

FORT BEND CHRISTIAN ACADEMY
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FAMILY RESEMBLANCE:
A WAKE-UP CALL TO THE MODERN EVANGELICAL CHURCH

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS
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Introduction

“Some of you here today don’t have this love in your life; you’re still suffering from the gap in your heart that only Jesus can fill. Some of you will walk away from this place today without that relationship, and if you know that’s you today, I *pray* that you will come to know the Lord who loves you and created you. It is my prayer that none of you walk out today without this saving relationship and this knowledge.”

Jesus is a heart bandage. Jesus is Fix-a-Flat, Miracle Gro, a get-out-of-hell-free card. At least, that is all that the Modern Evangelical Church makes him out to be.

Jesus ought to be more than that. Jesus is not the salve for the sin-induced burns to which Christians willingly subject themselves. Do not pull him out and apply liberally as needed and place the Christ Cream back into the medicine cabinet until the next time an inexplicable, pesky conscience silently accuses. This is antinomianism.

However, many in the church treat Jesus in this exact manner. Man is sinful, but by knowing Jesus, an escape from hell and a hope of heaven upon death can be cherished. This is true, but it oughtn't be the small scope of the Christian mindset. This makes for a small Christian.

The way in which the Christian treats heaven as good and the world as absolutely bad, the Sinners’ Prayer as the sure and only way to achieve salvation and as a safeguard against hell, a secret knowledge, is thoroughly gnostic and detrimental to the church. In fact, the Modern Evangelical Church is closer in form and structure to a gnostic belief set than to the gospel as presented by Jesus and practiced by the early church.

It is the goal of this paper to highlight the gnosticism which has crept its way into the church, to gently but irrefutably explain the issues which ought to be taken, and to lovingly redirect the church to what it was after Jesus' ministry.

The Ailment: Present Day Church Experience

e·van·gel·i·cal
adjective

1. Also evangelic, pertaining to or in keeping with the gospel and its teachings.
2. belonging to or designating the Christian churches that emphasize the teachings and authority of the Scriptures, especially of the new testament, in opposition to the institutional authority of the church itself, and that stress as paramount the tenet that salvation is achieved by personal conversion to faith in the atonement of Christ.
3. designating Christians, especially of the late 1970s, eschewing the designation of fundamentalist but holding to a conservative interpretation of the Bible.
4. pertaining to certain movements in the Protestant churches in the 18th and 19th centuries that stressed the importance of personal experience of guilt for sin, and of reconciliation to God through Christ.
5. marked by ardent or zealous enthusiasm for a cause.

Beliefs

The Modern Evangelical Church is comprised of several denominations of Protestantism, such as Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Baptist. According to Wheaton College, approximately 39% of Americans identify themselves with this subject of Christianity.¹ Their beliefs are pulled from the unification under the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as the foundation for their faith.

On Heaven

Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, said in an interview with acclaimed talk show host Larry King:

KING: What's your notion of hell?

J. OSTEEN: Well, I believe hell is a real place. I think it's — you know, the scripture talks about it's separation from God. And I think — I believe

¹ Larry Eskridge, "How Many Evangelicals Are There?," Wheaton College Institute for the Study of Modern Evangelicals, 2012, accessed May 10, 2014

if God as [sic] light and love and everything good, then hell's going to be everything bad. I mean we certainly do not want to go there and I don't think hell was designed for people.

KING: You think there's life after death?

J. OSTEEN: I do. I believe we're all going to live on, that we're a spirit.

This body — I like to think of it as just like my coat. There's something on the inside of me that's making this thing move. And I'm — the real me is on the inside. So I do believe we'll live on.²

Pastor John Hagee of San Antonio's Cornerstone Church has the following to say to his congregation in a discourse on heaven:

This is not our home. We're pilgrims and strangers here. We're looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. We're going to a city where roses never fade. We're going to a city where the redeemed of God rejoice day and night. Heaven is a place of rest; they should come from the north the south and the east and the west and be at rest. Jesus said "come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest". There's no such thing in this world as rest.³

Rick Warren, senior pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, also has something to say about heaven:

² Joel Osteen, interviewed by Larry King, October 16, 2007.

