

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW

Lesson 35

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THEOLOGY

Study 3: Soteriology and Evangelism

(Note to teacher: “Soteriology” is from the Greek verb, *sozo*, to “save” or “rescue.” Hence, it refers to the doctrine and study of salvation. This is more than you could cover in a 30-35 minute lesson; don’t try to cover every detail; do your best to cover the essential points!)

I. Introduction

A. Opener

False conversions may be leading to “the suicide of the church,” says Mark Dever, Pastor of Washington’s Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

The problem, he says, isn’t merely the “occasional hypocrite lost in unrepentant sin,” but “systems that seem to produce false converts—not just one man, but whole congregations.”¹

Dever’s concern brings to mind a practice in 17th century Congregational churches in New England, called the “Half-way Covenant.”

Early in America’s history, there was an erosion of the Pilgrim worldview. A major thrust was away from propositional punctiliar (at a point in time) evangelism. The Pilgrims had arrived as early as 1620, but a half century later, Congregational Churches in New England were losing members as people died. Initially, membership had been limited to “Visible Saints,” those who had made a definite commitment to Christ followed by a public affirmation. But the second and third generations faced shrinking membership roles.

In addition to death, other factors were responsible. Some people no longer wanted to make a public declaration of their decision to follow Christ. Churches allowed for a partial membership, hoping osmosis would occur, and that individuals would come to the point of decision, followed by open witness and announcement.

¹ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/false-conversions-are-the-suicide-of-the-church-pastor-warns-73132/>

More women than men were willing to make their public profession, so there was a feminization of the early New England church that was of concern. A way had to be found to accommodate partial membership and grow the church.

At a church conference in 1662, a number of congregations embraced the Halfway Covenant. Children of partial members could be baptized without making a decisive profession of faith, and ultimately brought into full membership.

This so weakened the church that it lost the prophetic voice that had been sounded so clearly by the Pilgrims who had arrived on the Mayflower with a clear vision for God's Kingdom.

This soteriological belief and practice certainly led to the decline—if not “suicide”—of the Half-Way Covenant churches, and the loss of evangelistic zeal.

Certain soteriological trends today that have veered from pure biblical doctrine regarding what salvation is and how people are saved are threatening evangelical churches in the same way the Half-Way Covenant impacted what had been an enthusiastic atmosphere of biblical belief and evangelism in New England more than three centuries ago.

B. Focus—The erosion of biblical authority in our time has not only led to confusion in Christology (the doctrine of Christ), but also with regard to the doctrine of salvation and the practice of evangelism.

II. Information-Background

The crisis in biblical authority, which we discussed in part 1 of this series, led to the crisis in Christology, as presented in part 2. In this study, we will examine how the erosion of the firm belief in the Bible's authority has also denigrated the understanding of soteriology and defused evangelism. The modern trends that question Christ as the only way to the Father, that minimize the severity of sin, and deny the reality of eternal Hell “is to question the Gospel and biblical authority,” says Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Professor Thomas White.

III. Instruction

A. Contemporary trends regarding Soteriology—the doctrine of salvation

1. Post-modern enculturation of evangelical movements and churches has had a major impact on soteriological views and evangelism.

a) Post-modernism, as we saw previously, is a turning away from the cold and mechanical modernism of the early and mid-20th century.

b) Post-modernism is an attempt to recover “spirituality,” but in keeping with the 21st century mood, without firm doctrinal boundaries.

c) Many Western churches, as we will see in more detail below, have allowed the authority of the cultural “geist,” or “spirit” to displace the authority of the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

(1) They have done this in an attempt to be more relevant to the culture.

(2) Tragically, they have become enculturated to contemporary culture rather than enculturating contemporary culture with the culture of the Kingdom of God.

(3) Such churches forget a key dynamic that is practiced at Second Baptist Church: Let culture drive style, but do not let style drive theology.

1 Cor 9:19-23

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.
20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. 23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. NASU

d) *Pastor-Theologian James A. Fowler:*

... there are a number of contemporary (Western) cultural factors conducive to the acceptance of universalism... a desire to become increasingly liberal in tolerance and to be non-judgmental of every person, idea, and religion... pluralism mandates we accept every opinion as having equal truth-value... an unwillingness to identify anything as right or wrong, true or false... a tendency to believe no one should be held accountable or responsible for their choices...

2. **Universalism arises from non-biblical soteriological beliefs.**

Definition: Universalism is the belief that everyone will be saved ultimately, irrespective of their belief in and response to Jesus Christ.

3. **A closer look at universalism**

a) *There is “a mushrooming acceptance of universalistic thought among those who call themselves ‘Christian.’²*

b) *The Swiss theologian Karl Barth, while making valuable contributions to theology, left the door cracked for the possibility of a universalistic approach.*

(1) Barth taught that deity subsumed humanity in Christ’s incarnation.

