

The Essential Church: Relentlessly God Centered

Roger N. Wiles

It's been said of the life, ministry and theology of Jonathan Edwards that all were "relentlessly God centered." Compare the Church today and its lack of zeal for the Word of God with the passion of Edwards, Whitfield, Spurgeon, the Puritans, and the magisterial Reformers Luther, Calvin and Knox for *sola Scriptura*. Frankly there is no comparison. I think it's safe to say that if most of modern evangelicalism were tried in a court of law on the charge of being "relentlessly God centered" most would be found not guilty. I have heard R. C. Sproul speak often and passionately about the "eclipse of God" in American Christianity. This doesn't mean that God is not there or silent; it means that His people have become like Jacob who discovered in a dream "The LORD is in this place and I knew it not."

The opposite of God-centered faith and practice is religious life with man in the center with his felt-needs the focus of attention. Man-centered religion creates another "gospel" altogether from the God-centered historic, reformed and confessional Christianity. David Powlinson of Westminster Theological Seminary calls this different gospel "The Therapeutic Gospel." Powlinson argues that a man-centered therapy gospel has five elements:

1. The Need For Love;
2. The Need For Significance;
3. The Need For Self Esteem, Self Confidence, and Self Assertion;
4. The Need For Pleasure; and,
5. The Need For Excitement and Adventure.

Some of these needs are not inherently sinful. The felt-needs of people are often important. But seeking to live "Your Best Life Now" is not what the Bible or the gospel is about. Our best life comes in heaven when we are finally conformed to the image of Christ. Bob Dylan wrote well and sang badly the lyric that sums up this therapeutic gospel, "You think He's just an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires."

Conversely, what Paul calls “The Gospel of God” is about the Word made flesh, the sin-bearing Savior, the resurrected Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit to turn us from our own way to serve God in the beauty of holiness. A God-centered gospel is not about our need for love, significance, or self-esteem. It’s about our desperate need for mercy, grace, and transformation of who we are by instinct, choice and practice. A God-centered gospel demands trust in God’s sovereignty and providence, worship in spirit and truth that resounds with reverence and awe, and that we seek hard after God himself as our greatest joy.

What would a relentlessly God-centered church look like? Consider three absolutely critical components that evidence and edify a congregation centered on God – biblical theology, biblical preaching, and biblical worship.

Biblical Theology¹ – II Tim. 1:13-14

God has chosen one way to reveal himself and that singular way is through inspired, infallible and inerrant Scripture. God cannot be known by reason, nature, or instinct apart from the Word of God. How then do we learn God through the Word? How do we understand all that God has said to us? Paul charged Timothy to “guard the gospel” to follow “the pattern of sound words.” In other words, Paul charged Timothy to follow orthodoxy or straight teaching.

The text of the Bible has been exegeted, explicated, and systematically organized over the centuries. The Church formulated biblical creeds to teach, define and express orthodox Christianity. Early catholic creeds (Apostle’s, Nicene, Chalcedon, Constantinople, etc.) were critically important to an orthodox God-centered faith. Later Protestant creeds (Heidelberg, Three Forms of Unity, Thirty-Nine Articles etc.) were developed to express the recaptured biblical truths of the Reformation. But it is the Westminster Confession of Faith that most logically, completely, and scripturally reflects orthodox biblical theology. Therefore, the relentlessly God-centered church is a confessional church that believes the Holy Scriptures teaches the system of doctrine formulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF); a full biblical theology that may be best defined as catholic, evangelical and reformed.

¹ Taken in part from Saint Andrews Chapel, Sanford, FL www.SaintAndrewsChapel.org.

The WCF is "catholic" in that it reaffirms the doctrines of historic orthodoxy as defined by the great ecumenical councils of the first millennium of Christian history. These catholic doctrines affirm such foundational doctrines as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the atonement of Christ, and other doctrines essential to historic biblical Christianity.

