

The Wrong Use of ‘You’

I might call this an appalling use of ‘you’. This first use – the modern emphasis on ‘you’ – speaks of a gospel which is man-centred and not God-centred.

Let me give an example of what I am talking about. Consider this meme.¹ The following words (the upper case is original) were inscribed on a piece of ‘art’ – a graphic picture of Christ, thorn-crowned, resting his cheek against the wood of the cross. I presume it was posted on the internet for all to see:

Jesus² did not solely die on the cross – he died for you.
EVERY drop of his blood was shed for YOU. Every step,
every humiliation, every strike, every whip, every mocking,
every piercing nail... YOU WERE ALWAYS ON HIS
MIND.

What do you think of that?

For a start, I dissent from Christ’s sacrifice being presented as a general redemption. But – even if the words are treated as particular to the elect – is the sentiment altogether healthy? Is this the way Scripture speaks of the death of Christ? In addition to the excessive emphasis on the details of the physical sufferings of Christ,³ is it not a bit too heavy on the individual, the personal, the ‘you’?

That’s one example of what I am talking about.

¹ A meme is a photograph or picture with a caption. Posted on the internet, memes can spread their message like wildfire; in today’s jargon, they can go viral.

² In what follows, do miss the modern way of speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ as ‘Jesus’. Of course, it is perfectly scriptural to talk of ‘Jesus’, but I am afraid that the contemporary lack of the use of ‘the Lord’ and ‘Christ’ frequently has sinister overtones.

³ It reminds me of the Moravian emphasis on the physical sufferings of Christ.

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And what about the Gadarene rush⁴ shown by churches which are buying into the prescription now being disseminated with vigour – the principle that we must go to the world, find out how it gets ‘success’ – defined in terms such as heavier footfall in the mall, more customers (credit card in hand) at the till, improved product consumer-satisfaction ratings, seeing off the competition, the winning of sports trophies, or whatever – and, having found what ‘works’ for the world, putting its principles into practice in the church? I am referring to those who think the business of the church – and ‘business’ is the proper word for it – is to market the gospel for its community customers.⁵ I am speaking of ‘seeker-friendly’ churches – those who put the pagan man or woman of ‘the community’ at the centre of the universe.⁶

In short, I am speaking of the way evangelicalism is being radically altered as an increasing number of churches adopt the principles and practices set out by teachers who are promulgating the re-engineering of *ekklēsia* life.⁷

Let me say a little more about this ‘re-engineering’ of the ‘church’.

I start by giving the church its proper, scriptural name, an *ekklēsia*; this is what we are supposed to be talking about. Modern evangelicals are radically – root and branch – altering the church, turning it into the forum *par excellence* to attract unbelievers into long-term attendance at, and

⁴ That is, headlong (Mark 5:13).

⁵ See my *Relationship; Attracting; ‘Why Are You Following Christ?’; ‘A Vital Lesson For Today’; ‘This Place Needs a Church Plant’; ‘Turn or Turn Up?’; ‘The “O” Word’; ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’; ‘Cleansing the Temple Today’; ‘A Glance into the Abyss: Modern Evangelicals Warned’; ‘Letting William Dell Speak Today’*.

⁶ I also include prosperity-gospel teachers. See my *Beyond*.

⁷ Incidentally, as I pointed out in *Relationship* – in which I engage with Ray Evans, a leading exponent (in the UK) of this trend – ‘re-engineering’ is one of his favourite words.

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participation in, its activities, and all in order to evangelise them.

This is utterly foreign to Scripture. It is pure Christendom-speak. The very word chosen by God to describe the saints and their gatherings – the *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’ – precludes any such thought. There is no evidence in Scripture of any protracted ‘church attendance’ by unbelievers. Moreover, it is clear that the first believers would never have encouraged such a practice. There is not the slightest suggestion that the early churches engaged in this kind of activity. And as for the early churches adopting pagan principles and practices in order to attract pagans to its meetings – and blazoning the fact abroad – words fail!

Consequently, since Scripture knows nothing whatsoever of this modern process, inevitably, in order to attract pagans, the ‘re-engineers’ have to go to the world – to pagans – to learn from them, to ape them, and so devise extensive programmes to attract and hold pagans while they [that is, the pagans] are being evangelised. Hence such churches put great stress on the carnal – food, entertainment, accountancy techniques, business methods, dumbing down the gospel, and all the rest, all performed with zeal and professional polish. Naturally – and ‘naturally’ is the very word – all this pagan razzmatazz is necessary if the church and its schemes are to appeal to pagans.