(2) If Christ taking humanity causes men and women to be incorporated into God, then it might be concluded that all humans are in oneness with God.

c) *Rob Bell, though attempting to disassociate himself from universalism has nevertheless become identified with it among evangelicals*

d) *Bell’s book, Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith, seems to have universalistic undertones, especially when he writes, “Whatever those things are that make you feel fully alive and like the universe is ultimately a good place and you are not alone... These moments can’t exist on the edges, because they are part of our faith...”*

e) *Bell later wrote, Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived, and this book has recently exploded into a universalism-centered controversy among evangelicals.*

(1) In *Love Wins* Bell argues three points:

(a) *The Gospel is exclusive—salvation is only through Christ*

(b) *The Gospel is also inclusive—people throughout the world will be saved even if they have not professed Christ*

² *ibid.*

(c) Hell is not so much a literal place as it is a description of the travails of this present world

(2) Bell comments on Jesus claim in John 14:6—“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me”—this way:

“What (Jesus) doesn’t say is how, when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through him. He doesn’t state that those coming to the Father through him will even know that they are coming exclusively through him.”

f) Bell tries to support his views on universalism and Hell through the Bible, however, says Professor Page Brooks, of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary:

Love Wins is filled with exegetical gymnastics, historical inaccuracies, and eschatological knots that would even make John the Revelator have a headache.”

4. One of the worst consequences of universalism is its impact on the church’s mission: If everyone goes to heaven then why be involved in evangelism and missions?

B. Impact of universalism on philosophy and implementation of evangelism: The demise of propositional evangelism and the embrace of conversion by osmosis

1. Osmosis evangelism is the strategy built on the notion that people can evolve into becoming followers of Christ under the right circumstances. Propositional-punctiliar evangelism introduces specific truths that call for a specific moment of decision.

2. Contrasts between propositional-punctiliar evangelism and osmosis-conversion

a) Osmosis evangelism is the strategy built on the notion that people can evolve into becoming followers of Christ under the right circumstances. Propositional-punctiliar evangelism introduces specific truths that call for a specific moment of decision.

b) Biblical evangelism is propositional in that it presents people with truth that demands a response. It is punctiliar because biblical evangelism mandates decision at a specific point in time.

c) Churches that change their societies with the Kingdom of God confront culture with a Gospel that demands a yes-no decision. Those who expect people to “evolve” or “ooze” into the Kingdom are marginalized and irrelevant.

d) Osmosis evangelism is linear, in that it believes there is a progression into faith, and that the moment of decision may be cloaked somewhere in the process. Propositional-punctiliar evangelism understands there is a linear process, but that it leads to a decisive volitional event in which an individual commits himself or herself to Christ actively and intentionally.

e) Osmosis evangelism seeks to carry people into God’s Kingdom on the coattails of a confession of dogma, the belief system of a family, or through the shared faith of a community. It is passive evangelism in that the individual is brought into salvation. Propositional-punctiliar evangelism is an active entering into the Kingdom by the individual presented with its propositional truth.

3. Thus the “point” missed by the church embracing osmosis evangelism is the point of decision.

a) For people in such a church, bearing witness to Christ does not necessarily have as its aim bringing them to accept or reject Him.

b) Removing the punctiliar—the point of time in which a decision is made—makes the task easier, but it fails in its objective.

4. And that is the “point” the osmosis-church loses. Everywhere the church has historically made the greatest impact for God’s Kingdom on its culture, it has followed the propositional-punctiliar style of evangelism.

a) The revolution that brought down Marxism in the Eastern European satellite nations sprang from churches that challenged people to commit themselves either to Christ and His Kingdom or to the Caesar of the moment and his kingdom. All the people who led in that movement were individuals who had a moment when they decided to cross over from the kingdoms of this world to the Kingdom of Christ.

b) Accomodationists, like the German Church establishment of the Nazi era survive, but lose the point of leadership in setting the values of their cultures.

(1) It was the German Confessing Church that brought forth martyrs, as it has been the underground church in communist and Islamic societies.

(2) Osmosis evangelism is not likely to produce martyrs because it accommodates the values, style and practice of the predominate culture. It is a threat to no one and is therefore not under a threat.

5. The New World’s DNA was seeded by biblical Christians with a Kingdom worldview.

a) The Pilgrims understood the need to be decisive.

b) They had made a decision to exit the Church of England, then England itself, then Europe, and come to the New World.

c) They stated their vision for a “city on a hill,” that would be shaped by propositional truth in the form of biblical values.

6. Osmosis evangelism received the scholarly stamp through the work of Horace Bushnell, a 19th century New England pastor who denied many key Christian doctrines, and, under Enlightenment influence, disassociated himself from supernatural revelation and event.

a) In 1847, Bushnell wrote Christian Nurture. The book opposed propositional-punctiliar evangelism—which Bushnell regarded as “revivalism.”

*b) Bushnell and others under the Enlightenment spell, rejected the idea of original sin, preferring Rousseau’s idealism that a child was a *tabula rasa*, a clean blank slate.*

c) Bushnell’s thesis was a person growing up in a Christian environment would emerge into adulthood with no consciousness of ever being a non-Christian.

d) People, argued Bushnell, come into the world in a neutral state, and through a gradual and proper nurture come to be Christians.

7. Charles Finney, a New England evangelist in the same period as Bushnell, introduced the altar call into his services because of his own concern that people were not making a definite personal decision to turn to Jesus Christ.

