

Where To Look When You're In Trouble

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A shift has taken place in the Evangelical church with regard to the way we think about the gospel—and it's far from simply an ivory tower conversation. This shift effects us on the ground of everyday life.

In his book *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, famed Dutch Theologian Herman Ridderbos (1909 – 2007) summarizes this shift which took place following Calvin and Luther. It was a sizable but subtle shift which turned the focus of salvation from Christ's external accomplishment to our internal appropriation:

While in Calvin and Luther all the emphasis fell on the redemptive event that took place with Christ's death and resurrection, later under the influence of pietism, mysticism and moralism, the emphasis shifted to the individual appropriation of the salvation given in Christ and to its mystical and moral effect in the life of the believer. Accordingly, in the history of the interpretation of the epistles of Paul the center of gravity shifted more and more from the forensic to the pneumatic and ethical aspects of his preaching, and there arose an entirely different conception of the structures that lay at the foundation of Paul's preaching.

Donald Bloesch made a similar observation when he wrote, "Among the Evangelicals, it is not the justification of the ungodly (which formed the basic motif in the Reformation) but the sanctification of the righteous that is given the most attention."

With this shift came a renewed focus on the internal life of the individual. The subjective question, "How am I doing?" became a more dominant feature than the objective question, "What did Jesus do?" As a result, generations of Christians were taught that Christianity was primarily a life-style; that the essence of our faith centered on "how to live"; that real Christianity was demonstrated in the moral change that took place inside those who had a "personal relationship with Jesus." Our ongoing performance for Jesus, therefore, not Jesus' finished performance for us, became the focus of sermons, books, and conferences. What I need to do and who I need to become, became the end game.

Believe it or not, this shift in focus from "the forensic to the pneumatic", from the external to the internal, has enslaving practical consequences.

When you're on the brink of despair—looking into the abyss of darkness, experiencing a dark-night of the soul—turning to the internal quality of your faith will bring you no hope, no rescue, no relief. Every internal answer will collapse underneath you. Turning to the external object of your faith, namely Christ and his finished work on your behalf, is the only place to find peace, re-orientation, and help. The gospel always directs you to something, Someone, *outside* you instead of to something *inside* you for the assurance you crave and need in seasons of desperation and doubt. The surety you long for when everything seems to be falling apart won't come from discovering the

dedicated "hero within" but only from the realization that no matter how you feel or what you're going through, you've already been discovered by the "Hero without."

As Sinclair Ferguson writes in his book *The Christian Life*:

True faith takes its character and quality from its object and not from itself. Faith gets a man out of himself and into Christ. Its strength therefore depends on the character of Christ. Even those of us who have weak faith have the same strong Christ as others!

By his Spirit, Christ's continuing subjective work in me consists of his constant, daily driving me back to his completed objective work for me. Sanctification feeds on justification, not the other way around. To be sure, both doctrine and devotion go hand in hand, but the gospel is the good news announcing Christ's devotion to us, not our devotion to him. The gospel is not a command to hang onto Jesus. Rather, it's a promise that no matter how weak your faith may be in seasons of spiritual depression, God is always holding on to you.

Martin Luther had a term for the debilitating danger that comes from locating our hope in anything inside us: *monstrum incertitudinis* (the monster of uncertainty). It's a danger that has always plagued Christians since the fall but especially Christians in our highly subjectivistic age. And it's a monster that can only be destroyed by the external promises of God in Jesus.

Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is a bonafide peace that's built on a real change in status before God—from standing guilty before God the judge to standing righteous before God our Father. This is the objective custody of even the weakest believer. It's a peace that rests squarely on the fact that we've already been "reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (v. 10), justified before God once and for all through faith in Christ's finished work. It will surely produce real feelings and robust action, but this peace with God that Paul describes rests securely on the work of Christ for us, outside us. The truth is, that the more I look into my own heart for peace, the less I find. On the other hand, the more I look to Christ and his promises for peace, the more I find.

So, when pressed in on every side, look up. In God's economy, the only way out is always up, not in.