

Ecclesiology and the Honor of Christ (Part Two)

By Jay Wegter

The Glory of Christ must be our aim

Churches that order their services around the glory of Christ seek to make the offices of Christ as visible as possible in the way they ‘do church’. Since Christ is **Prophet**, He actively examines us by His Word (Heb 4:12-13; Rev 1:14-16). All we do is under His watchful omniscient searching gaze. He corrects us, comforts us, and admonishes us by His Word. As **Priest**, He is our access to God, our status before God, our pardon, sanctification, hope, and cleansing—these come from His ceaseless intercession on our behalf (Rom 8:34). As **King**, He rules over us, His beloved subjects and the citizens of His Kingdom (1 Tim 1:17; Rev 19:16). He is sovereign King over all, He selects the trials which refine us, discipline us, sanctify us, and subdue our wills to His will (Heb 2:11). He is subjecting us to Himself by trial, discipline, and affliction for our consistent progress in holiness, all for His glory, and our eternal good (Heb 12:1-17). Now this begs the question: “Is the way we *do church* really intended to communicate Christ’s offices and authority, and the church’s relation to His offices and authority?” “Do we *do church* so as to honor Christ’s authority and place as absolute Lord and life of His church?” We are instantly aware that the answer to this question is “no.” This calls for a second question: “Why don’t we?” “Why are we not committed to exalting the glory of Christ in every part of our Sunday services?” The answer is revealing: it is because we think we can *do church* without utter dependence upon Christ and without His glory being central! We have stepped into the ditch Paul Zahl warned of—we have *objectified the non-objectifiable*—in our hubris and yearning for control, we have attempted to possess that which cannot be possessed. We have patted ourselves on the back as competent ecclesiastical engineers who take great delight in having our managerial skills put on display in our cherished philosophies of ministry.

Martin Luther said it well: the church always tends to deteriorate into a system of honoring men. And why does that take place? The trend throughout church history has been, by ‘sheep consensus’ to crave a strong visible human head to lead them. The answer in part is because men prefer a visible head in which they may take pride, and with whom they may identify—for a visible head requires no vigorous faith to behold (1 Sam 8:4-5ff.; Heb 12:2). In addition, men in their carnal religious instincts tend to be unnerved by, and fear that which they cannot control and influence. It takes faith well-fortified by Scripture to prefer the glory of our unseen Lord Jesus, to the dynamism of a mortal pastor standing before us in

the flesh. Do we really want Christ and His offices exalted and made ‘visible’ in our ecclesiology—made manifest in the way we *do church*? If so, it will cost us the relative comfort of, and preference for, our traditions and religious forms, and high visibility of our celebrity pastors.

Preaching that exalts the Glory of Christ

We will have to review what it means to be a believer priest in the new covenant. It will take a fresh renewing of our minds to be thrilled once again that every true believer is a living stone in the temple God—and that through Christ, God is constructing an eternal dwelling place for His Spirit—Christ being the Chief Corner Stone (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:1-10). And, that as the life source and transforming power of the Body, Christ’s work causes each believer priest (‘each joint and ligament’) to contribute to the body what it needs in order to edify itself, and grow to maturity: “. . .holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God” (Col 2:19). Notice that the body receives what it needs as Christ animates, and works through each member, through the contribution of each believer-priest, “. . .but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Eph 4:15-16).

To recover our cognizance of Christ’s glory, we will need to craft our sermons in such a way that they are clearly directed at our saved listeners as being alive in Christ (Hywel Jones). Notes Joel Beeke, people leave the Sunday service excited, fired up, and feeling good, but they have zeal without knowledge. There is no vital connection between truth and love in Christ. Gospel truth has not reached its goal until it produces love.ⁱ In quoting Puritan William Perkins (1558-1602), Beeke states that “the spiritual knowledge of God consists in an experimental knowledge of Christ’s death and resurrection, an effectual and lively knowledge, working in us new affections and inclinations.”ⁱⁱ ‘Experimental’ in this context comes from the Latin root, meaning to *try, prove, or test*. Thus, *experimental preaching* stresses the need to know the great truths of the Word of God by personal experience, so that these truths reach deep into our religious affections and are therefore life-transforming.

