

# IN RESPONSE - HOW WE PRESENT THE GOSPEL, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

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Westminster Shorter Catechism Question and Answer 86 have intrigued me for quite a long time.

Question: What is faith in Jesus Christ? Answer: Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered in the gospel.

I am particularly interested in the final clause, *as he is offered in the gospel*. In other words, *how* we present Christ is of deep significance. How we present Christ, how Christ is offered in the gospel, affects the faith response made by individuals hearing the gospel. One of the problems is the very term, *offered*, used in the catechism.

On one side, our views regarding *how* Christ is *offered* in the gospel have been colored by a broad evangelical approach to the gospel. On the other side, some individuals are hesitant to call men and women to faith in Christ because, in their thinking, the twin doctrines of election and reprobation inhibit an earnest call to men and women to trust in Christ.

I was recently told about a college student who had been attending a very fundamental Baptist church. This young man repeatedly heard the call to accept Christ. He was urged to simply believe in Jesus. To register his faith, he was urged to *go forward*. His reaction was simple, "I'm uncomfortable with this."

Part of the problem faced by this young man is the store of questions he has regarding the gospel. In the press for this young man to make a decision for Christ, his questions are evaded.

What then does it mean to receive Christ? The popular answer is simple. Allow Christ into your heart. Let Christ come into your heart. This *is* the popular answer. Look at John 1:12-13.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. To receive Christ is to *believe in His name*. This is plain from John 1:12. In other words, this is the *faith* mentioned in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

In addition, John 1:13 describes the people who savingly believe in Christ. These are people *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*. These are people who are born again prior to their reception of, faith in, Christ. In other words, the Spirit of God already resides within the people who place faith in Christ. Faith is a saving grace.

Finally, it is not an act of human will which produces the new birth. Specifically, it is not the will of the flesh or the will of man which brings about the new birth. It is the will of God. Compare Romans 9:16, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

Many of those who seek *decisions for Christ* take a curious position. The decision, it is said, is simply that, a decision which is fully within your power to make. You made a decision to read this article, did you not? Decide for Christ. It is just that simple. Zane Hodges illustrates the point by asking a question.

For example, if I say to someone, "Do you believe that the President will do what he has promised?" I could expect any one of three possible answers. One answer might be, "Yes, I do." Another might be, "No, I don't." But my respondent might also reply, "I'm not sure," or "I don't know."

There is nothing complicated about this exchange. Two of the three answers reveal a lack of trust in the President.... Only the response, "Yes, I do," indicates faith or trust.<sup>1</sup>

Saving faith is no more or less than trust in the words of the President of the United States when he says he will not raise taxes. If we say this, we confuse head knowledge, intellectual assent, with saving trust in the sacrifice of Christ to pay the penalty due to us for our sins.

Several years ago, a young lady came to my office along with her parents and a certain young man. The parents and the young lady appeared to be Christians. They were concerned with the young

man's lack of commitment to Christ. I was supposed to remedy the situation.

As I understood it, I dutifully explained the gospel to this young man. My objective was to extract a decision from him. I did so. We went to our knees and said a prayer together. When the young man left the office, he got on his motorcycle and rode away laughing. I've never forgotten this incident. I was very wrong.

When we present Christ in this way, many men and women may make simple declarations in favor of the gospel. We make it easy for them. We make it easy as the step of faith and we make it easy as far as subsequent life is concerned. You may accept Christ as Savior now and serve Him later as Lord. The important thing is that you come to Christ *as your Savior*.

When we present Christ in this way, individuals may assent to the truth and then think they are Christians. However, there is no subsequent change of life. The decision, it is thought, gets them to heaven even if there is no difference in earthly relationships.

Another college student I have counseled told me point blank he tried the gospel and it does not work. This fellow could relate his *acceptance* of Christ but concluded the gospel was defective. There was no change of life. The gospel made no difference to him or in him.

*How* we present the gospel is terribly important. Easy-believism may have two results. First, we may lead people to think they are Christians when they are not. Second, we may actually lead people away from Christ. In either of these two cases, we make legitimate biblical evangelism more difficult. Those who wrongly think they are Christians see no further need of Christ. They are closed to the gospel. Others, who wrongly think the gospel is powerless, will consider Christ no further. They too are closed to the call of the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Zane Hodges, *A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation, Absolutely Free* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1989), p. 27-28.

