

## Essential Christianity – 2

Beyond clarifying the meaning of the gospel, churches must be committed to the gospel. That is, churches must be devoted to the application of the gospel throughout church life.

In our teaching, the believer's position in Christ, and Christ's position in the believer must become a constant refrain.. The human heart is not only naturally idolatrous, but it is also naturally legalistic. Even to those who teach the gospel of grace, the message of the gospel for Christian sanctification must be kept central. The secret of abiding—ongoing communion with God—is that Christ is in us and we are in Him (John 15:4). As a church disciplines its own, it must teach the principle that the gospel's effects continue throughout a Christian's life (Col 2:6).

A church also displays commitment to the gospel when it pursues clearly defined membership. Far from being a mere administrative detail, membership provides a clear boundary of professing Christians within a local church. Church membership is an incarnation of the idea of a regenerate church : only those who profess Christ and have publicly followed Him in believer's baptism are included within a local assembly's rolls as those for whom the church can give an account.

Apart from teaching on the nature of the church, fairly detailed membership classes can help people understand that the church is composed of professing, baptized believers only. My church reads the prospective member a summary of the church covenant and observes as he or she makes a covenant with the church publicly. In an era of truce-breakers, this helps us appreciate the enormous significance of being included in a church—the fellowship of the regenerate.

The flip side of membership is a wise use of church discipline. The gospel is not only demeaned by the denials of apostates and the compromise of indifferentists. It is also denied by the ungodliness of professing Christians.

Intrinsic to the gospel is the truth that Jesus saves us from our sins. Certainly, He saves us from the penalty of these sins, and will one day save us from their presence entirely, but the New Testament is consistent in its teaching that true saving faith is evidenced by salvation from the power of sin in our lives. In other words, the gospel is testified to by the changed lives of its professors.

Conversely, the gospel is demeaned if those who profess to possess it contradict that claim with their lives. They effectively deny their profession with their lives.

*Titus 1:16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.*

*2 Timothy 3:5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!*

*1 Timothy 5:8 But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

However, the Lord put something in place to protect the integrity of the gospel from those who demean it with their lives. He created the visible church as an institution, and commands it to guard its membership.

Those who profess to be part of it (by believing the gospel) must live accordingly (by obeying Christ), or be removed from recognised membership of the visible church. No one knows who is part of the invisible church, but the acts of membership and church discipline are a visible, tangible

means of protecting the integrity of the Gospel in the eyes of the world.

*Matthew 18:17-18 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

*1 Corinthians 5:11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner — not even to eat with such a person.*

*2 Thessalonians 3:6 But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.*

Church discipline is Christ's method for loosing from the church (Mt 18:18) those whose profession of faith has been denied by their lives (Titus 1:6). The aims of the initial actions preceding church discipline are all restorative; the final action is one of changing the relationship between church and member. At some point, a church is authorized to say that an individual's life clearly compromises the meaning of the gospel and can no longer be recognized as that of a believer. When the nature of the relationship between gospel-professors and a gospel-denier changes, the gospel's meaning and effects are both taught and protected.

What happens when churches refuse to limit their membership to baptised believers who profess and obey the gospel? What happens when churches refuse to preach on sanctification and holiness as the necessary effects and fruits of saving faith? What happens when churches refuse to discipline unrepentant believers or believers who commit scandalous behaviour? The gospel is demeaned. The world looks upon scandalous behaviour in the church and concludes that if the gospel is actually the boundary of the church, while guilty parties continue unchecked within the boundaries of the church, then the gospel itself must be a very porous thing. They conclude that the gospel must make very little difference to real life, if the people 'on the inside' look and live like the people 'on the outside'.

Put simply, to believe the fundamentals of the faith, defend them, preach a clear gospel, and then extend Christian fellowship to people who act like unbelievers, without remorse or amendment of life, is to cut down the gospel message almost before it leaves your lips. We conserve the gospel by practising Christian discipleship, church membership and church discipline.

A church is committed to the gospel when it is committed to "gospelizing," that is, evangelism. If the message is as exclusive as it says it is, if the command to evangelize is as clear as any other command, and if our Savior is as excellent as we say He is, we must spread the gospel. We must spread it by preaching, and we must also spread it without a word. We must spread it at home, and spread it abroad. We must reason with people, and we must appeal to their consciences. We must show the rational basis for Christianity, and we must show the guilt of sin. We must give people books and meet them for meals and host Bible studies and pray and live winsome lives. Different contexts call for different approaches, but for all Christians, the command is, as you are going, make disciples. Evangelism is one citizenry encountering another and the ambassadors of Christ announcing God's promises and living like citizens of another culture.