Let me give just one example of the sort of change I am talking about. The Bible speaks of the necessity of regeneration and conversion (Matt. 13:15; 18:3; John 3:3-8; 12:40; Acts 3:19; 28:27; Jas. 5:19-20; 1 Pet. 1:23, for instance), calling the unconverted ‘unbelievers’, pagans, and the like. Modern evangelicals, however, seem shy of using such terms; they are, after all, offensive to the natural man and will only put off prospective customers! Modern evangelicals realise this, of course, and so prefer such euphemisms as the ‘de-churched’, or the ‘unchurched’. This is but one example – but a very, very serious example – of

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how all must be made to bow and bend to meet the stated goal; namely, attracting unbelievers into church attendance. The ultimate motive is good, I grant – at least, it is good if that aim is to see the unregenerate regenerated, sinners saved, the unconverted converted, pagans made into true believers – but the method, I repeat, is utterly unscriptural. Indeed, I fear that mere conformity to modern-church norms, mere attendance at church activities, mere production of more Christendom-Christians, is now the aim; well, if it is not the deliberate aim, with the present rate of decline, it will be the inevitable result!

There is much more that needs to be said about this – and in my aforesaid works I have tried to say some of it. If you are not up to speed with what I am talking about, reader, before you go on with this booklet, please consult those works.

What has all this to do with the wrong use of 'you'?

In the literature produced by those who want to 're-engineer' the *ekklēsia* in order to attract pagans, do not miss the heavy use of *you* when such churches address 'the community' – what God will do for *you*, what he has done for *you*, what we can offer *you*, what we have and will set up for *you*. We, as a church, offer *you* programmes, schemes, activities, diversions all designed for *you*, tailored to meet *your* likes, in order to attract *you*, and make *you* feel at home among us. 'The church exists for *you*, it revolves around *you*' is their mantra. No! Let me state it as it is: 'The church exists for and revolves around YOU'!

I am not making it up!

Take this selection from the website of Grace Community Church, Kempston:

Welcome to Grace Community Church, Bedford. We're a thriving church made up of people from all walks of life, committed to loving God and loving people. Why not visit us one Sunday[?] – we'd love you to join us.

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You will find a friendly, welcoming atmosphere where things are explained clearly. The good news of Jesus is for everybody and our meetings are designed for absolutely anyone,⁸ from the interested observer to the committed follower.

Our Sunday meetings aim to have a worship style which combines the best of our Christian heritage with a contemporary edge. Our leaders are committed to explaining the Bible in a way which connects with modern life. We hope that you will benefit enormously from this.

We always have a time for a coffee and an opportunity to get to know people better after each of our services.

All are welcomed, regardless of background, level of interest, religious affiliation, or life circumstances. The church has a saying[:] 'No perfect people allowed'!

One life... what's it all about?

So many questions! Where did we come from? Where are we going? What's wrong with the world? How do we fix it? Sometimes our upbringing, our previous religious experience – or lack of it [-] or our constant busyness, mean we haven't stopped to think through our biggest questions about life.

We believe that Jesus stepped into our world and gave us answers to all of these big questions. [']Explore['] is a chance to take a closer look at what Jesus had to say, and discuss what you think.

The church, as a community of people who are followers of Jesus, is here to serve our wider community.

Such talk tells me that those addressed as 'you' are at the centre of the universe. It is all designed for 'you'.

By no stretch of the imagination is this example unique or the worst. Far from it! A growing number – almost exponential in growth? – of church websites seem to be in competition with each other in trying to appeal to and attract 'the unchurched'. In other words, the great business of the church is fast becoming the need to make itself attractive to

⁸ Do not miss this. This church designs its meetings for the community, the ungodly, pagans. Is this not a shocking confession? And in print!

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pagans, more attractive than the enterprise (another church) down the road.⁹

How very, very different is all this to Scripture! In the Bible, salvation, church – and everything else – is primarily for the glory of God, the glory of Christ specifically. Yes, even the salvation of sinners is for the glory of God. And an integral part of giving that glory to God is obedience to Christ. The business of the church is not to attract ‘the unchurched’, but to exalt God in and through Christ. This is severely threatened by the re-engineering of the *ekklēsia*.¹⁰

Let this sink in: the glory of God is the great theme of the Bible and all it reveals. Put ‘glory’ into a Bible-concordance search engine and see!

