

THE GOSPEL DEFINED

It's not about what we can do for Jesus, or what he can do for us, but what he has already done.

The gospel of moralistic therapeutic deism is running rampant in the church. In an interview with Mark Galli, theologian Michael Horton says we are tempted to live a Christless Christianity because we are human-centered rather than God-centered. Conservative-leaning believers say, "These are God's commandments. The culture is slipping away from us. We have to recover it, and you play a role." Meanwhile, others say, "You can be happier if you follow God's principles." But as good as following these imperatives might be, the gospel is not a matter of doing the right things or trying harder. Horton says, "The gospel isn't 'Follow Jesus' example' or 'Transform your life' or 'How to raise good children.' The gospel is: Jesus Christ came to save sinners—even bad parents, even lousy followers of Jesus, which we all are on our best days."

Scripture: Romans 1:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25; 15:1–11; Galatians 3:1–11

Based on: "Christ at the Margins," from CHRISTIANITY TODAY



Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Christ at the Margins," from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

In our therapeutic, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps society, the message of God doing all the work attacks our egos. "In this culture, religion is all about being good, about the horizontal, about loving God and neighbor," Horton says. "[But] the gospel is entirely a message about what someone else [Jesus Christ] has done not only for me but also for the renewal of the whole creation." Compounding the problem, Christians today are faced with increasingly militant opposition to Christianity. So we face the temptation to live a Christless Christianity both from without and from within. Horton notes with dismay that while all this is occurring, people in the pews, pastors, and theologians seem to be incapable of articulating and defending the Christian faith. Much of the time our Christian leaders simply assume that we know the gospel before telling us what we ought to be doing, and the radical, God-centered message of the gospel is obscured in a flurry of good works. What we need is a refresher course on the gospel.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] Horton, referencing Paul, says the gospel is foolishness to Greeks, and most Christians today are "Greeks." Does the gospel seem foolish to those you know? Explain.
- [Q] What does Christless Christianity look like, and why is it so pervasive? Can you give examples?
- [Q] What is the relationship between faith and good works?
- [Q] Which is a bigger temptation for you: moralism or a therapeutic gospel?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: The gospel applies to everyone.

There are many human-centered gospels out there. Some imply you can be saved by works, or that the gospel is about self-improvement, making a better life for yourself. Yet the apostle Paul says there is only one gospel, and it is God-centered. This gospel applies to all—Greeks and non-Greeks, wise and foolish. The old divisions of ethnicity and learning no longer apply when it comes to the gospel, because the gospel, which means "good news," is not something you do. It is something you hear and believe. It comes from God to humanity. The gospel therefore applies to everyone.



Read Romans 1:14–17.

[Q] The apostle says he is *obligated* to preach the good news to all (v. 14). If the gospel is not about works, why does he feel he *must* do this? Do we feel this same sense of obligation?

[Q] Paul also says he is *eager* to preach the gospel, and that his eagerness flows out of his sense of obligation (v. 15). Do you experience the same eagerness? Are you willing to go out of your way, as Paul did, to share the good news? Explain.

[Q] Then Paul says he is *not ashamed* of the gospel, “because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (v. 16). Why might Paul have been tempted to be ashamed of the gospel? Why might we? What is the antidote?

[Q] The gospel reveals a righteousness from God (v. 17). Where does righteousness come from in the gospel and how does it come to us? Why is this good news?

Teaching Point Two: The gospel is about the death and resurrection of Christ.

We often confuse the gospel itself with the fruits of the gospel: sanctification from a life of sin, a better marriage, a renewed passion for social justice or world evangelization. These are all good things, but they are *not* the gospel. “All of that is the fruit of the gospel,” Horton reminds us. “The gospel is entirely a message about what someone else has done not only for me but also for the renewal of the whole creation.” So what has that “someone else” done for us? What is the core of the gospel? That’s what Paul addresses in this passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–11.

[Q] Paul is reminding the Corinthian believers about the gospel (v. 1). What verbs does he use in relation to the gospel? What implications do these verbs have for the Christian life?

