



R E M E D I A L
Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity

#6 – Getting Started With God

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
5/11/2003*

Getting Started With God

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things” (Romans 10:14, 15)!

Review

We have, in our Remedial Christianity series, discussed: (1) the need to have a starting place for knowledge; (2) that for Christians, the Bible is the starting place of all knowledge, ethics, and truth; (3) the over-arching message of the Bible; (4) why we should believe the Bible; (5) the main topic of the Bible, God; that He is knowable and why we should believe in Him. We now move into the nature of the relationship between man and God; specifically, how does the relationship get started?

Preview

I intend to address the remedial nature of the popular presentation of the Christian faith, namely, asking Jesus into our hearts. Then I will seek to show what the biblical components of the presentation of the gospel actually are: believe, repent, be baptized, acknowledge pardon, and persevere.

The Sawdust Trail

Altar calls are the rage. The 19th century was flooded with traveling salvation shows, tent revival meetings, and people, by the thousands, sauntering down that sawdust trail to redemption. Though mass media may have put a bit of a damper on the Elmer Gantry-style yurt worship, the heart of this style of evangelism has changed very little during the past two hundred years.

Whether it's the television evangelist urging his viewers to place their hands on the television set in an act of saving faith, or the para-church crusader urging his audience to walk forward to the tune of “Just As I Am” while the busses patiently wait, the central theme of popular Christian evangelism during the past two hundred years has remained constant; get people to ask Jesus into their hearts.

Asking Jesus Into Your Heart

My recognition for remedial instruction in this area became acute one day when a church member walked into my office and asked me to show him where in the Bible we're told to ask Jesus into our hearts. I knew enough to avoid the popular Revelation 3:20 passage:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me (Revelation 3:20).

These words were written to a church in danger of going apostate (backsliding). These would be people who, presumably, would have already asked Jesus into their hearts. Peter tells us to sanctify the Lord in our hearts (1 Peter 3:15). But again, this is written to Christians regarding lordship (power of authority), not getting saved (power of deliverance). There are, nonetheless, places in Bible that talk about Jesus being in our hearts.

There is certainly some sense in which Christ should be in our hearts. We see this in the prayer of the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul prays **“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Ephesians 3:17).**

But once again, this is written to Christians. It is not evangelism to unbelievers. Certainly the heart of the Christian (the seat of morality, perception, thoughts, reasoning, imagination, conscience, intentions, purpose, etc.) should be inhabited by the spirit of Christ, and governed by the words of Christ (the Bible). But this is a far cry from the modern man-made sacrament of initiating salvation by a prayer of invitation.

The notion that Christ is some kind of Victorian gentleman tapping on the doors of our somewhat reluctant hearts then placing His hands kindly behind His back patiently waiting for us to come to our senses (which some do and others don't for reasons inexplicable) is contrary to biblical reality. The Bible has Him as an invader of the heart.

Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14).

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

God is more akin to one who performs heart surgery than one who sells Avon. This should be obvious to us for man is more in need of a heart transplant than cosmetics.

Paralyzed

So dominant is this view, and woven into the fabric of my psyche, that I have often found myself somewhat paralyzed when confronted with a sinner who wishes to be saved. If we don't pray the sinner's prayer ("Jesus come into my heart") then what is there to do? I remember having lunch with a minister who had two doctorates (one in systematic theology) who was beginning to have the same remedial concerns as myself. He wanted to know what we were to do if not to try to get someone to pray the prayer. How do we present the gospel?

The sawdust trail is so simple, so convenient; it provides great spiritual closure—done deal! Yet at the same time it has been proven quite ineffective. Very few people who pray the prayer are still attending church after a year. The decline of western Christendom has corresponded very closely to the rise of this brand of gospel presentation. The church is fraught with confusion as to whether or not people have

lost their salvation – after all, they prayed the prayer yet no longer seem to be in the fold.

Unless someone sneaks a passage my way that I have not yet seen, asking Jesus into our heart is simply not the means by which the relationship between man and God gets under way. So how does it? What should we expect to be the touch point between sinful men and a holy God? When Christians (or preachers¹) are called to blow the horn of warning (Ezekiel 33:6), what tune should they be playing? Is the tune, “The wrath of God abides, quickly ask Jesus into your heart?” The examples we see in Scripture are quite unlike this.

