

***Christless Christianity (The Alternative Gospel of the American Church)***  
by Michael Horton, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2008 (29 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

## **Foreword- by William H. Willimon**

### **1. God Loves Sinners More than Our Needs**

The determination of God in Jesus Christ to love sinners and to enlist them in the invasion that is his kingdom is so much more relevant to our true condition than our inclination to meet the felt needs of narcissistic North American consumers.

[Page 11]

## **Chapter 1. Christless Christianity**

### **2. Where the Gospel Is Important, Things Happen**

Where the gospel is not taken for granted, it is often a means to an end, like personal or social transformation, love and service to our neighbors, and other things that in themselves are marvelous effects of the gospel. However, the Good News concerning Christ is not stepping-stone to something greater and more relevant. Whether we realize it or not, there is nothing in the universe more relevant to us as guilty image-bearers of God than the news that he has found a way to be “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). It is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16), not only for the beginning, but for the middle and end as well – the only thing that creates the kind of new world to which our new obedience corresponds as a reasonable response. [Page 22]

### **3. God Is Trivialized**

Liberalism started off by downplaying doctrine in favor of moralism and inner experience, losing Christ by degrees. Nevertheless, it is not heresy as much as silliness that is killing us softly. God is not denied but trivialized – used for our life programs rather than received, worshiped, and enjoyed. [Page 24]

### **4. Christ Redeems Lives**

Christ is a source of empowerment, but is he widely regarded among us today as the source of redemption for the powerless? He helps the morally sensitive to become better, but does he save the ungodly – including Christians? He heals broken lives, but does he raise those who are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1 NKJV)? Does Christ come merely to *improve* our existence in Adam or to *end* it, sweeping us into his new creation? Is Christianity all about spiritual and moral makeovers or about death and resurrection – radical judgment and radical grace? Is the Word of God a resource for what we have already decided we want and need, or is it God’s living and active criticism of our religion, morality, and pious experience? In other words, is the Bible God’s story, centering on Christ’s

redeeming work, that rewrites our stories, or is it something we use to make our stories a little more exciting and interesting? [Page 24]

## **5. Christ Bearing Our Condemnation**

Religion, spirituality, and moral earnestness – what Paul called “the appearance of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5) – can continue to thrive in our environment precisely because they avoid the scandal of Christ. Nobody will raise a fuss if you find Jesus helpful for your personal well-being and relationships, or even if you think he was the greatest person in history – a model worthy of devotion and emulation. But start talking about the real crisis – where our best efforts are filthy rags and Jesus came to bear the condemnation of helpless sinners who place their confidence in him rather than in themselves – and people begin shifting in their seats, even in churches. [Page 26]

## **Chapter 3. Smooth Talking and Christless Christianity**

### **6. Theology of Glory**

Although explicit proponents of the prosperity gospel may be fewer than their influence suggests, its big names and best-selling authors (T.D. Jakes, Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer) are purveyors of a pagan world view with a peculiarly American flavor. It’s basically what Luther called the “theology of glory”: How can I climb the ladder and attain the glory here and now that God has actually promised for us after a life of suffering? The contrast is the *theology of the cross*: the story of God’s merciful descent to us at great personal cost – a message that the apostle Paul acknowledged was offensive and foolish to Greeks. [Page 68]

### **7. Christ the Only Way**

It is actually arrogant for ambassadors to create their own policies, especially when they directly counter the word of the one who sent them. Osteen seems to admit that Jesus Christ is in some way unique and important, but he presumes ignorance of a point that Christ made perfectly clear: namely, that he is the only way of salvation from the coming judgment. [Page 80]

### **8. God Declares Us Righteous**

It was Jesus who said that anyone who does not trust in him “stands condemned already” (John 3:18 NIV). That was because for Jesus, the judgement he came to save us from by enduring it for us had God and his glory, not me and my temporal happiness, as its reference point. The ditch we had dug for ourselves was so deep that only God incarnate could pull us out of it by falling in and climbing back out of it himself as our Substitute and Victor. For Osteen, the good

news is that on judgement day God will look at our heart, life, death, and resurrection of his Son and declares us righteous in him. It is not a cheap gift, but it is a free gift. [Page 80]

