

THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

PART I: IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS *By Timothy Keller*

PRINCIPLE

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter's racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living "in line with the truth of the gospel." From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life—spiritual, psychological, corporate, social—by thinking, hoping, and living out the "lines" or ramifications of the gospel. The gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.

IMPLICATION 1

The power of the gospel. First, Paul is showing us that bringing the gospel truth to bear on every area of life is the way to be changed by the power of God. The gospel is described in the Bible in the most astounding terms. Angels long to look into it all the time (1 Peter 1:12). It does not simply bring us power, but it is *the power of God* itself, for Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). It is also the blessing of God with benefits that accrue to anyone who comes near (1 Cor. 9:23). It is even called the very light of the glory of God itself: "they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. . . . For God . . . [has] made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

After the gospel has regenerated us and we are converted, it is the instrument of all continual growth and spiritual progress: "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth" (Col. 1:6). Here we learn several things: (1) The gospel is a living thing (cf. Rom 1:16), like a seed or a tree that brings more and more new life—*bearing fruit and growing*. (2) The gospel is "planted" in us so as to bear fruit only as we understand its greatness and implications deeply—*understood God's grace in all its truth*. (3) The gospel continues to grow in us and renew us throughout our lives—as *it has been doing since the day you heard it*. This text helps us avoid either an exclusively rationalistic or mystical approach to renewal. On the one hand, the gospel has a content—it is profound doctrine. It is *truth*, and specifically, it is the truth about God's grace. But on the other hand, this truth is a living power that continually expands its influence in our lives, just as a crop or a tree would grow and spread and increasingly dominate an area with roots and fruit.

IMPLICATION 2

The sufficiency of the gospel. Second, Paul is showing that in our Christian life we never "get beyond the gospel" to something more advanced. The gospel is not the first step in a stairway of truths; rather, it is more like the hub in a wheel of truth. The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.

We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience; rather the gospel is *the way we grow* (Gal. 3:1–3) and are renewed (Col. 1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power to take us through every barrier (Rom. 1:16–17). It is very common in the church to think as follows: "The gospel is for non-Christians. One needs it to be saved. But once saved, you grow through hard work and obedience." But Colossians 1:6 shows that this is a mistake. Both confession and "hard work" that is not arising from and in line with the gospel will not sanctify you—they will strangle you. All our problems come from a failure to apply the gospel. Thus when Paul left the Ephesians he committed them "to the word of his grace, which can build you up" (Acts 20:32).

The main problem in the Christian life, then, is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel; we have not "used" the gospel in and on all parts of our life. Richard Lovelace says that most people's problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel—a failure to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther says, "The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually" (on Gal. 2:14–15). The gospel is not easily comprehended. Paul says that the gospel does its renewing work in

us only as we understand it *in all its truth*. All of us to some degree live around the truth of the gospel but do not “get it.” So the key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal and revival is *continual rediscovery of the gospel*. The discovery of a new implication or application of the gospel—seeing more of its truth—is an important stage of any renewal. This is true for either an individual or a church.

APPLICATIONS

The two “thieves” of the gospel. Since Paul uses the metaphor of being “in line” with the gospel, we can consider that gospel renewal occurs when we keep from walking “off line” either to the right or to the left. A key for thinking out the implications of the gospel is to consider the gospel a *third* way between two mistaken opposites. However, we must realize that the gospel is not a halfway compromise between these two poles—it produces not something in the middle but something different from both.

Tertullian, a Christian writer in the second and third centuries, said, “Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors.” He meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which “steals” the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us to one side or the other of the “gospel line.” These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind. (The gospel is “revealed” by God [Rom. 1:17]—the unaided human mind cannot conceive it.) The “thieves” can be called *moralism* or *legalism* on the one hand and *hedonism* or *relativism* on the other hand. Another way to put it is: the gospel opposes both religion *and* irreligion (see Matt. 21:31; 22:10). On the one hand, moralism/religion stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, relativism/irreligion stresses grace without truth, for it says that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true *for us*. But “truth” without grace is not really truth, and “grace” without truth is not really grace. Jesus was “full of grace *and* truth” (John 1:14). Any religion or philosophy of life that deemphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths falls into legalism or license, and either way, the joy and power and release of the gospel are stolen.

The moralism-religion thief. How does moralism/religion steal joy and power?

