

# THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

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## PRINCIPLE

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter's racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living "*in line with the truth of the gospel*". From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life-- spiritual, psychological, corporate, social--by thinking, hoping, and living out the "lines" or ramifications of the gospel. The gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.

## Part I - IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

### IMPLICATIONS

#### ***Implication #1 - The power of the gospel.***

First, Paul is showing us that that bringing the gospel truth to bear on every area of life is the way to be changed by the power of God. The gospel is described in the Bible in the most astounding terms. Angels long to look into it all the time. (I Peter 1:12). It does not simply bring us power, but it is the power of God itself, for Paul says "*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation*" (Rom.1:16). It is also **the blessing of God** with benefits, which accrue to anyone who comes near (I Cor.9:23). It is even called the very light of **the glory of God** itself-- "*they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...for God...has made his light shine into our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*" (II Cor.4:4,6)

It has **the life of God**. Paul said to the Corinthians, "*I gave you birth through the gospel!*" And then, after it has regenerated us, it is the instrument of all continual growth and spiritual progress after we are converted. "*All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.*" (Col. 1:6). Here we learn: 1) That the gospel is a living thing (cf. Romans 1:16) which is like a seed or a tree that brings more and more new life--*bearing fruit and growing*. 2) That the gospel is only "planted" in us so as to bear fruit as we understand its greatness and implications deeply--*understood God's grace in all its truth*. 3) That the gospel continues to grow in us and renew us throughout our lives--*as it has been doing since the day you heard it*. This text helps us avoid either an exclusively rationalistic or mystical approach to renewal. On the one hand, the gospel has a content--it is profound doctrine. It is *truth*, and specifically, it is the truth about *God's grace*. But on the other hand, this truth is a living power that continually expands its influence in our lives, just as a crop or a tree would grow and spread and dominate more and more of an area with roots and fruit.

#### ***Implication #2- The sufficiency of the gospel.***

Second, Paul is showing that we never "get beyond the gospel" in our Christian life to something more "advanced". The gospel is not the first "step" in a "stairway" of truths, rather, it is more like the "hub" in a "wheel" of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C's

but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.

We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience, but the gospel is *the* way we grow (Gal.3:1-3) and are renewed (Col.1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power through every barrier (Rom.1:16-17). It is very common in the church to think as follows. "The gospel is for non-Christians. One needs it to be saved. But once saved, you grow through hard work and obedience." But Col.1:6 shows that this is a mistake. Both confession and "hard work" that is not arising from and "in line" with the gospel will not sanctify you--it will strangle you. All our problems come from a failure to apply the gospel. Thus when Paul left the Ephesians he committed them *"to the word of his grace, which can build you up"* (Acts 20:32)

The main problem, then, in the Christian life is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel, we have not "used" the gospel in and on all parts of our life. Richard Lovelace says that most people's problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel--a failure to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther says, *"The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine....Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually."* (on Gal.2:14f) The gospel is not easily comprehended. Paul says that the gospel only does its renewing work in us as we understand it *in all its truth*. All of us, to some degree live around the truth of the gospel but do not "get" it. So the key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal and revival is the ***continual re-discovery of the gospel***. A stage of renewal is always the discovery of a new implication or application of the gospel--seeing more of its truth. This is true for either an individual or a church.

## APPLICATIONS

### ***The two "thieves" of the gospel.***

Since Paul uses a metaphor for being "in line" with the gospel, we can consider that gospel renewal occurs when we keep from walking "off-line" either to the right or to the left. The key for thinking out the implications of the gospel is to consider the gospel a "third" way between two mistaken opposites. However, before we start we must realize that the gospel is not a half-way compromise between the two poles--it does not produce "something in the middle", but something different from both. The gospel critiques both religion and irreligion (Matt.21:31; 22:10).

Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us "off the gospel line" to one side or the other. These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind. (The gospel is "revealed" by God (Rom.1:17)--the unaided human mind cannot conceive it.) These "thieves" can be called *moralism* or *legalism* on the one hand, and *hedonism* or *relativism* on the other hand. Another way to put it is: the gospel opposes both *religion* and *irreligion*. On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace

without truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us. But "truth" without grace is not really truth, and "grace" without truth is not really grace. Jesus was "full of grace *and* truth". Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license and either way, the joy and power and "release" of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other.

