

Ecclesiology and the Honor of Christ (Part One)

By Jay Wegter

Introduction: God the Father's great purpose is that Christ Jesus have first place (preeminence) in everything. "He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything" (Col 1:18). Jesus is preeminent, that means He is first: first in importance, first in honor, first in exaltation. The fact that Jesus is the Preeminent One must have real-world application to the life of the believer. Christ Jesus must not simply have *prominence* in our lives (a place of importance), He must have *preeminence* in our lives, He must have *supremacy*. This means that the ultimate goal of salvation is not to bring human beings to heaven, but to exalt the Son of God to the status of supremacy (Phil 2:9-11).ⁱ And, as such, if we are to manifest a zeal for the honor of Christ, it behooves us to understand the forces which are at work against the honor of Christ, both in our own thoughts, affections, and behaviors, and also in the church itself.

Ecclesiology and the doctrine of God

Mega-church values are killing the spiritual core of Evangelicalism, states author David Wells. He is one of the most lucid and incisive writers on Evangelicalism's drift from God. In the following four pages, are some of the most important observations which Wells makes about Evangelicalism's 'degenerative sickness'. These excerpts are primarily from his book, *God in the Wasteland*. Wells notes that Evangelicalism has assimilated *therapeutic culture* (in which 'badness' or human depravity, is a disease 'treatable' by the therapeutic). In addition, Evangelicalism has assimilated *consumerism* in which it is common for 'worship' to be equated with mood-altering entertainment. Wells argues that the spirit of the age has reduced Evangelical Christianity to the *private and the internal*. ***Evangelicalism has been emptied of serious thought, serious theology, serious worship, and serious holy practice in the world***, states Wells. Yet, these are the very things needed by broken men! Protestant orthodoxy has been altered to fit an atmosphere of 'pleasantness and light'—insulating hearers from the trauma inherent in true repentance. Churches are filled with those who wear a happy face, but who have no religious passions. Decades of postmodernity have left us with an ingrained self-referential perspective. This has twisted Evangelicalism to the point wherein interest in the transforming power of the truth of God is severely lacking. The therapeutic and managerial have replaced the love of the truth—divine truth which God intends to devastate, renew, transform, and sanctify His people (Jn 17:7).ⁱⁱ God's absolute

truth has been displaced by personal intuition as the basis for decision-making.ⁱⁱⁱ This sentiment has invaded the psyche. It may appear to value the individual, but is it worldliness.

We are seeing an ever-present search for adaptation to the needs of the modern world. God in Christ is secondary to the organization, its image, and its perpetuation. The world of 21st Century Evangelicalism prizes techniques, managers, and psychologists, all in Christ's name. Wells goes so far as to suggest that "the church has replaced God."^{iv} That is certainly a damning assessment, but a deserving one. The sovereignty and providence of God, and our incumbent reverential fear in light of these truths, are no longer stressed; they are seldom pulpit themes. God's control of creation has been wrenched away, and replaced with self-fulfillment. But, this orientation is completely at odds with the self-denial and cross-bearing proper to union with Christ (Lu 9:24-26).^v

Today's Evangelicals practice a religion comfortably wedded to worldliness. Results are measured by 'successful' entrepreneurship. But, when biblical truth is dislocated from life, discernment evaporates. The Church's theological soul is dying as a result. The Church is no longer taking its bearings from God who is centrally holy. Evangelicalism, having abandoned theology, is running on the high octane fuel of *preoccupation with self* ('tell me more about me'), therefore it cannot see the alien values inside it. In this condition, the Church cannot recognize or dislodge the worldliness within her (1 Jn 2:15-17).^{vi} The priority that has taken over is refinement of technique in order to improve the bottom line. Because of accommodation to modernity ('my needs, my journey, my potential through therapy, my conviction that the individual is ultimate reality'), the techniques of capitalism are devastating the understanding and experience of God. The inescapable biblical fact is that we won't be able to reconcile the true knowledge of God with a self-referential view of life, for the love of the world and love to God are totally antithetical.^{vii}

Evangelicalism's new value system can be stated thus: 'remove the barriers to conversion and to attendance, and you'll get the numbers'. McGavran's formula for church growth is '*applied sociology*'. Raw pragmatism intrudes into churches where the confessional and the theological have faded. When theology is not at the center, managers and marketers will conduct the 'business' of the Church.^{viii} George Barna does not even conceal his crassness in the matter: ***the Church is to follow the big business competition model; i.e. assess consumer needs.*** Says Wells, according to George Barna the Church is viewed as a business with a market and with a product. Its core product is the message of salvation and the experience of God. Each church is a franchise, the Chrysler of tomorrow. Modern pastors are the CEO's in this business model. 'Market the Church by understanding need suggests Barna'.

