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“Christless Christianity”: Michael Horton’s Lawless Trilogy

By Paul M. Dohse: Editor

See no law, hear no law, speak no law. Such is “Christless Christianity,” published by Dr. Michael Horton in 2008. He presents the book as a treatise exposing the supposed fact that the church is awash in a “Christless” evangelicalism. After suffering through page after page of a nuanced semblance of orthodoxy masking his antinomian bent, his real thesis, and what drives his “Modern Reformation” organization, is stated on page 62.

See No Law

On page 62, he states the following:

“Where we land on these issues is perhaps the most significant factor in how we approach our own faith and practice and communicate it to the world. If not only the unregenerate but the regenerate are always dependent at every moment on the free grace of God disclosed in the gospel, then nothing can raise those who are spiritually dead or continually give life to Christ’s flock but the Spirit working through the gospel. When this happens (not just once, but every time we encounter the gospel afresh), the Spirit progressively transforms us into Christ’s image. Start with Christ (that is, the gospel) and you get sanctification in the bargain; begin with Christ and move on to something else, and you lose both.”



Encompassed in this statement is Dr. Horton's position on “faith,” “practice,” and how we “communicate” those things to the world. Let's look at the “faith” part. First, he says that both the unregenerate and regenerate are dependent on the “free grace” of God disclosed in “the gospel” “at every moment.” He goes on to say that the gospel (ie., the free grace of justification) does two things: gives life to the spiritually dead (“unregenerate”) and “continually give[s] life to Christ’s flock” (ie., believers).

Secondly, believers only receive this life “every time WE encounter the gospel afresh.” Therefore, the relationship of the gospel to unbelievers and believers is no different. We are raised to life and progressively transformed in the exact same way. Horton says this happens at “every moment”; therefore, people are raised to life by the gospel (justification by faith alone) and transformed by the gospel (justification by faith alone), and only “each time” they encounter the gospel “afresh.”

Thirdly, what gospel gives life to the unregenerate? Well, Horton says plainly that if believers leave that same gospel, “you loose both.” Both what? Answer: sanctification and justification. Horton says you get “both” in the bargain because according to him they are both the same. In other words, what orthodox Christians normally consider to be sanctification, is really progressive justification. Ever heard of that? Didn't think so. Does this mean Michael Horton believes that synergism in sanctification is a false gospel? Sure it does, what else can be surmised? Does this explain why he thinks he is on the cutting edge of a new reformation? I would imagine.

Fourthly, we also see another tenet of antinomian (see no law) doctrine (specifically, gospel sanctification) in this same excerpt: “....but the Spirit working through the gospel.” Note “but.” But what? The giving of life: “....nothing can raise those who are spiritually dead or continually give life....” In other words, the Spirit only works through the gospel. Therefore, the Scriptures are only used by the Spirit to impart life when the Bible is used in regard to showing forth justification, or the gospel. This is the redemptive-historical use of the Bible. Again, a gospel sanctification tenet. Hence, using the Bible for spiritual instruction is supposedly taboo, and in fact, law-keeping (as though that's wrong for believers to do in the first place). Like many other proponents of antinomian doctrines, Horton's teachings will contain a lot of very good what (descriptive information [which the Bible has in glorious abundance]), but rarely any how (prescriptive), and I contend to the detriment of many. They will have a glorious picture of heaven in their minds as they die on the vine, being hearers of the word (they would say gospel) only and not doers, “deceiving themselves.”

Fifthly, we see Horton's mystical personification of Christ and the gospel in this part of the excerpt: “Start with Christ (that is, the gospel)....” Making the nebulous concept of the person of Christ synonymous with “the gospel,” and also paramount in interpretation rather than what Christ objectively instructs, serves antinomians well. Their writings are often peppered with this kind of subjective rhetoric, but it always has a purpose. An example is making “the gospel” synonymous with “the word” so they

can say that every verse in the Bible is about the gospel, and therefore serving that purpose only (progressive justification) for believers and unbelievers alike.

