

IS THE GOSPEL LOSING ITS POWER TO CHANGE LIVES?

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

I have never spoken on this theme specifically ever - not in the church I serve nor anywhere else. But there's an issue that's been haunting me lately. Let me explain. I would never presume to offer any advice on missionary work. You all would know far more than I about what makes for effective *missional* endeavor (to use the most over-worked word on planet earth today). So I have nothing to bring to the table on that front.

I think I have learned a few things about pastoring a church in a Canadian context over the last 35 years. And I've been in one church just long enough (26 years) to at least take note of trends that you wouldn't see coming and going if you were just momentarily on the scene.

So, for what it's worth, let me share my own convictions about something I see happening in our churches in Canada (and I include P.A.O.C. churches here as well) and, more importantly, *why* I think it's happening. I think *why* it may be happening relates to how *all* of us frame up our understanding of what the Christian Gospel *is* and how it relates to whatever ministry God has for us. And surely, what we *all* have in common is a desire to be saying what we're *supposed* to be saying as servants of Christ and doing what we're *supposed* to be doing as servants of Christ.

It came to a head for me this summer on a trip to Minneapolis. The main reason for the trip - as should be obvious to any thoughtful person - was to attend the PGA at Hazeltine and see Tiger Woods defeated. Then we were off to *John Piper's* church for Sunday. Great service and a great message. I made my regular dash to the bookstore after the benediction. And it was there that something deeply disturbing happened inside my head.

I was reading some articles by various authors in a magazine, when these words by Piper passed in front of my eyes like all words do when you read them, but then had the effect on my mind like being struck with a heavy, blunt, lead pipe. It wasn't that the theology was so innovative, but the way the words were arranged made it like I had never heard the idea before: "*Only in a climate where sin is labeled and exposed can the Gospel have any power, or even the most remote trace of relevance.*"

And I guess it was the way my mind sounded out that word "*any*" - "*Only in a climate where sin is exposed can the Gospel have any power or even the most remote relevance.*" Really? So the Gospel can become *totally* irrelevant? *Totally* powerless? *Totally* useless? It just didn't sound right. I couldn't get this disturbed feeling out my stomach.

It seemed to me that Piper was saying, "*We're not just dealing with style of ministry here (like contemporary versus traditional), or degrees of fidelity to truth (like, aren't there some points of doctrine that *aren't* worth quibbling about), or degrees of effectiveness, - like the Gospel works better under these conditions, rather than those - the way some plants do better in the sun than the shade.*" No. Piper seemed to be saying. "*If you don't get this principle right, whatever else you may be doing, you're not really working within the Christian Gospel at all.*"

Now, back to what I said at the beginning about something I see happening in the church and then, later on, *why* I think it's happening.

1) WE SEEM TO HAVE SO MANY "MISFIRES" IN PROFESSING CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

It's just getting too hard to deny it anymore. We can't just whistle and pretend this isn't happening. There is a large portion of a whole generation that is becoming Christian in *heritage only*. There are more and more "*professions of faith*" that leave the life totally unchanged from what it was before such faith was professed.

Please don't misunderstand me. I *know* Christians have never been anything more than a pale reflection of the beauty and power of Jesus Christ. We've always needed a humble reliance on God's grace for any measure of conformity to Christ. That's not news to anyone.

But now it's different. It's precisely that so many no longer *sense* their failure to follow Christ as closely as they should. They *justify* what we *used* to call worldliness by saying, over and over again, "*I do believe in Jesus - just not the same way you do. I have my own relationship with Jesus - it's my personal relationship - and it just doesn't look like yours. It's different.*"

And different is an *understatement*. Consider these words on the contemporary faith level of the American church from *George Barna* in his book (and video), "*Morality And the Church*": "*Americans unanimously denounced the September 11 terrorist attacks as a textbook example of evil, suggesting that there is a foundational belief in an absolute standard of right and wrong. Subsequent research, however, has shown that in the aftermath of the attacks, only a minority of Americans believe in the existence of absolute moral truth. Even more surprising, the data from a pair of nationwide studies conducted by the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California showed that less than one out of three born again Christians adopt the notion of absolute moral truth. The surveys also found that few Americans turn to their faith as the primary guide for their moral and ethical decisions.*"