³ David Marcel, "Pastor John Hagee - About Heaven - Yodebepro," (video), 00:00:50

People miss heaven because of their rebellion against God's offer of love, by rejecting Jesus. But dogs, which have no ability to sin nor moral conscience, do not have an ability to reject Jesus. It is the same principle as a baby, young child or mentally challenged individual. The Bible calls them "safe," not "saved." In Proverbs we read, "The Lord preserves the simple," which includes persons without the ability, capacity or moral conscience to reject Jesus.⁴

It is evident, then, that these representatives of the church take similar stances on heaven. They all maintain that it is a place to which all Christians ascend upon death, and that it is the climax of the faith and the goal of Christianity itself. Heaven is the ultimate manifestation of God's glorification.

On the Gospel

Osteen says:

The gospel is translated good news. And to me, good news is letting people know that God loves them, that Jesus came, that we can overcome any obstacle, that we can -- we can be forgiven for our mistakes. And I don't see how beating people down every, you know, every time they get in front of me how that helps them to grow closer to God.⁵

According to Pastor Matt Neely at Parkway United Methodist Church in Sugar Land:

⁴ Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Rick Warren: Dogs Go to Heaven, Maybe Not You," USA Today Faith & Reason, last modified April 10, 2012, accessed May 11, 2014.

⁵ Joel Osteen, interviewed by Larry King, October 16, 2007.

I would summarize the gospel as the good news that Jesus lived, died and came back to life in order to give us as [sic] the free gift of ‘Life as God intended it’ in this world and eternal life in the next. That’s why I Believe that Christians are called to address issues like poverty, and curable disease, etc in this life and also share the hope that we have because of Christ for the next life as well. . .because all of life is good, both now and forever.⁶

Scott Rambo, head pastor of The Bridge Fellowship in Sugar Land, Texas, defined the gospel as follows:

The gospel is the “good news” of what Jesus did for us that we could not do for ourselves. Because of our sin, each of us is disqualified from heaven. No matter how many good deeds we perform, we can never do enough to merit or earn our entrance into heaven when we die. So, God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to die for our sin. He offered His life as a substitute for mine and His blood fully covers and atones for my sin. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, we are offered forgiveness of sin, removal of guilt, a right relationship with God, an abundant life on this earth and an eternal home in heaven—we simply must receive by faith the gift of eternal life that He offers. All of that adds up to “good news”

⁶ Matt Neely, emailed to author, Sugar Land, TX, March 16, 2014.

which is exactly what the gospel is. Now, we have the awesome privilege of telling the world this incredibly good news.⁷

Again, the leaders of the church are fairly much alike in their doctrines of the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for the sins of the world and that through Him eternal life and a comforter in the sufferings of the present age is made available. Christians are therefore blameless and untouchable by sin.

On God

Said Rick Warren:

The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ came to do three things. He came to have my past forgiven, you get a purpose for living and a home in Heaven. It's almost like 3D: past, present, future. Past forgiven, purpose for living, home in Heaven.⁸

Osteen has several things to say:

1. Faith activates God - Fear activates the Enemy.
2. It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It's God's will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt.
3. God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us.

⁷ Scott Rambo, emailed to author, Sugar Land, TX, March 17, 2014.

⁸ Rick Warren, interviewed by Steven Waldman, December 18, 2008.

4. Sometimes we look at gay being a bigger sin than being proud or not telling the truth. I don't think God categorizes sins.
5. I believe God's keeping the records, and I believe you will be rewarded even in this life. Somehow, some way, God will make it up to you.⁹

God came to forgive our past, to save us and to provide us with a future of comfort. He is activated by faith and will bless His faithful followers with money beyond anything they could possibly need, and does not categorize sin. With this, the leaders of the Modern Evangelical Church would wholeheartedly concur.