[Q] What saves us (v. 2)? How do we know whether we are saved?

[Q] Paul says he both learned and taught something “of first importance” (v. 3). Here Paul says that some truths take priority, and that what follows is more important than other teachings. How do we determine what is “of first importance” in a culture where everyone is entitled to his or her opinion?

[Q] Paul lists the core elements of the gospel (vv. 3–8). What are they? What have we added to them?



[Q] Paul says he did not deserve to see the risen Christ, but by God's grace he was prepared to preach and represent the gospel (vv. 9–11). How do grace and works come together in our lives?

Teaching Point Three: The gospel challenges all human-centered religious notions.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–25.

Apart from Christ, all human religious impulses boil down to what *we* must do to please the divine. Christianity, however, asserts that God was pleased to do something for us—he sent his only Son to die for us on the cross. This solution is so counter-intuitive, it so devastates our pride, that our first response is to reject it. Salvation cannot be so simple, we think; surely we must add *something*. This prideful dynamic is on display in this passage, where the wisdom-seeking Greeks despise the simple message of the cross, and the unbelieving Jews demand further miraculous authentication. But the message also finds both Jews and Greeks who will hear and believe.

[Q] The gospel produces two responses among its hearers: Some call it foolishness, while others recognize it as “the power of God” (v. 18). What makes the difference in people's responses and what does this say about our evangelistic efforts?

[Q] God says he will “destroy the wisdom of the wise” and frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent (v. 19, see also Isa. 29:14). The context indicates that God is not against human intellectual pursuits but against human religious pride. Why is the latter such a persistent temptation? Why is God *not* impressed?

[Q] Paul contrasts God's wisdom with the world's wisdom (vv. 20–25). The wisdom of the world is a spiritual dead end, so God provides a “foolish” way forward. What is his solution? To whom does it apply?

Teaching Point Four: The gospel is about faith, not works.

Christians often start their walk with God by faith but end up relying on their works. As Horton says, “A lot of Christians, especially people who have had dramatic conversion experiences, go sailing out of the harbor with wind in their sails. They are so confident in Christ and what he has done for their salvation, and that gospel wind in is in their sails. Yet after two years, they have heard just one imperative after another. They have lots of course plotting, lots of books on how to do this and that. They've read every manual on spiritual disciplines. They have heard their pastor tell them they need to pray more, to read the Bible more, to evangelize more. Now they are dead in the water. There's no wind in the sails.”



Read Galatians 3:1–11, which is about getting the wind back in our sails.

[Q] Paul uses direct, even harsh language with the Galatian church. They are “foolish ... bewitched.” Their error points not to ignorance, but moral failure (v. 1). Paul seems stunned that they have moved away from the heart of the gospel, Christ crucified, and is rhetorically shaking them by the shoulders. How might we defend the gospel enthusiastically in our culture?

[Q] What do we learn about faith and works from Abraham (vv. 6–9)? What does this tell us about the nature of faith in the Old Testament and in the New?

[Q] Trying to live according to the law is not only misguided, it's dangerous (vv. 10–11). How do we keep ourselves from this error—or its opposite, licentiousness?

Optional Activity: *Using a whiteboard or poster board to record their answers, ask the group to list the questions Paul asks in Galatians 3:2–5. What are the results of belief versus human effort (v. 3)? Why does God reward the one and not the other?*

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Christians are often caricatured as narrow-minded bigots because of our exclusive claims for the gospel. But ultimately, they are not our claims, but God's. The gospel is good news because it is available to anyone, does not rely on human wisdom or effort, is received by faith, and is completely God's doing. The gospel is not a training regimen whereby we clean up our acts and receive God's favors. It is good news. The point of the gospel is that we are unworthy sinners who cannot clean up our acts. The gospel is about grace—receiving God's unmerited favor.

The gospel is not about good works. This does not mean Christians are free to live any way they please, however. Paul said that by God's grace he “worked harder than all of them.” While the gospel is a free gift, it is not a free ride. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Good works don't save us or keep us, but they do follow us.