In Barna's world, the mega-church is a full-service bureaucratic structure that fills

a market niche of felt needs.^{ix} Modernity plays to the ‘sovereignty’ of the audience. Os Guinness gives this sobering reminder; *it is possible to “win” the world and lose our own souls by ecclesiastical engineering.* Worldliness makes sin look normal and righteousness look strange. Worldliness puts man at the center and God out to pasture—then there is no place for truth and its disturbing ramifications. When self is at the center as a religious consumer, technique replaces the very truth which God intends to disrupt our self-directed lives. There is no longer a place for God’s devastating word of grace which is intended to knock men off balance and bring them face to face with God transcendent in holiness.^x

The “otherness” of God is domesticated, He is reduced to a benign and harmless helper. God is no longer understood as standing outside the sinner, summoning him to repentance. By contrast, the God of Scripture calls the sinner to repent by means of the knowledge of Himself who is thrice holy. The Holy Spirit convicts the sinner, pressing upon him a crushing, bankrupting verdict of ‘guilty’—for there is no other way to be emancipated from the deception of external religious appearances.^{xi} *Psychologized* culture has an affinity for the relational, but a “*dis-ease*” for the moral, thus it is drawn to a god who can be used. The modern church wants the love of God, but not the invasive holiness of God (1 Pet 1:14-16). Scripture is replete with the reality that objective truth anchored in redemptive history is the revealer of who God is—*He is so right, and we are so wrong.* But, that is considered too disturbing. God’s redemptive presence in truth and holiness are found only on His terms, not ours—His truth and holiness are not accessible if we come as a consumer. But why is that the case? We must have God transcendent in holiness, or we simply do not know Him!^{xii} Simply put: self as the final arbiter of truth is appalled by the great things of God—as a consequence, the all-consuming significance of God becomes dislocated from life. God’s moral “otherness” is converted into relatedness. In the transition from transcendence to immanence, God becomes a convenient means to satisfy self, and self’s longings and aspirations. And, what is the disastrous upshot? God’s incomprehensible “otherness” is increasingly lost in compromised Evangelicalism.^{xiii}

To be Christ-centered is to be God-centered

The only way to be God-centered is to be Christ-centered. The glorified Christ of eschatology who returns as Lord of history to judge the earth and consummate all things is assiduously avoided by a church culture that reveres autonomous choice (Heb 9:26-28). Disinterest in God’s holiness always results in a lack of interest in the pursuit of godliness and little interest in the reception of holiness from God.^{xiv} There must be an echo of holiness in those who approach God, without which there is little evidence of personal salvation (1 Jn 3:6). That echo manifests itself in separation from sin and in consecration unto God. God’s

holiness is intrusive to the inner man. To approach God's holiness is to have the life of the inner man invaded by light that exposes everything. What a source of discomfort and trauma! But, is that the kind of involvement ordinary in our church experience? Not really, the most common experience in Evangelicalism is to hear perky homilies which insulate the hearer from anything traumatic in regard to the true knowledge of God. The listener is 'protected from' coming in contact with anything about God that which would ravage his perceived sense of security and importance.

If holiness slips from a central position, then the centrality of Christ is lost. One cannot enter the knowledge of the Holy as a consumer, only as a helpless sinner. Sin, grace, and faith are meaningless apart from the holiness of God. The implications of God's holiness are increasingly missing in the Church. God's authority and power are passé. Self is sovereign, authority now is only a private reference, nothing is allowed into the inner man which would dislodge the self.^{xv} The church which caters to the self-referential individual is *fun and bouncy*—she is oblivious to the gaunt figure of death that is stalking a world filled with lovers of self rather than lovers of God (2 Tim 3:2, 4). The indulged Church must be put to death by living out her co-crucifixion with Christ in order to be of any consequence in the world. For, only God in Christ can incite the heart to 'rebel' against the world so as to love the Word of God, to love the truth, and to love the Lord.^{xvi} Anything less warrants the assessment found in James 4:4, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

