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# Review of Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*. Part Two

John M. Frame

## Abstract

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Michael Horton's *Christless Christianity* claims that contemporary evangelicalism is so corrupt in its doctrine and preaching that it is close to rejecting Christ altogether. In this two part review article, I argue that Horton's basis for this evaluation is itself doctrinally questionable and that he misrepresents the targets of his criticism. I describe ten assumptions Horton makes that have no basis in Scripture or in any of the major theological traditions. If we reject these assumptions (as we certainly should), we will find that Horton's critique of evangelicalism is wide of the mark, and that it is Horton's own rather idiosyncratic brand of Protestantism that deserves our critical attention.

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This concludes my review of Michael Horton's *Christless Christianity*.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Law and Gospel

In this book, as in previous books, Horton places much emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> For part one, see *Ecclesia Reformanda* 2.1 (2010): 5-25.

the distinction between law and gospel. Here, he says that it is the failure to properly distinguish law and gospel that has put the American church on the road to Christless Christianity. 'The worst thing that can happen to the church,' he says, 'is to confuse law and gospel' (122). What happens is that

When even good, holy, and proper things become confused with the gospel, it is only a matter of time before we end up with *Christless Christianity*: a story about us instead of a story about the Triune God that sweeps us into the unfolding drama. (109)

Horton distinguishes law and gospel as follows:

It is important to point out that law and gospel do not simply refer to the Ten Commandments and John 3:16, respectively. Everything in the Bible that reveals God's moral expectations is *law* and everything in the Bible that reveals God's saving purposes and acts is *gospel*. (109)

Certainly 'law' and 'gospel' are not synonymous. I would define the distinction between them pretty much as Horton does. But Horton vacillates in his definitions. Sometimes, as we've seen, he regards any expression of God's moral expectations as law, but other times, he seems to think that 'law' must have an additional element: pronouncement of condemnation. Note:

The bad news is far worse than making mistakes or failing to live up to the legalistic standards of fundamentalism. It is that the best efforts of the best Christians, on the best days, in the best frame of heart and mind, with the best motives fall short of the true righteousness and holiness that God requires. Our best efforts cannot satisfy God's justice. Yet the good news is that God has satisfied his own justice and reconciled us to himself through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. God's holy law can no longer condemn us because we are in Christ. (91)

So Horton is able to criticize Osteen as follows:

There is no *condemnation* in Osteen's message for failing to fulfill God's righteous law. On the other hand, there is no *justification*. Instead of either message, there is an upbeat moralism that is somewhere in the middle: Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful. (69)

He calls Osteen's message 'Law-Lite: Salvation from Unhappiness by Doing Your Best' (69, section title). So evidently Osteen's moral

exhortations don't really constitute law, even though they 'reveal God's moral expectations.' To preach the law, according to Horton, it is not enough to reveal God's moral expectations, as his definition on 109 would suggest. Rather, one must preach biblical morality *in order to condemn*. Otherwise, we proclaim, not law, but only 'law-lite.'

This discussion recalls the controversy within Lutheranism as to whether the law should be preached to the regenerate.<sup>2</sup> Some Lutherans said that since the law always condemns, it should not be preached to believers, because believers are not under God's condemnation. Others argued that believers do need the law to expose their residual unbelief and to turn them again to repent and believe on Christ. The second party prevailed. But still a third position prevailed in Reformed theology: that believers need to hear the law simply because they always need to know God's will. Redeemed people will want to obey God out of gratitude (not works righteousness), and the law tells them how to do so. On this basis, we read the law, not to be condemned anew, but simply to serve the God who has removed from us all condemnation.

In this respect, Horton is more Lutheran than Reformed. He defines law as God's moral requirements, a definition acceptable to all parties in this discussion. But for him the law must always bring condemnation, so that he doesn't think one is *really* preaching the law unless he preaches it as condemnation.

This is to say, for Horton the law may be preached only in the context of justification, for justification is the removal of condemnation. As we saw earlier in this review, he cannot seem to reconcile himself to the fact that redemption involves sanctification as well as justification, our work as well as God's, the subjective as well as the objective.