## **9. Words of God Are Commands**

The *seven keys* are not gospel indicatives. In other words, announcements of God's saving work in Christ – such as prophetic anticipation of the Messiah; the incarnation; Christ's active obedience in the place of sinners; his sin-bearing death and victorious resurrection as the head of a body; Christ's ascension to represent us before the Father and send his Spirit into our hearts as a down-payment on the resurrection of our bodies at the end of the age when he return in glory to judge the living and the dead. Rather, they are imperatives (commands) that could be generated from a host of sources without any appeal to the Bible: "To become a better you, you must: (1) Keep pressing forward. (2) Be positive toward yourself. (3) Develop better relationships. (4) Form better habits. (5) Embrace the place where you are. (6) Develop your inner life. (7) Stay passionate about life." These are all things for you to do, without any mention of the Good News of what has been done for us by God. [82]

## **10. Ambassadors Do Not Choose What to Say**

Just as Joel Osteen has decided for himself the message he will preach, he has also tailored his own vocation. In interviews, he has said that he is not called to explain the Scripture or expound doctrine. In this book he adds, "I'm not called to explain every minute facet of Scripture or to expound on deep theological doctrines or disputes that don't touch where real people live. My gifting is to encourage, to challenge, and to inspire."

Ambassadors do not get to choose what they say. As ministers of the gospel, our *gifting* is to preach "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). As Paul says in Romans 10, we do not ascend to God; he descends to us in grace. He sends ambassadors who will preach the Good News that they have been *appointed* to preach. They do not send themselves but are sent on someone else's errand. "For faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (v. 16 NKJV) [Page 90-91]

## **11. God Has Satisfied His Justice**

It is clear that Osteen is reacting against the scolding legalism of a previous generation, which beat people down over rules. Yet Osteen's alternative is to tell people to "lighten up and give yourself a break," asking God to "help me to do better next time." The biblical message is far deeper and richer, however, both in its bad news and its good news. The bad news is far worse than making mistakes or failing to live up to the legalistic standards of fundamentalism. It is that the best efforts of the best Christians, on the best days, in the best frame of heart and

mind, with the best motives fall short of the true righteousness and holiness that God requires. Our best efforts cannot satisfy God's justice. Yet the good news is that God has satisfied his own justice and reconciled us to himself through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. God's holy law can no longer condemn us because we are in Christ. [Page 91]

## **12. We Will Be Free**

Christianity announces the Good News that God in Christ has saved us now from the condemnation of the law, has dethroned the tyranny of sin, and has delivered us from Satan's oppressive regime. But it gets even better: one day this salvation will be consummated in the gift of resurrection, glorification, and everlasting life free of the very presence of sin, pain, evil, and violence. [Page 97]

## **13. God Has Saved Us from Sin and Death**

Through faith in Christ we have the assurance that the last judgement has already been determined in our favor despite our sinfulness even as Christians. In the midst of our suffering, pain, and even death, we can confidently cling to the promise that Paul quotes from Isaiah 64:4, namely that which "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God had prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

Where the gospel offers salvation from the guilt and tyranny of sin now and from the presence and effects of sin in the future, Osteen's very American message presents the gospel as salvation from the symptoms of sin now without any clear proclamation of the far greater liberation from God's wrath.

Because he does not face the bad news, Osteen does not really have any good news. To paraphrase Jesus's description of his generation in Luke 7:31-35, Osteen's message teaches us to sing neither the blues nor the triumphant anthem. It's more like a steady, droning, upbeat hum that we hear on the elevator or at the mall, keeping everything light and undisturbed.

The best news that Osteen has for us in these books is that by following these seven steps he has been given good parking spaces, the best seat in a restaurant, and an unexpected upgrade to first class on the plane. But the gospel tells us that God has taken all of the steps down to us, saving us not from discomfort or the ills that are common to humanity in this present age but from the penalty of sin and death. Clothed in Christ's righteousness, no longer condemned, we are adopted and made alive in Christ, "and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). Chosen by God before creation, redeemed by Christ, justified, renewed, being sanctified, and one day raised bodily in glory – what could be better news than this? Paul adds,

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly within us as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:18-20, 22-25) [Page 99-100]

## **Chapter 4. How We Turn Good News into Good Advice**

### **14. God Has Judged by Raising Christ from the Dead**

In 1 Corinthians, Paul points out that Greeks (basically, Gentiles) do not understand the gospel because they are looking for wisdom. Greek philosophy was obsessed with *the good life*, and there were different schools of thought about how to attain it. So it is surprising that when the apostle to Gentiles was given a spot at the philosophers' forum in Athens, he did not offer Christ as the best path to "your best life now" but told the story of how God is the Creator who needs nothing from us but has stooped to save us through his Son. Everyone must now repent and turn to Christ, for God has proved the imminence of the final judgement by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17). [Page 103]