The church of cultural accommodation is afraid to ask its attendees for consecration, for death to sin, and for sacrificial service. But, the church which asks most in terms of conformity to Christ will stay closest to the biblical pattern. But, those raised on social media are, for the most part, ignorant of the fact that the believer is strengthened by giving of himself. Only when the lives of believers intersect in sacrificial ways, will the Church develop an internal culture of true community to the glory of Christ. Only then will the reality of God weigh heavily on the Church. The Evangelical Church must reformulate anew what is the chief end of man, the glory, worship, and enjoyment of God. This will only happen if there is complete resolve to the Word of God.^{xvii} For, the culture of self has deceived us by suggesting that our level of consecration to Christ the Lord ought to be in keeping with our level of comfort. In that view, daily taking up one's cross in self-denial will never 'feel right' or 'comfortable'. The true believer's consecration flows not from comfort, but from Christ's absolute call upon the lives of His disciples (Mt 10:37-39).

Ecclesiology and the gospel

The gospel comes down like a Texas tornado, and by its power redeems sinners and gathers them into local church bodies (P. Zahl). The gospel’s transforming force operates by the power of forgiveness, blood-bought freedom, and Spirit-engendered true community, “creating families of love.” The result is that churches are planted. But that powerful ‘gospel tornado’ when neglected, can lift up and away. Author Paul Zahl warns of a consequence of drifting from the gospel truth that Christ sustains the life of His people—the church is ‘objectified’ (institutionalized). In other words, Zahl is reminding us that the church is a *supernatural entity* by virtue of organic union with Christ. It is formed, birthed, and sustained by the gospel of Jesus Christ. When that reality is forgotten, men tend to *objectify* the church; treating it, and managing it like an earthly institution, even redefining its purpose as the perpetuation of itself. But, that is to sever it from its life source, from Christ, its living Head. As a result, argues Zahl, they begin to kill it in the process of objectifying it. Christ owns the church having purchased the church by His blood (Acts 20:28), He possesses the church (1 Cor 6:120), she belongs to Him and not to herself (1 Cor 6:19), He indwells His church as her life force (Jn 14:20), He rules His church by His infallible Word (1 Cor 2:16). But, these all-pervasive Christo-centric realities are obscured when the values of a corporate, consumer-based ecclesiology are held in high esteem. In the process, Christ’s honor and glory are overshadowed.

“To overestimate church as a value in itself is to objectify the non-objectifiable and thus to possess that which can never be possessed.”^{xviii} Zahl’s point is deep and profound—he is saying that any movement in the direction of objectifying the church will have the effect of hiding and concealing its God-ordained, and God-sustained life and identity in Christ. The author cites the fact that Europe is filled with church buildings which are lifeless monuments to a bygone age. They have become ‘museums’ of marble and stained glass, but in reality they are nothing but ‘grave markers’ recording the memory of where gospel-fed spiritual life once thrived (note the severe warning against gospel ‘drift’ in Hebrews 2:1-4). How bitter is the irony that the relative permanence of innumerable tons of polished marble only serve today to emphasize the ephemeral nature of an objectified church.^{xix}

Charles Hodge offers a related comment: the purity of the Gospel is of extreme importance because it alone is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16-17), and it is solely the true basis of Christian unity. Hodge points out the danger of teaching decisional regeneration (a pervasive error in Evangelicalism today), “*No more soul-destroying doctrine could well be devised than the doctrine that sinners can regenerate themselves, and repent and believe just when they please. . . As it is a truth both of Scripture and of experience that*

the un-renewed man can do nothing of himself to secure his salvation, it is essential that he should be brought to a practical conviction of that truth. When thus convicted, and not before, he seeks help from the only source whence it can be obtained.”^{xx} Paul Washer also enunciates the disturbing assessment of this problem, “The biblical doctrine of regeneration is completely missing in the church today.” Where are the messages which leave the sinner undone because he possesses a ‘stone heart’ that is dead to God, and that he cannot make himself alive to God? The hunger for numerical growth will always tend to push the church in the direction of ‘easy-believism’—an error which makes salvation the sinner’s prerogative, and the power of God in salvation diminutive, or even unnecessary.