The Non-Formulaic Gospel

The presentation of the gospel in the Bible is hardly formulaic. The theology student will find many of Jesus’ presentations of the gospel lacking, what would seem, principle elements. He doesn’t always mention repentance (though He usually does), He doesn’t always mention belief (though it is implied), He doesn’t always make it clear that you’re not saved by works (the clear teaching of the Apostle Paul).

Sometime Jesus brings forth the gospel in virtually indiscernible parables (Matthew 13). Other times He simply asks His listeners if they believe *in* Him or what they believe *about* Him, e. g. to Martha He said “**I am the resurrection...do you believe this**” (John 11:25, 26)? To Peter He said, “**Who do you say that I am?**” and after Peter’s answer pronounced him blessed (Matthew 16:15-17). Jesus seemed to be quite aware of His audience and what aspects of the gospel needed to be emphasized.

He would summarily dismantle those who had confidence in their own righteousness, e.g. the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-27) and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-15). To those who were broken He would simply proclaim forgiveness, e.g. the sinful woman who wept at Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:48).

Flip Chart Gospel

Though the theology of the gospel is more didactically (intended for instruction) examined in the epistles, it still seems a bit artificial to carve it into a flip chart or tract that has simplistic appeal to the masses. Can these flip charts work? I am living proof that the power of the gospel can penetrate all manner of foolishness. Of course this doesn’t mean we should be committed to folly.

This type of mass appeal “McChristianity” has burgeoned a society of paper Christians who can scarcely discern between a “Happy Meal” and the Lord’s Table. Western Christianity (as evidenced by the society it is failing to bless or influence) is sliding down a helix and rapidly approaching the nadir (lowest point) of its existence.

One of the biggest problems, arguably, in modern Christianity is the surroundings and methods of new births. The modern gospel movements are delivery rooms with little seed, and what seed there is is often defective. Many of the spiritually reborn come into the kingdom with birth defects – hence the need for remedial instruction.

¹ We will discuss later who should be delivering the message.

So how should the gospel be presented? Again, what is the means by which the relationship between man and God gets under way? What should we expect to be the touch point between sinful men and a holy God? What is the message God calls His preachers to preach that actually makes their feet beautiful (Romans 10:15)?

The Biblical Gospel

Wishing to avoid becoming formulaic myself, I will simply mention those elements of the gospel which seem to be at the fore of the message. Keep in mind, I am not speaking here of those things which take place in the invisible realm (God's power to regenerate). I am speaking of those things that God has called His people to say and do. The elements include, a call to believe, a call to repent, a call to be baptized, a declaration of pardon, and a call to persevere.

A Call to Believe (Receive)

A call to believe is either explicit (clearly stated) or implicit (implied) in every gospel message. If you don't believe in Jesus, that is, specific things about Jesus (mainly that He died for sins and rose again), you simply will not respond to anything else that involves faith in Him – why would you? Jesus' dialogue with Martha ends with a simple question.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. ²⁶And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this (John 11:25, 26)?

The Ethiopian Eunuch asked Philip (after Philip had preached to him),

"What hinders me from being baptized?" ³⁷ Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:36, 37).

Even the woman who wept and kissed Jesus' feet did so because of belief. The story ends with Jesus saying, **"Your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (Luke 7:50).**

Note that a proper definition of belief or faith includes knowledge (knowing, at least at some discernible level, what you're believing); assent (acknowledging that the knowledge is true and right); and trust (you appropriate it – make it yours).

Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, ⁴¹ not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, *even* to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. ⁴² And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God *to be* Judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins (Acts 10:40-43).

People should be called to believe on the Lord.

