

# TRUE GOSPEL-CENTEREDNESS IS NEVER BLAND

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JARED MELLINGER

There is a kind of “gospel-centeredness” that fails to do justice to the glory and wonder of the gospel. I have in mind an approach to remembering, communicating, and applying the good news that becomes unhelpfully predictable, bland, and rote. It always tends to use the same language; it remains on the surface of Scripture and rarely provides new insights.

In Sovereign Grace Churches, we can appropriately describe ourselves as a gospel-centered people who attend gospel-centered churches where we receive gospel-centered preaching and enjoy gospel-centered fellowship. We aim for gospel-centered marriages and gospel-centered parenting; we do gospel-centered work and enjoy gospel-centered leisure; I hope to live a gospel-centered life followed by a gospel-centered funeral.

All of this is good. The idea of centering the whole of our lives on Christ and his cross is essential and profoundly biblical.

Yet, we need to remember that it’s possible to say the word *gospel* a lot without ever mining the glories of the person and work of Christ in all of Scripture and without applying that message to our daily lives. Gospel-centered has been a popular Christian buzzword over the past decade, but repeating

the buzzword is not what makes a Christian or a church truly centered upon Christ. Some of the most gospel-centered preachers and churches throughout history never used that term at all.

Our goal is not the lingo but the reality. We aim for a deep and vibrant focus on the living Christ and his finished work. It is a focus that ought to expand our minds, thrill our souls, and transform our lives. So how can we continue to cultivate this kind of Christ-centeredness in our lives and our churches?

### **Learning from Scripture**

One way to avoid a stale gospel-centeredness is to follow Scripture in considering the diverse ways Christ is revealed: prophets spoke of him, biblical themes find their fulfillment in him, stories of sinners reveal our need for him, mighty acts of redemption point to him. In our study of Scripture, we never want to move so quickly to Christ that we flatten the Biblical landscape, neglect the careful study of each book and chapter, and fail to discover the unique way each passage and theme uniquely reveals the redemption that is found in Christ.

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We should also consider the vivid and varied language the New Testament uses to communicate what Christ has done. “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3) is a gospel summary of great value, and repetition has its use. Yet, the New Testament writers do not take the approach of always communicating the gospel the same way.

Consider the varied words of Paul:

- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13).
- “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5).
- “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are

justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:23-25).

- “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).
- “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).
- “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).
- “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7).

There is a richness in these biblical descriptions of what God has done for us in Christ. Therefore, every Christian should maintain an expansive gospel lexicon. If we swim in the vast ocean of the biblical presentation of the gospel, it will guard us against a shallow gospel-centeredness.

### **Christ and His Benefits**

The idea of a shallow gospel-centeredness is, in fact, an oxymoron, a contradiction of terms. The reason is that Christ himself is so glorious. If we are truly centered upon him and going deeper into the knowledge of his grace, it is impossible for there to be anything shallow or bland about it.

How can we yawn when we fix our eyes on the excellencies of Jesus Christ? How can the greatest story ever told become boring? How can we pass by the bleeding Savior without being moved to tears of adoration? How can we remember the risen Christ and not experience triumphant hope rushing through our veins? How can we believe in him and not rejoice with joy inexpressible and filled with glory?

Arise, my soul, arise: The Son of God has loved you by taking upon himself the divine judgment you deserve! My Savior bore the wrath reserved for me! I have experienced adoption through propitiation! His death is my freedom and my pardon.

“Because the sinless Savior died  
My sinful soul is counted free  
For God the Just is satisfied  
To look on Him and pardon me”

When we are truly centered on the Savior, we realize just how little we know of the glory and love revealed at Calvary. There are always new things to see in the old rugged cross. The slain Lamb of God will be the fascination and praise of the redeemed for all eternity.

Progress in the Christian life is experienced as we go deeper into Christ, deeper into a knowledge of his love, deeper into an understanding of the many reasons he died. He is the glorious Christ, and his benefits are beyond counting. “In their union with Christ, believers freely receive all the benefits of the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> In Christ, we do not receive some benefits of the gospel; we receive all of them. Surveying these manifold benefits helps us avoid unvaried and monotonous views of our salvation.