⁹ Joel Osteen, "Joel Osteen Quotes," BrainyQuote.com, accessed May 11, 2014.

The Parallel: Parallels to Gnosticism

Having discussed the primary aspects of the Modern Evangelical Church's belief structure and evangelistic techniques, or lack thereof, it is now paramount that the similarity to gnosticism in several regards be made very clear.

Beliefs

In addition to their unification in essential beliefs as outlined in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, these branches of Christianity that make up the Modern Evangelical Church have become united in their progression toward the promulgation of quasi-Gnostic principles in place of the focal teachings of Jesus. Central beliefs of the Modern Evangelical Church, such as the definitions of the Gospel, God, Heaven, and so forth, have become altered in some way, deviating from Jesus' original teachings.

The solution, then, is to look back to the original teachings of Jesus, and the formulas devised and structures settled by his early followers, whose ability to comprehend his meaning would have been greatest and therefore the most desirable in the eyes of Christ.

On Heaven

When the Modern Evangelical Church looks in the mirror, its members should recognize the alarming resemblance of its reflection to Platonic dualism. This pining for an escape from this sinful world and a desire to transcend the physical world by entering into heaven is glaringly similar to the contrast between "the two levels of existence: the spiritual eternal ideas and their transitory material (spatial) counterparts, which form the cosmos; the latter do indeed signify a

loss of being, but nevertheless belong to the good part of creation”¹⁰. A desire on the part of the church to encourage salvation as a means of escaping eternal torment in hell (or even the more mild torment of earthly existence) is paralleled strongly by the dualist desire to shed the evil material world and become fully represented and reach union with the spiritual. This is, in fact, what the Modern Evangelical Church has been promoting: a substantial portion of gnostic belief in the form of dualism, which cannot be accepted as a substitute for the foundational truth: Jesus is Lord.

The promotion of this misdirection of the church has not only been facilitated by the pastors of local churches, but spearheaded by the CEOs of megachurches. Osteen’s view on heaven has perpetuated the over-simplified focus upon the spiritual release from the physical body, no more than a “coat”, as paramount in the Christian faith and experience. Heaven is not supposed to be represented as a spiritual existence in the presence of God to which Christians ascend after death in an escape from this earth. Instead, it ought to be taught as our reign with Christ on the earth after its redemption and our resurrection and perfection at Jesus’ return.

Hagee’s message on heaven is equally toxic. He claims that the earth is no place for the redeemed, and that all hopes of occupying the earth ought to be abandoned, prompting believers to look ahead to “a city whose builder and maker is God”. Was not the earth spoken into existence by God, made by him, and the eventual place of restful reign for Christ and Christians, his co-heirs?

Overlooking the obviously sacrilegious nature of Warren’s comment, one is hardly challenged to extract from his message what is held by him to be an essential truth: heaven is a

¹⁰ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, ed. R McL Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987, 1983), 60.

train or a plain or a ferry to be missed, and anyone who does not rebel has still the ticket with which they were gifted at birth. Heaven is a privilege to be lost, not a gift to be given or a reward to pine for. Since dogs are incapable of doing anything sinful, they maintain their right (and equal) standing with God and can look forward to spending an eternity with Him, enjoying the presence of their creator, which they are capable of doing.

Though Warren's argument for the presence of dogs in heaven could be made under the pretext of the redeemed earth and the exact recipients of the Fall's curse, the discussion is altogether a waste of theological stamina and an exact example of the lack of awareness exhibited by the church regarding Jesus' salvific priorities. In addition, Warren's citation from Proverbs was completely out of context and used to support his otherwise unfounded doctrine of the age of accountability, but this is a tangent not relevant to the subject at hand.