"*In two national surveys conducted by Barna Research, one among adults and one among teenagers, Christians were asked if they believe that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging, or that moral truth is relative to the circumstances. By a 3-to-1 margin (that's 64% vs. 22%) adults said truth is always relative to the person and their situation. The perspective was even more lopsided among teenagers, 83% of whom said moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6% of whom said moral truth is absolute.*"

“In addition, Barna Research noted that substantial numbers of Christians believe that activities such as abortion, gay sex, cohabitation, drunkenness and viewing pornography are morally acceptable.”

Barna states, ***“Without some firm and compelling basis for suggesting that such acts are sinful, people are left with philosophies such as ‘if it feels good, do it,’ ‘everyone else is doing it,’ or, ‘as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else, it’s permissible.’ In fact, the alarmingly fast decline of moral foundations among Christians has culminated in a one-word worldview: ‘whatever.’ The result is a mentality (and here’s where I’m going with all of this) that esteems pluralism, relativism, tolerance, and diversity without critical reflection on the implications of particular views and actions.”***

Barna continues, ***“Just one out of ten of our country’s born again teenagers believe in absolute moral truth - a statistic that is nearly identical to that of non-Christian teens. Christian families, educators and churches must prioritize this matter if the Christian community hopes to have any distinctiveness in our culture. The virtual disappearance of this cornerstone of the Christian faith - that is, God has communicated a series of moral principles in the Bible that are meant to be the basis of our thoughts and actions, regardless of our preferences, feelings, or situations - is probably the best indicator of the waning strength of the Christian Church today.”***

“The failure to address this issue at its root, and to do so quickly and persuasively, will undermine the strength of the church for at least another full generation, and probably longer.”

I don’t have the time to take this any further. But the problem is **not** that these Christians Barna describes are weighed down by sin and guilt. That would be **good** news, not bad. The problem is we have more and more professing Christians who don’t read or know their Bibles, don’t go to church very much because they find it boring (I want to talk about that in a minute), sleep with whomever they please, and when they **do** come to church, they come with lifted hands and closed eyes, singing about how much they adore and love Jesus. **It’s not that they feel they’re failures as disciples. It’s that they have redefined discipleship on their own terms.**

That last sentence in Barna’s quote seems so important - at least in his mind: ***“The failure to address this issue at its root, and to do so quickly and persuasively, will undermine the strength of the church for at least another full generation, and probably longer.”*** It makes me wish he were a bit more informative. The sentence doesn’t, except, perhaps, in very general terms, make clear exactly **how** we must address this issue.

If it’s true - and I’m arguing that it **is** - that growing numbers of Christians see no need to **behave** like Christians - if all the ***“What Would Jesus Do”*** bracelets aren’t promoting life-styles of holiness and self-denial - then what are we to do? And here’s my point - I’m arguing that all of this dilemma calls us back to Piper’s quote that dented my cranium back in Minneapolis: ***“Only in a climate where sin is labeled and exposed can the Gospel have any power, or even the most remote trace of relevance.”***

2) **AT LEAST IN CANADA, WE PASTORS AND LEADERS BEAR A BIG PART OF THE BLAME FOR THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THAT “CLIMATE” PIPER DESCRIBES WHERE SIN IS LABELED AND EXPOSED**

I don’t think we did it on purpose. I think we had the best of intentions. Several things combined, at least in our North American culture, that made it feel very narrow minded and prudish - heaven forbid, perhaps even **intolerant** - to harp on sin, God’s wrath, and judgment, and eternity.

I can think of several examples:

First, with all the wonderful things resulting from the renewal in the worship music in the last twenty-five years, there was something dangerous embedded in it. As quickly as you can, list three - just **three** - contemporary worship songs with the word ***“judgment”*** in them. As quickly as you can, list two - just **two** - with the word ***“wrath”*** in them.

