

Chapter 2:

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL VITALITY

Countless evangelistic programs have been developed over the years to assist the Church in fulfilling the Great Commission. Strategies such as *Evangelism Explosion* and *Alpha Courses*, to name a few, have had some positive results, but oftentimes only a small number of people are actually involved in doing the evangelism.¹ Christians go through various training programs, but within a few short weeks, fall back into old behavioral patterns. They resort to their previous humdrum, non-evangelistic way of living. Likewise, many college students have sat through inspiring sermons and were challenged to leave their college experience with the commission to win the world for Christ. Yet, after a few weeks, people return to the same humdrum life. Why? Lack of ongoing spiritual vitality is the missing, and an often overlooked, key element.

Spiritual Vitality Defined

The term I have opted to use is spiritual vitality, which is the result of spiritual renewal. Every Christian college desires to foster corporate renewal in the students on their campus. If so, how is corporate spiritual renewal to be understood? Furthermore, how can spiritual renewal take place campus wide?

Tim Keller in his book *Center Church* believes that historically there are three options people throughout church history have adopted to achieve corporate spiritual renewal. The first option is of the Pentecostal or Charismatic variety, and sees revival or renewal as God bestowing his power on his Church through signs and wonders, working miracles and miraculous healings. Option two, on the other hand, sees revival as a planned event where believers gather to seek revival. The latter view represents how renewal/revival is understood by many non-Pentecostal and Charismatics. The thinking is that God always desires to send corporate renewal or revival. It is up to the Church to seek for it.

“In contrast to both,” Keller believes “that gospel renewal or revival is an intensification of the normal operations of the Spirit (conviction of sin, regeneration and sanctification, assurance of grace) through the ordinary means of grace (preaching the Word, prayer, and the sacraments).”² This type of move of the Spirit is what fosters continued spiritual vitality in students and is the view of spiritual renewal or revival I adopt.

If spiritual vitality is the goal, what then is meant by spiritual vitality? To begin, the word “vitality,” according to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, means “a lively or energetic quality; the power or ability of something to continue to live, be successful, etc.”³ In conjunction with the word

¹ Timothy Keller. *Session 1: Vision New England*, Lowell, MA, (2013), YouTube Video 53:38, Posted on Nov. 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9KKlqr09go> accessed April 16, 2016.

² Keller, Timothy J.. *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Kindle Locations 1254-1256). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

³ *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, s.v. “vitality,” accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.merriam->

vitality is the word “spiritual,” the adjective explaining and modifying the word vitality. The term “spiritual” represents the resources provided by Jesus’ finished work on the cross and practically applied by the Holy Spirit to the gospel-changed person. It is the spiritual component which produces vitality in a believer through Christ’s life, death, burial, and resurrection.

Students experience spiritual vitality when they continue to grasp what Christ has done for them. Consequently, the gospel increasingly bears fruit in a believer’s life (Col. 1:6). When the gospel is bearing fruit, it should move one to serve others more, regardless of tongue, tribe, or nation.⁴ If there is true spiritual vitality, evangelism should logically follow. Conversely, if spiritual vitality doesn’t characterize one’s life, then “something is lacking in [one’s] understanding, approach, and application of Jesus’s sacrifice for [one’s] sins.”⁵

What is the Gospel?

If experiencing spiritual vitality means centering one’s life on the gospel, what then is the gospel? Graeme Goldsworthy defines it as “an event (or the proclamation of an event) of Jesus Christ that begins with his incarnation and earthly life, and concludes with his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father. These are the historical events [that were directed] by God as His preordained programme for the salvation of the world.”⁶ The Apostle Paul shows that this plan was conducted in the mind of God long before the earth and mankind were created (2 Tim. 1:9). God foreknew that Adam and Eve would sin, thus when sin entered the world, the plan had already been conceived in the mind of God from eternity past. In the beginning, all of His creation was deemed to be good (Genesis 1-2). Then when sin entered the world (Genesis 3), everything changed. What was once perfect, namely man and creation, was now in ruin. The rest of the Bible (beginning in Genesis 3:15) records God’s plan to redeem the world. Thus God’s Word reveals that both man and his creation have been damaged by sin and the subsequent need for redemption emerged.