On the Gospel

Another startling facet of Osteen's interview is that neither in this selection nor in the rest of the interview does Osteen mention the kingdom of God, in relation to heaven or to the gospel. The issue which ought to be taken with Osteen's claim of the gospel's identity is his representation of the "good news" as entirely subjective—that it can be whatever the Christian wants it to be; akin to a buffet, Christianity is for the enjoyment of the Christian, and by picking and choosing their dishes (politely refusing the bread and wine), can be whatever the Christian wishes for it to be. Entranced the neon Lakewood Buffet sign, millions of Americans have been exposed to Osteen's message that since this is a buffet, one may take as much as he wants of the desert, of the saccharine tales of redemption, monetary support, and forgiveness proffered by

God upon his lost lambs; one is also, however, entirely permitted and woefully unchecked in his ability to skip out on his vegetables, the spiritual nourishment that may not come as sweet realization, but is the required graduation from spiritual immaturity which every Christian must constantly undergo. If the gospel never becomes larger than the individual, then Christians have no need to study the scriptures, to pray, or to become actively involved in heralding the impending arrival of the kingdom of God, all crucial facets (and requirements) of the Christian's mission.

The sad truth is that nobody has to take up a cross in order to follow Christ, according to Osteen. God loves His lambs, who can overcome any obstacle and be forgiven their mistake. This is the Gospel according to Osteen, in its entirety: people ought only be told this and never beat down. Though the church is instructed by Paul to "let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear"¹¹, they are "you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."¹²

So it turns out that Lakewood¹³ is not a buffet after all, proffering no solid food to those welcomed into its fold; it provides only milk with no demonstrated plan to wean and grow its

¹¹ Eph. 4:29 (English Standard Version).

¹² Heb. 5:12-14 (English Standard Version).

¹³ Lakewood here is used as metonymy for the doctrines and theology of Joel Osteen, lead pastor of Lakewood Church. Though his personal beliefs may vary from the official stance of his church, this matter proven to be largely shared by the two entities and he has remained largely unimpeded in the imposition of his personal theological preferences upon the church's official doctrines. This serves only to further prove the point of this thesis in the Modern Evangelical Church's blind acceptance of gnostic teachings from its members in varying degrees of leadership.

congregation, raising up mature believers. However, not much more should be expected of a pastor whose view of God is as shallow as “God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us”¹⁴. Willingly glazing over the mandates of God and the requirements and costs of being a Christian (which Jesus makes indisputably clear in his command to “let him [a disciple of Christ] deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”¹⁵), Christianity does not consist of much more than a constant prayer for financial prosperity and the fear that salvation is not had if financial peace and stability does not accompany it; behold, the monster that is the “prosperity gospel”.

(There is a relatively benign controversy in the Modern Evangelical Church as to whether Osteen’s teaching ought to be accepted and taken into the fold of Protestant—and most specifically, Baptist—orthodoxy or to be ostracized for his methodology and beliefs, perhaps a little too glaringly the “prosperity gospel”. The problem herein is that Joel Osteen serves to evangelical church leaders the example of the logical trajectory of their current course; the gnosticism which this thesis attempts to combat, or at least to uncover, is far advanced and startlingly mature in Lakewood, but is present in the majority of the Modern Evangelical Church. Is not the Ghost of Christians Yet to Come the most frightening and effective visitor of the pastor’s conscience when he leaves the pulpit?)

When left to the definitional and theological whims of the leaders of the Church, the gospel takes on an entirely new focus. Nowhere in Neely’s definition is the word “kingdom”. Instead, the emphasis is placed upon God’s desire to endow to his followers eternal life, which,

¹⁴ Joel Osteen, “Joel Osteen Quotes,” BrainyQuote.com, accessed May 11, 2014.

¹⁵ Matthew 16:24 (English Standard Version).

though an undeniable byproduct of salvation, is by no means the purpose of Christ's suffering. Thought not technically incorrect, it is the target of this thesis due to its emphasis of eternal life over the Christians' responsibility to prepare as the bride of Christ and to herald in the kingdom of heaven here on Earth.