Don’t misunderstand me. I **know** at least most of us still believe in those things. Though even that, as we’ll see in a minute, isn’t a given. My issue right now isn’t that I don’t think we **believe** in those concepts. My question is different. What happens in the minds and hearts of Christians - even those who have a doctrinal agreement with the wrath of God against sin and the inevitability of judgment against those who unrepentantly resist God’s ways - ***what happens to the life-style of Christians who never hear about those things?*** Remember Piper’s quote. ***“Only in a climate where sin is labeled and exposed can the Gospel have any power, or even the most remote trace of relevance.”***

And I'm arguing when people *never* have those concepts reinforced in their corporate worship the *power* of those concepts will wear very thin over one or two generations. So one of the things that has brought pressure to bear on pastors and leaders in the disappearance of the "*climate*" where sin is labeled and exposed is the theological vacuum created by a burgeoning worship industry.

Second, as the church has become less doctrinal and increasingly therapeutic, talk about sin and wrath and judgment has seemed increasingly out of place. This has put immense pressure on leaders because, after all, who wants to appear out of place? Add to that the list of books on effective church growth and leadership that tell me if people don't embrace what I teach and love everything our church does, we must be doing it wrong. **Acceptance** by our culture now equals **success** in message and ministry.

This is the pot in which many of us serve Christ. Most of the best-sellers either **deny, down-play, or totally ignore** the consistent teaching of the Scriptures on God's wrath and judgment against sin.

Consider the whopping best seller, "*The Shack*," just as one example among many. "**I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment...**" (p.118). These words pour out of the mouth of none other than "Papa God" Himself - or *herself* - portrayed by an apron clad "*Aunt Jemima*." Of course, the book is just a novel - an allegory. But once you start putting words into God's mouth, people - or at the very least, **Christians** - should be very careful about what He's made to say. Other places in the same book virtually eliminate the reality of any future, eternal judgment against sin.

But **doesn't** God judge sin? What about Achan and his entire family. God told Joshua to get all of Achan's family - kids and livestock to boot - gather them all together - and then force the Israelites **themselves** to stone that whole family to death. Isn't **that** judging sin? What about Sodom and Gomorah? And what about Lot's wife - turned to a pillar of salt, just for turning around and looking back. And what about Jesus on the cross? Why is He dying there, anyway? Why can't God just let sin **play itself out in its own punishment** in our three-score and ten years, and then we'll all be happy?

And what about the rest of the revealed New Testament God? What about Ananias and Sapphira? And what about all those - the "**many**" Paul says God has judged with sickness and death because of their wicked hearts at the Lord's Supper? And what about the revelation of a future event - apparently, a revelation from Jesus Himself to John on the Island of Patmos - "**And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire**" (Rev.20:15).

I can't think of the last time that I was in any church **anywhere** where I heard **anyone** even **mention** the lake of fire.

Third, people tend to assess the needs of people without calculating the historic reality of the Fall. This came home to me afresh while watching *Larry King* interview *Joel Osteen*. You could just sense where it was all going. As soon as Osteen mentioned how wonderful and helpful Jesus Christ was to people Larry jumped all over the obvious question. "**Well, what about people who don't know anything about Jesus Christ? You aren't saying they're all doomed, are you?**"

You could see the panic all over Joel's face. I mean, you can't appear intolerant of other religions on network television. Jesus wouldn't be intolerant of other sincerely practiced religions, would He? Joel took the only road open: "**You know Larry, my dad worked with Hindus in India for years. And those were some of the dearest people he ever met. I don't know the answer to your question for sure, but I know in my heart that God will judge those people by their hearts. Maybe they've never heard of Jesus, but they have good hearts and God will judge them, not by their religion, but by what's in their hearts.**"

Larry King seemed happy with that response. But the response is full of problems. Let me ask you something. Let's just pretend for a minute. If you could stand at the final judgment and set the terms for your judgment, would you rather be judged by your **deeds**, or by everything that's in your **heart**?

I can answer that question in a heart-beat. I'd far rather be judged by my **deeds**. At least - in my pretend scenario - my deeds might give me a chance of God's favor. I don't steal. I have never cheated on my wife. I don't view pornography. I don't swear. I give to my church and other charities. I have a few Child Care Plus children. I try not to lie. I love my wife. I go to church. I read my Bible. I've never been in jail or in trouble with the law. Not too bad.