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes this controversy has been described as a controversy over the 'third use of the law.' The first use is to restrain sin in society. The second use is to condemn us so that we will flee to Christ. (In the literature, the first and second use are sometimes interchanged.) The third use is as a guide to the believer's life. Among the Lutherans, some rejected the third use, because for them the law always brings condemnation. Those who favored the third use thought that believers need continuing condemnation so that we will continually flee to Christ. Calvinists favored the third use simply because it declares how redeemed people should behave.

So when Osteen presents a message that almost entirely lacks a focus on justification, Horton replies with an emphasis entirely lacking in sanctification. But Scripture also speaks of sanctification, of the believer's 'working out' of salvation, his obedient walk with God. It gives us plenty of 'instructions' about that, and as I indicated earlier it promises blessings ('success,' Josh. 1:8). It does indeed tell us how to be happy in this world.<sup>3</sup>

Now I think if we recognize that God's law functions in sanctification as well as justification, we will see little need to insist on 'separating' law and gospel as Horton insists. Horton demands that the two be sharply separated from one another: that there should be no law in the gospel and no gospel in the law. These are 'two distinct worlds,' he says (137). For Horton, law is unmitigated bad news, with no good news mixed in (63, 91). This view is stressed in Lutheran theology<sup>4</sup> and has gained an increasing following in Reformed circles.

But as a matter of fact, that separation of law and gospel does not have biblical support. One should ask here, is there anything in Scripture that does not reveal God's saving purposes? Jesus said that all of Scripture testified of him (Luke 24:25-27, John 5:39). And is there anything in the authoritative scriptures that does not impose a requirement upon us, at least the requirement to believe? But if the whole Bible can be considered law, and can also be considered gospel, how can law and gospel be separate?

Further, the gospel as proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles contains a command, the command to repent and believe (Mark 1:14-15, Acts 2:38-40). The law, on the other hand, is often based on divine deliverance, as in the case of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:2). The law itself is

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<sup>3</sup> Horton quotes Osteen as saying that we receive God's blessing and favor in return for our efforts and equates this with works righteousness (87-88). Here Horton misses the fact that God's blessings come in at two points in our salvation: (1) the ultimate initiation of salvation, and (2) the blessings he gives us for our obedience. Clearly Osteen in the quoted context is talking about (2), but Horton reads him as talking about (1) and therefore preaching works righteousness, that is that our works are what move God to initiate salvation.

<sup>4</sup> I have criticized the position of the Lutheran Formula of Concord at some length in my article 'Law and Gospel,' <[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/2002Law.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2002Law.htm)>, cf. my *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 182-192.



a gift of God's grace, according to Ps. 119:29. The gospel is the proclamation of the coming kingdom (Isa. 52:7, Matt. 4:17, 23) in which God's will shall be done on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6:10). It is the announcement that God's law will prevail. So the law is good news, gospel. And the gospel is law.

To say that law and gospel come together in Scripture, however, is not to diminish the distinction between works and grace as means of salvation. Many have thought that they must separate law and gospel in order to separate works from grace. But the two issues are not parallel. Scripture plainly teaches, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.' (Eph 2:8-9) This passage speaks of the basis of salvation, not of two different verbal messages.

## 7. Redemption and Moralism

Now Horton sees a close relationship between the law/gospel distinction and the quest for relevance in the American church that we discussed earlier. He says,

When people ask for more *practical* preaching, for a more *relevant* message than Christ and him crucified, what they are falling back on is law rather than gospel. Another way of saying it is that we always prefer giving God a supporting role in our life movie—our own glory story—rather than being recast in his unfolding drama of redemption. How can God fix my marriage? How can he make me a more effective leader? How can I overcome stress and manage my time and finances better? These are not bad questions. In fact, the Scriptures do bring sound wisdom to bear on these issues. But they are not the major questions, not even for lifelong Christians. (146)

I maintain my earlier defense of relevance: that God's word is to be applied to all areas of life, and that preachers have a duty to help them do this. Horton says that all attempts to make the Gospel relevant are 'law' rather than gospel.<sup>5</sup> Does this mean that even if a preacher tries to show that the gospel deals with a specific kind of

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<sup>5</sup> I would have expected him to say that such attempts are 'law-lite' (69) rather than real law, because they don't present God's condemnation.

sin—let's say adultery—that his sermon is law rather than gospel? I find that unpersuasive. Further I maintain my earlier argument (section 1) that God actually wants to serve his people, so that he delights to fix our marriages, help us with finances, etc. He is a God who is big enough to be concerned with small things. To seek from him this kind of help is not to trivialize him or to diminish him or to make him subordinate to me.

