
The Gospel, Sanctification, and Mission

Robert Heppe

An example of spiritual self-preoccupation

It is now a commonplace that American Christians are self-absorbed. I believe that this self-preoccupation in the church, whether in the US or here in Britain, can be traced at least partially to a faulty paradigm of sanctification, and that this faulty paradigm is due to a misunderstanding of the gospel – which can be traced back to the Reformation!

We don't understand the gospel. I am not talking merely about not understanding *grace*. It is painfully true that many Christians don't understand grace. But legalism is not the root of the problem of self-preoccupation. Legalism is rather just one form of it. Many have been brought out from under legalism to a new appreciation of grace and yet their visions and passions have remained substantially unaltered. They are still basically self-centred. They are still wrapped up in themselves. One could multiply examples, but I trust that the one given below will illustrate the sort of self-preoccupation that can and often does occur, even among those who have been liberated from legalism by a deep understanding of grace:

Please pray for me – God is really dealing with the roots of some of my most consistent sins and it hurts to not be able to do any righteous things to take care of them. – All I'm asked to do is trust Jesus that he has been plenty righteous for me and that he is constantly willing to change me into a son who believes that he doesn't need to achieve his own righteousness or try harder to keep from sinning. A life of faith ... I have a lot of anger toward God that I struggle so much with sin ... then I hear him say "Stop struggling!! I've done it all. Just believe that I have the power to help you live based in these truths." You know, sometimes I get tired of rambling like that – I feel like it is sort of another way to conjure up some righteousness sometimes. Sometimes I get genuinely excited, but sometimes I wonder ...

This has the appearance of being deeply spiritual. But the whole enterprise is turned inward, self-referential, and somewhat nauseating. The holy extroversion of an Isaiah, who, when confronted with sin, takes it to the cross there to be forgiven and forgotten, is replaced by a morbid interest in whether he is properly trusting in the finished work of Christ or surreptitiously trying to build his own righteousness. Grace is serving a quest that ought not to exist in the first place, the quest of attaining one's goal of freedom and happy feelings. The problem is deeper than legalism; it is self-centredness. And grace is serving self-centredness.

The gospel misunderstood

How is it that the gospel could be put to such a self-centred and self-serving use, and lead to such morbid introversion? The answer to that is a long story, which stretches back at least to Augustine. However, one major reason, I believe, is that the *scope* of the gospel isn't appreciated and, in many cases, is actually filtered out of view. Two pivotal moves enable this to happen:

1. It begins with the individual person at the centre and asks how they can relate to (be

right with, justified before) God. It is anthropocentric.

2. It so elevates the forensic aspect of the gospel (atonement, justification) that **these** elements tend to take on the whole meaning of the gospel, thereby screening out the broader implications of the gospel.

This is essentially what I call the “Lutheran” paradigm of the gospel.¹ Luther himself is the primary example, having wrestled for years with the state of his soul in the light of “the righteousness of God” and finding the solution in imputed righteousness. Such was the power of his discovery that it became the basis for a method of doing theology: theology, says Luther, is to be done *from the standpoint of the human subject*, bound in sin and set free by grace:

The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned and God the Justifier and Saviour of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject is error and poison.²

Jerry Bridges, although not a Lutheran but a Calvinist, reflects this “Lutheran” paradigm in *Discipline of Grace*. This is one of the best books on the market dealing with living the Christian life by grace. But when he explains what it means to “preach the gospel to yourself” – one of the central themes of the book –³ his explanation involves a detailed exposition of Romans 3:21-31 and concludes by saying that this passage is the “clearest” and “fullest” account of the gospel. Bridges’ book is representative example of the “Lutheran” paradigm of the gospel operative in almost all evangelical theology.