When Jesus came to earth, He came with a mission to set right what had been made wrong as the result of Adam’s sin. God’s creation had been corrupted, and it was through Him alone that His creation could be made right. He sent Jesus Christ to accomplish this task by redeeming men and women through the incarnation, substitution, and the eventual restoration of all things. In the incarnation Jesus took on human flesh, becoming fully human while remaining fully God. Only God himself could provide what was necessary to accomplish man’s salvation. In the substitution, Jesus, as the Savior of mankind and perfect sacrifice, paid the penalty of sin.

This is why the cross and what Christ has accomplished should be so precious to Christians. It is why Christians must continue to preach the gospel to himself or herself in order to apply by faith what Christ has already accomplished. The tendency is for them to forget the gospel. Tim Keller offers the needed reminder,

webster.com/dictionary/vitality

⁴ Robert H. Thune and Will Walker. *The Gospel-centered Life Participant’s Guide* (City of Publication: New Growth Press, 2013), 2.

⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic Press, 2010), 58.

The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is inaccurate to think the gospel is what saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying hard to live according to biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our minds, hearts, and lives by believing the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on (see Rom 12: 1 – 2; Phil 1: 6; 3: 13– 14).⁷

When the gospel is applied, as Keller suggests, God’s work of restoration begins to take hold in the life of a believer. When that happens, the believer is empowered to serve the purpose of proclaiming the gospel.

The Gospel Must Be Restored

If spiritual vitality takes place when there is an ongoing, deep grasp of the gospel, how well is the gospel understood and proclaimed in Evangelical circles today? The simple answer to that question is not well. J. I. Packer was right when he said, “The most urgent task facing evangelical Christianity today is the recovery of the gospel.”⁸ It could also be said that the most urgent task facing Evangelical Christian colleges today is the recovery of the gospel. It is interesting that something so foundational to Christianity that encapsulates its central message, could be lost. But it can, has been, and needs to be restored.

The loss of the gospel is not a new phenomenon. In antiquity, the Catholic Church lost the gospel, as it embraced Pelagian heresies, and consequently, the need arose to restore it to the church. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther answered that call and countered the teachings of the Catholic Church by establishing the gospel. He began what is termed the Protestant Reformation.

In a similar vein, there needs to be a contemporary Reformation in order to restore the gospel. Martin Luther led the charge to reform the Catholic Church because it had drifted far from essential Christian teaching. “The Reformation was concerned with restoring the gospel to the church. The magisterial Reformers linked the Christological foundation of the church with its gospel, since it was the preaching of the gospel that mediated the saving presence of Jesus Christ.”⁹ This same postulate must be enacted today by Christian colleges if they hope to produce spiritual vitality and gospel-centered Evangelical Christians that can reach Muslims for Christ.

The Reformation “bound the gospel to the center of the church as an ever-present and effervescent force with the church...”¹⁰ Christian colleges need to do the same. What is needed is “a gospel-driven theology in order to yield a gospel-soaked piety and gospel-acting church.”¹¹ These colleges must recapture what it means to be evangelical. Stanley Grenz offers a helpful

⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 1083-1086.

⁸ J. I. Packer, Preface “God Centered vs. Man-centered Gospel” to *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, by John Owen, accessed May 17, 2016, <https://verticalivingministries.com/tag/the-biblical-gospel-by-j-i-packer/>

⁹ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

reminder when he says,

To be “evangelical” means to be centered on the gospel. Consequently, evangelicals are to be gospel people. They are people committed to hearing, living out, and sharing the good news of God’s saving action in Jesus Christ and the divine gift of the Holy Spirit, a saving action that brings forgiveness, transforms life, and creates a new community. As a gospel people, evangelicals continually set forth the truth that the center of the church is the gospel and that of the church, therefore, must be gospel-centered.¹²

While many factors contributed to the gospel’s demise in America, one factor is a decline of doctrine being taught and understood. Unfortunately, there is often disdain for preaching doctrine and hearing doctrine preached. In his book *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists*, Colin Hansen uncovers the rationale for not preaching doctrine and not holding it dear to the heart of the church. He states with conviction, “We’ve so dumbed down the gospel [by devaluing doctrine] ... in a good effort to reach as many people as we can that there’s almost a backlash. It comes from this great hunger for a genuinely God-centered, transcendence-focused understanding of who God is and what God wants us to do and what God has given us in Jesus Christ.”¹³ Doctrine, Hansen surmises, cannot be thrown aside because in order to reach those same people, the message of the gospel must be properly understood, then communicated. The richness of what one has in Christ, it comes as a result of understanding the gospel not just experientially, but intellectually as well.