In fact, Horton here (though rarely in this book) admits that these are good questions, and he admits that Scripture addresses them. Again, in his view, it is a matter of *emphasis*.

Nevertheless, he has a rather ugly word for people who preach sermons on such subjects. He calls them *moralists*. Moralists are people who 'miss the point' and trivialize the Bible so that it becomes '*life's instructional manual*' (142). The Bible is about Christ and him crucified, Horton says, and so therefore not about moral questions, at least by way of emphasis.

So it is wrong, Horton says, to present (emphasize?) characters in Bible stories as moral examples (148-52).

Instead of drawing a straight line of application from the narrative to us, which typically moralizes or allegorizes the story, we are taught by Jesus himself to understand these passages in the light of their place in the unfolding drama of redemption that leads to Christ. (151)

This is another of many false dichotomies in this book. Horton says that understanding passages in the light of Christ is incompatible with understanding them as providing moral examples. But Christ himself called on the Jews to rejoice in his day, as Abraham did (John 8:56). He commended David's behavior in supplying food to his hungry men (Mark 2:25).

Imitation is a major means of sanctification in Scripture. We are to imitate God (Ex. 20:11, Lev. 11:44, Matt. 5:48, 1 Pet. 1:15-16) and Jesus (John 13:14-15, 34-35, Phil. 2:5-11, 1 Pet. 2:21, 1 John 3:16, 4:9-11). We are to imitate the apostles as they imitate Christ (1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1). The Israelites in the wilderness are negative examples in 1 Cor. 10:6 and Heb. 4:11, as are Sodom and Gomorrah in Jude 7. Timothy is to be an example to other believers (1 Tim. 4:12). Hebrews 11 presents many 'heroes of faith' as examples for us. James refers to the prophets and Job as examples of suffering and patience (James 5:10-11) and to Elijah

as a man of prayer (verses 17-18).

So the qualifications of church officers in 1 Tim. 3:1-13 and Tit. 1:5-9 are primarily qualities of character, so that these officers can be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3). When Horton confesses on p.117, '...I am not an exemplary creature,' he perhaps unintentionally disqualifies himself for church office.

Horton is right to say that Bible characters foreshadow Christ in various ways. He is also right in saying that these characters, except Jesus, are sinners like us and justified only by the grace of Christ. So, of course, not everything they do should be imitated. And insofar as we should imitate them, we should imitate them as examples of living by faith. But, given these qualifications, we should be encouraging, not discouraging, preachers to point out parallels between the lives of these people and our lives today. Preaching this way does not deserve to be called moralism.

Nor certainly does the use of biblical examples deserve this condemnation from Horton:

Regardless of the official theology held on paper, moralistic preaching (the bane of conservatives and liberals alike) assumes that we are not really hopeless sinners who need to be rescued but decent folks who need good examples, exhortations, and instructions...

This insult is quite undeserved. Horton says that to use a biblical character as an example for Christians today is a denial of the gospel. (Or is he again criticizing an 'emphasis?' Hard to say.) That is nonsense. And it shows again that Horton has no ear for the complexity of biblical salvation, for the distinction between justification and sanctification. Obviously we are not justified by following anyone's example, only by trusting in Christ. But in the process of sanctification we often have need of examples and, for that matter, exhortations and instructions as well. Scripture itself provides these, and we ought to be thankful for them.

I think what has happened here is that Horton has locked on to a certain theory of preaching and has neglected to look at what the Bible actually says. And at this point the theory is so unscriptural that Horton's condemnations reflect back on himself rather than hitting his targets.

I agree with Horton that preachers sometimes refer to Bible

characters without an adequate appreciation of their place in the history of redemption. Certainly it would be wrong to preach on David and Goliath and conclude that all believers have the power to kill literal giants (cf. Horton, 148-49). But that is just to say that Scripture passages must be understood in the context of the whole Bible. It certainly does not forbid all use of Bible characters as examples.