### **15. Christianity Is Not Just a Way of Life**

The central message of Christianity is not a worldview, a way of life, or a program for personal and societal change; it is a gospel. From the Greek word for "good news," typically used in the context of announcing a military victory, the *gospel* is the report of an appointed messenger who arrives from the battlefield. That is why the New Testament refers to the offices of apostle (official representative), preacher, and evangelist, describing ministers as heralds, ambassadors, and witnesses. Their job is to get the story right and then report it, ensuring that the message is delivered by word (preaching) and deed (sacrament). And the result is a church, an embassy of the Triune God in the midst of this passing evil age, with the whole people of God giving witness to God's mighty acts of redemption.

It is not incidental, then, that this story of redemption is called *Good News*. If it were merely information or a program for self-improvement, it would be called something else, like *good advice* or *a good idea* or *good enlightenment*. But it's Good News because it is an announcement of something that someone else has already achieved for us.

When we are distracted from this commission, we begin to think of ourselves not as ambassadors of a great King and witnesses to that which someone else has accomplished for us but as the starts of the show. Instead of *reporting* the news, we *become* the news. In fact, today we often hear Christians speak of “living the gospel” and “being the gospel,” as if anything we do and are can be considered a supplement to God’s victory in Christ Jesus. Instead of ambassadors, heralds, reporters, and witnesses, pastors become entrepreneurs, managers, coaches, therapists, marketing gurus, and communications specialists. [Page 105-106]

## 16. **The Bible Is the Story of the Triune God**

It’s important to point out that law and gospel do not simply refer to the Ten Commandments and John 3:16, respectively. Everything in the Bible that reveals God’s moral expectations is *law* and everything in the Bible that reveals God’s saving purposes and acts in *gospel*. Not everything in God’s Word is gospel; there are a lot of exhortations, commands, and imperatives. They are to be followed. However, they are not the gospel. Not everything that we need is *gospel*. We also need to be directed. We need to know God’s commands so we will come clean, acknowledge our sins, and flee to Christ and also so they can direct us in grateful obedience. When it comes to doing something, we are answering the law (works); when it comes to believing what has been done for us by Christ, we are answering the gospel (faith). Confused with faith as the means of inheriting God’s gift, our “good works” become the most offensive sins against God. But when faith alone receives the gift, it immediately begins to yield the fruit of righteousness. When even good, holy, and proper things become confused with the gospel, it is only a matter of time before we end up with *Christless Christianity*: a story about us instead of a story about the Triune God that sweeps us into the unfolding drama. [Page 109]

## 17. **Christ Died for Us Once for All**

However, McLaren seems never to have found an alternative kind of evangelical faith to the more pietistic and legalistic background in which he was raised. When he recoils from the doctrine of Christ’s atoning death as bearing God’s righteous judgment in our place (i.e., penal substitution), I know the distortion he is reacting against. Yet it was a wise and elderly systematic theologian at the seminary where I now teach who warned us never to present this precious truth as if a vengeful Father was taking out his anger on his Son. Rather, he instructed us from the relevant passages, the Father gave his Son because of his love, and the Son was not a victim but a willing substitute who gave himself in love as well.

Whatever the reasons, McLaren – along with other pastors and writers, like British evangelical Steve Chalke – rebound from a popular caricature of evangelical Christianity into the arms of a different kind of moralism that is often indistinguishable from the movies that were made long ago by Protestant

liberalism and more radical versions of various liberation theologies. Chalke describes penal substitution as “divine child abuse” and McLaren expresses the same view in the voice of one of his fictional characters. After offering a caricature of the “conventional view” of Christ’s atonement, McLaren offers his alternative “emerging view”: “God graciously invites everyone and anyone to turn from his or her current path and follow a new way. This,” he says, “is the good news.” While in the conventional view, “original sin” is the root problem and God provides salvation from his wrath as “a free gift,” the gospel according to the emerging view is that Jesus “inserted into human history a seed of grace, truth and hope that can never be defeated.... All who find in Jesus God’s hope and truth discover the privilege of participating in his ongoing work of personal and global transformation and liberation from evil injustice.”

