



The Demise of Gospel Preaching in Modern Evangelicalism Part 3

By Bob DeWaay

In the first two parts of this series we examined the person and work of Christ and how the sinner needs to see himself as a law breaker who needs to repent. In this final part of this series we will examine several popular ideas in modern evangelicalism that have served to obscure the gospel and cause preachers to fail to proclaim the true terms of salvation.

Decision Theology

There are problems even when some are actually converted through the popular “decision for Jesus” approach. If they eventually do find out the true nature of the gospel, those truly converted then realize that they have been sold a bill of goods. The gospel does not promise better living in this world through a simple decision. The gospel calls us to take up our cross and live in this world as ones already condemned to die. Furthermore, the truly converted who are in the evangelical culture soon find themselves dying of spiritual starvation because the Word of God is not being preached. How much better to tell our hearers up front what the gospel is, and then when they come on that basis they can, like the early Christians in Acts, “rejoice to be counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”^[i]

There are a number of problems with the “decision theology” of modern evangelicalism. The most prominent one is that the Bible knows nothing of, “inviting someone to make a decision for Jesus.” The main proof text used by the teachers of decision theology is **Joel 3:14**: “*Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.*” The valley of decision in Joel is eschatological and has to do with Israel and the surrounding nations who would destroy her. The context of **Joel 3:14** shows that God as the Judge makes the decision! Charles Feinberg comments, “The prophet sees the nations assembled in innumerable hosts in the valley where God (not they) will make His decision.”^[ii] This is a description of the judgment of nations. God is about to arise and come forth from His chamber and issue His decision.

The idea of imminent wrath is clear in Joel, and that is surely something that ought to be preached. God’s coming judgment is reason to repent and flee from this perverse, sin cursed world system. But the only escape is through the gospel. So far from teaching “decision theology” the key passage used by its proponents teaches the coming wrath of God. Only the gospel offers a way of escape from this horrific valley of decision.

The misuse of the Joel passage illustrates what is wrong with much modern preaching. What is portrayed is the idea that God is awaiting our decision. We go into our chambers to issue our verdict based on whether we find God to our suiting or not. We make our decision about God and tell Him the verdict. This is dishonoring to God. The Biblical teaching is that we should fear God’s verdict and find a way of escape from the wrath of the Judge. James wrote, “[T]he Judge is standing at the door” (**James 5:9**). We make ourselves the judges and put God on trial. This is not Biblical.

Another problem with decision theology is that it discounts the sin nature and appeals to non-existent human ability. No sinner in his or her natural state finds the cross appealing. Here is Paul's description of the fleshly mind: "[T]he mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (**Romans 8:7,8**). God's Law makes sinfulness and inability evident, but only the gospel can change them. Decision theology has the fleshly man deciding if he will "accept Jesus" while totally in his unregenerate, fallen condition.^[iii] True gospel preaching shows sinners their lost condition and the reality of God's wrath against sin. Convicted before God's Law and found guilty, their only recourse is to repent and believe the Gospel. God uses gospel preaching to bring His gracious gift of faith to those who will be saved: "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ*" (**Romans 10:17**).

Decision theology comes in various packages. What they all have in common is that God has to await man's determinative decision. Many times sinners are told, "Jesus stands at the door of your hearts; you must decide to let Him in." This is based on a passage in Revelation and the famous painting of Jesus at a door. Decision theology proponents even use details of the painting to build their theology. They say, "When you look at the painting of Jesus at the door, you notice there is no door knob on the outside; you have to let Him in." I wonder if those who preach like this realize what they are doing. They have a strong, decisive sinner and a weak, needy Jesus. The sinner has the final say. Jesus is portrayed as standing "out in the cold," wanting in but unable to enter. What a sad and pathetic contrast to the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost: "*Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ- this Jesus whom you crucified*" (**Acts 2:36**). Peter had just told them that Jesus was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father, in all authority and majesty. They were accountable to Him for their sin. What a far cry from Jesus out in the cold hoping that the sinners would be nice and let Him in.

The passage in Revelation about Jesus knocking at the door is given as an ironic rebuke to a church. The Laodicean church had become complacent and self-satisfied. Jesus would "reprove and discipline" those He loves (**Revelation 3:19**). Jesus tells them to repent and open the door and so restore fellowship with their Lord (**Revelation 3:20**).^[iv] This was written to a church, not the lost. Its misuse in evangelism obscures the true nature of the gospel and the power of God. When Jesus saved Paul in **Acts 9**, He did not knock on Paul's door to see if Paul would decide whether or not to let Him in.

The Problem with "Wooing"

Another belief system that hinders gospel preaching in evangelical churches concerns "wooing." This means that God is doing all He can to attract people to Him; and He needs our help. God is portrayed as a suitor who desires the affections of a potential spouse, but is being rejected. The reason for the rejection is that "seekers" have not seen the right portrait of who God is. Christianity must be made more appealing, they say, if we want people to "accept Christ."

On the surface of things, there is something very wrong with the wooing approach. Why should the only perfectly beautiful being in the universe have to be "dressed up" to look good to sinners? The problems are many: 1) Sinners by nature are

attracted to sin, and God is perfectly sinless. 2) Wooing requires that the needs and concerns of the unregenerate determine the message of the church: thus the movement to preach to “felt needs.” 3) The Bible says that the message of the cross is foolishness to the Greeks and offensive to the Jews (**1Corinthians 1:23**). Furthermore, it is considered foolishness to the perishing (**1Corinthians 1:18**). The perishing are supposedly the target of God’s wooing. 4) God chose to bring salvation to the Jews first through a Jewish Messiah. The world has hated the Jews since the beginning of their existence. A Jewish Messiah would hardly “woo” the world.