The WCF is "evangelical" in that it affirms with historic Protestantism such vital doctrines as *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*, *solus Deo gloria*. *Sola Scriptura* speaks of the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God as the sole written revelation and only rule of faith and practice for the Church. The other *sola's* are together the basis of the Christian's salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to God alone the glory!

The WCF is "reformed" in that it affirms the distinctive doctrines of the magisterial Reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Knox. Most important of these doctrines is belief in an absolutely sovereign and providential God that leads to a strong belief in the "doctrines of grace" whereby this sovereign God of grace saves us by the sovereign grace of God.

Biblical Preaching – II Tim. 4:1-2

A God-centered biblical theology demands that revealed truth about God be preached. Paul didn't expect Timothy simply to "guard the gospel" but to preach the "pattern of sound words." Timothy was told to preach orthodox biblical theology in and out of season whether or not the people wanted to hear. In fact, Timothy was warned that many people with "itching ears" wouldn't want to hear the faithful preaching of Scripture. Yet, the goal of preaching a biblical theology is to "convince those who are in vital union with Christ that they are in vital union with Christ and to convince those who are not in vital union with Christ that they are not in vital union with Christ" (Sinclair Ferguson). Timothy and every relentlessly God-centered pastor, preaching Christ and not themselves, are called to proclaim "the whole counsel of God" with authority and without apology.

What we preach is the Bible. In 1617 William Perkins said, "The Word of God alone is to be preached in its perfection and inner consistency. Scripture is the exclusive subject of preaching, the only field in which the preacher is to labor."² How we preach is expositional. Albert Mohler has said that "expository preaching is central, irreducible, and nonnegotiable to the

² William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1996), p.9

Bible's mission of authentic worship that pleases God."³ Expository preaching happens when God's minister, "speaking the truth in love," takes what God said in the written text and delivers the meaning of the text to the minds and hearts of God's people under the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

"I like to hear a man dwell much on the same essentials of Christianity. For we have but one God, and one Christ, and one faith to preach; and I will not preach another gospel to please men with variety, as if our Savior and our Gospel were grown stale" (Richard Baxter).

Biblical Worship – Jn. 4:23-24; I Cor. 14:33-40⁴

The true, holy and biblical worship of God is the highest privilege and duty of the Body of Christ.⁵ "We worship God because God created us to worship him. Worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being."⁶ The Church most directly serves her Lord when she worships God in spirit and in truth.⁷ Therefore, in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, the Church militant on earth gathers with the Church triumphant before the throne of God above to give Christ the glory due His name.⁸

However, we cannot rightly worship God if we do not understand God and we cannot understand God without the Bible. The late James Boice once remarked, "To worship God we must know who God is, but we cannot know who God is unless God first chooses to reveal himself to us. God has done this in the Bible, which is why the Bible and the teachings of the Bible need to be central in our worship."⁹ It only follows that the only acceptable way of worshipping God is according to His Word, limited and regulated by God's revelation of Himself, and therefore cannot result from the vain imaginations of men, the demands of culture, sincere emotionalism, or "any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture."¹⁰ This is the "regulative principle" of worship.

³ Albert Mohler, *Feed My Sheep: The Primacy of Preaching*, Morgan, PA (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), p.16

⁴ Read the Word, Preach the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word, see the Word – Terry Johnson

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever," Answer #1

⁶ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According To Scripture*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2002, p. 1

⁷ John 4:23-24

⁸ Revelation 1:9-11, 4:1-5:14

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, quoted in "Give Praise To God, P&R Publishing, Philipsburg, NJ, 2003.

¹⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day*, Chapter XXI.

A relentlessly God-centered people know that when they come to the corporate worship of God, they “cross the threshold of the secular to the sacred, from the common to the uncommon, from the profane to the holy”¹¹ (R. C. Sproul).

¹¹ Taken from the Order of Worship, Saint Andrews Chapel, Sanford FL.