I do not wish to deny the absolute necessity of living out of the grace of God. The Christian life involves a continual process of repentance and faith, both in the finished work of Christ and for his ongoing enabling power through the Spirit. The dangers of legalism and moralistic self-sufficiency, to which writers such as Bridges draw attention, are very real and are eating away at the vitality of the church. We are told continually to go to the throne of grace, there to find the resources we lack in ourselves. Nevertheless, there are problems with this “Lutheran” paradigm, as I see it, one of which I will discuss here. The problem is that the “the gospel of God’s grace” is much broader and far greater than justification by faith; it is more than merely an answer to legalism, works-righteousness, Roman Catholicism, or even how to get saved.

The scope of the gospel is *a whole world made new as men and women are brought into a saving relationship to Christ, to be consummated when he returns*. It is cosmic in scope. Jesus summarises it as the gospel of “the Kingdom of God” (see, for example, Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:16-21,43). It was anticipated by the Old Testament prophets as the good news of Messiah’s coming, when all of God’s enemies would be destroyed and Israel vindicated. It is pictured as a restoration of exiled Israel, but far more: it means also a time for the inclusion of the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:1-7; 54:1-3; 56:1-8; Jeremiah 1:4; Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:16ff; Romans 1:1-6). It looks back to the pivotal promise to Abraham that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed and included as “the people of God” (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:8; Ephesians 3:6; 1 Peter 2:9-10). But even more, it involves a restoration of *SHALOM* to the whole creation (see, for example, Isaiah 65:17-23; Romans 8:18-25). Paul speaks in terms of reconciliation, having in mind more than personal, individual peace between man and God. He has in view the whole cosmos – all things in the heavens and on earth – being reconciled, that is, brought

into proper relationship not only to God but to everything else, subsumed under the headship of Christ (compare, for example, Colossians 1:20 with Ephesians 1:9-10).

NT Wright's recent work on the theology of Paul sheds further light on the meaning of "gospel", and it confirms that Paul's message, which could be summed up as "Jesus is Lord", is a Pauline way of expressing the theme of the gospel of the kingdom. Wright summarises his conclusions as follows:

My proposal has been that "the gospel" is not, for Paul, a message about "how one gets saved" in an individual and ahistorical sense. It is a fourfold announcement about Jesus:

1. In Jesus of Nazareth, specifically in his cross, the decisive victory has been won over all the powers of evil, including sin and death themselves.
2. In Jesus' resurrection the New Age [kingdom] has dawned, inaugurating the long awaited time when the prophecies would be fulfilled, when Israel's exile would be over, and the whole world would be addressed by the one creator God.
3. The crucified and risen Jesus was, all along, Israel's Messiah, her representative king.
4. Jesus was therefore also the Lord, the true king of the world, the one at whose name every knee would bow.⁴

We need to recover the grand, cosmic significance of Jesus' saving activity, that moves the gospel out of the narrow realm of our self-preoccupation. Reformation Christianity has had a tendency to produce introspective, self-centred people. We get terribly worked up over how we are doing at living the Christian life: "Am I good enough? Have I evangelised enough? Is God pleased with my progress? Am I weak enough? Am I living by grace?" The legalists are trying to earn God's favour and those who have had a grace-breakthrough act as though the chief goal in life is not to be a legalist.

God has more important (and interesting) things to be concerned about. The gospel is God's message of liberation: from guilt, alienation and every bondage that hinders the human race from being fruitful for God and reflecting his glory. The good news that Jesus preached is that he, as Lord of the cosmos, is now in the business of recapturing a runaway planet.⁵ He came to destroy the works of the Devil – all of them, not merely the psychological ones that plague middle-class Westerners – and to bring the world under his saving authority. That means he came to reverse the effects of the fall "as far as the curse is found". The gospel of the kingdom announces nothing less than God's intention, and activity, to replace the effects of the fall (sin, guilt, sickness, hunger, injustice, oppression, poverty, bondage, dehumanisation and death) with his kingdom righteousness and his work will not be finished until his redemption covers the whole earth.