# IN RESPONSE - HOW WE PRESENT THE GOSPEL, PART TWO

by Dennis Prutow

As stated in the previous lesson, on one side, our views regarding *how* Christ is offered in the gospel are colored by a broad evangelicalism. On the other side, some individuals are hesitant to call men and women to faith in Christ because, in their thinking, the twin doctrines of election and reprobation inhibit an earnest call. This is hyper-Calvinism.

Calvinism is often described in five points: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints. These points hang together as a system. Calvinists maintain these five points summarize the teachings of the Bible regarding salvation. From this perspective, we rightly understand God regenerates *only* the elect. He bestows the new birth *only* upon the elect. These two points, of necessity, are connected.

I say this because I have detected a hyper-Calvinistic tendency within Reformed circles relating to the new birth. The tendency was expressed in this fashion with regard to a known unbeliever in our community. "There is no sense giving him a Bible because he cannot understand it anyway." This is the death of evangelism. It stems from a common position I've heard many times.

In a Reformed Presbyterian Church a guest minister stated the position plainly. He began his sermon with these or similar words, "You cannot understand the gospel unless you are born again." When the pastor uttered these words, a man seated in front of me put his chin on his chest and promptly went to sleep. His teenage son bent forward, put his forehead on the back of the pew in front of him, and also went to sleep.

I was horrified. Did these people assume, since they had heard the gospel many times from the same pulpit and to a degree understood that gospel, they had no further need of it? Did they therefore assume they were born again people without doubt headed for heaven? I cannot answer these questions. But I do remember asking them to myself as the guest minister began his sermon. This is a hyper-Calvinistic tendency present within Reformed circles impeding evangelism.

Let me describe the position in a slightly different way. A good friend

once asked me if I thought an unbeliever could understand the Seventh Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). My answer was and is an affirmative. My friend's answer was a negative. I rephrase the question. Can people outside of Christ understand the proposition that a person should not engage in fornication or enter adulterous relationships and that the Bible purports to speak these words as coming from God? I say they can.

My friend then added a person cannot understand the *full implications* and *all the ramifications* of the Seventh Commandment without being born again. I heartily agree. I add, we who are born again do not understand the full implications and all the ramifications of the Seventh Commandment. We cannot. We are not God. However, this does not obviate or set aside a basic and rudimentary understanding of the simple proposition given in the Seventh Commandment.

What is the problem? As with the easy-believism described in the previous article, no distinction is made between *formal* understanding, head knowledge or intellectual assent, and *saving* understanding.

The Westminster Confession of Faith makes such a distinction as does the Bible. First, look at Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7.

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, *in a due use of the ordinary means*, may attain unto a *sufficient understanding* of them (italics added).

Extraordinary means are unnecessary to a *sufficient understanding* of the Bible. To get a very basic understanding of the content of the Bible, *ordinary means* may be used. such as the understanding of vocabulary and grammar. This is the case because the God chose to reveal Himself in human language by means of a book.

Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6 also acknowledges the existence of saving understanding of the Bible.

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. *Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word*; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed (italics added).

Saving understanding comes by way of a work of the Holy Spirit. He enables men and women to see the goodness of the Word. He enables men and women to delight in Christ.

Here is the difficulty. We tell people they cannot understand the gospel without being born again. At the same time we make no distinction between intellectual assent of the truth and a saving understanding which embraces and rests upon Christ. When people gain any understanding of the gospel, they assume they are born again and we do too. Yet saving understanding may be absent.

R. B. Kuiper warned of the growth of such orthodoxy, dead orthodoxy, in the Christian Reformed Church over thirty-five years ago.<sup>1</sup> This situation in particular arises when dealing with covenant youth. When they are able to assent to membership vows we consider them converted. Later departures from the faith betray a lack of conviction and shallowness of faith. In the mean time, evangelism is made more difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> R. B. Kuiper, *To Be or Not to Be Reformed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), p. 130.