"I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe" (vs. antinomianism)

"I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope" (vs. legalism)

**The moralism-religion thief.** How does moralism/religion steal joy and power?

Moralism is the view that you are acceptable (to God, the world, others, yourself) through your attainments. (Moralists do not have to be religious, but often are.) When they are, their religion is pretty conservative and filled with rules. Sometimes moralists have views of God as very holy and just. This view will lead either to a) self-hatred (because you can't live up to the standards), or b) self-inflation (because you think you have lived up to the standards). It is ironic to realize that inferiority *and* superiority complexes have the very same root. Whether the moralist ends up smug and superior or crushed and guilty just depends on how high the standards are and on a person's natural advantages (such as family, intelligence, looks, willpower). Moralistic people can be deeply religious--but there is no transforming joy or power.

**The relativism-irreligion thief.** How does relativism steal joy and power?

Relativists are usually irreligious, or else prefer what is called "liberal" religion. On the surface, they are more happy and tolerant than moralist/religious people. Though they may be highly idealistic in some areas (such as politics), they believe that everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong for them. They are not convinced that God is just and must punish sinners. Their beliefs in God will tend to see Him as loving or as an impersonal force. They may talk a great deal about God's love, but since they do not think of themselves as sinners, God's love for us costs him nothing. If God accepts us, it is because he is so welcoming, or because we are not so bad. The concept of God's love in the gospel is far more rich and deep and electrifying.

**What do both religious and irreligious people have in common?** They seem so different, but from the viewpoint of the gospel, they are really the same.

*They are both ways to avoid Jesus as Savior and keep control of their lives.* Irreligious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through irreligion, "worldly" pride. ("No one tells me how to live or what to do, so I determine what is right and wrong for me!") But moral and religious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through religion, "religious" pride. ("I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes me to listen to my prayers and take me to heaven. God cannot let just anything happen to me--he owes me a happy life. I've earned it!") The irreligious person rejects Jesus entirely, but the religious person only uses Jesus as an example and helper and teacher--but not as a Savior. (Flannery O'Connor wrote that religious people think *"that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin..."*) These are two different ways to do the same thing--control our own lives. (Note: Ironically, Moralists, despite all the emphasis on traditional standards, are in the end self-centered and individualistic,

because they have set themselves up as their own Saviour. Relativists, despite all their emphasis on freedom and acceptance, are in the end moralistic because they still have to attain and live up to (their own) standards or become desperate. And often, they take great pride in their own open-mindedness and judge others who are not.)

*They are both based on distorted views of the real God.*

The irreligious person loses sight of the law and holiness of God and the religious person loses sight of the love and grace of God, in the end they both lose the gospel entirely. For the gospel is that on the cross Jesus fulfilled the law of God out of love for us. Without a full understanding of the work of Christ, the reality of God's holiness will make his grace unreal, or the reality of his love will make his holiness unreal. Only the gospel--that we are so sinful that we need to be saved utterly by grace--allows a person to see God as he really is. The gospel shows us a God far more holy than the legalist can bear (he *had* to die because we could not satisfy his holy demands) and yet far more merciful than a humanist can conceive (he had to *die* because he loved us).

*They both deny our sin--so lose the joy and power of grace.*

It is obvious that relativistic, irreligious people deny the depth of sin, and therefore the message "God loves you" has no power for them. But though religious persons may be extremely penitent and sorry for their sins, they see sins as simply the failure to live up to standards by which they are saving themselves. They do not see sin as the deeper self-righteousness and self-centeredness through which they are trying to live lives independent of God. So when they go to Jesus for forgiveness, they only as a way to "cover over the gaps" in their project of self-salvation. And when people say, "I know God is forgiving, but I cannot forgive myself", they mean that they reject God's grace and insist that they be worthy of his favor. So even religious people with "low self-esteem" are really in their funk because they will not see the depth of sin. They see it only as rules breaking, not as rebellion and self-salvation.