Rambo, by comparison, speaks much more heavily to the doctrine of Jesus' propitiation. Dying once for the sins of the world, Jesus has opened up the door for a right relationship with His father by cleansing the unrighteous and making them sanctified. Jesus bridges the gap between the Father and humanity. Though not incorrect, this exhibits the same lopsided message as all of the other aforementioned gospel definitions, utterly failing to mention the kingdom of God anywhere. Despite what appears to be a very heavy undertone of universality, this explanation of the gospel still consists at its core of a very individualistic message: Jesus came for YOU in order to save YOU from YOUR sins to allow YOU to spend the rest of YOUR life in right standing with God and then spend eternity in YOUR spirit with God. Ask not how you can serve your God, fellow Christians; ask how your God can serve you.

On God

The view of God is distorted in the Modern Evangelical Church because of the misrepresentation of these previous pillars of the Christian faith, which in turn are erroneous in large part due to the inaccurate representation of God, and the cycle continues. The cycle is effective in pulling the Bible in and spitting out an individualistic Gospel. However, with a church, salary, and popularity as massive as his, his view of God is startlingly small.

From the sound of Warren's message, Jesus came entirely to do things for humanity. Nowhere in the scriptures are Jesus' ministry or purpose designated thusly. That Jesus came for these purposes alone is ignorant of the larger narrative which is told throughout the Bible and by the people therein. Nobody in Jesus' day would have expected him to do anything so personal or to have failed to carry the banner of a larger purpose, namely the kingdom which Jesus had come to announce.

All that can be said for Osteen's comments, respectively:

1. So God is now activated, flipped on and off like a switch, by faith, and the Enemy by fear, the much more potent and prevalent state of mind for most of the world, if not the church itself. This way of viewing God—in which humans have the ability to activate and consequently deactivate God—seems to run in direct opposition to Paul's teaching that “if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.”¹⁶ God is not dependent upon our actions in any way to act and move and continue affecting His creation as He sees fit, without any interference from the empowerment humanity could not possibly endow to the Enemy, as Osteen portrays.
2. God's will is for us to live in prosperity and not poverty? Why, then, does Jesus require of His followers to give what they have and follow him¹⁷ without the hindrance of money? The contention could (and should) be made that money—unless tithed, properly stewarded, and used with strong spiritual discretion—is more likely to hinder the spiritual life and growth of a Christian than to help him in either regard. However, it should come as no surprise that

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 2:13 (English Standard Version).

¹⁷ Matthew 19:21 (English Standard Version)

Osteen holds the position he holds, tremendously wealthy as he has become through his books and other media promoting this omnipresent prosperity gospel. God is not focused on us, but glorifying Himself.

3. In conjunction with the above statement, the Christians' destinies are not to be connected with financial prosperity. More penniless devotees to the gospel of Christ have through strong faith impacted the kingdom in ways previously thought impossible than have the overflowing coffers of the churchgoer whom Osteen would surely consider the more devout follower of Christ.
4. Though the wages of sin is death¹⁸, both the Old and New Testaments are clear in expressing the severity of homosexuality as greater than that of pride and lying. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination, according to Leviticus 20:13, and nowhere in the remainder of the Bible is there any such condemnation of pride or lying, sins though they are. God surely does categorize sins, else He would not have distinguished homosexuality in His law; however, this teaching on Osteen's part should not come as a surprise; he has certainly been mistaken before.
5. God owes nothing to humanity. He has done that which they could not do for themselves, saving them from eternal damnation as the result of violation of His supreme law. Therefore, if any party owes anything, it must be the Christians who owe to God a debt of infinite magnitude. What could God possibly have to "make up" to Osteen's audience? If anything, the trial of enduring the promulgation of this deformed and defunct gospel of secure feelings and stability promised nowhere by Jesus in his ministry or teachings. The Christian's life is

¹⁸ Romans 6:23 (English Standard Version).

more fulfilling and Biblically sensible if shaped by service, dedication, and the observance of Christ's mandates, a topic for another thesis.