As with the other perversions of the gospel, those who promote the wooing idea have a proof text: “*And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself*” (**John 12:32**). They interpret this as follows: “all” means universally all people, and draw means “attract.” Thus the lifting up of Jesus attracts all people to Him, in the sense of wooing. Let us study this verse in its context to see if it supports this idea.

First, it is clear that the phrase “lifted up,” means crucified. We know this because the next verse tells us: “*But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die*” (**John 12:33**). So the claim this interpretation makes is that the crucifixion of Christ would attract all the inhabitants of the earth to Jesus, universally. However, this is in direct contradiction to what Paul wrote in **1Corinthians 1:23**: “*but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness.*” The message of a crucified Jewish Messiah is not attractive to either Jew or Gentile. Plus, it is clear from the facts of history that the cross does not attract all people universally to Christ.

Second, the word “draw” does not mean “attract” or “woo.” It means “drag.”^[v] The idea is that the cross is the means God would use to bring (by God’s gracious means) people to Christ who by nature would be repulsed by the cross. Since this “dragging” is effective, the “all” cannot be universal. Not all come to Jesus. The context of **John 12** shows that the appearance of Greeks asking about Jesus on the occasion of the triumphal entry causes Jesus to give these teachings about this death bringing “all” to Him, i.e. Jews and Gentiles.

Therefore **John 12:32** does not teach wooing. It teaches God’s grace through the cross to take dead rebellious sinners and bring them to Christ. The irony is that many who believe the wooing doctrine have fallen into the “seeker” movement and removed the preaching of the cross from their churches. If they really believed that the cross “woos” people to Jesus they would preach the cross with great boldness and clarity. If they did so, God would indeed save people through the gospel in spite of their misinterpretation of the passage. The preaching of the cross is effectual in saving those who will be saved. This is so not because it “woos” them, but because it is God’s ordained means whereby He calls forth His elect out of the mass of perdition.

What Must We Do?

We must be confident in the effectiveness of God’s ordained means. The pressure to lay aside gospel preaching is all around us. We are bombarded with everything but gospel preaching. However, God has sovereignly ordained the means by which He will save all who will be saved. In **Romans 10:14-17** we see the call to send preachers of the gospel so that people will call upon the Lord and be saved by faith. The insidious forces inside and outside the church to lay aside gospel preaching must be resisted at all costs.

We must not allow the fear of man to become a snare for us. We naturally want to be accepted, so it is a difficult thing to preach what people naturally do not want to hear. Yet in the face of this rejection, Paul said, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*” (**Romans 1:16**). The gospel is the power of God for salvation, and thus must be preached with all fervency. People must hear that they have offended the Holy Judge, broken God’s Law, and desperately need a savior. They need to know who Jesus is, what He did, and how His death on the cross can avert God’s wrath for those who believe. They must know that God raised Christ from the dead. These are strong words, but they are the gospel.

By believing in God’s sovereignty, we have full assurance that if we preach the gospel faithfully and accurately, God will always use it to save all who will be saved. It is not our business how many that turns out to be. It is our business to be faithful; God will save all those He has chosen from all eternity. We must preach to all because we do not know who they will be. They will be saved through the gospel, not apart from the gospel. May God give us boldness and grace in proclaiming the only way whereby we must be saved.

End Notes

[i]. Acts 5:41; see also what was in store for Paul; Acts 9:16

[ii]. Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, (Moody Press: Chicago, 1948, 1990 edition) 84.

[iii]. John MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1994), writes “It may surprise you to learn that Scripture never once exhorts sinners to “accept Christ” . . . The great miracle of redemption is not that we accept Christ, but that he accepts us. 113.

[iv]. See John Owen, *Communion With God*, 54. Ages Software, CD ROM (Ages Software: Rio, Wisc.; 2001). John Owen often cited this passage about the blessed communion the Christian has with His Lord. For example, he wrote: “Revelation 3:20, ‘Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.’ Certainly this is fellowship, or I know not what is. Christ will sup with believers: he refreshes himself with his own graces in them, by his Spirit bestowed on them. The Lord Christ is exceedingly delighted in tasting of the sweet fruits of the Spirit in the saints.” Also, John Gill writes in *The Cause of God and Truth*, Part 1, Section 60: “This church was in a sleepy, lukewarm, indifferent, secure frame of spirit, as appears from (vv. 15-18). Christ will not suffer her to continue so, and, therefore, takes his rod in his hand, stands at her door, and gives some severe knocks and raps to bring her to herself, and out of this indolent, supine, and self-confident state and condition she was in; which sense is confirmed by the preceding

verse, as *many as I love, I rebuke and chasten be zealous, therefore, and repent.*” Gill rejects the interpretation that applies this to the unregenerate.

[v]. The same word in the Greek is used in John 21:6&11 for drawing in a net full of fish; John 18:10 for Peter drawing his sword; in Acts 16:19 for being dragged into the market place; Acts 21:30 for being dragged out of the temple; and James 2:6 for being dragged into court. It hardly means, “attract.”

Critical Issues Commentary

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