The doctrines, such as the new birth, the depravity of man, justification, sanctification, glorification all need to be proclaimed faithfully and taught accurately if the gospel is to be preserved. Each doctrine acts as a sign pointing to Christ and the need for his sacrificial death on the cross. Understanding doctrine should bring about humility, reverence, and awe because one develops a God-centered, as opposed to a man-centered view of the true and living God. J. I. Packer captures well the fallout when doctrine is not taught and embraced, which results in a man-centered view of God.

Without realizing it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel for a substitute product, which though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in past days proved itself so mighty. The new gospel conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, and a concern for the church. Why? We would suggest that the reason lies in its own character and content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do. One way of stating the difference between it and the old gospel is to say that it is too exclusively concerned to be “helpful” to man—to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction—and

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Nashville: Crossway, 2008), 21, Kindle.

too little concerned to glorify God.¹⁴

The need to restore the gospel is particularly true, given the current religious climate in America, as it relates to teenaged students. In their book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers*, Christian Smith and Lelina Lundquist Denton uncovered that American teenagers follow a new religion, one they received from their adult parents. They found that American teenagers had ingested a view of religion which the authors call moral therapeutic deism. This religious creed is as follows:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most religions.
3. The central goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.¹⁵

This new religion challenges their adherents to be a moral people by simply doing good, meaning they can be moral by their own self-effort. It teaches people that God desires to satisfy the therapeutic goal of feeling good about oneself in all of his followers. What's more, this view of God is not particularly interested in the affairs of people as a whole, just in the affairs of each individual. In other words, it is a religion about me, not about you. This new god doesn't demand repentance or obedience, nor does he require any sort of self-denial or encouragement to spend one's life for the service of another, not to mention sharing one's faith with others. To the contrary, this new deity wants people to feel good about themselves as well as live a life that is personally rewarding, absent of any consequences. This new deity is a god of America's own making, not the God of the Bible. This is the view of God that teenagers have received from their parents. This is the teenagers' god; this is their parents' god; this is America's god, and this is a god embraced by many university students.¹⁶ To counter this, Christian young people need to be continually renewed by the gospel if they hope to remain fruitful in their walk with God.

A Gospel Revolution

For college students to experience the spiritual vitality needed to influence the lives of their Muslim friends, a revolution is needed. Not the type of revolution that calls for an overthrow of a government via an angry revolt, but the type of revolution that H. Richard Niebuhr called for when he said, "The great revolutions come not by the discovery of something that was not known before. It happens when somebody takes radically something that was always there."¹⁷ The message of

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, Preface "God Centered vs. Man-centered Gospel" to *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, by John Owen, accessed May 17, 2016, <https://verticallivingministries.com/tag/the-biblical-gospel-by-j-i-packer/>

¹⁵ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3527-3532. Kindle.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Quotes/Authors, accessed May 26, 2016. <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/878901>

the gospel, as has already been shown, is that Jesus paid the penalty for humanity's sins through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The result of it changes the believer by enabling him or her to glean "a clear grasp of the gospel [which] displaces pride, overcomes despair, and grounds one firmly in the love of God."¹⁸ The believer, as a result of repentance and faith, receives the benefit of having one's sins imputed to Christ as a result of His substitutionary work. As a consequence, the believer receives Christ's imputed righteousness that totally and completely justifies the believer.

What is Gospel-Centered?

Now that the term gospel is defined, how is the gospel applied to one's life? God intends His children to center their lives on the gospel, hence the term gospel-centered. The term simply means that one views all of life through the lens of the gospel, and their experience and walk with God flows from the gospel. Justification, sanctification, and glorification are all achieved through faith in the finished work of Christ, which constitutes the gospel. It is relying on the grace of God through the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ alone, revealed by the Word of God, and illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit reveals that salvation is achieved in the life of a Christian through faith alone in Christ's finished work. A life that is characterized by spiritual vitality involves rejoicing and treasuring everyday what Christ has done on the cross and what he did in the resurrection. If one is consistently living out the gospel-centered life, one will continually experience spiritual renewal, or more specifically, gospel-centered renewal. This kind of commitment will lead the Christian to walk in the joy and victory that comes with salvation. He or she will see the power of sin broken in their lives, feel the joy of the Lord, and understand that Christ has forgiven them and justified them. Looking through life through such a lens will motivate people to share this same message with others.