Sinners' Prayer

Billy Graham Ministries offers up the following explanation and method of salvation:

You must first admit that, like everyone else, you are a sinner. Being sinners means that we are imperfect and do wrong; we fall short of God's perfect standard. It also means we are separated from Him and deserve His judgment. But He loves us! God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. He died for your sins. He was punished so you don't have to be. Not only that; death did not defeat Him. After three days, Jesus rose from the dead, alive again! The only way to find forgiveness from God and to begin a relationship with Him is to trust in Jesus' sacrifice for you and repent—turn from your sins. We urge you to take this step of faith today. To do that, simply talk to God—this is called praying—and tell Him you believe in His Son.¹⁹

This passage explains exactly what keeps humanity from its intended spiritual form: sin, or evil, which traps the souls of mankind and keeps them here on earth. The hope of the gnostics is to achieve flight from the world and body.²⁰ However, this can only be achieved through the gnosis for which this heretical early “anti-Christian” movement is named; a secret knowledge

¹⁹ Billy Graham, “But Have Eternal Life,” PeaceWithGod.net, accessed May 4, 2014.

²⁰ Irenaeus and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 8.

which, once discovered, makes the enlightened one privy to the community of fellow gnostics and gives him the hope of escape from the evil physical world. The gnosis is not, however, fully contained in the paragraph above. Instead, it is boiled down into its purest form and marketed as the “Sinners’ Prayer”, more an incantation than a prayer, which entitles the enchanter to eternal life and escape, or at least promise of isolation, from the evil material world. Though there are many different forms, almost all of them closely resemble the following, a continuation of Graham’s salvation plan:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe you died for my sins and rose from the dead. I trust and follow you as my Lord and Savior. Guide my life and help me to do your will. In your name, amen.²¹

Welcome to the brotherhood.

Emphasis on Heaven

This section is dealt with for the most part in the “On Heaven” segment of the first section of this paper. However, not enough can be said about the dangers of prioritizing heaven over the work to be done on God’s kingdom. When heaven is made ultimate and of paramount importance in Christianity, it ceases to be Christianity, but a perverted dualism; God is made to be solely an escape, and not an almighty God to whom is owed everything which is in fact due him by Christians. This is spiritually detrimental, and ought to be, in all love, called to the attention of both those responsible and those affected.

²¹ Billy Graham, “But Have Eternal Life,” PeaceWithGod.net, accessed May 4, 2014.

Transcendence Over Transformation

In addition to the previous section, heaven ought never be taught as the spiritual release and escape from the world, from which Christians ought to strive to be separate whilst still there. This view is neither biblical nor logical as a disciple of Christ or a believer in his mission. It is thoroughly dualist in nature, a central tenet of gnosticism as was combatted by Irenaeus. Examples of beliefs Irenaeus was forced to combat are included in the following summary of the gnosticism resurfacing in the Modern Evangelical Church:

The everyday world is a regrettable intermingling of matter and spirit. Particles of light and the purer world lie trapped in human souls and bodies unaware of their loftier home. But the Supreme One has sent messengers to conger knowledge and freedom. The messenger brings knowledge of the soul's home and opens a way to return to the Father. The soul must free itself through a series of acts of apprehending what lies beyond...picking and choosing among the teachings of Christians, philosophers and cults.²²

At risk of beating a horse who has already transcended this materialistic flesh jail, Christians ought not view heaven as the release from the physical and the belief in its necessary evil. Instead of focusing on this most unrealistic of transcendences, one ought rather to focus on transforming the world, setting an example of light and cultural renovation, not isolation.²³ How

²² Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, ©2000), 46.

