

## Preaching the God-centered Gospel in a Man-centered World (Part one)

By Jay Wegter

When strolling through a public place we can instantly recognize the behavior of an insolent child. Everything inside of us evokes the conviction that the youngster's impudence calls for the paddle. But, what we are much less cognizant of is that the life of the unregenerate man is regarded by God as an entire posture of impudence (as revolt, effrontery, and habitual impertinence). For, the natural man, in his love of self, imagines that he exercises the sovereign power to decide what authority he shall be subject to. And, as a studious truth suppressor (Rom 1:18), he fancies himself as the final arbiter of every truth claim, and every claim to authority. His rebellion is made manifest by the fact that his mental powers are employed in explaining away God's claims upon him (Ps 2:2; Rom 3:4, 10-18).

**Man as the image of God has, by virtue of creation, the obligation to live as the image of God.** This he will not, and cannot do. The law of God is needed to diagnose his moral impotence and covenant-breaking which are expressed in his thoughts, words, worship, deeds, and motives. The natural man shuns the diagnostic 'mirror' of God's law, and prefers to cling to a spurious and counterfeit assessment of himself. He regards himself to be an *upright fellow*, though he lives as if it were possible to be autonomous from God (Jer 17:5-6, 9). In his self-authenticating pride, he views his own morality from a self-referential perspective which skews his self-perception toward self-justification. He does not consider what he owes God, so he 'dumbs down' God's moral requirements, adapting them to fit his own lifestyle. Upon this point, Christ's rebuke is fitting: "And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God'" (**Lu 16:15**; Eph 4:17).

**Man's true creational identity as the image of God is inseparable from his covenant obligation to live out his created purpose.** This sheds much needed light on why unbelievers are eternally condemned in hell. For, Christ was given by the Father so that sinners might be recovered, that they might be restored to their created purpose to live as the image of God. Therefore, the rejection of Christ and the gospel constitutes the rejection of one's created purpose. There is no 'back up plan' for those who do not wish to live as God's image-bearers—one might as well wish himself to live in another galaxy. To spurn God's justifying mercy is to reject the 'Ark' of salvation and 'take one's chances in the flood' ('the flood came and

destroyed them all'—Luke 17:27). But, just as there was no contingency plan for those who refused to enter Noah's ark, there is no alternate plan for those who do not wish to know God as His image-bearer

**Consider that in our culture of 'selfism' choosing one's own purpose for living is considered innate to personal freedom** (*men are lovers of pleasure and self, more than lovers of God—2 Timothy 3:1ff.*). Today, selecting one's own purpose for life is regarded as elemental and intrinsic to self-realization—one cannot be 'authentic' without exercising that option. How often have we heard this trite saying after a fatal accident: '*at least he died doing what he loved—he died doing what made him feel alive*'. The extent of the popularity of this view (authentication through self-determination) is certainly evidence of the devil's cleverness. For, the evil one has taken the Edenic lie and cast it into postmodern language so that it sounds reasonable and desirable to 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears. The patience of the powers of darkness is evident at this juncture, for it is taken several hundred years for the philosophy of dualism to become fully engrained in the Western mind (men are held as captive prisoners through philosophy—Colossians 2:8).

**This dualistic, or 'two story' view of truth places facts in the lower story, and values in a subjective, irrational upper story.** Thus, through the eyes of the dualist, the truth of Scripture is seen as no longer corresponding to the real world, the contents of the Bible have been placed in an upper story category of irrationality. So, in the minds of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Post-moderns, when believers assert biblical truth claims, they are seen as merely expressing their own opinions and personal preferences. What a clever ruse on the part of the powers of darkness to shove all of Scripture into a dualistic upper story category which relegates holy writ to a set of 'inspirational myths' and 'moral sayings'. Thus, when Christians proclaim biblical truth claims, those assertions are regarded as merely propaganda, as imperious power plays which are disrespectful to the views of others.