**A whole new way of seeing God.**

But Christians are those who have adopted a whole new system of approach to God. They may have had both religious phases and irreligious phases in their lives. But they have come to see that their entire reason for both their irreligion and their religion was essentially the same and essentially wrong! Christians come to see that both their sins and their best deeds have all really been ways of avoiding Jesus as savior. They come to see that Christianity is not fundamentally an invitation to get more religious. A Christian comes to say: "though I have often failed to obey the moral law, the deeper problem was why I was trying to obey it! Even my efforts to obey it has been just a way of seeking to be my own savior. In that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as Savior." To "get the gospel" is turn from self-justification and rely on Jesus' record for a relationship with God. The irreligious don't repent at all, and the religious only repent of sins. But Christians also repent of their righteousness. That is the distinction between the three groups--Christian, moralists (religious), and pragmatists (irreligious).

**Summary.** Without a knowledge of our extreme sin, the payment of the cross seems trivial and does not electrify or transform. But without a knowledge of Christ's completely satisfying life and death, the knowledge of sin would crush us or move us to deny and repress it. Take away either the knowledge of sin or the knowledge of

grace and people's lives not changed. They will be crushed by the moral law or run from it angrily. So the gospel is not that we go from being irreligious to being religious, but that we realize that our reasons for both our religiosity and our irreligiosity were essentially the same and essentially wrong. We were seeking to be our own Saviors and thereby keep control of our own life. When we trust in Christ as our Redeemer, we turn from trusting either self-determination or self-denial for our salvation--from either moralism or hedonism.

### ***A whole new way of seeing life***

Paul shows us, then, that we must not just simply ask in every area of life: "what is the moral way to act?" but "what is the way that is in-line with the gospel?" The gospel must be continually "thought out" to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring everything into line with the gospel.

### **The example of racism.**

Since Paul used the gospel on racism, let's use it as an example:

***The moralistic approach to race.*** Moralists/legalists would tend to be very proud of their culture. They would fall into cultural imperialism. They would try to attach spiritual significance to their cultural styles, to make themselves feel morally superior to other peoples. This happens because moralistic people are very insecure, since they look a lot at the eternal law, and they know deep down that they cannot keep it. So they use cultural differences to buttress their sense of righteousness.

***The relativistic/hedonist approach to race.*** But the opposite error from cultural imperialism would be cultural relativism. This approach would say, "yes, traditional people were racists because they believed in absolute truth. But truth is relative. Every culture is beautiful in itself. Every culture must be accepted on its own terms."

***The gospel approach to race.*** Christians know that racism does not stem so much from a belief in truth, but from a lack of belief in grace. The gospel leads us to be: a) on the one hand, somewhat critical of *all* cultures, including our own (since there is truth), but b) on the other hand, we can feel morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone, and therefore a non-Christian neighbor may be more moral and wise than you. This gives the Christian a radically different posture than either moralists or relativists.

Note: Relativists (as we said above) are ultimately moralistic. And therefore they can be respectful only of other people who believe everything is relative! But Christians cannot feel morally superior to relativists.

### **The example of a physical handicap.**

Let's come down from something sociological (racism) to something psychological. Imagine that through disease or an accident, you lost your eyesight--you became blind. How would you bring the gospel to bear on this pain and grief?

***The moralistic person will either*** a) despair, because the handicap takes away something which was his/her "righteousness" or b) deny, refusing to admit the new permanent limitation. ***The hedonistic person will also either*** a) despair, because the handicap takes away their ability to live a pleasure-oriented life, or b) deny, because his/her philosophy cannot bear it. But ***the gospel will lead to*** a) resist the handicap, yet b) accept it too. Too much resistance is denial and too much acceptance

is despair. The gospel is real about both sin and grace, and thus can give the handicapped person the same balance.)

## **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Share a) what helped you most, and b) what puzzled you.

2. Now try to think through the following three subjects to come to a gospel-based position. In each case, distinguish the moralist view, the hedonist/relativist view, and a gospel view:

**How/whether to evangelize non-Christians.**

**How to relate (as adults) to difficult parents.**

**How to regard the poor.**

**(After you are done, check the appendix. See A.6, A.9, B.3)**

3. If there is time, choose other issues or subjects that the group wants to work on, using the same schema for thinking the through.

4. Before concluding, select one personal problem or issue in your life. During the next week, pray and reflect and fill out the following form:

**a. The moralistic way to handle this:**

**b. The hedonistic way to handle this:**

**c. The gospel way to handle this:**

## Part II. - THE KEY TO EVERYTHING

We have seen that the gospel is the way that anything is renewed and transformed by Christ--whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. It is the key to all doctrine and our view of our lives in this world. Therefore, all our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts and thinking and approaches to absolutely everything.

