical church and parachurch leaders. While Smith and Denton intended to describe the state of teenage faith, they seem to have described large segments of evangelical faith.

We find ourselves rightly and intensely concerned about our spiritual state, but such concerns are not new. The second-generation American Puritans saw a "declension" in religious fervor, and began adopting strategies to halt the decline. One strategy was the jeremiad, a sermon that rehearsed the sins of the people and the judgment of God, and called for repentance.

When that strategy failed, they gathered church leaders for the Reforming Synod of 1679, which produced a document titled "The Necessity of

Reformation." It said that "God hath a controversy with his New England people" and that he had "written his displeasure in dismal characters against us."

The Great Awakenings were divine answers to these early pleadings. As much as the evangelistic crusades of George Whitefield, and later, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham were meant for unbelievers, we know many Christians attended their events to revive their faith. The rhythm of declension and revival has been a regular feature in American Christianity. We seem to be in another downward part of the cycle as we enter the 21st century.

One reason for this rhythm is this continent's distinct culture. After his visit to America from late 1831 to early 1832, Alexis de Tocqueville described in eerily contemporary terms two features of American life and the religious tension they produced. While extolling the American emphases on freedom and equality, he said:

It must be acknowledged that equality, which brings great benefits into the world, nevertheless suggests to men ... some very dangerous propensities. *It tends to isolate them from each other, to concentrate every man's attention upon himself; and it lays open the soul to an inordinate love of material gratification.* The greatest advantage of religion is to inspire diametrically contrary principles. [Emphasis added.]

Tocqueville had the prescience to see the individualism and consumerism that would ever plague American Christianity. But he seems to have had an unwarranted confidence in American religion's ability to resist these temptations....

In our righteous frustration lies a temptation that entices us when we start anxiously comparing ourselves with "the rest of the world." This is the temptation of the devout that Jesus described, of the evangelical Pharisee who thanked God that he was no longer like sinners! We might do better to shift the comparison; the scandal is not that we are just like other people but that we are not more like Jesus.

Being missional often means admitting our weakness, knowing that the mission is fulfilled in God's strength. As Rob Bell puts it: "Swords appear strong, but they're actually quite weak. Jesus appears weak, but he's actually quite strong...Weak is the new strong."

In the sermon, I mentioned the importance of unity (as a function of community) to the church's mission. We cannot disciple the world if we are divided from other Christians.

Obviously, the church in our day is deeply fragmented. What is our hope of restoring unity? We can take comfort knowing the Jesus prays for and has promised unity to us. It is ultimately his gift, not our achievement. Try as we might, we cannot divide Christ in the end. He remains one, and his church remains one, even if we obscure that oneness by our sinful proliferations of denominations and subcultures, warring against and competing with one another.

Practically speaking, we find unity by returning to the Bible. But our return to the Bible cannot ignore or sidestep the last 2000 years of church history. This has a number of implications.

We can build bridges with other Christians by recalibrating our faith against the Great Tradition. Admittedly, many will want to debate the precise contours of that tradition right off the bat, and others will warn of the dangers of a "lowest common denominator" faith. But nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a core of Christian belief that virtually all Christians have professed and upheld. The ecumenical creeds, notwithstanding the crazy accidents of history that produced them, continue to function as useful doctrinal boundary markers and a summary of the Christian consensus.

What I am getting at is this: *The Holy Spirit has a history* (to echo Chris Hall). The Holy Spirit himself has a tradition – a pattern and legacy of working over the last 2000 years (and of course, we could back into his shadowy work in the old covenant as well). There is a goldmine of wisdom and guidance in the church's tradition, and even though we have to sort through it with a measure of discernment, it is of great value to our present day mission.

One reason we are so sectarian and divisive and tribalistic in our own day, fighting ecclesiastical turf wars rather than carrying forward the mission, is that we have disconnected ourselves from the Great Tradition. We have cut ourselves off from the great saints who have gone before us. Without tradition, we are

orphans, without mother or father. The works of the great saints – their writings, prayers, liturgies, hymns, and practices – are the common possession of the whole church. The consensus of their faith is our tradition and heritage.