The cross is not thereby minimised. It is absolutely necessary that Jesus become incarnate, die as an atoning sacrifice, be raised and ascend to heaven. Moreover, the centrality of faith is not threatened. Indeed, *more* faith needs to be exercised to believe the gospel of the kingdom than the "Lutheran" gospel, for the former includes everything in the latter for the individual, but extends to the entire fallen world as well.

The gospel has to be at least as broad as the effects of the fall. A gospel which doesn't address all of the effects of the fall is less than the gospel. Francis Schaeffer neatly discerned four levels of alienation which resulted from Adam's sin:

- (1) theological: man became alienated from God through guilt and corruption;
- (2) psychological: man's relationship with himself (self-alienation, identity crises,

- crises of meaning and purpose) quickly became problematic – Adam was ashamed;
- (3) societal: alienation between human beings (broken relationships, injustice, poverty, violence, oppression, societal patterns that conspire to destroy the image of God in man and to maintain the Devil’s bondage and oppression over people), and
 - (4) natural: even our relationship with nature (diseases, famine, natural disasters, work cursed) has been corrupted!

Jesus means to transform everything! He says, “Behold, I am making all things new!” And he won’t be satisfied until he has destroyed evil in every corner and crevice of the world. He is on a mission of renewal.

One of the marvelous things about this gospel is that he has saved us so that we can be a part of his redeeming activity. God’s new people are called into his redeeming activity (e.g. Exodus 19:4; 1 Peter 2:9). David Schwartz puts it this way:

For all of us who have heard his voice and claim his name, Jesus’ conquest of a runaway planet should be our main business ... Everyone who comes by faith to Jesus Christ enters the most revolutionary enterprise a human being can undertake – the pursuit of the kingdom of God!⁶

The gospel, properly understood, is much broader than our concerns for personal survival, security, significance, success, or even self-centred sanctification. It presents us with a Jesus, not meek and mild, but One come to set the world on fire. It presents a plunderer and it bids us to throw ourselves away in the pursuit of his new world order. This gospel, properly understood, includes within it a *mission*. For to accept the gospel is to believe in and identify with God’s ultimate purpose for his world. Thus when one accepts the gospel, one does not merely accept forgiveness and assurance of eternal life, but a vision of and for the future and a mission. This has been overlooked, and so, given our unending bent towards the self (which is the essence of sin), it is little wonder that a gospel which filters out the grand cosmic redemptive purposes of God cannot combat self-preoccupation.⁷ In a word, we need to preach the gospel of *the kingdom* to ourselves every day.

Sanctification sidetracked

One effect of not understanding the gospel (of the kingdom) is that sanctification gets sidetracked. Almost all treatments of sanctification tend to discuss it within what I consider to be the faulty, anthropocentric, “Lutheran” paradigm of the gospel.⁸ Sanctification is then thought of as working out the implications of the gospel within one’s personal life, but as it begins with man at the centre of things and doesn’t challenge this, it tends to produce self-absorbed Christian “sanctophiles”. Sanctification becomes merely a Christianised version of the non-Christian quest of self-realisation. Christians – the spiritually-minded ones – are so busy working out God’s plan of salvation in their own lives that they have little interest, time or energy for God’s “other concerns”.

One way this misplaced foundation works itself out is that in treatments of sanctification the emphasis is placed *merely* on Jesus’ *character traits*. Sanctification then becomes the science of developing Christ-like qualities in one’s life. They can be grace/faith oriented methods or discipline/legalistic methods, but in both types the focus and goal is the character traits of Jesus: patience, humility, kindness, love (understood quite self-centredly) and so on.