Lastly, If Horton, like the antinomian doctrine that he propagates, sees no difference in justification and sanctification, then the law will play the exact same role for believers as it does unbelievers. In fact, this is what Horton believes. However, the following excerpt from "Creeds and Deeds: How Doctrine Leads to Doxological Living" reveals how difficult it is to nail down Horton on this aspect:

"It might seem controversial to identify doctrine with 'gospel' and deeds with 'law,' especially since these days we often hear calls to 'live the gospel.' However, the gospel is not an imperative but an indicative; not a program to follow, but an announcement to welcome for our own salvation and to herald for the salvation of the world. Does that mean that we do not have imperatives or that we do not follow Christ? As Paul would say, 'May it never be!' It simply means that we have to distinguish indicatives and imperatives. The law gives us something to do, and the gospel gives us something to believe. Christians are no less obligated to obey God's commandments in the New Testament than they were in the Old Testament, but they are commandments not promises. The imperatives drive us to despair of self-righteousness, the indicatives hold up Christ as our only Savior, and then the imperatives become the 'reasonable service' of believers 'in view of God's mercies.' There is a lot of wisdom to the order of the Heidelberg Catechism: Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude. The commandments tell us what we are to do; the gospel tells us what God has done."

This excerpt reminds me of the John Kerry controversy during the 2004 presidential election: "I was for it before I was against it." First, because of Horton's progressive justification view, it is not possible for him to believe that the law has a role in sanctification anymore than it would in justification, other than a schoolmaster that leads us to Christ for justification. Though he makes statements above that seem to indicate that he believes the law has a role in the spiritual growth process, that's not the case, it's not logically possible when his positions are considered. Consequently, we can clearly see the statements that match progressive justification: "The imperatives drive us to despair of self-righteousness, the indicatives hold up Christ as our only Savior...." The law shows unbelievers their need for Christ, but please note that the Scriptures never tell us that God's commands / imperatives drive Christians to despair; the extreme opposite is true. In fact, Christians are promised blessings for applying God's word to their life (James 1:25).

Secondly, Horton makes it clear in the first excerpt that the Holy Spirit only imparts life "through the gospel" ("....nothing can raise those who are spiritually dead or continually give life to Christ's flock but the Spirit working through the gospel") ; then, he says in the second excerpt that ".... the gospel is not an imperative but an indicative [indicative: indicative of God's work, not ours]...." But throughout Scripture, we see clearly that in fact, the Holy Spirit does use imperatives to impart life.

Examples such as Matthew 4:4 and John 17:17 (see endnote number 3) are abundant throughout the whole Bible. Another glaring contradiction to Scripture is Horton's suggestion in the second excerpt that commands "are not promises."

Michael Horton's gospel is a no-Lordship, antinomian gospel because obeying biblical commands is synonymous with works justification. Furthermore, he believes that biblical commands are indicative of God's work, not ours. I delve into the subject of imperatives / indicatives in two other essays in this same section.

Hear No law

How does all of this effect corporate worship? Supposedly, we are not to see any law in our progressive justification, but what about when we come together to worship? Should we then hear the law? Michael Horton says the following on pages 189 -191:

"God gathers his people together in a covenantal event to judge and to justify, to kill and to make alive. The emphasis is on God's work for us - the Father's gracious plan, the Son's saving life, death, and resurrection, and the Spirit's work of bringing life to the valley of dry bones through the proclamation of Christ. The preaching focuses on God's work in the history of redemption from Genesis through Revelation, and sinners are swept into this unfolding drama. Trained and ordained to mine the riches of Scripture for the benefit of God's people, ministers try to push their own agendas, opinions, and personalities to the background so that God's Word will be clearly proclaimed. In this preaching the people once again are simply receivers - recipients of grace. Similarly, in baptism, they do not baptize themselves; they are baptized. In the Lord's Supper, they do not prepare and cook the meal; they do not contribute to the fare; but they are guests who simply enjoy the bread of heaven. As this gospel creates, deepens, and inflames faith, a profound sense of praise and thanksgiving fills hearts, leading to good works among the saints and in the world throughout the week. Having been served by God in the public assembly, the people are then servants of each other and their neighbors in the world."

As in the process of spiritual growth, corporate worship focuses totally on the gospel. Notice that Horton refers to believers as a "valley of dry bones" who have come to be made alive by the Spirit's work through the gospel. This is another tenet of the neo-

antinomianism of our day, the total depravity of the saints.

In a contrasting scenario (or how not to have corporate worship) on page 191, Horton adds the following: "The expectation that God was actually visiting his people to apply the benefits of Christ's victory to sinners - both believers and unbelievers - was less obvious than the sense that we were primarily regrouping to get our marching orders." Note that believers are called "sinners," and also note the construction of the sentence which would indicate that believers and unbelievers are the same kind of sinners who both gather together for the same purpose, the gospel.

Speak no Law

Regarding evangelism, the following excerpt is taken from pages 117-119 of "Christless Christianity."