As a result, gospel-centered renewal should be the heart cry of every Christian college campus. It is the missing element in the lives of Christian college students who are not engaging their unsaved friends with the gospel. Justin Christopher captures the essence of gospel-centered renewal and its results when he says,

The good news of Jesus's death and resurrection for our redemption coupled with His lordship over us is the only thing that can bring transformation in us and on our campuses. The vision of a transformed campus is what brings us together in partnership, but we will never see the work of transformation apart from the work of the gospel. The gospel is at the center of our vision. Our vision is rooted in a dependence on God's work in us and His message through us.¹⁹

This gospel-centered renewal results in effective evangelism. How does the gospel-centered life fuel the passion necessary for evangelism? To explain this it would be helpful to first to offer the three essential elements for successful evangelism—borrowed from human anatomy—the heart,

¹⁸ Dr. John David, *How Does the Gospel Transform Us?*, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://www.gracechurchphilly.org/2010/01/23/how-does-the-gospel-transform-us/>

¹⁹ Justin Christopher, *Campus Renewal: A Practical Plan for Uniting Campus Ministries in Prayer and Mission* (Austin: Campus Renewal Ministries, 2010), 675-679, Kindle.

the head, and the feet. The heart motivates evangelism, while the head informs evangelism; the feet then do the evangelizing.

Being Evangelistic Starts with the Heart

Unfortunately, when training people for evangelism, the heart is often overlooked. This is why people lose their evangelistic fervor so quickly after being trained. The “how to” of evangelism might be there, but the “want to” often falls by the wayside. The assumption of this chapter is that if a person is truly gospel-centered and has experienced ongoing gospel renewal and transformation, he or she will have the heart motivation to want to reach people with the gospel.

Ongoing engagement with the gospel provides the heart motivation to reach people with the gospel because the gospel challenges the sinful heart commitments – pride, fear, pessimism and indifference—that prevent people from sharing the good news of the gospel.²⁰ When Christians draw the link between the nature of the gospel and the logic of the gospel, natural organic evangelism takes place. For example, when pride prevents someone from sharing the gospel because they think they are morally superior to the other person, the gospel should humble that person because his righteousness is but filthy rags in the sight of God. The Christian is right before God only because of trusting, by faith alone, in what Christ has done. As a consequence, the nature of the gospel is that one is saved by grace through faith alone, and not by one’s moral goodness. The logic of the gospel, then, says that the gospel of grace accessed through faith alone keeps the Christian from feeling morally superior.²¹

If the Christian is afraid to share his or her faith because he or she fears being rejected, the logic of the gospel says the Christian is already totally accepted by Christ. If Christ accepts the Christian, their security should lie there. It shouldn’t matter if the non-Christian accepts the message or not. If the Christian is pessimistic about his or her Muslim friend coming to Christ, the logic of the gospel says no one comes to Christ unless He draws him or her. Every salvation is a miracle. The Christian’s duty is simply to share the gospel; it is God who decides who will accept the free gift offered. If the Christian attitude is one of indifference, the logic of the gospel suggests since God loved us when we were unlovable, so the Christian should do the same for his or her Muslim friend? Therefore, if ongoing gospel renewal is taking place in the heart, the Christian is more likely motivated to share his or her faith.²²

The How of Gospel-Centered Renewal

To best maintain spiritual vitality, believers should continually be renewed by the gospel. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul begins the chapter by summarizing the spiritual blessings that are part of it. God’s plan for His people is that they are chosen to be made holy, predestined for adoption, redeemed through Christ’s blood by forgiveness of sin, and sealed by the Holy Spirit. This plan assures the believer that he or she is a child of God forever!

A few verses later, Paul’s prayer in the book of Ephesians 1:15-23 shows the need for believers

²⁰ Timothy Keller. *Session 1: Vision New England*, Lowell, MA, (2013), accessed April 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9KKlqr09go>. For a more complete understanding of this point, follow this link.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

to experience continuing gospel renewal in their hearts. Paul understood that the gospel is more than a creed. It is a doctrine to be lived out, embraced by both the head and heart. This calls for a work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers in the form of gospel renewal.