### A. The Gospel and the individual.

1. Approach to discouragement. When a person is depressed, the moralist says, "you are breaking the rules--repent." On the other hand, the relativist says, "you just need to love and accept yourself". But (assuming there is no physiological base of the depression!) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say: "something in my life has become more important than God, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness". The gospel leads us to repentance, but not to merely setting our will against superficialities. It is without the gospel that superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. The moralist will work on behavior and the relativist will work on the emotions themselves.

2. Approach to the physical world. Some moralists are indifferent to the physical world--they see it as "unimportant", while many others are downright afraid of physical pleasure. Since they are seeking to earn their salvation, they prefer to focus on sins of the physical like sex and the other appetites. These are easier to avoid than sins of the spirit like pride. Therefore, they prefer to see sins of the body as worse than other kinds. As a result, legalism usually leads to a distaste of pleasure. On the other hand, the relativist is often a hedonist, someone who is controlled by pleasure, and who makes it an idol. The gospel leads us to see that God has invented both body and soul and so will redeem both body and soul, though under sin both body and soul are broken. Thus the gospel leads us to enjoy the physical (and to fight against physical brokenness, such as sickness and poverty), yet to be moderate in our use of material things.

3. Approach to love and relationships. Moralism often makes relationships into a "blame-game". This is because a moralist is traumatized by criticism that is too severe, and maintains a self-image as a good person by blaming others. On the other hand, moralism can use the procuring of love as the way to "earn our salvation" and convince ourselves we are worthy persons. That often creates what is called "co-dependency"--a form of self-salvation through needing people or needing people to need you (i.e. saving yourself by saving others). On the other hand, much relativism/liberalism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You only relate as long as it is not costing you anything. So the choice (without the gospel) is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. But the gospel leads us to do neither. We do sacrifice and commit, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others we are acceptable. So we can love the person enough to confront, yet stay with the person when it does not benefit us.

4. Approach to suffering. Moralism takes the "Job's friends" approach, laying guilt on yourself. You simply assume: "I must be bad to be suffering". Under the guilt, though, there is always anger toward God. Why? Because moralists believe that God owes them. The whole point of moralism is to put God in one's debt. Because you have been so moral, you feel you don't really deserve suffering. So moralism tears you up, for at one level you think, "what did I do to deserve this?" but on another level you think, "I probably did everything to deserve this!" So, if the moralist suffers, he or she must either feel mad at God (because I have been performing well) or mad at self (because I have not been performing well) or both. On the other hand, relativism/pragmatism feels justified in avoiding suffering at all costs--lying, cheating, and broken promises are OK. But when suffering does come, the pragmatist also lays the fault at God's doorstep, claiming that he must be either unjust or impotent. But the cross shows us that God redeemed us through suffering. That he suffered not that we might not suffer, but that in our suffering we could become like him. Since both the moralist and the pragmatist ignore the cross in different ways, they will both be confused and devastated by suffering.

5. Approach to sexuality. The secularist/pragmatist sees sex as merely biological and physical appetite. The moralist tends to see sex as dirty or at least a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. But the gospel shows us that sexuality is to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely without conditions. So we are not to seek intimacy but hold back control of our lives. If we give ourselves sexually we are to give ourselves legally, socially, personally--utterly. Sex only is to happen in a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage.

6. Approach to one's family. Moralism can make you a slave to parental expectations, while pragmatism sees no need for family loyalty or the keeping of promises and covenants if they do not "meet my needs". The gospel frees you from making parental approval an absolute or psychological salvation, pointing how God becomes the ultimate father. Then you will neither be too dependent or too hostile to your parents.

7. Approach to self-control. Moralists tell us to control our passions out of fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Liberalism tells us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach. The gospel tells us that the free, unloseable grace of God "teaches" us to "say no" to our passions (Titus 2:13) if we listen to it. This is a whole-person based approach, starting with the truth descending into the heart.