# IN RESPONSE - *HOW WE PRESENT THE GOSPEL, PART THREE*

by Dennis Prutow

In the two previous lessons, I attempt to show both evangelicals and Reformed people may betray the gospel in the same way. They may both equate intellectual assent to the truth of Scripture with saving understanding. The former err in this way when they *press* individuals to make a decision for Christ. The latter err in a similar fashion when they *press* the notion men and women cannot understand the gospel without being born again. Error creeps in when we *push* either position to the extreme. Men and women must themselves trust in Christ. God doesn't do this for them. But individuals cannot savingly trust Christ unless they are born again.

Three points help clear the smoke settled over this matter of *how* we present the gospel. First, we must understand the gospel is a story; it is new, good news. Second, let's understand the biblical requirements of the gospel are repentance and faith. Third, we must also trust the Holy Spirit to do the work He promises He will accomplish. We cannot do the work of the Holy Spirit for Him.

First, the gospel is primarily a story; it is a news story. When we read the four gospels in the Bible, we realize this is the case. We receive a flood of information concerning Jesus Christ. The writers tell us *who* He is. We see the disciples wrestle with this staggering concept and often stumble. The gospels then tell us *what* Christ came to do and they detail Christ's suffering and passion. Peter at first rejects the work of Christ but later becomes a chief spokesman. This is a story told from differing perspectives by different people to allow us a full view of Christ.

The Old Testament prepares us for the gospels with its stories, prophecies, songs and wisdom. The epistles comment on the story of the gospel and explain the significance of the story. In all of this we find the emphasis of Scripture is upon the *who* of Christ and on the *what* of His staggering accomplishments.

In this we are wrestling with answer 86 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the last clause of that answer. "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we rest upon him alone for salvation, *as he is offered in the gospel*" (italics added).

In that last clause, "as He is offered to us in the gospel," we have the center and core of the whole matter. The Lord Jesus Christ does us no good, no matter how great He may be, unless He is offered to us; and as a matter of fact He is offered to us in the good news of His redeeming work. There are other conceivable ways in which He might have been offered to us; but this has the advantage of being God's way. And I think that in the long run we may come to see that God's way is best.<sup>1</sup>

How is Christ offered to men and women? Whenever we present the gospel story of Christ's life, death and resurrection, Christ *is offering* Himself. This is the point. The *story* offers Christ.

This seems to baffle some students of Scripture. When I said to a young college student that I really think God saves people by means of telling a story, this particular student looked at me incredulously. I then added the story is the gospel of Christ, the good news of Jesus. This still did not seem to satisfy. Why?

The answer comes in our second point. We do not seem to properly understand the requirements of the gospel. To be sure, these requirements are part of the gospel message. However, modern evangelicalism and too frequently modern Reformed people place the greatest emphasis on these requirements while spending precious little time on the story itself. This, you recall, was what made the college student attending the fundamental Baptist church so uncomfortable. He had questions. These questions were not addressed. This fellow was given only exhortations.

Before going further, let's briefly look at the requirements of the gospel. We take several texts as examples. Mark 1:4. "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." One of the requirements of the gospel is repentance. We must call men and women to repentance. We should make this call indiscriminately. Acts 17:30, "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance,

God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent." Mark 1:14-15 gives the example of Jesus.

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."

The call of the gospel includes the call to faith in addition to repentance. We should also make this clear, the call to repentance and faith is a *part* of the gospel. When Jesus comes to Galilee preaching the gospel, He proclaims the need to repent and believe the gospel.

Repentance and faith are the two sides of true conversion. When a person repents of sin, that person turns away from his or her former life and turns to Christ in faith. The apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders his ministry included the work of "solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). We have the same message. We must indiscriminately call men to repent of sin and trust in Christ.

If we are going to properly do the work of calling men and women to repentance, we must define sin, describe its devastating nature and inform men and women of their peril before God because of sin. This takes time and painstaking care in explaining the human plight and answering objections. If we are going to properly do the work of calling men and women to faith in the gospel, we must, with great care and fulness, tell the story of Christ. This also takes time. However, for too many, the accent in presenting the gospel is upon the response. We spend little time on the story.

How can we expect a proper response to the requirements of the gospel if we spend far more time attempting to elicit a response to the story than we spend upon the story itself. The Bible ought to be our teacher. The Bible is a very large book which painstakingly tells us the story of Christ. The story is primary. Christ offers Himself as we tell the story.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925), p. 152.