### **A Life-Permeating Gospel**

We also find that gospel-centricity maintains its power and liveliness as the good news is applied to all of life. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” This does not mean he was talking about Christ without explaining the relevance of Christ in our daily lives. The opposite is true: to know nothing except Christ is to insist on the relevance of the gospel for all of life.

C.J. Mahaney says, “The gospel is life-permeating, world-altering, universe-changing truth.”<sup>2</sup> He says we must not only rejoice in it, but we must also “allow it to color the way we look at the world and all of life.”<sup>3</sup>

1. [SOVEREIGN GRACE CHURCHES STATEMENT OF FAITH](#), 40.

2. C.J. MAHANAY, *LIVING THE CROSS CENTERED LIFE* (COLORADO SPRINGS, CO: MULTNOMAH, 2006), 142.

3. *IBID.*, 15.

It was in 2005 that C.J. invited Mike Bullmore to teach at our Sovereign Grace Pastors Conference. His theme was “The Functional Centrality of the Gospel in the Life of the Local Church.” Mike talked about the omni-relevance of the gospel and explained the importance of making gospel connections to everyday life:

“One of the greatest challenges, yet one of the most important tasks, of pastoral ministry is to help people actually see the connections between the gospel and the thinking and behavior that make up their everyday lives. We know well the centrality of the gospel message, but in order for it to have a functional centrality, it must be clearly, carefully, and consistently connected to the real issues—issues of thought and conduct—of people’s lives. This kind of ministry is most greatly needed.”<sup>4</sup>

The maturity of Christians and our effectiveness in ministry depends on cultivating the skill of connecting the gospel to everyday thinking and behavior. To be a Christ-centered people is to strive to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27) and to have our conduct be “in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14).

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### **Connecting Christ and Conduct**

The good news of Christ’s finished work has powerful application for the most pressing issues in our lives and our world. It shapes our view of ourselves, our relationships, our trials, our future. As we help each other connect Christ to our conduct, the gospel equips us for daily living and obedience.

- How does the gospel connect to living a life of purity? “For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:20).
- How does the gospel strengthen marriages? “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

<sup>4</sup> 2005 SOVEREIGN GRACE PASTORS CONFERENCE

- How does the gospel empower forgiveness when others sin against us? “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).
- How does the gospel compel us to a life of service and sustain us in service when we are weary? “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).
- How does the gospel lead to generous giving? “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Mike Bullmore expands these categories:

Many more examples could be given. The gospel has something to say about racism. The gospel has something to say about suffering. The gospel has something to say about self-control. The gospel has something to say about worship. The gospel has something to say about caring for the poor. Ultimately, all Christian behavior should flow out of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

A Christ-centeredness that does the hard and joyful work of connecting the gospel to all of life will always be fresh. There are gospel connections for our lives, waiting to be discovered in God’s word.

### **A Christ-Centered People**

By God’s grace, the brothers and sisters in Sovereign Grace are a gospel-centered and Christ-centered people. To my great joy, I have seen this evidence of God’s kindness in our churches and our pastors for many years. The proof is not how loud we shout, how many times we say the word gospel or gospel-centered, or whether we can check the box that we mentioned the cross in a sermon.

To be a Christ-centered people means that our churches are pressing on to see Christ in all of Scripture, applying the work of Christ in daily life, proclaiming the good news of Christ to others, and celebrating the endless glory of Christ and his benefits.

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5. 2005 SOVEREIGN GRACE PASTORS CONFERENCE

Doing this together as a union of churches is, to me, the most exhilarating thing in the world. How could centering our lives and our churches on so glorious a Savior ever become dull and uninspiring? Let's continue to demonstrate the joy, the wonder, and the life-transforming power of being a Christ-centered people. True gospel-centeredness is never bland.

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