Thus, our labors are not simply the fruit of salvation but are part of Christ’s “ongoing work.” Lost in this view is the uniqueness of Christ’s once-and-for-all work *for* us, *apart* from us, *outside* of us, in the past, and the work that only he can do when he returns in glory. Jesus and the community, his work and ours, blend into one saving event. [Page 112-114]

#### **18. Preach Christ and Him Crucified**

A lot of us have grown up watching our religious leaders attack pornography and gay rights while employing prostitutes of both genders. But is the answer to “mindless, even cultish... crusades to wipe out the evils of society” simply another crusade with a different agenda? The proper preaching of the law and the gospel is the *real* antidote to self-righteousness of every stripe. It is interesting that when the apostle Paul had to write a disciplinary letter to the Corinthian church for its sexual immorality, hypocrisy, strife, and pride, he began by telling them the gospel all over again. He never assumed it. In fact, he assumed that if the church is in a particular mess ethically, it probably did not really get the message yet. Only after once again preaching *Christ and him crucified* would Paul turn to the practical exhortation to live in the light of their high calling in Christ. [Page 116]

#### **19. The Battle with Indwelling Sin**

Like many emergent Church leaders, Kimball invokes a famous line from Francis of Assisi that I also heard growing up in conservative evangelicalism: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” Kimball goes on to say, “Our lives will preach better than anything we can say.” (We encountered a nearly identical statement from Osteen in the previous chapter.) If so, then this is just more bad news, not only because of the statistics we have already seen, which evidence no real difference between Christians and non-Christians, but because despite my best intentions, I am not an exemplary creature. The best examples and instructions – even the best doctrines – will not relieve me of the battle with

indwelling sin until I draw my last breath. Find me on my *best* day – especially if you have access to my hidden motives, thoughts, and attitudes – and I will always provide fodder for the hypocrisy charge and will let down those who would become Christians because they think I and my fellow Christians are the gospel. I am a Christian not because I think that I can walk in Jesus’s footsteps but because he is the only one who can carry me. I am not the gospel; Jesus Christ alone is the gospel. *His* story saves me, not only by bringing me justification but by baptizing me into his resurrection life. [Page 117]

## **20. Christ’s Person and Work, Not Our Own**

We do not preach ourselves but Christ. The good news – not only for ourselves, but for a world (and church) in desperate need of good news – is that what we *say* preaches better than our lives, at least if what we are saying is *Christ’s* person and work rather than our own. The more we talk about Christ as the Bible’s unfolding mystery and less about our own transformation, the more likely we are actually to be transformed rather than either self-righteous or despairing. As much as it goes against our grain, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for justification *and* sanctification. The fruit of faith is real; it’s just not the same as the fruit of works-righteousness. [Page 118]

## **21. Faith through the Gospel**

So law and gospel are not inherently opposed, but when it comes to how we are saved, these two principles could not be more antithetical. And since our faith in every moment is threatened by our natural tendency to be distracted from its object – Christ – we need the gospel placarded before us not just at the beginning but throughout the Christian life. The gospel is for Christians too. We need to be evangelized every week. It is not by following Christ’s example but by actually being inserted into Christ, clothed with Christ, united to Christ – as the spirit creates faith through the gospel – that we are not only justified but sanctified as well. [Page 125]

## **22. Two World Religions**

So there are really only two religions in the world: a religion of human striving to ascend to God through pious works, feelings, attitudes, and experience and the Good News of God’s merciful descent to us in his Son. The religions, philosophies, ideologies, and spiritualities of the world only differ on the details. Whether we are talking about the Dalai Lama or Dr. Phil, Islam or Oprah, liberals or conservatives, the most intuitive conviction is that we are good people who need good advice, not helpless sinners who need the Good News. [Page 128]

## **23. Cling to Christ**

The law *guides*, but it does not *give*. For all who seek to be acceptable to God by their obedience, love holiness, and service, the call to obedience only condemns.



It shows us what we have *not* done, and the more we hear it properly, the more we actually lose our moral self-confidence and cling to Christ. It stops our inner spin machine that creates a false view of God and ourselves. [Page 132]

**24. No Rules, Just Loving God and Others**

While on the road recently, I surfed the television channels looking for some news and happened upon Joyce Meyer, a popular prosperity evangelist. Much like Joel Osteen, Meyer reflects the antipathy of Boomers toward their strict upbringing. After railing against the rule-driven religion of her past, Meyer said, “I finally realized that the gospel is not about rules; it’s about loving God and each other. So what have you done this week to help out someone you know?” We have already encountered a similar theme in Joel Osteen: Christianity isn’t a bunch of rules, its essence is loving God and others. This sentiment is expressed across the spectrum, as we have seen, from conservative to liberal, traditional to megachurch to Emergent Church. [Page 134]

