

New Covenant Evangelism

Sharing in Christ's Glory, in the Now!

II Corinthians 2:12-13

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² Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, ¹³ I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.

Part One

Do you realize, if you are in Christ, God is working in you to conform you into the image of his Son, *and* to participate in his glory in the here and now? One day you will see Jesus as he is, and you will be perfected in his likeness and glory; and yet, God is working in you by his Spirit even *now*, so that, you may experience Christ's glory. Don't misunderstand me, this is not happy-clappy triumphalism, for we participate in Christ's image and glory even if and when we suffer for his name's sake. Indeed, the very reason we may suffer persecution is because we are now participating in his image and glory! So sharing in Christ's glory in the present age, is for you in the present age, and as such, it is part of our evangelistic message to the world. This is the gospel message: Christ's death and resurrection has reconciled us to God and it is by the Spirit (not the Law) that we then appropriate the work of Christ.

Today is part one of a two-part study on the character and nature of new covenant evangelism and how it differs from what we usually think of as evangelism. We are making our way verse by verse through Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. But before we can unpack today's text, I want to remind you of the overall context of this letter, for it is vitally important to your spiritual, mental, and relational health, and to the proclamation of the gospel. This letter is a study in contrasts between true apostolic ministry, that is, the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit, as over and against Satan's counterfeit ministry of the letter of the Law.

Now why is this important to you?

It is important because these two ministries remain at work in the world today, and that is important to you because *only* the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit will facilitate what Paul calls “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory” (II Corinthians 3:18). Now, both Paul and his opponents, those whom he refers to as “super-apostles,” claim to be servants of Christ and ministers of righteousness (See II Corinthians 11). And if you had lived in first-century Corinth, this would have been cause for confusion. Who do we believe? Both Paul and the super-apostles understand Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ. But what sets Paul and his associates apart from the super-apostles is *how* the death and resurrection of Christ is *appropriated* into the Christian life. And that is what I want to speak to in this lesson, because this is critical to your spiritual health and to how you understand evangelism.

Participation in Christ’s Glory

As a minister of the new covenant of the Spirit, Paul teaches the absolute superiority of the ministry of the Spirit, for it this ministry alone, and not that of Moses, that brings saving righteousness *and* transformation into the Lord’s image (see 2 Corinthians 3:7-18). This is the full-scope of new covenant evangelism. By contrast, Paul’s opponents also teach faith in Christ, but turn the to the veil of “the letter” of the Mosaic Law (Torah)¹ as the means to appropriate the righteousness of Christ, which it cannot do; instead, the “letter” produces only condemnation and death. Strangely, however, it is the ministry of the letter that was popular in Paul’s day and remains popular, today. You can now see the implications of this study for you, and all believers throughout the ages. The stakes were breathtakingly high in Paul’s day, and they remain high today.

What Paul is teaching throughout this letter, in both word and deed, is any proclamation of the cross that does not include the on-going appropriation of the work of Christ, *by the Spirit*, is a reductionist view of the gospel — and thus “a different gospel” (11:4). Many are converted by hearing of God’s saving work in his Son, but later fall prey to this reductionist gospel. This is not evangelism. What is it? It is Satan’s scheme to keep the church from imaging Christ into the world. This was Paul’s concern when he wrote to the Galatians, “Since we live by the Spirit, let

¹ See Gordon D. Fee *To What End Exegesis?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 244-247.

us keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). Since it was by the Spirit you began the Christian life, now keep in step with the Spirit. Returning to the Law, in any manner, is not the way forward. The Galatians, and the Corinthians, had an initial experience with the Spirit when they heard and believed the gospel, but afterward false teachers entered the region and began to teach that it was by observing the Law of Moses that they were to *appropriate* the righteousness of Christ into their character.

So Paul asks the Galatians, as he would ask many of you today as well, “Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3). In his seminal work, *Christ is All*, David H. J. Gay asks the logical question, “If the moral law can sanctify, what need is there of the Holy Spirit and the New Testament?”² In the final analysis, a return to the Law, under any guise, is a denial of the work of the Spirit in the Christian life. Therefore, it was not necessarily that Paul’s opponents did not know Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ, just as many do today; rather, their folly was that following conversion, it was through the Law that one appropriated Christ’s righteousness into their character. And this so twisted the truth of Christ’s work that Paul concluded that they preached “a different Jesus” (II Corinthians 11:4). And, frankly, there are those today who teach the same thing, primarily within the Presbyterian and Reformed confessions, writings, and pulpits, today. To listen to these men, one would think Christ saved us so that we could do a better of obeying Moses.

Why is this?