What is left out is the *mindset* of Jesus. While we cannot ignore the character traits

of Jesus, I have begun to question whether this was the chief concern to the gospel writers. Rather, they show us his *mentality*, his *passion*, his *mission*. In Jesus' interaction with people, we are not primarily being given examples of character traits to emulate, but examples of his *mission* in action: to seek, to save, to suffer, to restore, to embrace, to include, to renew, to forgive, to reconcile, to heal, to comfort, to liberate and so on. What then does "becoming like Jesus" look like in this paradigm? It certainly includes his character traits. But it also includes at the centre of it adopting his mindset and hence his mission – not only to act the way he acted but to be what he was. Now the punch line: he was a *missionary*! He was dominated by a sense of purpose which lay outside of himself. Bear in mind that the word "missionary" comes from the Latin "*mitto*", and that this word is used to translate the Greek *apostello* (from which we get "apostle"), which means "to send (with a purpose)". Jesus was *the* sent one, the "missioned" one. He was a man on a mission of love, come to sacrifice his life for the sake of others. In that light, consider what John Stott has to say:

The sense of having been sent was a fundamental awareness of Jesus. It gave significance, urgency, and compulsion to everything he did. "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is still day," he said; "night comes, when no one can work." (John 9:4). Thus his mission dominated his mind and actions. Indeed, the phenomenon of Jesus is inexplicable otherwise. Wherever we look in his earthly career – his birth and boyhood, his words and works, his suffering and death – we are faced with the fact that he had been "sent" and that he knew it.

Now he says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Therefore, if mission was central in the mind of Jesus, it must be central in our minds too. If Jesus is inexplicable apart from his mission, his church is equally inexplicable apart from its mission. If God was to Jesus "he who sent me", then Jesus must be to us "he who sent us." For this is part of the very nature of the church. The church is the community of Jesus who have first been chosen out of the world and then sent back into the world. Mission is as fundamental to us as it was to Christ. An introverted church, turned in on itself, preoccupied with its own survival, has virtually forfeited the right to be a church, for it is denying a major part of its own being. As a planet which ceases to be in orbit is no longer a planet, so a church which ceases to be in mission is no longer a church. In order to qualify for the name "church" we must be a community deeply and constantly aware of our "sentness" and actively loyal to this part of our Christian identity.⁹

It is frightful to think that what Stott says about the "introverted church, turned in on itself ..." might be equally applicable to the individual Christian. To qualify for the title "Christian", we must be deeply and constantly aware of our "sentness". But how many Christians or churches approach this mentality?

Jesus had no time for self-absorption because he was absorbed by a higher purpose of love. Note, by the way, that it is a higher purpose *of* love, not the higher purpose *to* love. Love was not his purpose. Saving people and transforming the world was his purpose, motivated by love. I draw attention to that distinction because, in our self-centredness, we turn even love into a self-centred goal. Love which is aware of itself is not love at all. Love for us was not the object of Jesus' endeavour but the motivation. Love was not the goal; the salvation of others for the glory of God was his object.

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Now he says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Therefore, if mission was central in the mind of Jesus, it must be central in our minds too. If Jesus is inexplicable apart from his mission, his church is equally inexplicable apart from its mission. If God was to Jesus "he who sent me", then Jesus must be to us "he who sent us." For this is part of the very nature of the church. The church is the community of Jesus who have first been chosen out of the world and then sent back into the world. Mission is as fundamental to us as it was to Christ. An introverted church, turned in on itself, preoccupied with its own survival, has virtually forfeited the right to be a church, for it is denying a major part of its own being. As a planet which ceases to be in orbit is no longer a planet, so a church which ceases to be in mission is no longer a church. In order to qualify for the name "church" we must be a community deeply and constantly aware of our "sentness" and actively loyal to this part of our Christian identity.⁹

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brilliantly points out what becoming like Jesus means and exposes the way in which the interest in personal piety can mask self-absorption. Warfield distinguished between self-denial and self-sacrifice, showing how Jesus (and only Christianity) taught and practised self-sacrifice. Self-denial, as practised in, for example, ascetic forms of Hinduism, and in Christianity is essentially self-centred, directed towards the salvation or improvement of the practitioner. Self-sacrifice, on the other hand, is exhibited when one is no longer thinking about oneself and one's performance, but has forgotten oneself by becoming absorbed in the service of the need of others. Warfield says:

Our self-abnegation is thus not for our own sakes, but for the sake of others. And thus it is not to mere self-denial that Christ calls us, but specifically to self-sacrifice: not to unselfing ourselves, but to unselfishing ourselves. Self denial for its own sake is in its very nature ascetic, monkish. It concentrates our whole attention on self – self-knowledge, self-control ... [Christ] was led by his love for others into the world, to forget himself in the needs of others, to sacrifice self once for all upon the altar of sympathy. Self-sacrifice brought Christ into the world. And self-sacrifice will lead us, his followers, not away from but into the midst of men ... Self-sacrifice means not indifference to our times and our fellows: it means absorption in them.¹⁰

What then does it mean to be like Jesus? Certainly, it does not look like being all wrapped up in our sanctification programmes; but rather, to simply forget about ourselves as we become absorbed in his self-sacrificing mission to save the world.

A missionary gospel

The gospel discovered at the Reformation, while a great advance on the Roman Catholic theology of merit, filtered out of view the broader dimensions of the gospel of the kingdom. In the “Lutheran” paradigm, therefore, there is no conceptual link between the gospel and mission. Indeed, as Addison Soltau puts it, the Reformation understanding of the gospel was somewhat anti-missionary:

Historic Reformed confessions lack an adequate expression of the teaching of Scripture concerning the apostolic task of the church. So lacking are they, in fact, that there are those within our communities who feel that Reformed tradition is threatened by too great a missionary emphasis.¹¹

The historian Richard Lovelace likewise points out that the Reformation did not produce kingdom-oriented, missions-minded Christians. He says that the “tendency to forget the redemptive emergency in the world and to concentrate on enjoying dominion in a part of it has been a continual temptation of the church.”¹² Concerning the Reformation in particular he says:

It would seem at first that the Reformation should have overcome this problem, since it attacked the separation between lay and clerical vocations, encouraged the priesthood of all believers and stressed the truths of justification and sanctification through Christ. All these emphases should have helped release the laity spiritually for mission.¹³

The emphasis on justification and sanctification by faith that was rediscovered in the Reformation did not always result in a significant unleashing of the church in missions. “Gospel” became Lutheranism to such an extent, in my opinion, that it became synonymous with “atonement” or “justification”. The broader implications of the gospel were filtered out and it took until the late 18th century before any significant

missionary activity began.

Lovelace seems to imply that the Lutheran paradigm of the gospel should have contained within it a missionary motivation. He says, "But the Kingdom of God continued to be an elusive reality for Protestants."⁴⁴ Although they had some missionary concern,

Most American Puritans in the late seventeenth century seem to have been caught up in either of two forms of self-absorption: those who were seriously religious were urgently concerned to establish their regeneracy and grow in personal holiness and those who were formally pious were mesmerised by their interest in land and business.⁴⁵

The idea of the kingdom of God was submerged, or rather, never recaptured during the Reformation.

In a later book, Lovelace pushes the importance of the kingdom further, devoting a whole chapter to it, and he explicitly connects its absence in the Reformers' thought with spiritual introversion:

As we have noted, the Protestant Reformers did not clearly point to the kingdom of Christ as a goal to be pursued beyond the concern for individual salvation. This opened the way for self-centredness to reassert itself after the event of conversion. The Reformation corrected the Catholic understanding of individual salvation, but did not go beyond it to define adequately the collective Christian enterprise.

In large measure, the Reformers simply tuned up the medieval model of individualistic spirituality, without refocussing the church's consciousness on the kingdom of God.¹⁶

These observations are critically important and they point in the right direction, but they do not go far enough. I believe Lovelace should rather have said that the Reformers, stuck with a problem bequeathed to them in Medieval Christianity, made a breakthrough in the area of soteriology, but nevertheless still didn't understand the gospel comprehensively enough. The gospel *is* the good news of the kingdom of God, centred in the person of Jesus the Messiah. This includes within it justification and sanctification by faith (though these concepts may have to be revised in the light of a more redemptive-historical approach to the Scriptures), but it is not circumscribed by these doctrines.