But please don't let God judge me by my heart! Do I really want to stand accountable for every single second I **didn't** love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength? And what about every time I coveted material things? What about every moment of silent pride? What about every time I knew something good I **should** have done, but **didn't**? James says that's a sin.

And what about every moment of anger - even if I was mature enough not to **express** it in mean or hasty words? Because, remember, **not** expressing my anger is **wisdom**, but it's not **righteousness**. I mean, not expressing my anger doesn't **erase** the wickedness of that anger from my **heart**. **Silence** doesn't erase the sin of inward anger. Only the **blood of Jesus** can erase that sin from my hidden heart.

So what could Larry and Joel have been thinking? Who could possibly take any peace whatsoever from the fact that God will judge us by what's in our hearts? I'll tell you who. **Only those who talk about people's hearts as though the Fall never happened. Only those who don't reckon regularly with the blunt reality of inward corruption and sin.**

Churches have gotten caught up in this same optimistic view of who we really are as people and consequently are losing sight of what the

gospel is really *for*. Bright sounding euphemisms for the conversion experience abound. It's a "*spiritual journey*," or worse, "*personal life-transforming experience*." Or even worse still, "*people realizing their full potential as beings created in the image of God*."

And, while none of those phrases is wicked in itself, none expresses anything about *sin* and *what needs to be done about sin*. None of them calls to mind a Gospel that emphasizes justification by faith or a substitutionary atonement, or anything in the realm of accountability beyond this earthly life. They're more about *therapy* than *atonement*.

The inevitable result of all this is people are getting *bored with the church*. "*Church*" has just become a plural for "*Christian*." It's not a coincidence that we've come to a time when many prefer to think of a group of *three Christians at Starbucks* as a "*church*" rather than "*First Presbyterian Church on Main Street*." Once doctrine and sin and redemption and eternity recede in emphasis, the church becomes only *one of many options for making a positive difference in the world*. So, naturally, people can pick and choose on the basis of nothing more than personal preference and convenience.

Now, try to remember where we've been. First there was that haunting quote from Piper: "*Only in a climate where sin is labeled and exposed can the Gospel have any power, or even the most remote trace of relevance*." Then, in pondering the relevance of the Gospel I've been laboring over two ideas. *First, we seem to see so many "misfires" in terms of transformed behavior in Christian conversion*. And *second, I think we leaders bear some blame for the de-emphasizing of that "climate" of sin consciousness and recognition that gives the Gospel relevance*.

Then we looked at *three* ways in which this de-emphasis has been facilitated by the current evangelical religious scene. *First*, the nature of at least much of the current worship material. *Second*, the trend in popular Christian best sellers to appeal to a mass, unchurched, or at least uninformed market. And *third*, the ease with which *therapeutic* religion can aim its material at that market without taking into consideration the massive effects of the Fall on our now sinfully corrupted hearts.

But there's one more aspect of this subject I still want to consider:

3) DO THE SCRIPTURES ANTICIPATE THIS CURRENT TENDENCY? AND DO THEY OFFER ANY CORRECTION TO IT?

And I think the answer is "*yes*" to both questions. Let me just look at two passages, though there are dozens that deal with this theme:

Romans 12:3-9 - "*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. [4] For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. [6] Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; [7] if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; [8] the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.[9] Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*"

The only verse I want to comment on is **verse 9** - "*Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*" But I wanted to read it in its context because there are surely people who might argue that if you truly "*abhor what is evil*" you will do damage to the unity and bond of love in the body of Christ. And Paul, in an apparent anticipation of that objection, seems to say just the opposite. He seems to say that genuine unity and love and ministry and spiritual life in the church are *impossible* until all Christians "*abhor what is evil*." In other words, you can't create a loving, spiritual, user/seeker friendly church - a church where people sense *Jesus* present - if you ignore the call to "*abhor what is evil*."

But here's the money question. Why must we *abhor* what is evil? Why isn't it enough not to *do* evil? Surely that's the important thing. If we *do* what is good, and *don't do* what is evil, wouldn't anybody apostle be happy with that?