**The Christian preacher's dogmatism is viewed by the unbeliever as an exercise in 'signaling' the things that are dear to his own identity.** And further, his efforts to persuade others to embrace what he believes are seen as evidence of the speaker's own insecurities and hunger to control others—he 'needs' others to buy into his propaganda so he can feel good about himself (so he can 'shore up' his identity). Of course that reaction by unbelievers presupposes the sham concept of pluralism and relativism—namely that there is no knowable, universal absolute truth. The natural man's existential vantage point is a position of folly, for he trusts

his own heart and holds God's authority in suspicion. "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered" (Prov 28:26).

**Secular humanism has replaced theology with psychology as the new 'queen of the sciences'.** For over one hundred years, psychology has reassured its students that man himself is the final and ultimate reference point. Under the tutelage of psychology, the natural man's sinful instincts have been reinforced—"be true to your desires and yearnings, for that is how to be true to yourself". 'you may determine for yourself what is real, what is true, what is right and what is wrong'. 'You decide the limits of possibility in the cosmos'. The self now has a new level of sovereignty bestowed upon it by the 'sciences' (man, in determining reality for himself, now equates the powers of his mind with the mind of God).

**Man's arrogant affinity for a self-referential life view is evidence of his love of darkness and his hatred of the light.** "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God" (Jn 3:19-21). We see this love of darkness in bold relief on the campuses of public universities. The academy is dogmatic in its stance that we cannot know absolute truth. But, this sentiment reveals a brazen contempt for Christ, the *Logos*, who is God's light to the world. God has spoken infallibly and authoritatively through His Son. "Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life" (Jn 1:1-3; **8:12**; 6:51; Col 2:2; Heb 1:1-3).

**So fixed and recalcitrant in the depraved heart is the original lie, that contemporary man regards God's governance to be antagonistic to human flourishing.** God's loving rule and glory are considered hostile to man's best interest. This rebellious sentiment that God's glory opposes man's good can only be removed by an act of God. Nothing can evict the lie but the gospel. What is required is the miracle of regeneration through the bloody sacrifice of the Son of God. For, man's ruthless loyalty to his imagined autonomy is even stronger than a mother's love for her own infant—barring a miracle of God, man will not release his cherished imagined sovereignty.

Only the new birth can break that iron grip. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 'Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again'" (Jn 3:6-7). "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds

which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5).

**There can only be one Sovereign, there is no coregency, God will not share His throne with His creatures of dust.** In order for man to experience redemption, he must come face to face with God’s transcendent holiness and bow before it. But, what does it mean that God is transcendent in holiness? In a multitude of places, Scripture attests to the uniqueness of God’s holiness—there is nothing in creation to which it may be compared. “To whom then will you liken Me that I would be *his* equal?” says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these *stars*, the One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; because of the greatness of His might and the strength of *His* power, not one of *them* is missing” (Is 40:25).

**God, transcendent in holiness means a number of things, first of all it means that God is the standard of holiness, His holiness flows from His character as infinite Creator and sovereign moral Judge.** Holiness is defined by who God is and not by anything outside of God. “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44a). ‘Transcendence’ in association with God’s holy nature also means that every bit of holiness in the creature must be derivative from God Almighty Who is the source—holiness in the creature is not due to the accomplishment of the creature, it must be imparted to the creature by the Creator. In addition, God’s holiness can never be accurately described as merely quantitatively greater than ours. For, holiness that is transcendent exceeds all categories which are quantifiable. “There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God” (I Sam 2:2).

**In order to help us understand this concept of transcendent holiness, consider how incredibly difficult it is for us to contemplate a universe that is measured in billions of lightyears.** Our vast cosmos is the thought of God and He effortlessly maintains it in all places by his infinite power (Is 40:25). This present author readily acknowledges his own failure in attempting to accurately conceive of the scope of our universe with its mind-bending immensity. Thus, when God’s infinitude as Creator and Sustainer of the universe is considered in conjunction with His foundational attribute of holiness, the concept of His transcendent holiness becomes a staggering thought. My mind cannot contain it, I cannot take its measure, or even place it within a quantifiable category. This is why the adjective

'transcendent' modifies the word holiness. For, God's holiness *transcends* any source, any metric, any dimensions, or any set of limits known to man.