Moralism is the view that you are acceptable (to God, the world, others, yourself) through your attainments. Moralists do not have to be religious but often are. When they are, their religion is pretty conservative and filled with rules. Sometimes moralists have a view of God as very holy and just. This view will lead either to (a) self-hatred (because they can’t live up to the standards) or (b) self-inflation (because they think they have lived up to the standards). It is ironic that inferiority *and* superiority complexes have the very same root. Whether the moralist ends up smug and superior or crushed and guilty just depends on how high the standards are and on his or her natural advantages such as family, intelligence, looks, willpower. Moralistic people can be deeply religious—but there is no transforming joy or power.

The relativism-irreligion thief. How does relativism steal joy and power?

Relativists are usually irreligious, or else they prefer what is called “liberal” religion. On the surface, they are more happy and tolerant than moralistic/religious people. Although they may be highly idealistic in some areas (such as politics), they believe that everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong for themselves. They are not convinced that God is just and must punish sinners. Their beliefs in God will tend to picture him as loving or as an impersonal force. They may talk a great deal about God’s love, but since they do not think of themselves as sinners, *God’s love for humankind costs him nothing*. If God accepts us, it is because he is so welcoming or because we are not so bad. The gospel’s concept of God’s love is far richer and deeper and more electrifying.

What do both religious and irreligious people have in common? They seem so different, but from the viewpoint of the gospel, they are really the same.

1. *They are both ways to avoid Jesus as Savior and keep control of their lives.*

Irreligious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through “worldly” pride. (“No one tells *me* how to live or what to do; I determine what is right and wrong for *me*!”) But moral and religious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through “religious” pride. (“I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes it to me to listen to my prayers and take me to heaven. God cannot let just anything happen to me—he owes me a happy life. I’ve earned it!”) The irreligious person rejects Jesus entirely; the religious person uses Jesus as an example and helper and teacher—but not as a Savior. In her novel *Wise Blood*,

Flannery O'Connor's main character Hazel thinks "that the way to avoid Jesus [is] to avoid sin." These are two different ways to do the same thing—control one's own life. (Note: Ironically, moralists, despite all the emphasis on traditional standards, are in the end self-centered and *individualistic*, because they have set themselves up as their own savior. Relativists, despite all their emphasis on freedom and acceptance, are in the end *moralistic*, because they still have to live up to [their own] standards or become desperate. And often they take great pride in their own open-mindedness and judge others who are not.)

2. *They are both based on distorted views of the real God.*

The irreligious person loses sight of the law and holiness of God, and the religious person loses sight of the love and grace of God; in the end they both lose the gospel entirely. For the gospel is that on the cross Jesus fulfilled the law of God out of love for us. Without a full understanding of the work of Christ, the reality of God's holiness will make his grace unreal, or the reality of God's love will make his holiness unreal. Only the gospel—that we are so sinful that we need to be saved utterly by grace—allows us to see God as he really is. The gospel shows us a God far more holy than the legalist can bear (he *had* to die because we could not satisfy his holy demands), and yet far more merciful than a humanist can conceive (he had to *die* because he loved us).

3. *They both deny our sin—and therefore lose the joy and power of grace.*

It is obvious that relativistic, irreligious people deny the depth of sin, and thus the message "God loves you" has no power for them. But although religious persons may be extremely penitent and sorry for their sins, they see sins as simply a failure to live up to standards by which they are saving themselves. They do not see sin as the deeper self-righteousness and self-centeredness through which they are trying to live lives independent of God. So when they go to Jesus for forgiveness, they go only as a way to cover over the gaps in their project of self-salvation. And when people say, "I know God is forgiving, but I cannot forgive myself," they mean that they reject God's grace and insist that they be worthy of his favor. So even religious people with "low self-esteem" are actually in their state because they will not see the depth of sin. They see it only as rule-breaking, not as rebellion and self-salvation.

A whole new way of seeing God. Christians have adopted a whole new system of approach to God. They may have gone through both religious and irreligious phases in the past, but they have come to see that the reasons for both their irreligion and their religion were essentially the same, and essentially wrong! Christians come to see that both their sins *and* their best deeds have all been ways of avoiding Jesus as Savior. They come to see that Christianity is not fundamentally an invitation to become more religious. A Christian comes to say, "Though I have often failed to obey the moral law, the deeper problem was *why* I was trying to obey it. Even my efforts to obey it have been just ways of seeking to be my own savior. In that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as savior." To "get" the gospel is to turn from self-justification and rely on Jesus' record for a relationship with God. The irreligious don't repent at all, and the religious repent only of sins; Christians also repent of *their righteousness*. That is the distinction between the three groups—Christians, moralists (religious), and pragmatists (irreligious).