Horton should have thought about this enough to understand that there is an opposite extreme. I once had occasion to sit for some months under the preaching of a couple of Horton's students. Their sermons typically developed some too-clever way at making their text 'point to Christ.' Beyond that, they offered no illustrations, no applications except a general 'repent and believe.' I hope Horton doesn't regard this kind of preaching as ideal. But had he merely recognized that there were two extremes he would not have used rhetoric that condemned only one, but would have tried to do some careful analysis to define a middle position.

### **8. Redemption and Other Things**

Not only does Horton draw a dichotomy between redemption and morals, but also between redemption and a number of other subjects. He says,

The central message of Christianity is not a worldview, a way of life, or a program for personal and societal change; it is a gospel. (105)

Gospel, he says, is 'an announcement of something that someone else has already achieved for us' (105). Now we have already seen that Scripture also includes imperatives under 'gospel,' the command to repent and believe in Christ. Other questions also arise. Given all the books, chapters, and pages in Scripture, very few of them are devoted to 'announcement of something that someone else [Jesus, of course - JF] has already achieved for us,' if only because that achievement was accomplished only at the end of Jesus' earthly life. Before that, there were many other things (creation, redemptive history, Psalms, wisdom literature, prophecy), but no gospel in Horton's sense, though certainly their fundamental purpose is to anticipate the gospel. Further, the books of the New Testament from Acts to

Revelation are not mere announcements of Jesus' work. As we have seen, they *apply* the work of Jesus to various aspects of human life.

I'm willing to say that the gospel, as Horton defines it,<sup>6</sup> is the most important content of Scripture, but it is by no means the only content of Scripture. For one thing, I'm disappointed that Horton disparages 'worldview' as a content of Scripture. As a Professor of Apologetics, he of all people should understand that the Bible presents a worldview that is utterly unique among all the religions and philosophies of the world. No other system of thought recognizes that the world is created out of nothing by a supreme being who is both absolute and personal (tri-personal!) and who relates to his creatures as lord.<sup>7</sup> Most non-Christians have no idea that the Bible contains a distinctive metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. And if the gospel (the *gospel!*) is to be presented to them clearly, they must understand that it presupposes a way of thinking about the world that is unique in the history of thought. In one sense, then, worldview is part of the gospel. In another sense, worldview is the gospel's presupposition. But to speak, as Horton does, as if we must choose between the gospel and its worldview is to have a very abstract concept of gospel indeed.

And certainly, as I have shown, the gospel is also a program of personal and societal change. The gospel is not given simply to be understood, but to be obeyed (2 Thess. 1:8, 1 Pet. 4:17). A faith that does no good works is not true faith in the gospel (James 2:14-26). Many pages of the New Testament are given over to ethical teaching. And the gospel is not only a program for personal change, but for societal change as well. Scripture condemns over and over again the injustices of society: oppression of the poor, dishonoring of parents, murder, adultery, theft, corrupt courts that promote false witness.

This discussion is sometimes caught up in eschatological debate: is the Kingdom of God only future or is it in some sense present now? Sometimes it is waylaid by debates about the roles of church and state (as Horton's exposition of the 'two kingdoms' view on 206-217). But

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<sup>6</sup> If we give 'gospel' a broader definition, as I did earlier in this review, it is possible to say that all Scripture is gospel. But it is similarly possible to say that all Scripture is law, worldview, ethical guidance, etc.

<sup>7</sup> I have expounded this worldview in many places, such as the first seven chapters of my *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

apart from these debates, isn't it obvious that when people come to trust in Christ they seek to bring biblical standards to bear in their workplaces? Paul says, 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' (1 Cor. 10:31) Can we possibly exclude from 'whatever' our work in politics, the arts, or finance? And can we possibly forbid the church to give us guidance in our attempts to improve society?

What does it mean to be engaged in politics to the glory of God? That is not always easy to define. I would agree with Horton that Christians often exaggerate their expertise on social issues; sometimes nonbelievers can do a better job of gathering the relevant facts. But if I am charged with the work of planning national health care, I certainly must ask how biblical principles apply to that. When a believer produces a sculpture, it may be difficult for him to see how his faith is relevant to each stroke of his tool; but he certainly doesn't want critics referring to it as a symptom of modern nihilism.