Gospel renewal takes place when “the great doctrines of the faith become real. ... [People] find a renewed energy to pursue holiness in their daily living and are possessed by a new vision of God’s glory. They begin to wait on God and pray strenuously that their minister would have a message which satisfies their new spiritual hunger”, meaning that the Holy Spirit is doing the renewing work.²³ The point of the Spirit’s work is to draw people closer in their relationship with God. As Martin Lloyd aptly once said, “... the hallmark of the work of the Holy Spirit is that He presents the Lord Jesus Christ to us, and brings us an ever-increasing intimacy with Him, and an enjoyment of his glorious presence.”²⁴

The problem for the Christian, in spite of being redeemed and having the Holy Spirit indwell him or her, is that the heart still has a tendency to waffle back and forth between loving and rejecting God. One’s heart, even after being redeemed, longs to worship others things other than God. After all, as the prophet Jeremiah lamented, the human heart is wicked and who could know it? (Jer. 17:9). A continual renewal is required both at the individual and corporate level “because religion (I obey, therefore I am accepted) is so different from the gospel (‘I am accepted through Christ; therefore I obey’).”²⁵ Since our hearts have the tendency to drift, provisions must be made at both the individual and corporate level in order for both individuals and a church to be motivated by the gospel. This requires that one respond appropriately.

Ongoing renewal is needed because the Christian heart’s tendency is to respond to God in three ways, namely moralism, antinomianism, or through responding properly the gospel.²⁶ Hearts motivated by legalism seek moral improvement through human effort. This is moralism, and those who follow it live by works in the form of religious duty, making one’s identity rooted in moral behavior. Paul warned against such thinking when writing to the Galatian church stating, “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:2-3). Moralism still needs to be resisted today.

Antinomianism, on the other hand, avoids God all together by seeking to justify oneself, ignoring God’s demands, and clinging to the idea that He forgives and doesn’t demand obedience. The desire, whether acknowledged or not, is to live with no accountability to God.

However, there is a third option, the option that God desires, which is the gospel-centered outlook seeking to love God because He first loved us.²⁷ The proper response is captured beautifully by Robert Thune and Will Walker when they say,

²³ Martin Lloyd Jones, “The Everlasting Covenant” (MP3 of sermon, London, England), accessed May 12, 2016, <http://www.mljtrust.org/collections/book-of-ephesians/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 1505-1506.

²⁶ Ibid, 458-459.

²⁷ Ibid, 379-380

Many Christians live with a truncated view of the gospel. We see the gospel as the “door,” the way in, the entrance point into God’s Kingdom. But the gospel is much more! It is not just the door, but the path we are to walk every day of the Christian life. It is not just the means of salvation, but the means of our transformation. It is not simply deliverance from sin’s penalty, but release from sin’s power. The gospel is what makes us right with God (justification) and it is also what frees us to delight in God (sanctification). The gospel changes everything!²⁸

This is the framework that allows college students to flourish best. Christian colleges are positioned to develop Christians who steadfastly live out their faith. The Christian seeks to delight in God and obey Him based upon what Christ has already done. The goal of the gospel is real heart change resulting in obedience to God’s Word, not just moral change. What is the proper motivation for obedience? Tim Keller supplies us with the proper motivation for obedience as he outlines the essence of gospel:

Gospel renewal is a life-changing recovery of the gospel. Personal gospel renewal means the gospel doctrines of sin and grace are actually experienced, not just known intellectually. This personal renewal includes an awareness and conviction of one’s own sin and alienation from God comes from seeing in ourselves deeper layers of self-justification, unbelief, and self-righteousness than we have ever seen before. There is a new, commensurate grasp of the wonder of forgiveness and grace as we shed these attitudes and practices and rest in Christ alone for salvation. Perhaps we have previously said that we were “resting in Christ’s work, not our own work” for salvation, but when we experienced gospel renewal, we have a new clarity about what it means in our mind and a new experience of actually doing it with our heart. Gospel renewal is a life-changing recovery of the gospel²⁹

This is the type of change that is needed because another solution will not provide the spiritual resources needed that transforms hearts and lives.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that spiritual vitality is important for Christian colleges to develop in their students. This takes place when they rely on the resources provided for them by Christ, and live out in their lives by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, which leads to bearing fruit, and having a heart for the lost.

The gospel was defined as those things that pertain to the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This message has been somewhat lost and needs to be restored. It was concluded that a deep grasp of the gospel is needed through the process of gospel renewal. Although it is a difficult task fraught with spiritual warfare, the end result will be students impassioned to pursue a relationship with God equaled by a passion to do His work. With such twin passions, the Kingdom will be advanced in the lives of the students’ Muslim friends.

²⁸ Thune and Walker, *The Gospel-centered Life Participant’s Guide*, 2.

²⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 1239.

