

Holiness begins at the Cross  
by  
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The word “pastor” comes from a Latin word for shepherd. The pastor-shepherd is called to feed the “sheep” (John 21:15-19) and to watch over them (I Peter 5:2), to insure that they are spiritually healthy, progressing toward spiritual maturity and fruitfulness. Sadly, every pastor watches over some perpetually unhealthy “sheep” whose spiritual journey never progresses. They do not mature and they bear no fruit for the Kingdom of God. They never bear the marks of a healthy Christian.

Healthy Christians have a certain level of energy in their spiritual walk. The word “enthusiasm” is appropriate here, because the word “enthusiasm” literally means “in God.” Healthy Christians have varying degrees of enthusiasm, and they manifest their enthusiasm in at least three ways:

First, they have an enthusiasm for knowing and doing God’s will. They don’t want to settle for less. They no longer like sin. Yes, they’re tempted to sin, and sometimes they fall into it, but increasingly they are moving on to victory as they realize the value of living in righteousness and holiness. More and more their repentance is becoming complete, and more and more Christ is on the throne of their lives. Accordingly, they have an enthusiasm for God’s Word, because that is the place, more than any other, where they discover God’s will.

Unhealthy Christians lack enthusiasm for the will of God. They may not be involved in gross sin, but often, there are secret sins that plague them, and when tempted, it doesn’t take much for them to compromise their Christian morals and to make excuses for doing so. I think of a lady in one congregation who, shortly after becoming a widow, began living with a man outside of marriage. Nothing I said could persuade her that her decision was a sin and carried severe consequences both for time and eternity. Fornication or adultery are often valid options for unhealthy Christians. They seldom, if ever, read the Bible and they don’t think of it as an essential source for understanding God, His will, and His plan for their lives. The Bible is a dusty book on their nightstand because, when they read it, they don’t understand it.

Second, healthy Christians, manifest their enthusiasm in peaceful relationships with God, with others, and with themselves. Yes, they live in the world, among unbelievers, whose relationships are often fragmented and filled with discord. But, they, being filled with the love of God, overcome the discord and live as reconcilers as opposed to living as dividers and alienators. They live in peace because the central issues of their lives are settled. They know where they will spend eternity, they know they are forgiven, and God has given them contentment in the midst of this world’s surrounding turbulence. Furthermore, they manifest a very high level of unconditional love — love for God and love for people.

Unhealthy Christians are seldom described as living in peace or as being peace makers. They are not quite sure about their relationship with God. They often live under a spirit of condemnation either because they have never fully understood God's mercy in salvation or because they experience perpetual guilt over unresolved sin. They are not quite sure if their sins are forgiven or if they have access to God as Father. They know little of the depths of that relationship with Him. If they pray, they pray only when they face crises or in little snippets here and there. And, their relationships with others — family members, co-workers, neighbors and friends — are fragmented. They often exhibit supercritical and unforgiving attitudes toward others, not realizing the enormous measure of mercy that God has poured into their lives. Most of all, they often lack that supreme motivation that characterizes Christians — love.

Third, healthy Christians manifest their enthusiasm with a growing joy. They are genuinely happy people even when those around them are miserable. In fact, their joy is contagious, attracting people both to them and to Christ. They have learned to live above the world's conditions and to master the attacks of the enemy. They have learned to see things from an eternal perspective, so that “the things of earth [are] strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”

Unhealthy Christians lack joy. I wonder, sometimes, if they are not worse off than the unbeliever. The unbeliever has both feet firmly planted in the world and feasts on the pleasures of the world if only for a season. The unhealthy Christian has one foot in the world and the other in the Kingdom, and this straddled position keeps him from enjoying the pleasures of each. Even God said that such people are nauseating to Him, and He vomits them out of His mouth (Revelation 3:16)

How is it that some who *claim* to be Christians can be so different from others making the same claim? Why do some go on to experience amazing victory and joy in their walk with Christ while others languish, bearing no fruit for the Kingdom?