"The question for us all is whether we believe the church is the place where the gospel is regularly proclaimed and ratified to Christians as well as non-Christians. 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." 12 (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.

Conformity to Christ's image (sanctification) is the process of dying to self (mortification) and living to God (vivification) that results from being regularly immersed in the gospel's story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Another way of putting it is dislocation (from Adam and the reign of sin and death) and relocation (in Christ). That my life is not the gospel is good news both for me and for my neighbors.

Because Christ is the Good News, Christians as well as non-Christians can be saved after all. For those who know that they too fall short of the glory that God's law requires—even as Christians who now have a new heart that loves God's law—the Good News is not only enough to create faith but to get us back on our feet, assured of our standing in Christ, ready for another day of successes and failures in our discipleship.

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.

Yes, there is hypocrisy, and because Christians will always be simultaneously saint and sinner, there will always be hypocrisy in every Christian and in every church. The good news is that Christ saves us from hypocrisy too. But hypocrisy is especially generated when the church points to itself and to our own "changed lives" in the promotional materials. Maybe non-Christians would have less relish in pointing out our failures if we testified in word and deed to our need and God's gift for sinners like us. If we identified the visibility of the church with the scene of sinners gathered by grace to confess their sins and their faith in Christ, receiving him with open hands, instead of with our busy efforts to be the gospel, we would at least beat non-Christian critics to the punch. We know that we are sinners. We know that we fall short of God's glory. That's exactly why we need Christ. I know that many of these brothers and sisters would affirm that we are still sinners and that we still need Christ, but it sure seems to be drowned out by a human-centered focus on our character and actions.

Kimball writes that the "ultimate goal of discipleship . . . should be measured by what Jesus taught in Matthew 22:37-40: 'Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul.' Are we loving him more? Love others as yourself. Are we loving people more?" 13 I was raised in conservative evangelicalism on this same diet of sermons that ended with a question like this one. A truly radical change in our approach would be to proclaim Christ as the one who fulfilled this law in our place, bore its sentence, and now freely gives us his absolution. Only then, ironically, are we truly liberated to love again.

For all of the Emergent Church movement's incisive critiques of the megachurch model, the emphasis still falls on measuring the level of our zeal and activity rather than on immersing people in the greatest story ever told. It may be more earnest, more authentic,

and less consumeristic, but how different is this basic message from that of Joel Osteen, for example? Across the board in contemporary American Christianity, that basic message seems to be some form of law (do this) without the gospel (this is what has been done).

Really, I have to admit the argument is very attractive. It definitely takes the pressure off of us. There is no way we are going to be perfect anyway, so why not emphasize the works of Christ rather than our own? Get people focused on Christ rather than us; why would you want Christ and the gospel represented by our best efforts? However, before I continue, I will take exception to being compared to Joel Olsteen because I believe in an effort on our part to represent Christ by our good behavior. I think a little more than that separates me and others from the likes of Joel Olsteen. But let's be honest here, in light of what Horton states above; "What does the Scriptures say?":

"Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1Peter 3:1,2).

Obviously, Peter is well aware that wives will never have a perfect testimony; but regardless, his counsel to wives is clearly stated. This plainly contradicts Horton's premise in every way possible.

Also, didn't Christ say something about letting "your" light shine before men, so that God would be glorified? Furthermore, in regard to our efforts at good behavior according to the Scriptures, is that really some kind of effort to "be the gospel" rather than "adorning" the doctrine of God as Paul instructed us to do? (Titus 2:10).

The apostles made it clear that the last days would be marked by shrewd attempts to undermine God's law. Frankly, I am leery of any teaching that seems to devalue the upholding of God's law by our Christian walk. I also recommend caution towards those who claim to uphold God's law by saying He (Christ) does all the obeying for us.

Even if they don't come right out and say it, they may talk against everything that would prevent such a conclusion, and therefore teaching it by default. But the bottom line is the following:

If the same gospel that saved us also sanctifies us, and Christ said that we are sanctified by the word; and certainly He did say that as recorded in John 17:17, then every word in the Bible must be about justification, or what God has done and not anything we could possibly do, being a gospel affair. Furthermore, if we are sanctified by the gospel which is God's work alone, we may have no more role in spiritual growth than we did in the gospel that saved us. The Scriptures are clear; no person is justified by works of the law. Is that not the gospel? Therefore, when the antinomians speak of obedience, it should be apparent that they are not speaking of our obedience, even though they allow us to assume otherwise.

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