**Now, practically speaking, the bottom line for us in being confronted by God's transcendent holiness is that all true piety involves the desire, above all else, to receive holiness from God.** In fact it is a question which pastors ask too infrequently, "Are you panting after God so that you desire holiness from Him?" This issue of being related to God's holiness by the reception of God's holiness is why God's gracious action of sanctifying the believer is so closely tied to salvation. It is because the reception of holiness from God, sometimes designated in theology as *definitive sanctification*, involves being set apart by His holiness for His holiness. "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth" (2 Thess 2:13). "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb 10:10, 14).

**Justifying grace is a divine miracle, for it places the unholy, unrighteous creature into a new standing, the saved man or woman becomes *right with God's righteousness*.** "He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). Of course this radical change in standings is not because the sinner has made personal improvements, it is because the believing sinner is reckoned righteous in Christ, his Representative (1 Cor 1:30; Heb 4:14-16). This reckoning of righteousness is not a bare transaction, it is better described a 'relationship given'. 'That means that God takes possession of the creature, separating the creature from what is profane, and separating the creature unto Himself, unto His own holiness. The redeemed person becomes a devoted being, a temple of God's Spirit (1 Cor 6:19, 20; Eph 2:19-22).

**This once for all setting apart, or sanctifying work of God is essential to the reception of holiness from God.** "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their *Lord* and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:2, 3).

Consider for a moment that our Creator's purpose for the ages is to share Himself with us. This all-consuming truth of God's overarching purpose flies in the face of today's prevailing mysticism that spiritual things belong to the esoteric, the experiential, to private piety, or to the realm of blind faith. But, Scripture takes God's redemptive plot out of the realm of merely 'inner spirituality' and places it

squarely in time, space history. For, the ‘redemption’ of the physical cosmos is linked with the redemption, or resurrection of the believer’s body! Listen to Paul’s words in Romans chapter 8 regarding salvation and a restored creation:

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body (Rom 8:19-23).

**Now returning to that phrase, *God’s purpose of the ages*, we may confidently say, in spite of our world’s efforts at self-destruction, history will ultimately prove to be *His Story*.** For, God will consummate, ‘wrap up’ all things in Christ—both visible and invisible things: “He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth” (Eph 1:9, 10). God’s *purpose of the ages* encompasses all of creation: people, angels, and the cosmos itself.

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*. *This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose [*purpose of the ages*] which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him (Eph 3:8-12)

**Thus, living as a Christ-follower is not the monkish life of a spiritual recluse, for, serving God is a whole-life endeavor.** His lordship is over every area of our lives, from family, to friends, to career, to possessions, to recreation. Our entire thinking is to be brought in line with God’s Word. For, we can only serve as

stewards to His glory if we are committed to 'thinking His thoughts after Him'. "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. *We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:3-5). Human beings are the crown of God's creation because they are the only creatures made in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:16-17). One of the expressions of our being the image of God is that we serve as His 'vice-regents' put over the work of His hands to steward the creation to the glory of God.

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, whatever passes through the paths of the seas (Ps 8:3-8).

**Our faithful stewardship of the world depends upon our willingness to define everything in our human experience as God does, by His infallible self-revelation, the Scriptures.** He made the world as a showcase, a stage, and theatre for the display of his moral majesty (His transcendent holiness) (Ex 15:11). That means that our bodies, our relationships, and our rule over the material world have a vital part to play in God's plan. They are to be used as He specifies; for His glory. There must be a conscious, daily presentation of ourselves (and the things entrusted to us) to God. "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God" (Rom 6:11-13).

*Part two in this series will be the June article of the month*