In addition to being highly applicatory, experimental preaching must be discriminatory. It is to aim at distinguishing the Christian from the non-Christian so that people can diagnose their own spiritual conditions and needs. The preacher applies biblical

truth to help his hearers test whether they belong to Christ and have His Spirit (Rom 8:9; 2 Cor 13:5). In the tradition of reformed preaching, ministers stood by the gates of hell, as it were, to proclaim that those not born again would soon walk through those gates to dwell forever in the abyss unless they repent. Thus, experimental preaching brings Judgment Day near the consciences of men, either to their vindication and joy, or to their guilt and terror.ⁱⁱⁱ

In stressing the urgent need for experimental preaching, Beeke observes that the Word of God is often preached in a way that cannot transform the listeners because the preacher fails to discriminate and apply. The preaching is reduced to a lecture. By contrast, experimental preaching often grows out of the preacher's own experience of Christ in the midst of his sorrows and sins. True experimental preaching brings a believer into the realm of vital Christian experience, drawing him away from himself and promoting a love for God and His glory as well as a burning desire to declare that love to those around him. Don't miss how central Christ is in Reformed experimental preaching, for this kind of preaching brings the entire range of Christian living into connection with the Savior of the world.^{iv} In so doing, Christ is honored as 'Source Person,' as the very life which sustains His people (Col 3:4). Indeed, Beeke's insights expose where pulpits fall short. Sermons tend to be orthodox, but lack application, or they are directed at the lowest common denominator. Therefore, a transforming vision and awareness of Christ our living Head eludes us—the remarkable truth that we are the very members of His body is overshadowed by endless exposition of principles rather than by the comprehensive ramifications of the believer's living union with Christ, and the adjoining mandate to abide in Him.

Major Ian Thomas in his book, *The Saving Life of Christ* (which means continuous daily sanctification by learning to let Him live through us) provides a wonderful summary phrase dealing with both justification and sanctification: ***To be in-Christ, that is redemption; but for Christ to be in-you, that is sanctification! To be in-Christ makes you fit for heaven, but for Christ to be in-you; that makes you fit for earth! To be in-Christ changes your destination, but for Christ to be in-you, that changes your destiny! The one makes heaven your home - the other makes this world His workshop!*** Rather than dealing with these truths in an occasional, hit and miss, peripheral manner, these spiritual realities of union with Christ, summarized above, must be central—they must be the 'turning dynamo' that moves the church community forward to answer her calling, keeping her *on mission*, and daily drawing close to her infinite privilege of knowing Christ her Head (Phil 3:7-11). Paul is the apostle of *union with Christ*. The genuine saints must continually hear about their being in Christ, and what that means in order to live *radically identified* with Him.

Pastors committed to the Glory of Christ

Pastors are too timid when it comes to proclaiming what Christ requires of us as a result of being in Him. If pastors were as bold as they ought to be, then they would frequently preach not only the infinite resources we have in Christ; but also the ‘hard words’ concerning discipleship uttered from the mouth of our Sovereign Savior. “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it” (Mt 10:37-39). A true believer is a *Christ learner*, a *Christ follower*. And, as such, a true disciple’s spiritual health and progress is tied to the consistent display and exhibition of his Lord’s glory, honor, power, love, example, and sufficiency.

If a pastor really ‘speaks for God’ then on his knees he will plead with God that Christ may be more visible, and he himself less visible. He will rely less upon the sway of his personality, and will rely more on exhibiting and displaying the glory of Christ to the affections of his listeners. Nothing less than this is required if a pastor is serious about growing a church that is pleasing to Christ. After all, who is really the final evaluator of a church, is it men, or the Lord Himself? If we bow to Christ as He rules through the imperial instrument of His Word, then will not have to wait until Judgment Day in order to find out what He thinks of our church—for, by His Word He searches the motives and intents of hearts (Heb 4:12). Therefore, we ought to be asking, “Is our ecclesiology engineered by human wisdom and pragmatism, OR, are we striving for an ecclesiology in which the glory of Christ is central?” “Is that our aim, to pursue a biblical ecclesiology which is true to Christ’s pattern for His church?” The ironic answer in many cases is that Christ is standing *outside the doors* of many Evangelical churches today. We know that 2000 years ago He is knocked at the door of the ‘Laodicean church’. Today He is knocking at the door of the 21st Century Evangelical church. Revelation 3:18-21 tells us precisely how to open the door to Christ. It is by repenting of our proud spirit of independence, pragmatism, and self-sufficiency by which we have imagined we do not need Christ in all we do, even as we ostensibly do His work—and even as we name His Name (Rev 3:19-22). Yes, to open the door to Him begins with church leaders repenting of the folly of self-reliance.