Sometimes we answer this question in psychological terms. Some, whose spiritual journey is so hijacked by emotional trauma, simply cannot let go of their past to enter into the fullness of joy in Christ's kingdom. A woman in one of my former congregations, whose father so traumatized her sexually when she was young, was never able to overcome the emotional damage despite her profession of faith and her active involvement in the church. But, emotional damage cannot entirely explain spiritual lethargy. Emotional damage may explain why some believers never move on in their spiritual journey, but not all.

Or, we might also explain the problem as simply a matter of varieties of human potential. Think about Jesus' parable of the soils where the good soil produces “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matthew 13:8). The same truth is taught in His parable of the stewards. Some produce a greater return than others. But, the point of both of these parables is that *something* is produced. Neither the sower nor the landowner will settle for no production whatsoever. The barren fruit tree, Jesus said, deserves only to be cut down and thrown into the fire. And, it is those whose spiritual life produces *no* fruit for the Kingdom that are of concern to us.

Since neither of these options explains the nature of the problem, then we must find an alternative answer. In my view, the problem is theological — in particular,

soteriological. Something is profoundly wrong with the salvation message we are preaching in much of the Church today. Two issues related to soteriology have arisen in my thinking. First, contemporary soteriology lacks Kingdom theology; in brief, it is missing a proper understanding of the Lordship of Christ as an *essential* ingredient in salvation. Second, contemporary soteriology has a faulty pneumatology. It fails to recognize the essential, regenerative role of the Holy Spirit in the saving act. In this article we will address the first of these two issues and save the second for later consideration.

In my hermeneutics classes, I tell my students that interrogation is the structural law that governs the Bible as a whole. By that I mean that the Bible presents a problem and then proceeds to meet the needs of, or resolve, that problem. It is important to understand that the solution to the problem must meet the needs of the problem.

The problem erupts in the third chapter of Genesis, which we normally title, “The Fall of Humanity.” Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God is essentially a problem of Lordship.<sup>1</sup> At the end of Genesis 2, we are faced with an implied question: Given the paradisaical environment in which God placed the two humans, and given that there is only one command they are exhorted to obey, what will they do? Who will reign as Lord of their lives? Will their beneficial God reign, or will they try to usurp His authority by replacing Him with themselves on the throne of their lives? Of course, this question is answered tragically in chapter 3. Through their disobedience, God is no longer on the throne and they are out of fellowship with Him. Their loss of faith in His Lordship has resulted in the loss of everything.

The problematic theme of mis-placed lordship is amply illustrated throughout the first 11 chapters of Genesis, and constantly emphasized throughout the Bible, but never more clearly than during the monarchy period beginning with the cry for a king at the end of the period of the judges:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you (I Samuel 8:4-8).

If mis-placed lordship is the essential problem of the Bible, then a proper soteriology must correct this problem. And a cursory examination of some of the major New Testament soteriological passages confirms that it does.

We begin with Jesus’ initial public appearance after the arrest of John the Baptist: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14-15). The theme of His message, indeed the theme of His life, is the Kingdom of God and His rightful place enthroned in that Kingdom and

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that some would maintain that the primary problem here is one of faith. Adam and Eve no longer have faith in their benevolent God. Certainly that is the case, and the result is a removal of God from His rightful place on the throne of their hearts,.

on the hearts and lives of His subjects. In that Lordship, salvation is to be found, and not apart from it. The remainder of Mark's Gospel is filled with illustrations of Jesus' Lordship over demons (1:27), disease (5:29, 34), nature (4:41) and His right to forgive sins (2:10), and to grant salvation (2:7). Mark's essential message about Jesus is that He is the rightful Lord who is worthy of a faith that obeys Him. In this Gospel, John the Baptist proclaims the coming of the Lord, not the Savior (Mark 1:3). Jesus claims to be Lord of the Sabbath (2:28), and He claims to be the rightful heir to David's throne (12:36). This theme is echoed in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is described as the promised King of the Jews (2:2), the One for whom the earth is His footstool (5:35) and who fulfills prophecy by riding into Jerusalem as a "King . . . humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey (21:5).