Here my goal is not to provide techniques for evangelism; Scripture is strangely silent on that. Again, if church members are saturated with the meaning of the gospel and filled with compassion for their neighbors, some kind of evangelism is inevitable.

There is one other way in which the gospel is threatened. It is threatened when its proclamation is neglected or perverted: complete neglect of evangelism will obviously threaten the gospel, for a failure to proclaim it will be a failure to propagate it. If the gospel is no longer heard, it will not be

received, and the gospel message will die with the disobedient generation that failed to pass it on. Failure to evangelise is a frontal attack on conservative Christianity.

The gospel is not proclaimed for several possible reasons. One is sheer laziness and disobedience. When Christians choose to please themselves, hide their faith and avoid the offense of the cross, they will not preach the gospel.

A second reason is hyper-Calvinism. (Not five-point Calvinism, but true hyper-Calvinism.) Hyper-Calvinism denies that man is truly responsible, therefore it dispenses the preaching of the gospel altogether. A warping of the biblical doctrine of the interchange between divine sovereignty and human freedom can lead people to fail to preach the gospel altogether.

A third reason is that some become so acculturated to post-modernism that they secretly doubt that their neighbours are in danger of hellfire for not believing the gospel. They might be gospel believers, but for all intents and purposes they are post-moderns, who live as if all beliefs are true to some degree and that there are many paths up the mountain of God.

The proclamation of the gospel can also fail to conserve the gospel if the presentation itself is twisted, perverted or warped. I am speaking about a methodological perversion. In other words, when the gospel is proclaimed in a way that gives a faulty understanding of conversion, this in turn can end up corrupting the gospel itself, as McLulan said so many years ago, the medium is the message. You might not deny the substance of the gospel message, but if your presentation fundamentally alters the perception of what the gospel does or is, then your proclamation becomes, ironically, a form of corrupting the gospel.

One of several well known examples is when the gospel becomes pure decisionism. Conversion is seen as consisting in a person making a choice hitherto not made, signified by praying a prayer, signing a card, raising a hand, walking forward at an invitation. The person's act on that day becomes to them the substance of their conversion. This is encouraged by those who make the belief in the gospel centre on a crisis decision, and point back to such a decision as the basis of assurance. It is encouraged by those who, à la Finney, use manipulative techniques to convince the person to 'accept Jesus' – lights, sentimental music, guilt trip altar-calls, scare tactics, peer pressure etc.

Certainly conversion is an event, and one which involves the human will. Certainly it can often be traced back to a decisive prayer of repentance and faith, or a public act of submission. However, when conversion is made to hinge on a sinner's prayer, or a four-point formula, the gospel itself is being diluted into a pale shadow of itself.

Another example of twisting the gospel in its presentation is to preach a utilitarian Christ. When the gospel becomes a means to our own ends, providing improved happiness, less guilt, a better family, more success, more health, more money – then the gospel is being lost. If the death and resurrection of Jesus is portrayed as a yuppie accessory, as the thing which will take your present lifestyle to the next level, it misses the point of the gospel. The gospel is not a means to our own ends. It is restoring us to the moral sanity needed to recognise God as the purpose of our existence.

A third example of perverting the gospel is to use worldliness as the bait. To use forms, devices, media, atmosphere and techniques that are intrinsically or even conventionally associated with the worldliness of I John 2:15-16, as a supposed tool to reach the 'unchurched', certainly sends a mixed message. It seems to redefine repentance itself. After all, if God hates worldliness, how can

Christian preachers baptise their message in it and expect the hearers to comprehend what God calls them to turn from? If the gospel has left those Christian rockers on stage fundamentally the same, what precisely does Jesus frown upon in the unsaved rockers in the audience? What must they turn from, and more importantly, what do they think they are turning to? “Party life lite”? The self-indulgence of rock with Jesus added? What you win them with, is what you win them to.

Now, when it comes to understanding the meaning and intention of the Gospel, as well as understanding its application, there are two tools we should make use of. They are tools we will return to for the other distinctives of essential Christianity. These two tools are **discernment** and **tradition**.

**Romans 12:1-2** *Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

**Ephesians 5:8-17** *<sup>8</sup> For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), <sup>10</sup> finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. <sup>13</sup> But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. <sup>14</sup> Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, And Christ will give you light." <sup>15</sup> See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, <sup>16</sup> redeeming the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*

**Philippians 1:9-11** *<sup>9</sup> And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

**Colossians 1:9-11** *<sup>9</sup> For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; <sup>10</sup> that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; <sup>11</sup> strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy;*

**1 Thessalonians 5:19-22** *<sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies. <sup>21</sup> Test all things; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.*

What all these Scriptures enjoin is discernment, judgement: the ability to weigh, consider, compare, and come to a careful, proper judgement. This must take place as we study Scripture to understand the Gospel.