A Call to Repent

The call to repentance is almost always included in Jesus' presentation of the gospel. To the woman caught in adultery He said, "**Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more**" (John 8:11). To the man He healed at the pool of Bethesda He said, "**Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you**" (John 5:14). In His instruction on the common sin of all men, Jesus warned, "**...but unless you repent you will all likewise perish**" (Luke 13:3). He taught that "**there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents**" (Luke 15:10). Jesus makes the clear assertion, "**I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance**" (Luke 5:32). It is also clear that the call to repentance was to be included in the preaching of, and to, others.

Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:46, 47).

A Call to be Baptized

A very unpopular aspect of the presentation of the gospel today is the call to be baptized. But one needn't search too far before they see this as part of the message. Peter preached, "**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins**" (Acts 2:38). The devout Ananias said to Saul (the Apostle Paul) "**And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord**" (Acts 22:16). We understand that men are saved by grace through faith. Remember, we are speaking here of the outward aspects of the faith; there is little doubt that Saul was already saved before meeting Ananias. The call to be baptized, however, is so closely linked to the gospel message that one who is not baptized is not to be considered (at least by outward observation) a believer. This may sound shocking to your ears. But I remember doubting a person's salvation because they hadn't participated in the man-made sacrament of asking Jesus into their heart; I'll bet that resonates with most of you as well.

The ordinary means by which God saves people is the church. A genuine personal and private relationship with Christ will always produce a person who recognizes, and associates himself with, the institution that Christ created – the church. The outward sign of association (or inclusion) with the church is baptism.

But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized (Acts 8:12).

Declaration of Pardon

The declaration of the forgiveness of sins is the great comfort of the gospel message. As I grow older there are different aspects of the church service which become more precious to me. The declaration of pardon has rapidly moved to the top of the list; it truly is good news. If the church is full of people who have genuine faith in a righteous and holy God, they yearn for these words of comfort.

When the paralytic was lowered through the roof by his friends (clearly an act of faith) Jesus' first words to Him were, "**Man, your sins are forgiven you**" (Luke 5:20). The first words of Jesus to the woman who wept at His feet were, "**Your sins are forgiven**" (Luke 7:48) followed by "**Your faith has saved you. Go in peace**" (Luke 7:50). We are explicitly taught in Acts, "**Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins**" (Acts 13:38).

Though the declaration of pardon is not a call to action, the message of being pardoned provides the listener with the beauty of the gospel. It is an aroma which effectively draws God's people.

He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy (Proverbs 28:13).

The Call to Persevere

In Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower, He explains,

But the ones *that* fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep *it* and bear fruit with patience (Luke 8:15).

Looking back on a religious experience with God is well and good. But Christians must also recognize that the gospel includes a call to continually believe and continually repent.

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:21, 22).

In Colossians 1:23 Paul uses the conditional "if":

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled ²² in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight— ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister (Colossians 1:21-23).

Jesus seems to indicate that the willingness to persevere should be pondered right up front.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it* (Luke 14:28).

Jesus also taught,

**Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father *his* child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.
¹³And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved (Mark 13:12, 13).**

The gospel is not to be thought of or presented, as is so common today, as a momentary religious experience. We are to ever believe, ever repent, and though we are baptized only once, we are to ever feed at the Lord's Table and ever enjoy the pardon of sin. We are to persevere in all these things. And we are to ever praise God who sustains our hearts in this through the grace of faith. Amen.

Questions for Study

1. What are some of the problems with the notion of asking Jesus into your heart (pages 2, 3)?
2. In what respect should Jesus dwell in the heart of Christians (pages 2, 3)?
3. What are some problems with reducing the gospel to a sort of cookie-cutter formula (pages 3, 4)?
4. If God saves people, why should we worry if the methods aren't as sound as they could be (page 4)?
5. What are some of the elements we see at the fore of the gospel message in Scripture (page 4)?
6. What is a proper definition of belief or faith (pages 4, 5)?
7. Should the call to repentance be included in the gospel? Why (page 5)?
8. Does the call to be baptized mean you believe in salvation by works (page 6)?
9. Why do you suppose people view baptism as unnecessary today in the presentation of the gospel (page 6)?
10. What is a declaration of pardon (page 6)?
11. Discuss the implications of the call to persevere. How does this militate against many popular views of the Christian faith (pages 6, 7)?