



Reformation Christian Ministries

The Gospel Versus a “Gospel Culture”

October 2007

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

What is the “Good News” or “the Gospel”? To a person truly convicted of their sins and the need for a Savior OR to the person who has truly been saved from their sins, it means **the work of Jesus Christ on the cross to save sinners from their sin while providing for God's justice that sin must be punished** (Rom. 3:26). However, to many others, while still employing the name of *Jesus Christ* and the words “salvation” and “sin”, it practically means a society or culture of refuge within this world. This society provides friendship, fellowship, security and a whole new culture that enables people to withstand the persecution that lies without. It is somewhat like joining a gang or club where everyone sticks together. North Americans know the attraction of this at all levels of society. This group or culture is the “good news” or “salvation” in this world by which they long to satisfy their “need to belong” and to feel safe and comfortable. It becomes their “good news”. The person and work of Jesus Christ is often quite incidental to these other needs. I call this the *cultural gospel*.

A more primitive version of this is common in less advanced societies. A study done in Haiti during 1970 on the growing church concluded that a family's fear of the surrounding culture of voodoo led them to flee “from voodoo” “to Protestantism”. Recognizing the various reasons for this was important in understanding how churches grew in Haiti. The author emphasized that understanding this “from-to” process was part of conversion, but was not to be confused with regeneration. Churches could be grown by admitting converts because of their choice of Protestantism over voodoo. The gospel to which they are responding is this “cultural gospel”. Outwardly, it seems close and it may be moving in the right direction, but it is not the real Gospel.

Outward conversion to Christianity can come more from a desire to **flee from something** or **belong to something** within the world than a true Spirit-led response to the Gospel. People flee to good news not bad news, but often it is not Jesus Christ to whom they flee; rather to a world-centered “religious” culture in which Jesus Christ is named.

We see such things like this all around us. Bad economic prospects in one culture often lead to an exodus of people to one offering better prospects (immigration problems). The same

principle applies within a culture where those disillusioned with the family breakdown and the *dog-eat-dog* nature of secularism are attracted to a caring community of “believers”. Conservative-value families struggle with the problems of public schools and its influences on children, marital problems, divorce, teenage delinquency, drugs, pornography, etc.; and they often seek refuge in a Christian community or culture which offers a more principled and loving environment. The attraction is often away from one culture and into some alternative, *but still in the world*, albeit a religious world. This has not passed unnoticed by groups around the world of various religions who set forth the loving and caring “ways of Jesus”. *Come away and join us and you will find what you are looking for.* Mormonism has tied their false gospel with the appeal of this cultural gospel and marketed it quite well. It has become an effective “church growth” technique and is now being increasingly used by Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses and is growing rapidly even in evangelical, Reformed and Presbyterian churches. If the true Gospel is preached, this is not all bad, but too often it will get lost in the milieu of worldly marketing for church growth.

This attraction to a culture or a society may not, in itself, be bad. Jesus used miracles. The danger is in equating this “good news” culture/society with the Good News of Christ. One is in this world, the other is not. The draw is really to the “church society” just as it was to Jesus' miracles. As a consequence, adherents to Christianity are often attracted by the consistency, sanity and friendship of people found in the church by contrast to alternatives offered by secular societies or other churches. This is, of course, attributed to Jesus Christ (because He is part of the “package”), and as soon as a person can learn the required language and teachings, repeat them coherently to the elders and demonstrate that their lives meet the “church rules”, they can join.

Covenant children have it all that much easier because they have been raised in this culture and already know the language and teachings. For many of them, public confession of faith is sort of their “right of passage” into “full communion” (read *full club membership*). Faith in the church, in its various confessional propositions along with an outward life not overtly inconsistent with those, allows them into the church (or Christian) culture. There is a vague understanding of the Gospel that Jesus died to save sinners and that *since we are not perfect and have broken God's law in various ways, we are sinners. So, He must have died for us.* Adherents also must recognize that there is nothing they can do to save themselves, Jesus has to do that, and so they can never say they are saved by their works. YET, there are all these things that are expected of them in this culture that they have to do either to get into it or to maintain it just like anything else in the world. For many, living up to these expectations is not any more difficult than living up to the expectations of any culture. If you make a mistake, you confess your mistake, are forgiven and are received back in again. Albeit, some decide to rebel and eventually leave to join another culture, but that is to be expected because there are tares among the wheat. (Those that find no culture to receive them, often become complete outcasts and are high amongst the suicide and “school shooter” ranks.)