When we try to reinvent the Christian faith we end up mirroring our surrounding culture rather than the historic church and we end up isolating ourselves from other Christians. The Holy Spirit's work in previous generations has to be received and appreciated before we can build on it and go beyond it. We have to be rooted and grounded in the history of the Holy Spirit, the tradition of the Holy Spirit, the history of the church and the Great Tradition. Sure, even as we seek to do this, we will find we still have big differences with our brothers and sisters in other branches of the church, but we find all kinds of common ground we can build upon.

Unless we venture out to do mission *together*, with other Christians and other churches, we are doomed to fail. On the front lines of mission work, our differences are put in proper perspective.

For more on tradition, unity, and mission, see Belcher 62ff, 65ff, 136, 177f. See also C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. My advice is that Christians find a tradition and church home as quickly as possible, putting down roots and throwing themselves into the work of community and mission. Get into a church body and do your part, contributing the health and growth of that congregation. Recognize your need for others and others' need for you. Recognize that your faith is personal but never private, and that community is always the context for growing in and sharing our faith. Find as much common ground as possible with other Christians and use that common ground as a platform and launching pad for mission and ministry in the world.

It is good and right that we emphasize the dangers of worldliness. We do not want to look like the world; we want to look like Jesus.

At the same time, we have to understand that we are called to something of a balancing act. There are all kinds of ways in which we should be like the world so we can reach the world (cf. 1 Cor. 9). For many Christians, the reason we struggle to reach the lost is that we are not worldly enough (in the right ways). Belcher puts it this way: "The Bible tells us to be all things to reach all people. There are areas of life where we are supposed to look like the world around us. I

think this includes large aspects of culture. But there are also areas where we are to 'flee from idols,' as the apostle John says. Ironically, many in the traditional church look nothing like the world in areas they are supposed to, and they have embraced areas – pride, arrogance, judgmentalism, and unloving attitude – they are to stand apart from. No wonder the younger generations see the church as un-Christian” (229-230). Or as Steve Turner puts it, “[We] become worldly in the very way the Bible condemns and yet are not worldly enough in the way Bible commands. We are told to be in the world but not of it. People like this are often of the world but not in it” (cf. Belcher 185-189). It sounds strange to say to the church, 'YOU ARE NOT WORLDLY ENOUGH!' and yet it is often the case.

Another anecdote on community and mission:

People today are looking for community. With the breakdown of family and neighborhood, people are looking for others they can connect with and count on. Very often, community is simply a matter of being there, being available for others.

A pastor in inner city Chicago was frustrated that his church lost so many of its young men to gangs. So he finally set up a meeting with the gang leader to see what was going wrong. He asked: “How do you get hold of our young men?” The gang leader said, “When they go play basketball, I’m there and you’re not. When they’re walking to school, I’m there and you’re not. When they go to the store for their moms, I’m there and you’re not. And every time I’m there and you’re not, I win and you lose.”

Gangs are just psuedo-churches. Young men turn to gangs because they are looking for a place to belong, looking for mentorship, looking for community in a world full of alienation and despair.

We need to find what are called “third places” – places outside of work and home, “neutral turf” where we can meet and get to know people in our community. It’s great to invite people into our homes and into our churches, but sometimes, people are threatened by having to come onto our turf. “Third places” allow us to get to people in places where they are already comfortable. We go to them instead of trying to get them to come to us. It’s a form of

incarnational mission. Third places include coffee shops, pubs, restaurants, sports leagues, etc.

We need to connect vocation with mission – and I do not mean evangelizing on company time. I mean pursuing our vocations with excellence and in accord with God’s Word. If you don’t even know what I’m talking about, then you have work to do! What would it mean to be a Christian bartender? A Christian salesman? Banker? Artist? Etc. These are questions the church is struggling to answer – but answering them biblically is one of the major keys to transforming our culture.

The church should be the model neighborhood.