Horton here again is arguing for an emphasis, certainly; I cannot believe he intends to absolutely prohibit the use of Scripture to guide us in 'secular' activities. But as he presents his argument, he gives no encouragement at all to Christians who are seeking to apply their faith to the world in which they live. Over and over again, he presents this task negatively, as one that doesn't deserve consideration, as opposed to his rather abstract conception of the gospel.

## 9. Giving and Receiving

Horton also criticizes the view and practice of worship in the American church. He begins by distinguishing 'two scenarios:'

In the first, 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 giving life, death, and resurrection, and the Spirit's work of bringing life to the valley of dry bones through the proclamation of Christ... In this preaching the people once again are simply receivers—recipients of grace...(189)

In the second scenario, the church is its own subculture, an alternative community not only for weekly dying and rising in Christ but for one's entire circle of friends, electricians [JF:?], and neighbors. In this scenario, the people assume that they have come to church primarily to do

something. The emphasis is on their work for God. The preaching concentrates on principles and steps to living a better life, with a constant stream of exhortations: Be more committed. Read your Bible more. Pray more. Witness more. Give more. Get involved in this cause or that movement to save the world. Their calling by God to secular vocations is made secondary to *finding their ministry* in the church. (190)

In the first scenario, God gives and man receives. In the second scenario it is the reverse.

I think it was Kierkegaard who somewhere said that we should not think of worship as a performance of clergy with the congregation as audience, but as a performance of the congregation with God as audience. I have repeated this point in the past, but it amounts to the 'second scenario' that Horton condemns. I'm certainly willing to be corrected, and I think Horton has a point here. Certainly in worship God is at work: speaking to us in the word, nurturing us in the sacraments.

But surely that is not the whole story. The biblical words for worship, such as the Hebrew *abodah* and the Greek *leitourgia* are action verbs. They can be translated 'work,' and they refer originally to the work of priests. But in the New Testament, in Christ, believers are priests (1 Pet. 2:5, 9, Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6). Certainly, worshipers have responsibilities in worship, if only to sing God's praises with their whole heart and to respond to the word appropriately.

And beyond this, the New Testament says that all believers have gifts of the Spirit that are to be used in the ministry of the church (Rom. 12:4-9, 1 Cor. 12:4-14:25). Consequently, the picture of worship Paul presents in 1 Cor. 14:26-33) is not a picture of a clergyman standing in front of everybody, forbidding them to speak unless spoken to. It is rather a picture of the whole congregation participating, offering suggestions, bringing 'lessons'. Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews speaks of worship as a time when believers come together stir up and encourage one another (10:24-25; compare Col. 3:16). It is incomprehensible to me that Horton should discuss the participation of believers in the ministry of the church without discussing these passages, but so far as I can tell he does not.

My conclusion is that in worship, and indeed in the whole ministry of the church, there is both giving and receiving. Why, then, is Horton's account so imbalanced on the side of God's giving and

our receiving? Part of it is his commendable passion to exalt God's grace. But another part is what we discussed before, his erroneous view of the relation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Again, he seems to think that any significant role for human beings detracts from God's sovereignty, his grace. We saw earlier that this is not the case.

Certainly there are special responsibilities in the church that fall on ordained leaders, elders and deacons. But this does not relieve other believers of the responsibility to edify one another (Col. 3:16, Eph. 4:25, 29) and to represent Christ when we go into the world. As I indicated earlier, we all have a mandate to apply the word of God to the situations of our families and workplaces.

### **10. Christ and Other Things**

There is a tension in this book, perhaps even a contradiction, between two different messages. In the first, there is an antithesis between a focus on Christ and a focus on anything else, so that the latter necessarily compromises the former and puts us on the road to Christless Christianity. In the second, it is fine to focus occasionally on the other things, but not too often. The other things are good in their place, but they should not be overemphasized.

The first perspective leads to the alarming and (in my view) overheated rhetoric about Christlessness. The second leads Horton to backtrack on the rhetoric.

There is in fact a lot of backtracking in this book. I indicated at the beginning that Horton backtracks on his title: he doesn't really mean that the American church is Christless, only that it is headed that way. After criticizing the church for its emphasis on human fulfillment and happiness, he backtracks as follows:

By the way, I don't think this means that we simply write off the desire for fulfillment and happiness. The gospel neither meets our narcissistic goals nor denies the truth of which they are a perversion. (34)

He is rather vague, however, as to what the truth is of which our felt needs are a perversion. Nor does he explain why he thinks that the whole American church, when it promotes human happiness, is not presenting true redemptive happiness.