How do we keep these truths in balance? Horton tells us to be involved in a church and become recipients of God's grace and “allow the imperatives that arise out of that to be our reasonable service [see Rom. 12:1–2]. Instead of trying to live the victorious Christian life, instead of trying to get into God's favor by following tips and formulas, let's receive the gospel and then follow the commands of God's law.”

Action Point: Write out on a piece of paper in two columns your hopes and fears about God's grace. When finished, we will each read our thoughts aloud. Group members are not allowed to criticize or critique. Then we'll discuss: Why is God's grace such a difficult truth to live?

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

📖 **The Gospel and Social Issues** Is the gospel getting lost in our concern for social issues?

📖 **The Gospel, a Napkin, and Four Circles** Examine a new way of expressing the gospel especially designed to explain God's "Big Story" with diagrams simple enough to be drawn on a napkin at a coffee shop.

📖 **Is Our Gospel Too Small?** Authentic ways of believing, sharing, and living a rich gospel message. This six-session study is part of the Christian Vision Project.

📖 www.desiringgod.com. God-centered resources from the ministry of John Piper.

📖 **The Cost of Discipleship**, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Touchstone, 1995). The classic work by one who knew the difference between cheap grace and costly grace.

📖 **Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church**, by Michael Horton (Baker, 2008). A call to put Christ at the heart of our discipleship.

📖 **The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World**, by Michael Horton (Baker, 2009). How to start living the gospel.





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CHRIST AT THE MARGINS

Michael Horton says we need to once again let our lives and churches be driven by the gospel.

Interview by Mark Galli

DESPITE THE TITLE of one of his recent books, Michael Horton doesn't believe the American church embodies Christless Christianity. But he is convinced that we are sorely tempted by it. So he has written two books—*Christless Christianity* and *The Gospel-Driven Life* (both with Baker Books)—to outline the problem and articulate the solution.

Horton is a professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California, and the author of many books (as well as the ghost writer for John Calvin's *Christianity Today* column this year). CT senior managing editor Mark Galli recently spoke with Horton about the concerns raised in his latest books.

What is at the core of the temptation to practice a Christless Christianity?

When the emphasis becomes human-centered rather than God-centered. In more conservative contexts, you hear it as exhortation: "These are God's commandments. The culture is slipping away from us. We have to recover it, and you play a role. Is your life matching up to what God calls us to?" Of course there is a place for that, but it seems to be the dominant emphasis.

Then there is the therapeutic approach: "You can be happier if you follow God's principles." All of this is said with a smile, but it's still imperative. It's still about techniques and principles for you to follow in order to have your best life now.

In both cases, it's law rather than gospel. I don't even know when I walk into a church that says it's Bible-believing that I'm actually going to hear an exposition of Scripture with Christ at the center, or whether I'm going to hear about how I should "dare to be a Daniel." The question is not whether we have imperatives in Scripture. The

question is whether the imperatives are all we are getting, because people assume we already know the gospel—and we don't.

But aren't many churches doing good preaching about how to improve your marriage, transform your life, and serve the poor?

The question is whether this is the Good News. There is nothing wrong with law, but law isn't gospel. The gospel isn't "Follow Jesus' example" or "Transform your life" or "How to raise good children." The gospel is: Jesus Christ came to save sinners—even bad parents, even lousy followers of Jesus, which we all are on our best days. All of the emphasis falls on "What would Jesus do?" rather than "What has Jesus done?"

Why is this such a temptation for the church?

It's our default setting. No one has to be taught to trust in themselves. No one has to be taught that what you experience inside yourself is more authoritative than what comes to you externally, even if it comes from God. Since the Fall, it has been part of our character to look within ourselves. And it is part of our inherent Pelagianism to think we can save ourselves by following the right instructions.

In such a therapeutic, pragmatic, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps society as ours, the message of God having to do all the work in saving us comes as an offensive shot at our egos. In this culture, religion is all about being good, about the horizontal, about loving God and neighbor. All of that is the fruit of the gospel. The gospel has nothing to do with what I do. The gospel is entirely a message about what someone else has done not only for me but also for the renewal of the whole creation.