8. Approach to other races and cultures. The liberal approach is to relativize all cultures. ("We can all get along because there is no truth".) The conservatives believe there is truth for evaluation of cultures, and so they choose some culture as superior and then they idolize it, feeling superior to others in the impulse of self-justifying pride. The gospel leads us to be: a) on the one hand, somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since there is truth), but b) on the other hand, we are morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone. Christians will exhibit both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility. For example, gays are used to being "bashed" and hated or completely accepted. They never see anything else.



9. Approach to witness to non-Christians. The liberal/pragmatist approach is to deny the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. The conservative/moralist person does believe in proselytizing, because "we are right and they are wrong". Such proselytizing is almost always offensive. But the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. a) First, we are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. b) Second, we are freed from fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have the favor of God by grace. c) Third, there is a humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. d) Fourth, we are hopeful about anyone, even the "hard cases", because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were likely people to be Christians. e) Fifth, we are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness. All these traits not only create a winsome evangelist but an excellent neighbor in a multi-cultural society.

10. Approach to human authority. Moralists will tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, cultural customs) too much, since they rely so heavily on their self-image of being moral and decent. Pragmatists will either obey human authority too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (since they may only obey when they know they won't get caught). That means either authoritarianism or anarchy. But the gospel gives you both a standard by which to oppose human authority (if it contradicts the gospel), but on the other hand, gives you incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when you could get away with disobedience.

11. Approach to human dignity. Moralists often have a pretty low view of human nature--they mainly see human sin and depravity. Pragmatists, on the other hand, have no good basis for treating people with dignity. Usually they have no religious beliefs about what human beings are. (If they are just chance products of evolution, how do we know they are more valuable than a rock?) But the gospel shows us that every human being is infinitely fallen (lost in sin) and infinitely exalted (in the image of God). So we treat every human being as precious, yet dangerous!

12. Approach to guilt. When someone says, "I can't forgive myself", it means there is some standard or condition or person that is more central to your identity than the grace of God. God is the only God who forgives--no other "god" will. If you cannot forgive yourself, it is because you have failed your real God, your real righteousness, and it is holding you captive. The moralist's false god is usually a God of their imagination which is holy and demanding but not gracious. The pragmatist's false god is usually some achievement or relationship.

13. Approach to self-image. Without the gospel, your self-image is based upon living up to some standards--whether yours or someone's imposed upon you. If you live up to those standards, you will be confident but not humble. If you don't live up to them, you will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can you be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble. For you are both perfect and a sinner!

14. Approach to joy and humor. Moralism has to eat away at real joy and humor--because the system of legalism forces you to take yourself (your image, your

appearance, your reputation) very seriously. Pragmatism on the other hand will tend toward cynicism as life goes on because of the inevitable cynicism that grows. This cynicism grows from a lack of hope for the world. In the end, evil will triumph--there is no judgment or divine justice. But if we are saved by grace alone, then the very fact of our being Christians is a constant source of amazed delight. There is nothing matter-of-fact about our lives, no "of course" to our lives. It is a miracle we are Christians, and we have hope. So the gospel which creates bold humility should give us a far deeper sense of humor. We don't have to take ourselves seriously, and we are full of hope for the world.

15. Approach to "right living". Jonathan Edwards points out that "true virtue" is only possible for those who have experienced the grace of the gospel. Any person who is trying to earn their salvation does "the right thing" in order to get into heaven, or in order to better their self-esteem (etc.). In other words, the ultimate motive is self-interest. But persons who know they are totally accepted already do "the right thing" out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God's sake, and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes "doing the right thing" a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end.

## **B. The Gospel and the church.**

1. Approach to ministry in the world. Legalism tends to place all the emphasis on the individual human soul. Legalistic religion will insist on converting others to their faith and church, but will ignore social needs of the broader community. On the other hand, "liberalism" will tend to emphasize only amelioration of social conditions and minimize the need for repentance and conversion. The gospel leads to love which in turn moves us to give our neighbor whatever is needed--conversion or a cup of cold water, evangelism and social concern.

2. Approach to worship. Moralism leads to a dour and somber worship which may be long on dignity but short on joy. A shallow understanding of "acceptance" without a sense of God's holiness can lead to frothy or casual worship. (A sense of neither God's love nor his holiness leads to a worship service that feels like a committee meeting.) But the gospel leads us to see that God is both transcendent yet immanent. His immanence makes his transcendence comforting, while his transcendence makes his immanence amazing. The gospel leads to both awe and intimacy in worship, for the Holy One is now our Father.