As I mentioned earlier, Horton tends to avoid discussions of sanctification in favor of references to justification. And when authors discuss human responsibility in sanctification, he interprets them as bringing in works righteousness. Yet he backtracks, '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.' (62)

This is very vague. What is the difference between these two options? Is it that in the first the person embraces Christ and immediately receives sanctification with no process, no spiritual battle? As I indicated earlier, I believe that is unbiblical. And what does it mean to 'begin with Christ and move on to something else?' Does that mean moving from Christ to some other savior and lord? If so, I would agree with Horton. In that case, you not only lose sanctification; you lose everything. But if it means 'begin with Christ and move on to his influence in all the areas of life,' I can't concur with his judgment. And I think that many of the people Horton condemns actually fall under this category.

More backtracking: We have seen that Horton is very critical of any talk of a personal, inner relationship with Christ. But then he says,

It is the Spirit who convicts us inwardly of our sin and drives us outside of ourselves to Christ, not only in the message of the gospel to which he testifies, but in the creaturely, public, and external means that he employs to do so. In this way, Christ and his saving work not only remain outside of us but penetrate our hearts so deeply that we are truly transformed and continually transformed by his grace. Therefore, intimacy and personal fellowship with Christ by his Spirit through the means of grace are not eliminated but secured—but without simply collapsing Jesus into our inner experience. (184)

This is a fine statement, but surprising. Horton evidently has not reflected how this concession affects his critiques of supposed Gnostics elsewhere in the book. Certainly Horton has not taken pains to show that the people he criticizes would disagree with it, or that their practice disagrees with it. Perhaps his point is that they don't stress sufficiently the external character of the gospel and the means of grace. But it does not seem to me that the American church is oblivious to the means of grace. Nor do I think it biblical to think that the gospel can come only through public proclamation and not also

through personal Bible reading and prayer.

After criticizing evangelical worship for emphasizing commands rather than grace, he qualifies his point, 'Of course we do receive exhortations in Scripture, and therefore this must be a part of public worship. Law without gospel, however, is death (2 Cor. 3:5-18).' (191) But his argument in context is simply based on the presence of law in this worship, not the absence of gospel (a negative that would be very hard to prove).

The pattern in the above backpedaling passages is that Horton moves from a mood of absolute condemnation to a mood of granting some truth in the other position. The other position would be fine, he seems to think, if it is properly related to Christ. He is making now a *subtle* point. But he has not given enough thought either to the issue or to the people he criticizes to show that they have not actually missed his subtle point, that they have somehow not properly related law to gospel.

So Horton leaves us uncertain as to whether the practices he condemns in the American church contradict the gospel, or whether they are good practices that could be improved with some greater degree of gospel emphasis.

In my view, the key to this is to think, not in terms of 'Christ and other things,' as Horton does, but of 'Christ and the applications of his work.' The relationships between Christ and other things vary considerably, and are very complex. Horton does not succeed in giving us anything near an adequate presentation of this complexity. But in regard to 'Christ and the applications of his work,' the matter is clear. This formula unambiguously sets forth the content of Scripture and the entire work of the church. Anything the church does that fails to serve and promote Christ and the applications of his work is indeed Christless, and a church that fails to promote Christ and the applications of his work is truly apostate. Any church that refuses to implement an application of Christ's work compromises the truth of Scripture.

Yet the phrase 'Christ and the applications of his work' also implies a hierarchy of focus or emphasis. Some applications are more central than others, and they ought to receive more attention in the church. Justification by grace through faith alone is a central application; the mode of baptism is less central, though advocates of

one particular mode will see it as an application of Christ's work.

To speak of 'Christ and the applications of his work' is not to speak of two different things. For there is no Christ without these applications. To believe in Christ is to believe in the Christ of Scripture, the Christ who became incarnate, taught, worked miracles, died as our sacrifice, was raised to glory, and will come again to judge the living and the dead. It is also to believe that his atonement secures our effectual calling, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. So it secures the Spirit's presence in order that we may serve Christ and receive his guidance in all areas of life. To believe in Christ is to believe in all of this, and also to believe in the law of love, his new commandment to his disciples (John 13:34-35). To believe in Christ is to seek his glory in all areas of life (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1).