# IN RESPONSE - *HOW WE PRESENT THE GOSPEL, PART FOUR*

by Dennis Prutow

We are looking at three points regarding *how* we ought to present the gospel. First, we saw the gospel is a story, it is news, good news. Second, we reviewed the biblical requirements of the gospel, repentance and faith. We emphasized the story takes priority while acknowledging the importance of the requirements of the gospel. We saw Christ really offers Himself in the telling of the gospel story.

Evangelicalism wrongly pushes us to press the requirements of repentance and faith in order to extract a decision. Hyper-Calvinistic tendencies, too often prevalent among modern Reformed folk, wrongly draw us back from pursuing repentance and faith. This brings us to our third point. We must trust the Holy Spirit to do the work He promises He will accomplish. Modern evangelicals attempt to do this work of the Spirit. The hyper-Calvinistic tendency may actually impede the work of the Spirit in its failure to distinguish between a head knowledge and a saving knowledge of the gospel.

Interestingly enough, modern evangelicals are in the position many liberals were in a half century ago. How is this the case? Look at this description of liberalism as compared to Christianity.

Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with the triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God.<sup>1</sup> The indicative refers to the gospel story. The imperative refers to the exhortation to believe. For many evangelicals, the gospel offer *is* the exhortation to believe. We have already seen Christ offers Himself in the telling of the gospel story. A vital *part* of this story is the requirement for repentance and faith.

Too often, however, we treat the gospel like a sales pitch. We need to clinch the sale. Drawing the person to the point of decision is of utmost importance. We fail if we do not draw the individual to make a commitment. The decision is often

registered in a prayer. A study of the New Testament examples of Christ and the apostles shows no instance of such decision making.<sup>2</sup>

Biblically, repentance is a gift of God. "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). Faith is also a gift of God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). Do we believe the Holy Spirit will work repentance and faith in the hearts of men and women when they hear the story of Christ and when we explain the requirements of the gospel? Must we preempt the Spirit and extract the decision? No!

However, we must faithfully tell the story of Christ including the sad story of human failure and sin. We must plainly relate the requirements of repentance and faith. We must also trust the Holy Spirit to accomplish His task of working faith in men and women. *He will do so.*

But He does so only through the medium of the gospel. Do we forget this point? Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 89:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation. The Scriptures teach this truth.

For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God (1 Peter 1:23). We must trust the Holy Spirit of the Sovereign God to do His appointed work.

Reformed folk must also trust the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit of God. When we say of someone, "There is no sense giving them the Bible because they cannot understand it anyway," we impede the work of the Spirit by removing the God ordained means of His saving work. As I said at the outset, this is the death of evangelism.

On the other hand, if we sincerely believe *any* understanding of the gospel indicates a person is born again, we de-

ceive ourselves and those to whom we preach. We make no distinction between head and heart. We fall into the trap of easy-believism.

One of the very greatest evils of present day religious life, it seems to me, is the reception into the Church of persons who merely repeat a form of words such as "I accept Christ as my personal Savior," without giving the slightest evidence to show that they know what such words mean.<sup>3</sup> At this point, evangelicals and Reformed folk are prey to the same error.

What is the answer? One, we must patiently and continually tell the story of human sin and depravity and of Christ's coming as the Savior from sin. We must never weary of telling this story in all of its many facets. The Bible gives us this gospel story and the Bible is a *big* book.

Two, we must never weary of setting forth the requirements of the gospel, repentance and faith, before men and women and boys and girls. A young lady needed to attend a church class for one of her college requirements. She selected a communicants class I was leading. The way I pursued the subjects of repentance and faith astounded her. I defined and described various types of faith and sorrow. I pursued the young people in the class calling them to examine their own level of faith and repentance. I sought to confirm for them where they stood before God. I opened to them the real possibility of people knowing the content of the gospel but not knowing the Savior. This we must do.

Three, we must do all this remembering the spoken word is a means of grace. We must trust the Holy Spirit to work faith in the elect. He brings conviction of sin (John 16:8), works godly sorrow in the heart (2 Corinthians 7:10), produces repentance (Acts 11:18), opens the heart to embrace the truth (Acts 16:14) and creates faith (Ephesians 2:8). The question is simple. Do we really trust the Holy Spirit to do His work as promised?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> See my pamphlet "The Gospel is Not a Sales Pitch."

<sup>3</sup> Machen, *What is Faith?*, p. 156.