What Hodge and Washer are contributing to our discussion is this: our ecclesiology and our unity (in order to be biblical) depend upon a corporate understanding of the sovereign grace of Christ—of monergistic regeneration—of the effectual call itself (Mt 11:27). The saints are bound together in overflowing gospel gratitude—for God intervened in His sovereign grace in our case—breaking into our ruinous situation of helplessness and rebellion. This is the power of God in the gospel (Titus 3:5-7). For in the good news of the gospel we discover that God comes to the elect *monergistically*—bringing the divine power necessary to resurrect spiritually dead sinners (Eph 2:4-11). Therefore, the saints, by means of the effectual call, are bound together into a worshipping body by the Spirit of God—this is the gospel reality that holds us together—the ‘call’ of which we are to walk worthy (Eph 4:1). We are in hearty agreement with Hodge that the purity of the gospel is “the true basis of Christian unity.” By denying the necessity of the effectual call, Semi-Pelagian (Arminian) schemes of salvation rob Christ of the glory He is due in calling, saving, keeping, and sanctifying us (1 Cor 1:30). “[Semi-Pelagianism, and decisional regeneration] while not denying the necessity of grace for salvation, maintain that the first steps towards the Christian life are ordinarily taken by the human will and that grace supervened only later.”^{xxi}

Ecclesiology and Christ’s relation to His church

Christ is Redeemer, Owner, Ruler, Sanctifier, and Lover of His church. He whose eyes are a flame of fire walks among the lamp stands of the churches, giving oil, trimming wicks, and in many cases, abandoning some of the lamp stands to die, leaving them in a state of ‘ichabod’ (Heb.- ‘the glory has departed’) (Rev 1:10-20). In Revelation chapters one through three, Christ examines the churches, providing very precise *commendations* and *condemnations*. In His office of ***Prophet***, He calls the churches to repent of very specific sins (Rev 2-3). Christ is the Chief Shepherd, the *True Pastor* of every genuine church body. But His absolute living Headship of His blood-bought church is not in the visible ‘DNA’ of

most Evangelical churches today! In other words, church leaders conduct the work of the ministry as if Christ were absent, and they are His vicars. This is tragic, and it begs the question, ‘how can this be rectified?’ ‘How may we do church in such a way that it manifests Christ as her life, her present Savior, her Lord, and her King?’

Very few churches order their worship services around the glory of Christ. A church pastored by a friend in Orange County, California is a wonderful exception to this sad trend. When I sat in this service, I was moved with awe and adoration as Christ. Our Lord’s accomplishments were central in every part of the service. Instead of the feeling of laid back, social-club casualness, there was a prevailing reverence and aim to exhibit Christ in His preeminence and majesty. Every portion of the morning worship was aimed at His glory. The Christo-centric mindset was grounded in the deliberate communication of the following: *Christ is enthroned on the praises of His church. The body of Christ is animated and constrained by His love. Christ directs His church by His Word and His Spirit—by His providence, by God-ordained circumstances, and by gifted men. The ordinances of the church are intended to communicate our corporate life in the Son by virtue of our union with Him. We are built up and edified by means of the corporate enjoyment of Christ. Progress toward spiritual maturity is indispensably a function of attaining to “the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).* The point is that none of these Christ-centered attitudes emerged as a matter of coincidence, or due to a seasonal theme that showed up on a calendar. No, this local body gathered and worshipped with the express purpose of seeing Christ honored, and with the intent of drawing its spiritual life and breath from Him. And then exalting Him as the Preeminent One, the very source of their sustenance and existence.

End Notes:

ⁱ Greg Stiekes, “The Uncomfortable Implications of the Preeminence of Christ,” 10.16.18

ⁱⁱ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*

ⁱⁱⁱ David Porteous, “A Christian View of Postmodernism and its Roots”

^{iv} Wells, p. 29

^v *Ibid*, pp. p. 38, 42-43

^{vi} *Ibid*, pp. 55-56

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 62

^{viii} *Ibid*, pp. 69-71

^{ix} *Ibid*, pp. 72-73

^x *Ibid*, pp. 85-86

^{xi} *Ibid*, pp. 110-111

^{xii} *Ibid*, pp. 114-117

^{xiii} *Ibid*, pp. 120-122

^{xiv} Ibid, pp. 132-134

^{xv} Ibid, pp. 142-148

^{xvi} Ibid, pp. 224-225

^{xvii} Ibid, pp. 226-227

^{xviii} Paul Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology*, p. 88

^{xix} Ibid, pp. 88-89

^{xx} Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids 1970, Vol. 2, p. 277

^{xxi} John Hendryx, "Differences between Semi-Pelagianism and Arminian Beliefs"