### **Conclusion**

I usually don't review books at this length. But I have noticed that the theology of this book is becoming more influential in evangelical and Reformed circles, and I believe there is danger in that. I say that despite the fact that I agree with the book about many things. Most relevantly, I agree with Horton that the evangelical church needs to put more emphasis on man's sin and the saving grace of Christ, less emphasis on what Horton regards as other things and what I regard as the lower-priority applications of Christ's work. But he thinks this wrong emphasis is so bad as to put the church in imminent danger of Christless apostasy. I do not.

Horton's alarmism is persuasive to many people, and I have been moved to try to show them their persuasion is premature. The problem is that the yardstick Horton uses to measure the American church's allegiance to Christ is not an accurate yardstick. Or, to drop the metaphor, Horton measures the American church with a defective theology.

He comes on to the reader as a generic Protestant Christian with a passion for the historic doctrines of the atonement and of justification by faith alone. He writes engagingly. Naturally, then, other Protestants tend to resonate to his arguments. But Horton is not just a generic Protestant or even a generic Reformed theologian.

As we have seen, Horton's argument depends on ideas that cannot be justified by Scripture, or by the classic Protestant confessions. Some of these are:

1. Attention to ourselves necessarily detracts from attention to Christ.
2. We should not give attention to the way we communicate the gospel, or to making it relevant to its hearers.
3. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are a zero-sum game. The idea that man must do something compromises the absolute sovereignty of God.
4. God's work of salvation is completely objective, external to us, and not at all subjective, internal to us. (Here he backtracks some.)
5. God promises us no earthly blessings, only heavenly ones, and to desire earthly blessings is a 'theology of glory,' deserving condemnation.
6. Law and gospel should be utterly separate. There should be no good news in the bad news and no bad news in the good news.
7. Preaching of the gospel must never use biblical characters as moral or spiritual examples. Nor must it address practical ethical issues in the Christian life.
8. A focus on redemption excludes a focus on anything else.
9. In worship and in the general ministry of the church, God gives and does not receive; the congregation receives and does not give.
10. Analysts of the church must compare the Church's focus on Christ with its focus on other things, rather than considering that many of these other things are in fact applications of Christ's own person and work.

Horton, as we've seen, does not follow these principles consistently; he often backtracks from his more radical positions. But his overall critique of the American church loses all probability unless it presupposes these principles. But not one of them is found in any Reformed confession. (#6 is found in the Lutheran confessions, but it is controversial among other Protestants.) And in my view, none of them are Scriptural.

So *Christless Christianity* is essentially an evaluation of the American church, not from the standpoint of a generic Protestant theology, but from what I must regard as a narrow, factional, even

sectarian perspective. Readers need to understand this. If we remove #1-10 as measuring sticks for the American church, the church does not look nearly as bad as Horton presents it.

There is great danger here of further division within the body of Christ, as if there were not already enough. Arguments over redemptive-historical preaching (#7) have already split congregations apart. When one group presents these principles as the only orthodox position, but others (understandably) are not convinced, and the principles themselves are often unclear, we have a recipe for disaster.

And the church would do well, in my judgment, *not* to add principles #1-#10 to its creed. The results could include intentional irrelevance (#1-#2), especially on social matters (#5, #7, #8), Christian passivity (#3, #9), intellectualism and impersonalism in our relation to God (#4, #9), artificiality in preaching, not drawing on the richness of Scripture (#2, #6-#8), elimination of lay ministry (#9), and poor theological analyses and evaluations of the church (#10).

Horton has mounted a critique of the American church with the most serious implications. He says that if we continue in our ways we will lose the gospel and Christ himself. But he utters these warnings from a position that almost nobody considers normative. He is saying that unless the church comes to emphasize exactly what he does, what his factional position dictates, it will soon be without Christ or the Gospel. I cannot regard that position as having any plausibility at all.

So I must render a negative verdict on this book, though commending the author's passion for the purity of the church and for the gospel. In doing this, I must disagree with many friends and respected colleagues, who have commended this volume lavishly. They should have known better.

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