²³ Matthew 5:13-16 (English Standard Version)

then shall Christians speak to, offer instruction toward and reform the view of heaven, the gospel, God, and other important doctrines of the church? The answer is dust-laden and reveals itself nearly two millennia in the past.

The Archetype: Early Church

Beliefs

Because of the proximity of the Early Church to the original teachings of Jesus and the influence of his apostles, it is the most logical template for the Modern Evangelical Church. However, in order to curtail the length of this solution, only the crucial Early Church beliefs will be covered, discussing the same topics whose modern evolution and representation has been berated without the offer of a solution, herein provided.

On Heaven

The ancient pre-Christian (that is, Jewish) expectation of heaven was not radically altered by the Christian movement; no doctrinal dispensation was seen therein. The expectation in both instances was for the kingdom of God to make itself manifest on earth, where, in the words of Handel, “The kingdom of this world is [to] become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever.”²⁴ However, it is fitting and proper to address the seemingly conflictual nature of Jesus’ claims of heaven and its ties to the other, more established doctrines.

Heaven was never to be a place where God would sit on an ethereal golden throne in the clouds and look down upon earth, hurling lightning bolts at sinners in a manner least friendly and most Jovial. Heaven is the manifestation of God’s kingdom in which full sanctification of saints has taken place, and the fullness of the effects of the fall are effaced from the earth.

²⁴ “Hallelujah Chorus: Text,” Hallelujah Chorus, accessed May 18, 2014.

This kingdom is brought to earth when Jesus overcomes death. After his resurrection, Jesus tells his followers that all earthly authority has been given him.²⁵ The grips of Death and Satan on the earth have been vanquished; Jesus is Lord. This is the gospel. It is now the job of the church to make this known to the world, as is commanded later in the Great Commission of Matthew 28. The kingdom is here and now, and cannot be stopped or overcome, Jesus having defeated the strongest enemy, whom no one else was capable of trumping. The ultimatum is now to be offered to the world outside of the church: kneel, or be knelt.

This is all well and good to the Christian, but many struggle with what to believe when Jesus says to the robber who is being crucified concurrently and adjacently, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”²⁶ This is a reference to a concept often referred to as Abraham’s Bosom. This teaches that Christians, upon death, enter into the presence of God in a realm different from Heaven; herein, humans do not reign over the kingdom of God as co-heirs with Christ, but rest in a purely spiritual form in the presence of God, truly a paradise, as Christ mentioned on the cross. It follows, therefore, that since the man repented and confessed Jesus’ lordship, he was a Christian, and therefore would be granted access to this paradise of which Jesus spoke with authority and to which he would logically also ascend. The New Testament tells its reader of a poor man named Lazarus, who, when he died, “was carried by angels to Abraham’s side”²⁷, a place distinct from Jesus’ earthly reign.

The maintenance of this differentiation between what is called Abraham’s Bosom and the Kingdom of Heaven is important in the Christian’s theology in order to know God’s motives,

²⁵ Matthew 28:18 (English Standard Version)

²⁶ Luke 23:43 (English Standard Version)

²⁷ Luke 16:22 (English Standard Version)

expressly stated as glorifying Himself. Glory is not brought to God if He never takes back that territory which was released from His grip at the Fall for the express purpose of gaining it back and glorifying himself. The kingdom is the manifestation of God taking the earth and all of His creation therein back into His fold and living with them as He did in the garden: unhindered by sin and death.

On the Gospel

As has been stated before, the crux of the gospel, this good news which is to be promoted and shared with all corners of the earth, is that Jesus is Lord. This definitional gospel claim, basic though it is, was never intended to be complicated. N.T. Wright has verified this:

The gospel is not, as I have stressed, a set of techniques for making people Christians. Nor is it a set of systematic theological reflections, however important. The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord — Lord of the world, Lord of the cosmos, Lord of the earth, or the ozone layer, of whales and waterfalls, of trees and tortoises. Preaching the gospel means announcing Jesus as Lord of the world; and, unless we are prepared to contradict ourselves with every breath we take, we cannot make that announcement without seeking to bring that lordship to bear over every aspect of the world.²⁸

²⁸ N T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997), 153-154.