SUMMARY

Without a knowledge of our extreme sin, the payment of the cross seems trivial and does not electrify or transform us. But without a knowledge of Christ's completely satisfying life and death, the knowledge of sin would crush us or move us to deny and repress it. Take away either the knowledge of sin or the knowledge of grace and people's lives are not changed. They will either be crushed by the moral law or run from it in anger. So the gospel is not that we go from being irreligious to being religious but that we realize that our reasons for *both* our religiosity and our irreligiosity were essentially the same and essentially wrong. We were seeking to be our own savior and thereby keep control of our own life. When we trust in Christ as our Redeemer, we turn from trusting either self-determination or self-denial, either hedonism or moralism, for our salvation.

A whole new way of seeing life. Paul shows us, then, that we must not simply ask in every area of life, "What is the moral way to act?" but "What is the way that is *in line with the gospel*?" The gospel must be continually thought out to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring *everything* in line with the gospel.

The example of racism. Since Paul applied the gospel to racism, let's use it as an example:

The moralistic approach to race. Moralists tend to be very proud of their culture. They easily fall into cultural imperialism and try to attach spiritual significance to their cultural norms, to make themselves feel morally superior to other peoples. This happens because moralistic people are very insecure, since they take the eternal law quite seriously and know deep down that they cannot keep it. Therefore they use cultural differences to buttress their sense of righteousness.

The relativistic approach to race. The opposite error from cultural imperialism is cultural *relativism*. This approach says, “Yes, traditional people were racists because they believed in absolute truth. But truth is relative. Every culture is beautiful in itself. Every culture must be accepted on its own terms.”

The gospel approach to race. Christians know that intolerance does not stem so much from a belief in *truth* as from a lack of belief in *grace*. The gospel leads us (a) to be somewhat critical of *all* cultures, including our own (since there *is* truth), but (b) to realize that we can feel morally superior to no one; after all, we are saved by grace alone, and therefore a non-Christian neighbor may be more moral and wise than I. This gives the Christian a radically different posture from that of either moralists or relativists.

Note: Relativists (as noted above) are ultimately moralistic, and therefore they can be respectful only of other people who believe everything is relative! But Christians cannot feel morally superior to relativists.

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PART II: THE KEY TO EVERYTHING *By Timothy Keller*

The gospel is the way that *anything* is renewed and transformed by Christ—whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. It is the key to all doctrine and to our view of our lives in this world. Therefore, all our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts and thinking and approaches to absolutely everything.

THE GOSPEL AND THE INDIVIDUAL

1. *Approach to discouragement.* When a person is depressed, the moralist says, “You are breaking the rules—repent.” On the other hand, the relativist says, “You just need to love and accept yourself.” Without the gospel, superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. The moralist will work on behavior and the relativist will work on the emotions themselves. But (assuming there is no physiological basis for the depression) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say, “Something in my life has become more important than God, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness.” The gospel leads us to repentance, not to merely setting our will against superficial issues.

2. *Approach to the physical world.* Some moralists are indifferent to the physical world and see it as “unimportant.” Other moralists are downright afraid of physical pleasure, and since they are seeking to earn their salvation, they prefer to focus on sins of a physical nature like a failure to discipline sex and the other appetites. These are easier to avoid than sins of the spirit like pride. Therefore, moralists prefer to see sins of the body as worse than other kinds. The legalism that results usually leads to a distaste of pleasure. On the other hand, the relativist is often a hedonist, someone who is controlled by pleasure and makes it an idol. The gospel leads us to see that God has created both body and soul and so will redeem both body and soul, although under sin both body and soul are broken. Thus the gospel leads us to enjoy the physical (and to fight against physical brokenness, such as sickness and poverty) yet to be moderate in our use of material things.

3. *Approach to love and relationships.* Moralism often makes relationships into a “blame game.” This is because a moralist is traumatized by criticism that is too severe and maintains a self-image as a good person by blaming others. On the other hand, moralism can use the procuring of love as *the* way to “earn our salvation” and convince ourselves we are worthy persons. That often creates what is called “codependency”—a form of self-salvation through needing people or needing people to need you (that is, saving yourself by saving others). On the other hand, much relativism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You relate only as long as it is not costing you anything. So the choice without the gospel is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. But the gospel leads us to do neither. We *do* sacrifice and commit ourselves, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others that we are acceptable. We can love the person enough to confront when that’s needed, yet stay with the person even when it does not benefit us.