Published by Reformation Christian Ministries

U.S.A.: 13950 122nd Street, Fellsmere, Florida 32948-6411

Telephone: (772) 571-8833; Fax: (772) 571-8010

E-mail: gwd@reformation.edu

Internet: <http://www.reformation.edu>

CANADA: R.R. #1, 5060 Oliver Road, Murrillo, ON P0T 2G0

Telephone: (807) 473-9344; E-mail: canada@reformation.edu

Reformation Christian Ministries, an international, educational missions ministry, is under the oversight of The King's Reformed Presbyterian Church and Sharon Orthodox Presbyterian Church. RCM is eligible to receive tax-exempt donations in both the United States and Canada and is underwritten by donations from individuals and other churches. The Board of Directors for RCM in Canada is responsible for the affairs of RCM in Canada. RCM in the U.S.A. and Canada cooperate on like-minded projects. RCM cooperates by agreement with like-minded churches and denominations by assisting with mission work in specific fields and/or projects. Ecclesiastical authority for missionary ministers comes from their respective churches, not from RCM.

Fields: Albania, Italy, Russia, U.K., Congo, Zambia, and Suriname.

Director of Missions: G. W. Donnan, Minister

(Continued on page 2.)

Some call this “Christianization” and the cultural mandate, and if all the world lived like those in conservative Bible believing churches, while not perfect, outwardly it would be more pleasant. YET, all of this can be done in the flesh of man. It requires no renewing of the mind. **Religious people around the world, be they Muslim, Jews, Buddhists or Hindus, can live outwardly decent lives.** The more decent among them are capable of good marriages, obedient children and stable families. But this culture often appeals primarily to pride and can be that which draws a person, instead of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. **So, it can seem very close, but is not the real thing.**

In a sense, living within Christian culture is very much like living in the covenant. It does not require regeneration, only relative conformity and familiarity with the language.

Yet, in contrast to this outward culture, **the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is one that draws us against our nature and against everything that comes from our flesh, including an attractive culture or religious feelings.** It is a renewing of our mind from Someone outside this world. **It is a trust not in something by which we are surrounded and are made proud of, but in a distinctly other and transcendent Person and His work.** While being part of this covenant has many advantages (see Rom. 2:25-3:2), it is not the same as the real peace found solely in Christ alone (not all Israel is Israel—Rom. 9:6-8). Instead of seeing ourselves as merely imperfect, we see ourselves as absolute and total violators of everything holy in Him (Rom. 7:14). We see nothing we can learn or say or do that saves us, but solely His work of salvation. We find our comfort not in the fact that we are part of a group of likeminded people who use the name of Jesus frequently and have the right doctrine. Instead,

we find our comfort in the actual work and person of Jesus Christ Himself. Our hope is not in our culture in this world, but in the Person and work of Jesus Christ alone.

Preaching (in the home and the church) can often be so centered upon how to conform to this Christian culture, find happiness in it and do the things necessary to be what we should be. In contrast to this, the true Gospel shows us who Christ is, what He did, how absolutely contrary to Him we are and that our only hope is found in Him alone and not in our conformity to the church society or its culture.

This is a very important understanding and one that is often lost in this day and age of religious activism and efforts to create a Christian culture. So, while RCM uses the word “Reformation” in our ministry title, we do so with a clear understanding that true reformation produces *renewing of the mind* by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. True Christians may well change the world in some ways, but only Christ changes people and that by His work and power alone. This must never be confused with the blessed hope in the Gospel.

Pray for RCM as we keep this in perspective and seek to help others do the same, so that our mission work is truly Reformational and not just outwardly so. Pray also for yourselves, that all true transformation is based solely upon the Gospel for then it will produce true reformation. The Gospel transforms our mind to that of Christ’s.

 *Geoffrey Donnan*

© 2007 Reformation Christian Ministries. All Rights Reserved. This article may be reproduced, transmitted, or copied, but only in its entirety with this note included.