Though the implications of this gospel are sundry, there ought never be a deviation from this in the Church; every teaching, about mission, practical doctrines, or otherwise ought to all have this at their focus.

Many are the leaders of the Modern Evangelical Church who have proclaimed a false gospel; intentionally or obliviously, it makes no difference. One pastor, however, who has succeeded in keeping the gospel centered on the fact that Jesus is Lord, is Neil McClendon of Grand Parkway Baptist Church in Sugar Land, Texas. He says:

The Gospel is the good news of God's Kingdom coming here on earth which is realized through the reign and rule of King Jesus in the lives of his followers which the Bible calls disciples or Christians. Personal salvation is a by product of the Gospel but not the goal of it. King Jesus reigning in the daily lives of Christians is the goal of the Gospel because this is how God is glorified. That this King left heaven and came to earth, lived a sinless life, died on the cross as a wrath satisfying sacrifice for the sins of those who would believe, was buried and rose again on the third day, appeared to many witnesses and then ascended back into heaven is the narrative of the Gospel. Church history, the testimony of eyewitnesses and the authority of Scripture all back up these truths. This is the Good News of the Gospel.²⁹

McClendon aptly redirects the gospel to be aligned with the Kingdom of God. This follows the theme laid out in the first century, both during and after Jesus' ministry: the gospel is

²⁹ Neil McClendon, emailed to author, Sugar Land, TX, February 26, 2014.

a proclamation that Jesus is Lord. Though the subsequent implications are myriad, this statement itself is the rigid, unchanging undertone and foundation of the Christian faith. Though it has remained a popular refrain in worship songs and a common rallying cry from the pulpit, its position as the foundation of the Christian faith has been undermined and has been made instead the consequence of the deeper truth whose creation is purely owed to the Modern Evangelical Church: Jesus came to save man from his sins and give him eternal life, a thoroughly gnostic teaching.

It is in this right, more fulfilling teaching that Christians ought to be raised and trained in the gospel.

On God

There are too many attributes of God to succinctly but comprehensively cover them here, but in regard to the early church's teachings on God, the church ought to look to the Creed and to the Bible. The Word of God speaks to who God is, and the scriptures do as well. Martin Luther was correct in his doctrine of Sola Scriptura; all that is necessary for salvation, right theology, and holiness are found therein.

The Ultimatum: A Wake-Up Call

Modern Evangelical Church, you are raising up Christians who do not recognize the form which Christianity took and never abandoned nearly two thousand years ago. Instead, they have been raised on the feel-good gnostic gospel.

Modern Evangelical Church, you are closer in form and structure to a gnostic belief set than to the gospel as presented by Jesus and practiced by the early church.

Modern Evangelical Church, you are raising up immature Christians. They are ignorant and unreceptive of the doctrines clearly taught in the Bible which are new or unattractive to them. This behavior has been modeled by your leaders, whose desire is reaching the most people possible, regardless of the message communicated.

Modern Evangelical Church, you should revert to the Early Church's characteristics, which consisted of Christ-followers who believed all of the elements of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, were more focused on the scripture and teachings of Jesus whence the creed's tenets were drawn, and who would look upon the teachings of the modern church as heresy, gnosticism, apostasy, and unfit for the believer.

Modern Evangelical Church, you will be held accountable, and no one can bring about this change but yourselves. Preach the gospel as bigger than you have made it out to be. Encourage your members to read the bible from a kingdom perspective, suddenly endowing relevance to the 94% of it for which they previously had no need.

Modern Evangelical Church, you are the chosen of God, his bride, and He will come for you when you are ready. You should desire to prepare yourself for this marriage.

Modern Evangelical Church, live like it.

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