4. *Approach to suffering.* Moralism takes the “Job’s friends” approach, laying guilt on yourself. You simply assume, “I must be bad to be suffering.” Under the guilt, though, there is always anger toward God. Why? Because moralists believe that God owes them. The whole point of moralism is to put God in your debt. Because you have been so moral, you feel you don’t really deserve suffering. Moralism tears you up, for at one level you think, “What did I do to deserve this?” but on another level you think, “I probably did everything to deserve this!” When the moralist suffers, then, he or she must feel either mad at God (because I have been performing well) or mad at self (because I have not been performing well) or both. On the other hand, the relativist/pragmatist feels justified in avoiding suffering at all costs—lying, cheating, and broken promises are okay. But when suffering does come, the pragmatist lays the fault at God’s doorstep, claiming that he must be either unjust or impotent. The cross shows us, however, that God redeemed us *through* suffering. God suffered not that we might not suffer but that in our suffering we could become like him. Since both the moralist and the pragmatist ignore the cross, they will both be confused and devastated by suffering.

5. *Approach to sexuality.* The relativist sees sex as merely biological and physical appetite. The moralist tends to see sex as dirty or at least a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. But the gospel shows us that sexuality is to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely without conditions, so we are not to seek intimacy while holding on to control of our life. If we give ourselves sexually, we are to give ourselves legally, socially, personally—utterly. Sex is to happen only within a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage.

6. *Approach to one's family.* Moralism can make you a slave to parental expectations, while relativism sees no need for family loyalty or the keeping of promises and covenants if they do not “meet my needs.” The gospel frees you from making parental approval an absolute or psychological salvation, for it points to how God becomes the ultimate Father. Then you will neither be too dependent on nor too hostile toward your parents.

7. *Approach to self-control.* Moralists tell us to control our passions for fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Relativism tells us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach. The gospel tells us that the free, unconditional grace of God “teaches” us to “say no” to our passions (Titus 2:12) if we listen to it. This is a whole-person approach, starting with the truth descending into the heart.

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

9. *Approach to human authority.* Moralists will tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, cultural customs) too much, since they rely so heavily on their self-image of being moral and decent. Relativists will obey human authority either too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (they may obey only when they know they won't get caught). That means either authoritarianism or anarchy. But the gospel gives you both a standard by which to oppose human authority—if it contradicts the gospel—and an incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when you could get away with disobedience.

10. *Approach to human dignity.* Moralists often have a pretty low view of human nature—they mainly see human sin and depravity. Relativists, on the other hand, have no good basis for treating people with dignity. Usually they have no religious beliefs about what human beings are. (If people are just chance products of evolution, how do we know they are more valuable than a rock?) But the gospel shows us that every human being is infinitely fallen (lost in sin) and infinitely exalted (in the image of God). So we treat every human being as precious, yet dangerous!

11. *Approach to guilt.* When you say, “I can't forgive myself,” it means there is some standard or condition or person that is more central to your identity than the grace of God. If you cannot forgive yourself, it is because you have failed your real god, your real righteousness, and it is holding you captive. The moralist's false god is usually a god of their imagination that is holy and demanding but not gracious. The relativist's false god is usually some achievement or relationship. God is the only God who forgives—no other “god” will.

12. *Approach to self-image.* Without the gospel, your self-image is based upon living up to some standards—whether yours or someone else's imposed upon you. If you live up to those standards, you will be confident but not humble. If you don't live up to them, you will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can you be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble. For you are both perfect and a sinner!

13. *Approach to joy and humor.* Moralism eats away at joy and humor—because the system of legalism forces you to take yourself (your image, your appearance, your reputation) *very* seriously. Relativism, on the other hand, will tend toward cynicism as life goes on. This cynicism grows from a lack of hope for the world: in the end evil will triumph—there is no judgment or divine justice. But if we are saved by grace alone, then the very fact of being Christian is a constant source of amazed delight for us. There is nothing matter-of-fact about our lives, no “of course” to our lives. It is a miracle that we are Christians, and we have hope. So the gospel that creates bold humility should give us a deep sense of humor. We don’t have to take ourselves seriously, and we are full of hope for the world.

14. *Approach to “right living.”* Jonathan Edwards points out that “true virtue” is possible only for those who have experienced the grace of the gospel. Any person who is trying to earn their salvation does “the right thing” in order to get into heaven, or in order to better their self-esteem, or for another essentially self-interested reason. But persons who know they are totally accepted already do the right thing out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God’s sake and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes doing the right thing a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end.

1. *Approach to ministry in the world.* Moralism tends to place all the emphasis on the individual human soul. Moralistic religionists will insist on converting others to their faith and church but will ignore the social needs of the broader community. On the other hand, “liberalism” will tend to emphasize only amelioration of social conditions and minimize the need for repentance and conversion. The gospel leads to *love*, which in turn moves us to give our neighbor whatever is needed—conversion or a cup of cold water, evangelism *and* social concern.