One reason is that since the Reformation, the entire New Testament, has been read through the lens of a sixteenth-century battle for the gospel of justification by faith alone. And as precious as that doctrine is to us, it was Paul who also told the Galatians, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!” (Galatians 4:19). Paul was perplexed because these believers had an initial experience of conversion by the Spirit, but they were now seeking to *appropriate* the work of Christ not by the Spirit, but by the letter of the Law. Therefore, those theological systems coming out of the Reformation which point us

² David H. J. Gay, *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law* (Bedford, England: 2013), p. 73.

back to the Law are not new, they are the heirs of Paul's opponents. And anyone, anywhere, that tells you that following conversion, you must show yourself saved by keeping man-made rules governing external conduct, is not a Christian minister.

Let's look at another text.

At Romans 8:28-30, read,

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).

Here, in Romans, the apostle makes it crystal clear. It is to share in Christ's glorification that God predestined you. In our zeal to preserve the doctrine of justification by faith alone, we have neglected the last line in Paul's order of salvation, that is, "those he justified, *he also glorified.*" Allow me to say it this way: The purpose for which God causes all things to work together for good is that purpose for which you are predestined, namely, "to be conformed into the image of his Son." And predestination, calling, even justification must not be considered an end unto itself; rather, justification by faith alone is essential only because apart from it, there is no hope of ultimate glorification.

And remember, in our study, Paul tells us we experience something of this transforming glory even now, in this life, as we await the final glory: "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (II Corinthians 3:18).

This therefore is the full message that we carry into evangelism: *God has sent his Son into the world to die for the sins of his people, and by raising him from the dead, God has begun a new humanity, all of whom share his image and glory of Christ, both in the now, and in perfection at his return.* It is participation in Christ's image and glory that is the outcome of the gospel of Christ, and *only* the new covenant ministry of the Spirit can facilitate this outcome. Mark this down. Highlight it. Stand on it. It is Christ in you that is your hope of glory.

To the Colossians Paul writes,

⁴ Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness — ²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory*. ²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ *To this end* I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me (Colossians 1:24-29).

"To this end" says the apostle — to what end? — to "present everyone fully mature in Christ." It is "Christ in you" that is the hope of glory, and Christian ministry is to "strenuously contend with the energy Christ so powerfully works" in us. I have memories of churches forming around a group of new converts, and for a while there was much rejoicing, but those ministries failed to teach these converts how to walk in the Spirit and what it means to be conform to Christ. Ultimately, those ministries folded, often following scandal. What was needed was for those new converts to understand that the work of God in them extended beyond initial conversion, as important as that conversion was to them. Let me say it again, *appropriation* must follow *proclamation*.

The apostle John echoes this point, writing,

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. ²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him. **3** See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³ All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 2:28-3:3).

"Now we are children of God" says John, "and what we shall be has *not yet* been made known." So, what is to be our response as we live in this *now and not yet* status? Some would say, "Pay and pray," others might say, "Do your best not to sin," still others would teach, "Turn to Moses." But what does John tell us? All who have this hope — what hope? — the hope of

being perfected in Christ's image at his appearing — what are they to do? Hang on until Jesus comes back? Circle the wagons and survive? No, we are to purify ourselves, just as Jesus is pure, not by looking back to Moses, but by learning to walk in the Spirit. Just because we are in the “not yet” status does not mean we do nothing; rather, the hope of perfection in Christ motivates us to become more like him, *in the now*.

Conclusion

It is good and right that we should concern ourselves with outreach and evangelism. We are, after all, called to “go and make disciples of all nations.” But the failure to adhere to the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit has caused much of Protestantism to adopt a reductionist form of the gospel upon which all the varying factions can agree for the sake of ecumenical unity. That reductionist gospel focuses on facilitating conversion with little or no emphasis on the continuing work of the Spirit in *appropriating* the work of Christ in transformation into his image.

Like those who opposed Paul, many today point converts to the Law as the “Believer’s rule of life”³ which in Paul’s own words, is “another gospel.” Still others dismiss altogether any need for new converts to grow in the image of Christ; indeed, these dismiss the new covenant as being relevant to the life of the church. In the end, both systems will be held accountable for such grave errors. But new covenant evangelism is compelled by the Spirit to emphasize both conversion by the Spirit and transformation into the Lord’s image by the Spirit with ever-increasing glory as they await perfection when he returns for them.

In Part Two, we will examine more closely the work of the Spirit in evangelism as being the compelling power in outreach and the source of comfort in the face of a hostile world, as well as the clarity of our message. **AMEN.**

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³ See the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 19, Article 6.