**Chapter 6. Delivering Christ-The Message and the Medium**

**25. Comparison with God’s Word and Emergent Church**

To help identify this connection between the message and the mission and methods of delivering Christ, I offer the following table:

**Law-Lite**

God as life coach  
Good Advice (Doing)  
Christ as Example  
The Bible as Instruction Manual  
Mystery of Christ  
Sacraments as Means of Commitment  
Grace  
The Church as Self-Help Resource  
(focus on our service/ministry)  
service/ministry)  
We Ascend to God  
We Send Ourselves

[Page 196]

**The Gospel**

God as judge and Justifier  
Good News (Done)  
Christ as Savior  
The Bible as Unfolding  
Sacraments as Means of  
The Church as Embassy of Grace  
(focus on God’s  
God Descend to Us  
God Sends Us

**26. Purpose of the Church**

Our temptation as Reformed Christians, however, is to pride ourselves on bearing the marks of a true church regardless of whether people are actually being added to the church. After all, we reason, we have the right confession, we administer the sacraments according to Christ’s institution, and we have a sound church order. But we can easily forget that all of this exists for the purpose of mission,

not so we can celebrate our purity. “The promise is for you and your children,” we quite properly emphasize, but what about “all who are far off”? The dichotomy between the marks and mission of the church or teaching the reached and reaching the lost would have been completely foreign to the apostles. [Page 197]

## **27. Self-serve Buffet**

“Based on our research,” Barna relates, “I have projected that by the year 2010, 10 to 20 percent of Americans will derive all their spiritual input (and output) through the Internet.” Who needs the church when you have an iPod?

Like any service provider, the church needs to figure out what business it’s in, says Barna. “Ours is not the business of organized religion, corporate worship, or Bible teaching. If we dedicate ourselves to such a business we will be left by the wayside as the culture moves forward. Those are fragments of a larger purpose to which we have been called by God’s Word. We are in the business of life transformation.”

Of course Barna does not believe Christians should abandon all religious practice, but the only ones he still thinks are essential are those that can be done by individuals in private, or at most in families or informal public gatherings. By eliminating the public means of grace, however, Barna directs us away from God’s lavish feast to a self-serve buffet. [Page 202]

## **28. Seeking a Transformed Life**

This is finally where American spirituality leaves us: alone, surfing the Internet, casting about for coaches and teammates, trying to save ourselves from captivity to this present age by finding those *excitements* that will induce a transformed life. Increasingly, the examples I have referred to are what people mean by the adjective *missional*.

Like Finney, George Barna asserts that the Bible offers “almost no restrictions on structures and methods” for the church. In fact, as we have seen, he does not even think the visible church itself is divinely established. [Page 203-204]

## **29. Church Preached, and Changes Were Worked Out in Lives**

Since any number of secular NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) currently exist to lobby for precisely the same policies, why do churches believe it is within their area of expertise, much less their official mandate, to offer pronouncements in God’s name on these issues? Why not allow their members to pursue the general human calling to public justice through these *common grace* institutions alongside non-Christians? Why must denominations commit their entire membership to very specific policies while often leaving matters of doctrine and worship more ambiguous and open-ended?

Surely the abolition of the slave trade was a noble work, yet it is interesting that in Britain it was not the church as an institution that abolished it but Christians who had been shaped by the church's ministry and held public office in the state. When William Wilberforce came to John Newton for advice on whether he should enter the ministry, Newton encouraged his friend to pursue politics instead. It was as a member of Parliament that Wilberforce loved and served his neighbor, benefiting from the ordinary means of grace that Newton ministered to him. The church preached God's transcendent law and gospel, and her children pursued their cultural mandate in their secular vocations. Thank God that Newton was a pastor and Wilberforce was not!

I often wonder how American history might have turned out differently if the *churches* in the South had disciplined members who held slaves. In other words, if the churches had simply followed their own mandate of preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline and care for the well-being of their flock. Would not the institution have lost its moral credibility even outside of the church? Both Northern and Southern churches had reduced slavery merely to a political issue when they should have done what only churches *can* do: proclaim God's judgment upon the kidnapping and forced labor of fellow humans and excommunicate members who refused to repent of the practice. At the same time, church members could have exercised their moral conscience in deciding for themselves how best to abolish the institution in courts and legislatures. [Page 214-215]

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