8. Osmosis evangelism is therefore characterized by several elements.

a) First, as we have just seen, is gradualism. Rather than a decisive turn away from sin and to Christ—the essence of repentance—one gradually shifts to Christ.

b) Second, osmosis evangelism, especially in the 21st century, is characterized by subjectivism rather than objective authority and faith. When a person begins to “feel” saved, they are Christians, rather than becoming a Christian through a positive, definite response to propositional truth about sin and the Savior.

9. Osmosis evangelism is appearing in the 21st century through the Emergent Church Movement.

a) Its leaders perhaps believe they are on the cutting edge, pioneering new models of evangelism and church.

b) However, as history shows, they are simply recovering old themes and challenges, and, in some cases, pursuing old non-biblical strategies. Many believe they have a new wineskin, when in actuality it's the old skin wrapped in flashy new colors.

c) The Emergent Church is more a functional mass of congregations than an orchestrated movement. At this early point, it is a consensus of belief and practice rather than a codified institution—though that phase is probably inevitable.

d) The Emergent Church minimalizes structure and decentralizes organization.

(1) It relishes mystery, sometimes preferring to keep the curtain closed rather than cherishing revelational truth.

(2) The Emergent Church wants flexibility in theology, and finds the systematic approach distasteful.

(3) It flirts with Bultmann in its love for a narrative Bible—though it doesn't go as far as he in stripping away all "myth."

(4) Nevertheless, for some in the Emergent Church what happened "back there" isn't nearly as important as what it says to people in contemporary culture.

(5) Its hermeneutic is to find the many modern contexts and varying perspectives rather than a single propositional truth.

e) The Emergent Church has some positive things to say.

(1) It brings a renewed emphasis on the importance of the church engaging with culture.

(2) It revives the importance of focusing on the Transcendence of God.

(3) It seeks a balance of the existential and eschatological, reminding us that God doesn't save us just to die, but to live as well.

(4) It calls us to seek creative styles of presenting the Gospel to our culture.

f) *Despite its promise and possibilities, the Emergent Church also introduces threatening influences, especially through its confidence in osmosis evangelism.*

(1) The danger is that the Emergent Church and its Emergent Evangelism, while seeking to engage with culture, ironically might push itself—and all who float in its wake—to the periphery of society.

(2) In missing the point, the Emergent Church might cause churches to lose the point.

(3) Among the reasons it may find osmosis evangelism preferable is the doctrinal attitude emerging among the Emergent.

(a) In a Public Broadcasting System interview, Emergent Pastor Brian McLaren said he believes the church has been too long preoccupied with getting more souls into heaven than hell when they die.

(b) In a recent book he authored, McLaren called on Christians to reassess their belief in hell, thinking traditional concepts make God look like a “torturer.”

(c) In fact, in another interview with Christianity Today, McLaren said, “I don’t think we’ve got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be ‘saved’? When I read the Bible, I don’t see it meaning, ‘I’m going to heaven after I die.’ Before modern evangelicalism nobody accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, or walked down an aisle, or said the sinner’s prayer.”

g) *While he can’t speak for all Christians, McLaren seems to be right about himself when he says “I don’t think we’ve got the gospel right yet.”*

(1) The Gospel McLaren and the Emergent Church seems not to have “right” is the Gospel of the Kingdom—a propositional-punctiliar Gospel.

(2) An examination of that Gospel shows McLaren is also wrong when he suggests people weren't making a personal decision about Christ as their personal Savior prior to the emergence of evangelicalism.

(3) The account of Jesus' earthly ministry begins like this: "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 4:17).

(4) Mark reports it like this:

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15 NASU)

10. Logically, a truth is established propositionally in relation to another when it is implicit, inherent and intrinsic.

a) To be implicit means that a truth is so bound up in a particular event, circumstance or matter that to think of it is to think of the implied truth.

b) To be inherent is to be inbuilt, so that whatever the object is, the particular truth is part of its structure.

c) Ultimately, that which is intrinsic is at the very core of a thing, as its nature, its DNA.

d) Repentance and belief are implicit, inherent and intrinsic to the Kingdom of God and its message.

e) Repentance is not the slow turning of the Titanic away from the iceberg and toward safety, but the whipping about of a motorcycle from the edge of a cliff.

f) It is decisive and it is punctiliar.

g) There is a point in time and space of turning away from sin and to God.

h) The decision is implicit, inherent and intrinsic to Gospel of the Kingdom.

IV. Interaction-Application

Ross Douthat is a social conservative rooted in Christian faith who is the only one of his breed and belief who is a writer for *The New York Times* editorial pages. He has written a new book, *Challenging America's Bad Religion*. In many ways, he says, America is more religious than ever, but that doesn't mean she is Christian. The new "spirituality" is a mix of pagan concepts, odd scriptural twists, and folk beliefs. Universalism plays a major role. Many churches, which have abandoned theology for therapy, and God's glory for human glitz does not challenge these wrong beliefs with a solid message. Those who do often are among the fastest growing, because people hunger for authenticity and truth.