And here's the answer. *No*. It's never enough just to not *do* what is evil. In fact, to be technical, Paul doesn't even *tell* us not to *do* evil in this verse. He doesn't address our *actions* at all. He's calling for something more *visceral* than our actions. He's calling for an inward *repulsion* to what is evil. He's talking about a community of believers *known* for their abhorrence of sin and wickedness.

But even that doesn't get to the bottom of the issue. *Why* this call to abhor evil? Is Paul just some raving, red-neck, rabid fundamentalist? No. That misses it by a mile. He's pleading the case for Piper's quote. He's calling for a *climate* that will make the Gospel of redemption and justification shine with a unique splendor no other religion or sense of well-being can bring.

One more reference quickly:

1 Corinthians 5:1-6 - "*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. [2] And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. [3] For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. [4] When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, [5] you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. [6] Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"*

There are some strange sentences in this text. I'm almost confused by Paul's accusation against the church in **verses 2 and 6**. I'm not shocked that Paul chews them out for not dealing with the immoral situation in their church. But it's the way he *describes* the congregation that seems strange. He says they are "**arrogant**"(2), and accuses them of "**boasting**"(6).

I can't believe they were actually boasting that they had the most immoral church in Corinth. That seems a stretch, even for the worldliest of congregations. So the boasting and the arrogance must be of a different sort.

Here's what I think. I think Paul is shocked that this church had come to the place where it prided itself on being a place filled with grace and love. I think they prided themselves on being a place where people were just accepted in Jesus as they were - warts and all. I think they had come to value **peace and unity** more than **obedience and purity**. And Paul calls them **arrogant** for trying to be more tolerant and accepting and loving than God.

But again, Paul's concern is deeper than even that. He's concerned, as with the Piper quote, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is **meaningless** in a climate where sin isn't labeled and people aren't called to repentance. We simply have nothing unique to offer a fluffy Christian mind-set that overlooks sin and the wrath of God and eternal judgment.

I'm talking about our lives here. In some very interesting verses, Paul **includes** the proclamation of divine judgment in the presentation of the Gospel - **Romans 2:14-16** - "**For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [15] They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them [16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.**"

If there's no judgment in your words - in your **message** - then it's not the gospel you're presenting. "**God is love**" isn't the gospel. It's merely a description of a beautiful aspect of God's character. "**God is holy**" isn't the gospel either. That's merely another facet of God's being. The gospel is not just a description of **who God is** any more than it's just a revelation of the **character of Jesus** when He walked this earth. That Jesus was compassionate - that He was full of love for the outcast - that He fed the hungry and had compassion on the outcast - as beautiful of these aspects of Jesus' character are - they are still not the gospel.

The gospel has more to it than just having Jesus "**meet people where they are.**" We need to press deeper than that. **What will this Jesus say when He meets these people where they are? What will He tell them that Gandhi won't say? How will His grace be manifested in ways deeper than a compassionate, loving Hindu or Muslim? What is uniquely redeeming about our Jesus?**

And only the issue of **human sin**, the **wrath of God**, and the blessed, eternal **Passover Lamb** - the one slain to allow a holy God to be both **just** and **justifier** - only **this** is the heart of the gospel.

And my conclusion is Piper was, at least on this point, right. Only in a climate where sin is recognized and taken seriously, does this gospel have any relevance at all. And the beautiful simplicity of the gospel shines here: the biggest issues - the **core** gospel issues - need the **least contextualization**. Certainly every culture has its unique features that must be engaged lovingly and thoughtfully by all in ministry. But the **core** issues are also those with the most common ground. **Death. Judgment. Heaven. Hell. Conscience.** These are the stuff of all lives and the ponderings of all God's human creation. We must strive to keep them at the center.

This is what will make or break everything about our calling and our ministry in this world until Jesus comes again. And Jude says we're going to have to "**contend**" (**Jude 3**) for this kind of faith. That means we'll have to heed the Biblical command to **fight for it** - not least of all right in the church - as these last days speed by. God help us all.