Is this a new challenge?

Of course it's perennial. That's why Paul said that the gospel is foolishness to Greeks, and most of us in the church are Greeks.

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But today we have a new situation. We face a bewildering diversity of opposition to Christianity that is increasingly explicit—at the same time that not only people in the pews but also pastors and theologians seem the least capable of articulating the Christian faith, much less of offering persuasive arguments for it.

A recent issue of *Newsweek* featured an article, “We Are All Hindus Now,” by Lisa Miller. She acknowledges that, of course, most Americans aren’t practicing Hindus. But she appeals to various surveys to show that most Christians, including many evangelicals, embrace more Hindu tenets than Christian ones.

Two examples: First, the resurrection of the body. Miller points out that most Americans assume that at death, the soul, which they think of as the real part of a person, is finally released from its bodily prison to float off somewhere or to be reincarnated. Second, she refers more generally to the widespread belief that all paths lead to God or the divine, another major Hindu tenet but of course opposed to Christianity’s central claim that Jesus is the only Mediator and Savior.

What specifically do you mean by “a gospel-driven life”?

Because I live in San Diego, I think of a sailboat decked out with all of the latest equipment that tells you where you are and where you need to be. It plots your course, but it’s a sailboat, so you need wind in your sails. You start out, and it’s a beautiful day with wind in your sails. You’re out in the middle of the ocean when the wind dies down. You’re just sitting there dead calm. And your radio tells you that a hurricane is approaching. But all of your sophisticated equipment will not be able to get you to safety. What you need is wind in your sails.

A lot of Christians, especially people who have had dramatic conversion experiences, go sailing out of the harbor with wind in their sails. They are so confident in Christ and what he has done for their

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salvation, and that gospel wind is in their sails. Yet after two years, they have heard just one imperative after another. They have lots of course plotting, lots of books on how to do this and that. They’ve read every manual on spiritual disciplines. They have heard their pastor tell them they need to pray more, to read the Bible more, to evangelize more. Now they are dead in the water. There’s no wind in the sails.

Paul calls the gospel “the power of God unto salvation,” and I don’t think he meant the power of God just unto conversion. The gospel remains the power of God unto salvation until we are glorified. Calvin once said we need the gospel preached to us every week, and the Lord’s Supper to ratify that promise, because we are partly unbelievers until we die.



In *The Gospel-Driven Life* you use news as a metaphor. Why?

I stole it from the apostles! Their dominant metaphor for the gospel message is “good news.” The content is that God has done all the saving, no thanks to us. Someone asked Martin Luther what we contribute to salvation, and he said, “Sin and resistance!”

The gospel is not even my conversion experience. If somebody asks me what the gospel is, I’m not going to talk about me; I’m going to talk about Christ. All of the testimonies we find from the apostles’ lips are not testimonies about what happened in their hearts. They are testimonies about what happened in history when God saved his people from their sins. That’s the gospel. Although the gospel makes all sorts of things happen inside of me and gives me the fruit of the Spirit, the gospel itself is always an external word that comes to me announcing that someone else in history has accomplished my salvation for me.

Someone comes with instructions and says, “Here’s what your life could be like if you do x, y, or z.” Good news is, “Let me tell you what has happened!” The gospel is not good instructions, not a good idea, and not good advice. The gospel is an announcement of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

You also say it's not "a personal relationship with God" or "making Jesus your Lord and Savior." What do you mean?

I realize that those are deeply held, personal convictions among many evangelicals. But everyone has a personal relationship with God. In Romans 1–3, Paul says Gentiles have a relationship with God, even when they are engaging in idolatry. The question is whether the relationship is with a father, who has justified and adopted his heirs, or with a judge.

The phrase "making Jesus Lord and Savior" does not appear anywhere in Scripture (any more than does "personal relationship"). It assumes we are the ones who make God something. It is hard to imagine a Jew saying he made God his liberator and Lord in the Exodus. No. God made the Israelites the recipients of his saving and lordly work. So we don't make God anything; it is he who makes us his people. The Good News is not that Jesus has made it possible for you to make him Lord and Savior. The Good News is that he has actually saved and liberated you, and that he is your Savior.