In the vacuum caused by the absence of Christ's kingdom agenda, and, at best, presented with a "Lutheran" gospel, Christians have *nothing better* to do than pursue a modified, Christianised version of the middle-class life. But if, the gospel is about the kingdom of God, that "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth his successive journeys run" and that his reign means the end of sin, misery and death; if it is a message of a world made new as it is brought under his lordship through the agency of his (suffering and sacrificing) church, then it will be impossible to believe in the gospel without embracing his mission. To believe the gospel is to believe in this future and to embrace his mission. We should not, however, adopt this understanding of the gospel merely for utilitarian reasons. We should adopt it because it more accurately reflects the true meaning of the gospel.

References

¹ I use the quotation marks to note the fact that there were a number of differences between Luther and other Reformers, but also to draw attention to a fundamentally common approach among all of them. It is appropriately called a "Lutheran" paradigm because his personal struggle with the righteousness of God, and subsequent breakthrough in understanding

justification, became the lens through which Scripture was approached for all of the Reformers.

² *Luther's Works*, 12:311

³ Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1994), chapter 3.

⁴ NT Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Oxford, Lion, 1998), p. 60.

⁵ I owe this expression to David Schwartz, *The Magnificent Obsession*, (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1990), p. 23

⁶ David Schwartz, p. 38.

⁷ The nature of sin and repentance takes on a new light. We must repent not only of legalism, self-righteousness and self-indulgence, but of the fundamental sin of "self-ism": of not really wanting to see and embrace the plan and purpose of God, of not caring about the glory of God. It is completely self-consuming! We need to repent of the resistance of the flesh to wanting to see God's name hallowed, to longing for righteousness (of the kingdom), to mourning (over the broken condition of the world), to throwing ourselves away for "my sake and the gospel's" (Mark 8:35). To preach the gospel to ourselves will involve both the appropriation of grace on a daily basis, and reorienting ourselves every day around Christ and his kingdom.

⁸ There is a Lutheran view of *sanctification* which contrasts to, and disagrees with, views such as Keswick, Pentecostal, Reformed and the man in the street's try-harder moralism. But they all share a "Lutheran" paradigm of the gospel.

Perhaps there is a more fundamental issue at work here: whether to approach sanctification in a systematic-theological and anthropocentric point of view, or from a Biblical-theological (redemptive-historical) point of view. In theology departments (and popular texts) sanctification is usually treated within the context of the (anthropocentric) *ordo salutis*. Years ago John Murray pointed out that underlying the whole order of salvation was the doctrine of union with Christ. This points in the right direction, as no discussion of sanctification can neglect the importance of union with Christ. Still, the discussion takes place from an anthropocentric starting point. It is born and bred of systematic theology and man-centred. Another perspective is gained by a redemptive-historical approach, which places personal sanctification in the framework of the already/not yet unfolding of the kingdom of God. For such a treatment see Sinclair Ferguson, *The Reformed doctrine of sanctification*, in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views On Sanctification* (Leicester, IVP). Individual sanctification is then seen as part of God's global plan of renewal. Ferguson puts it something like this: I experience on a microcosmic level the macrocosmic conflict of kingdoms. Another way to put it is this: individual sanctification can be seen in the light of a broader redemptive-historical understanding of the Bible, rather than in terms of a theological approach, which puts human soteriology at the centre of things.

⁹ John Stott, "The Lord Christ is a Missionary Christ", in David M Howard, ed., *Declare His Glory* (Leicester, IVP, 1977), p. 53.

¹⁰ BB Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), pp. 268-269.

¹¹ Addison Soltau "Mobilizing The Seminaries" in Harvie Conn, ed., *Reaching The Unreached*, (Philedelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1984), p. 156.

¹² Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Leicester, IVP, 1979), p. 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁶ Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life* (Leicester, IVP, 1985), p. 178.

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