3. Approach to the poor. The liberal/pragmatist tend to scorn the religion of the poor and see them as helpless victims needing expertise. This is born out of a disbelief in God's common grace or special grace to all. Ironically, the secular mindset also disbelieves in sin, and thus anyone who is poor must be oppressed, a helpless victim. The conservative/moralists on the other hand tend to scorn the poor as failures and weaklings. They see them as somehow to blame for their situation. But the gospel leads us to be: a) humble, without moral superiority knowing you were "spiritually bankrupt" but saved by Christ's free generosity, and b) gracious, not worried too much about "deservingness", since you didn't deserve Christ's grace, c) respectful of believing

poor Christians as brothers and sisters from whom to learn. The gospel alone can bring "knowledge workers" into a sense of humble respect for and solidarity with the poor.

4. Approach to doctrinal distinctives. The "already" of the New Testament means more boldness in proclamation. We can most definitely be sure of the central doctrines that support the gospel. But, the "not yet" means charity and humility in non-essentials beliefs. In other words, we must be moderate about what we teach except when it comes to the cross, grace and sin. In our views, especially those that Christians cannot agree on, we must be less unbending and triumphalistic ("believing we have arrived intellectually"). It also means that our discernment of God's call and his "will" for us and other must not be propagated with overweening assurance that your insight cannot be wrong. Vs. pragmatism, we must be willing to die for our belief in the gospel; vs. moralism, we must not fight to the death over every one of our beliefs.

5. Approach to holiness. The "already" means we should not tolerate sin. The presence of the kingdom includes that we are made "partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet. 1:3). The gospel brings us the confidence that anyone can be changed, that any enslaving habit can be overcome. But the "not yet" our sin which remains in us and will never be eliminated until the fullness of the kingdom comes in. So we must avoid pat answers, and we must not expect "quick fixes". Unlike the moralists, we must be patient with slow growth or lapses and realize the complexity of change and growth in grace. Unlike the pragmatists and cynics, we must insist that miraculous change is possible.

6. Approach to miracles. The "already" of the kingdom means power for miracles and healing is available. Jesus showed the kingdom by healing the sick and raising the dead. But the "not yet" means nature (including us) is still subject to decay (Rom.8:22-23) and thus sickness and death is still inevitable until the final consummation. We cannot expect miracles and the elimination of suffering to be such a normal part of the Christian life that pain and suffering will be eliminated from the lives of faithful people. Vs. moralists, we know that God can heal and do miracles. Vs. pragmatists, we do not aim to press God into eliminating suffering.

7. Approach to church health. The "already" of the kingdom means that the church is the community now of kingdom power. It therefore is capable of mightily transforming its community. Evangelism that adds "*daily to the number of those being saved*" (Acts 2:47) is possible! Loving fellowship which "*destroyed...the dividing wall of hostility*" between different races and classes is possible! But the "not yet" of sin means Jesus has not yet presented his bride, the church "*as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish*" (Eph.5:27). We must not then be harshly critical of imperfect congregations, nor jump impatiently from church to church over perceived blemishes. Error will never be completely eradicated from the church. The "not yet" means to avoid the overly severe use of church discipline and other means to seek to bring about a perfect church today.

8. Approach to social change. We must not forget that Christ is even now ruling in a sense over history (Eph.1:22ff). The "already" of grace means that Christians can expect to use God's power to change social conditions and communities. But the "not yet" of sin means there will be "wars and rumors of wars". Selfishness, cruelty,

terrorism, oppression will continue. Christians harbor no illusions about politics nor expect utopian conditions. The "not yet" means that Christians will not trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth. So the gospel keeps us from the over-pessimism of fundamentalism (moralism) about social change, and also from the over-optimism of liberalism (pragmatism).

**Sum:** All problems, personal or social come from a failure to use the gospel in a radical way, to get *"in line with the truth of the gospel"* (Gal.2:14). All pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness comes from a failure to use the gospel in a radical way. We believe that if the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will look very unique. People will find both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility. For example, gays are used to being "bashed" and hated or completely accepted. They never see anything else. The cultural elites of either liberal or conservative sides are alike in their unwillingness to befriend or live with or respect or worship with the poor. They are alike in separating themselves increasingly from the rest of society.