Another popular way of conceiving the Christian life is to describe it as simply "following Jesus," but you have concerns.

It's an explicit confusion of the law and the gospel. People talk about living the gospel and quote the line from Francis of Assisi (at least it's attributed to him), "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." Well, Paul says that faith comes from hearing the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). He says that salvation comes by hearing words, good words. And it's great news for me and for the people I'm witnessing to that my life isn't the gospel.

When we set things up in terms of following Jesus' example rather than looking to Jesus first and foremost as Savior, we set ourselves up as the gospel and preach ourselves rather than Christ. We also set ourselves up for a fall, when we fail to live up to the commands of Christ that we profess.

Wouldn't it be better to tell them, "Look, don't believe in Christ because I'm a marvelous person with wonderful experiences and morality. Look at Christ, because you and I both are so sinful and so prone to evil that we need a Savior." Unbelievers should see our testimony to Christ primarily when we are in church confessing our sin and confessing our faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, our lives are a fragrant aroma that brings attraction to or repulsion from the gospel. But our transforming work is not the gospel. The gospel is Jesus Christ's objective work in history.

Given your identification with Reformed theology, some might wonder if you're just preaching to Arminians.

Well, William Willimon, an Arminian and United Methodist bishop, wrote the foreword to *Christless Christianity*. One point I wanted to make in both books is that this is not about Calvinism versus Arminianism. As a Calvinist, I might think that focusing on Christ makes sense within a Reformed paradigm. But my argument is that this creeping fog of moralistic therapeutic deism is as obvious in Reformed churches today as it is in Methodist churches. None of us has clean hands here. This is not restricted to any one tradition.

Some theologians argue that classical Protestantism—with its concern for the individual's relationship with God—leads to

individualism and to a withdrawing from the world, because it becomes about me getting my soul saved for heaven.

It's exactly the opposite. I go into great detail about this in *The Gospel-Driven Life*. The Word creates community. All the Reformers said that if you read the Bible by yourself in a corner, there's no telling how many spirits you'll be filled with. That just means, as Luther said, that every man will go to hell in his own way. An external Word takes the form of a corporate event. It is preached. It's not us determining for ourselves over in a corner what we believe and how we'll live. It's the obsession with the spiritual disciplines that's actually very individualistic.

I've been in emerging church services where you have one person going up to take Communion, another person going up to watch a video, and another person going up to have a conversation. Talk about individualism.

No, the corporate event is highlighted when God says, "Assemble before me, all of you people. I am going to make you one people in Christ. I'm going to draw all of you into my Son by my Spirit, and make you united not only to Christ but also to each other."

Baptism is not only a sacrament of our union with Christ; it is also a sacrament of our communion as the body of Christ. Paul upbraided the Corinthians for their individualism by appealing to the practice of the Lord's Supper and by saying we are all one body because we eat of one loaf. The word-and-sacrament ministry [of Reformation Protestantism] is precisely what we need in order to uproot the narcissism and individualism that pervade our culture.

So what is the first step in living a gospel-driven life?

The fog of moralistic therapeutic deism is as obvious in Reformed churches today as it is in Methodist churches.

Become a recipient again. Mary and Martha, the two sisters and disciples of Jesus, had different relationships with Jesus. Martha busied herself with many tasks, and she was getting mad at Mary for making her do all the work. Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, learning from him. Jesus rebuked Martha for criticizing her sister and said Mary had chosen the better part.

First and foremost, disciples are recipients of Jesus Christ's teaching. His teachings are really teachings concerning his person and his work. He has accomplished our salvation. He has accomplished our redemption. So first, allow the gospel to soak in again.

Then allow the imperatives that arise out of that to be our reasonable service. Instead of trying to live the victorious Christian life, instead of trying to get into God's favor by following tips and formulas, let's receive the gospel and then follow the commands of God's law when it comes to directives. Then our sailboat is perfectly equipped. Now we have the wind in our sails—the gospel—and we also have God's own wisdom to guide us in that gospel-driven life.