This theme is played out in early Church history. The great confession of the early Christians, the one that got them in trouble with Roman authorities was not "Jesus is Savior," but, "Jesus is Lord." The early Christians were determined to call Him Lord and to obey Him. To deny His Lordship was tantamount to betrayal and would result in the loss of salvation. Their confession of His Lordship over them began at baptism. Baptism then — unlike baptism in the Western world today — was a public declaration of death to an old life, a renunciation of sin and anything that would hinder obedience to Christ. In some cases, a believer could lose everything of worldly value to him at the moment of his baptism — his family, his employment, his inheritance. There truly was a cost of discipleship. Thus, the new believer began His journey with Christ with a mindset that Christ was Lord and to be obeyed. The spirit of repentance in that believer recognized a three-fold repentance: repentance from sins, repentance from sin, and, ultimately, repentance from self-lordship.

Enter, now, into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and listen to an evangelistic message. What will you hear? You will hear an invitation to accept Jesus into your heart as your personal savior with little to nothing said about acknowledge Christ as Lord. Thus, the new believer begins his walk with Christ focused on what Christ has done for him with hardly any attention on what that believer can do for Christ, his Lord. Then, in time, what little devotion the believer has to Christ wanes because the Lordship of Christ is seldom addressed in contemporary preaching. I remember teaching a Sunday School class one Sunday morning when I expressed to the class that there is not one single verse of Scripture in the Bible that admonishes us to accept Jesus as our savior. One class member challenged me, insisting that I was wrong. But, every verse of scripture she located in the New Testament expressed something of the Lordship of Christ.

I would add, also, that I have become increasingly suspicious of the invitation system given at virtually all evangelistic meetings. My suspicion is aroused when I read Jesus' admonition for us to count the cost of discipleship before we enter into a relationship with Him. Counting the cost takes far more time than is allotted on a Saturday night crusade event. Yes, Jesus loves sinners and wants all of us to be saved. But, Jesus never rushes anyone into a relationship with Him without our first counting the cost. The rich ruler had much to offer that fledgling group of disciples, including a fat bank account. But, not only did Jesus not roll out the welcome mat for the man; He practically drove him away by insisting that he go and sell his possessions before taking his place among that band of men. As far as we know, the man never returned.

As a consequence of our misplaced understanding of Biblical soteriology, many believers are beginning their spiritual journey with Christ with a handicap. They know nothing of the Kingdom in which they are entering, and they know little about the King they are accepting into their lives, including His rightful place on the throne of their hearts. Then, when the call to holy living is issued, the new believer comes face to face with the cost of following Christ, a cost he may deem too expensive in light of the temptations he may face. Or, he may have the idea that grace is cheap and easy; if he does fall into sin, all he must do to find fresh forgiveness is confess the sin, no repentance required.

Much of the soteriological problem stems from our lust for numbers. It is extraordinarily difficult for a pastor to see only a few converts in his congregation each year. Surely there must be something wrong with him, he thinks, especially when he sees super pastors lead congregations of thousands. But, Jesus never seemed to be interested in large numbers simply for numbers sake. True, He wanted all to come to a knowledge of the truth. We often interpret that “knowledge of the truth” as the experience of salvation. But, I believe another perspective is warranted. “Knowledge of the truth” must include an intellectual understanding of the call to and cost of discipleship, so that one can make an informed, intelligent decision. It is almost certain that when we explain what it means to follow Christ and give people enough time to consider the cost, fewer people will make that commitment. Fewer names on the convert list may not make us look good in ecclesiastical circles. But, it may also mean fewer drop outs, fewer backsliders, fewer heartaches, fewer bad examples to other new converts, and more believers on their way to holiness of heart and life. The earliest confession of the fledgling Church was “Jesus is Lord.” May that be the confession of all who come to Christ through our ministries.