2. *Approach to worship.* Moralism leads to a dour and somber kind of worship that may be long on dignity but is short on joy. A shallow understanding of “acceptance” without a sense of God’s holiness, on the other hand, can lead to frothy or casual worship. (Meanwhile, a sense of *neither* God’s love *nor* his holiness leads to a worship service that feels like a committee meeting!) But the gospel leads us to see that God is both transcendent and immanent. His immanence makes his transcendence comforting, while his transcendence makes his immanence amazing. The gospel leads to both awe *and* intimacy in worship, for the Holy One is now our Father.

3. *Approach to the poor.* The pragmatist tends to scorn the faith of the poor and see them as helpless victims needing expertise. This is born out of a disbelief in God’s common grace to all. Ironically, the secular mindset also dismisses the reality of sin, and thus anyone who is poor must be oppressed, a helpless victim. Moralists, on the other hand, tend to scorn the poor as failures and weaklings. They see them as somehow to blame for their situation. But the gospel leads us to be (a) humble, without moral superiority, knowing that we were spiritually bankrupt but have been saved by Christ’s free generosity; (b) gracious, not worried too much about “deservingness,” since we didn’t deserve Christ’s grace; and (c) respectful of believing poor Christians as brothers and sisters from whom we can learn. It is only the gospel that can bring people into a humble respect for and solidarity with the poor.

4. *Approach to doctrinal distinctives.* The “already” of the New Testament makes us bold in our proclamation. We can most definitely be sure of the central doctrines that support the gospel. But the “not yet” requires charity and humility in nonessential beliefs. That is, we must be moderate about what we teach except when it comes to the cross, grace, and sin. In our views, especially our opinions on issues that Christians cannot agree on, we must be less unbending and triumphalistic (believing we have arrived intellectually). It also means that our discernment of God’s call and will for us and others must not be propagated with overweening assurance that our insight cannot be wrong. (Unlike pragmatists, we must be willing to die for our belief in the gospel; unlike moralists, we must keep in mind that not every one of our beliefs is worth fighting to the death for.)

5. *Approach to holiness.* The gospel’s “already” means we should not tolerate sin. With the presence of the kingdom, we are made “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The gospel brings us the confidence that anyone can be changed, any enslaving habit can be overcome. But the gospel’s “not yet” means that our sin remains in us and will never be eliminated until the fullness of the kingdom comes. So we must

avoid pat answers, and we must not expect quick fixes. Unlike moralists, we must be patient with slow growth or lapses and be aware of the complexity of change and growth in grace. Unlike pragmatists and cynics, we must insist that miraculous change is possible.

6. *Approach to miracles.* The “already” of the kingdom means that power for miracles and healing is available. Jesus demonstrated the kingdom by healing the sick and raising the dead. But the gospel’s “not yet” means that nature (including us) is still subject to decay (Rom. 8:22–23) and thus sickness and death remain inevitable until the final consummation. We cannot expect miracles and freedom from suffering to be such normal parts of the Christian life that we will glide through our days with no pain. Unlike moralists, we know that God can heal and do miracles; unlike pragmatists, we do not aim to press God into eliminating suffering.

7. *Approach to church health.* The “already” of the kingdom means that the church is *now* the community of kingdom power. It is therefore capable of mightily transforming its community. Evangelism that adds “to their number daily those who [are] being saved” (Acts 2:47) is possible! Loving fellowship that destroys “the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14) between different races and classes is possible! But the “not yet” of the kingdom means Jesus has not yet presented his bride, the church, “as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish” (Eph. 5:27). We must not then be harshly critical of imperfect congregations nor jump impatiently from church to church over perceived blemishes. Error will never be completely eradicated from the church. The kingdom’s “not yet” also means to avoid an overly severe imposition of church discipline and other means to seek to bring about a perfect church today.

8. *Approach to social change.* We must not forget that Christ is even now ruling in a sense over history (Eph. 1:22–23). The “already” of grace means that Christians can expect to use God’s power to change social conditions and communities. But the “not yet” of sin means there will be “wars and rumors of wars.” Selfishness, cruelty, terrorism, and oppression will continue. Christians harbor no illusions about politics nor expect utopian conditions. The “not yet” means that Christians will not trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth. So the gospel keeps us from the overpessimism of fundamentalism (moralism) about social change and also from the overoptimism of liberalism (pragmatism).

SUMMARY

All problems, personal or social, come from a failure to apply the gospel in a radical way, a failure to get “in line with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). All pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness come from a failure to let the gospel be expressed in a radical way. If the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will begin to look very unique. People will find in it both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility.

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