Let's now consider **tradition**, the one that tends to scare a lot of Christians, because of its abuse in the past.

I grew up in circles which were, if not overtly, then certainly implicitly, anti-ecclesiastical, anti-traditional, and anti-intellectual. Anything that was not immediately accessible to the common man was something viewed with suspicion. When I heard the word tradition, it was usually said with the curled lip of scorn or contempt, pointing out those who were not as biblical as we were and were dependent on the fallible opinions of church history. Fortunately, I came to see that such attitudes had the childishness of an infant on his father's shoulders, exclaiming, “Look how tall I am!”

In fact, we all stand on the shoulders of Christians that have gone before us. The Christian tradition is neither dispensable nor optional to our faith. A church that thinks it has independently arrived at

the Christian orthodoxy hammered out at Nicea, Constantinople, Chalcedon, Augsburg, Schleithem, Westminster, London, or New Hampshire is similar to that child. No church approaches the raw mass of biblical data and makes sense of it without help. Like that child, it might feel as if it has attained to heights of interpretive genius on its own, but in reality, even its working definitions for theological concepts have been supplied by Christians of the past.

The truth is, tradition is indeed a double-edged sword. When tradition preserves the truth, it is a reliable record that comes to a newer generation without that generation having to re-invent the wheel. When tradition preserves untruths, it becomes the guardian of a lie that will not die. It is an accomplice to deception, using its antiquity to give credibility to its spurious beliefs and practices. In reaction to gospel-eviscerated traditionalism, it is possible to make tradition itself the problem. This would be a mistake. If a museum keeps something worthless, this does not invalidate the value of museums. Clearly, what matters is what tradition preserves. A gospel-eviscerated tradition is a bad one. A gospel-centered tradition is a good one.

Now tradition is never our authority. Tradition is not to be placed on equal footing with Scripture. However, tradition has a clarifying effect. One of Paul's instructions to Timothy is to teach faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:2). This command is nothing less than a command for a tradition. The truth is to be taught to others, who will teach that same truth to others still. Since each generation receives the truth from teachers who heard from others, this is tradition at work. Simply because each generation holds to sola Scriptura does not mean that they were not helped, influenced, or enabled to understand the truth by former generations. When we train leaders and encourage people to disciple others and disciple their children, we are perpetuating a tradition. We want the truth passed on. We want right practices passed on. We want ordinate worship passed on. This is only right, and it is the biblical idea of tradition.

Second, we must teach that we all depend on tradition. One way of pointing this out is to ask how people came to faith. They will often mention a person who shared the gospel with them. The question then becomes, who shared the gospel with that person? And with the person before that? Soon we find a line of Christians who preserved and taught the gospel stretching back through the centuries. We would not be saved had Christians before us not preserved and passed on the gospel. This is true not only of the gospel but also of doctrine. We do well to help our people understand that we ourselves did not invent the categories of essence and persons when it comes to explaining the Trinity. Rather, we have received these categories after centuries of debate and theological refinement. Were it not for the work done at Nicea, Chalcedon, Augsburg and so on, we would be wallowing in an ocean of biblical data, taking on the gargantuan task of figuring it all out on our own. Fortunately, we do not have to do the pastoral or theological equivalent of swimming the Pacific, but we can and do receive the baton of orthodox doctrinal categories from centuries of Christian work.

Third, we must deny that tradition is a straight or unbroken line. While it is tempting for some to style themselves as true heirs of an undiluted orthodoxy that never wavered from the days of the apostles, church history simply does not bear this out. Church history is a time-line of doctrinal combat, a series of reactions and overreactions to heresy and hypocrisy, with corrections, over-corrections, and corrections-that-never-were. Church history is a very crooked, jagged line, with many branches veering off into denials of the faith. In order to rightly value tradition, we need not try to find ourselves with our combinations of beliefs and practices in the pages of church history for some form of self-validation. Rather, we can rejoice in the providence of God in bringing what we now have through the twists and turns of church history.

This study of the Christian tradition can have an enormously stabilising effect on our understanding of the Gospel. When we see that the Gospel we confess is the same one found in the Apostles Creed or in the Nicene Creed, we know we have not just come up with some idiosyncratic gospel. We are holding to the faith once delivered unto the saints.

Though some may balk at the use of creeds in church, creeds such as the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed helpfully state the doctrines essential to the gospel. Whether you read them in a corporate service or make a study of them in a Bible study, these help the church to understand what constitutes the gospel (and not merely a parochial 21st-century take on the gospel, but the historic, universal gospel).