Only new covenant worship adequately exalts Christ as Mediator of that covenant. The opposite is spectatorship and consumerism. In religious consumerism, the layman recedes into the background as an observer and consumer. The church service becomes an event to be attended instead of the body of Christ edifying itself under the animating love and authority of Christ her Head (Eph 4:11-16). If the truth be told, many of the mega-church

values so rampant in Evangelicalism represent a retrograde slide back into old covenant forms (i.e. O.T. forms of worship). For instance, under the Mosaic covenant, beginning with Solomon, there was a very visible elevated king, a large Levitical choir and orchestra taken from a priestly order, a clerical order separate from the laity, a physical altar or holy place, and a highly embellished lavish temple. In contrasting these ‘beggarly’ old covenant elements to the new covenant, the author of Hebrews says, “We have an altar”—spiritually speaking this ‘altar’ is the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work at Calvary. We meet our Lord at the altar of His cross-work as expounded in the gospel (Heb 13:10). Christ, the *substance* of centuries of symbolism is now here, all that went before was but shadows and types (Col 2:17). Thus, in the new covenant, each of these old covenant forms (associated with the tabernacle/temple, and a clerical order, and the theocratic kingdom) has been replaced or changed—for every true believer is now alive in Christ and ‘organically joined to Christ’. Sadly, mega-church values of spectatorship, numbers, and consumerism tend to drag the ‘altar’ away from the living Christ and His cross, and toward the front of the church where the ‘performance’ is often eloquent, showy, multimedia, and elaborate. Therefore, it is the premise of this article that *we ought to do church* in such a way that the truth about us being Christ’s members ‘bleeds through in all we do’. For, Christ has inaugurated the new and living way of access for us through the veil which is His flesh—we must *do church* in a way which communicates that Christ is our covenant Head who entered the heavenly sanctuary with His own blood—who alone joins us together into one body, and who as our High Priest constantly brings us all the way to God (Heb 10:19-25).

A Christo-centric Ecclesiology

Ruthless honesty is needed at this juncture. Our problem says Colin Marshall, is that our churches today have “a heretical ecclesiology—ecclesiology has become the soft underbelly of the church” (the place at which the church is most vulnerable). It is common today for a strong pulpit to be a covering, or disguise for a broken ecclesiology—an excuse to abandon the New Testament functions of the church (i.e. especially The Great Commission: *make disciple-making disciples who have been personally taught to obey Christ’s commands*). The reality of the new covenant in Christ’s blood must be central instead of marginalized in our ecclesiology. Only then will we *do church* in such a way that new covenant realities are modeled and communicated and, as a result, Christ’s glory will be central in our focus, and His honor will be the aim of our ecclesiology. The focal point of the Lord’s table ought to be expounded on a regular basis. For, by this ordinance which our Savior commanded, we are brought face to face with the wonder that Christ is our life, our Chief Shepherd, and the sustaining Head of His blood-bought church every moment. If we

are remiss here, we should not wonder why the celebration of the Lord's Supper has become a mechanical, formal, sanitized 'add-on' in our services, and not the metaphor chosen by our Lord to purify His church and to feed our affections for Him.

End Notes:

ⁱ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Preaching*, in the abstract/summary of his work, "Experimental Preaching," Chapel Library, Pensacola, FL

ⁱⁱ William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, p. 270 in Joel Beeke, *Reformed Preaching*

ⁱⁱⁱ Joel Beeke, in "Experimental Preaching" an abstract of Joel Beeke's *Reformed Preaching*, by Chapel Library

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Bob Alderman citing Major W. Ian Thomas in, *The Saving Life of Christ*, p. 20