Remember the model prayer Christ taught his disciples. Yes, Christ included personal requests, but how did he begin? Like this:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:9-10).

⁹ See my ‘Cleansing’. The Vale Community Church and Kempston Grace Community Church are situated in localities just the proverbial stone’s throw apart. They are, therefore, inevitably in competition with each other, in competition for consumers. The latter church offers coffee at the *end* of its meetings, while the former offers coffee and fast food *during* most of its activities. Pagans will not be slow to evaluate the choice and, being mobile, it will not be surprising if they switch outlets to get the best offer – the best offer, that is, as they see it. If anybody objects to my terms, when I was involved in the possibility of starting a church in a certain town in California, a Reformed Baptist minister in a nearby town told me of his relief, when he discovered what was intended. He had feared, he said, ‘that you might be setting up shop [or stall – I forget which] here’.

¹⁰ See my ‘Glance’.

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God first! God must always be first. How did the LORD open his law and covenant with Israel at Sinai? With these words:

You shall have no other gods before me (Ex. 20:3).

It could not be plainer.

In previous generations, believers were persuaded of it. Take the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which opens – opens, mark you – with the question: ‘What is the chief end of man?’. Today’s answer – as supplied by the re-engineered *ekklēsia* – too often seems to be along the lines of self-fulfilment and personal enjoyment. The men of Westminster, however, saw fit to state: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever’. Yes, enjoy God – not enjoy yourself. ‘Enjoy’, too, has come to mean ‘have a good time’, but our forefathers thought more in terms of ‘take delight or pleasure in’ or ‘possess and benefit from’: ‘take delight in knowing God, and glorifying him in all we say and do’; that is the chief end, the great purpose, of all things – to glorify God. So the men of Westminster thought four centuries ago. Of far greater significance, so did the apostles! And it must be our way of thinking, too – and our practice! Specifically, the *ekklēsia* must reflect, teach and convey this overriding concern in all it says and does.

Take the natural world, its creation and maintenance:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Ps. 19:1).

Since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made (Rom. 1:20).

Think of the triune God’s great work of redemption – the work he decreed, planned, purposed, accomplished and, throughout this age, is now applying to his elect: surely, he expects – and has a sovereign right to expect – his people to respond in this way:

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[We must] do... all for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

Take John's Gospel. It is full of the glory of God in Christ (see John 1:14; 2:11; 7:18,39; 8:50; 9:3,40; 11:4,40; 12:16,23,28,41; 13:31-32; 14:13; 15:8;17:1-5,10,22,24, for instance). Whether it be Christ's incarnation and life, his miracle at the wedding, his healing of the blind man, his raising of Lazarus, or his great prayer, death and resurrection, all is declared to be for God's glory. The emphasis is not upon man's pleasure, not upon the healing of the body, not even upon the saving benefits of Christ's work accruing to those who believe, but the glory of God. All – all – is, must and will be for God's glory in Christ. Peter never forgot the lesson he learned through all this. So much so, when he was encouraging believers to be active in *ekklēsia* life, he had no doubt about its motive and goal; it can only be:

...in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 4:11).

And it is not only believers who will glorify God. God will be glorified even in his condemnation of the unbeliever (see Revelation 18 and 19, for instance). Everything – everything – must lead to this end, everything will lead to this end – the glory of God:

Oh, the depth of the riches and of [the] wisdom and [the] knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?' Or 'who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).

Yet the modern gospel puts man, not God, at the centre; it puts man's pleasure, satisfaction and sense of fulfilment before God's glory.

The modern gospel starts on the wrong foot by asking: 'Who are we?', rather than: 'Who is God? What does he demand?'

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What does he demand of us?'¹¹ 'Christ has come to fix your problems for you', seems to be the modern message. Man's desires are going up; God's demands are going down.

And it can be very subtle. The modern evangelical, even when he uses the old – that is, scriptural – language, can suck the meaning out of it, replacing God with man; more specifically, replacing God with self.

John Piper put his finger on the spot. He quoted Lesslie Newbigin:

I suddenly saw that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the centre was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that... I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, and not in the glory of God.¹²

Piper commented:

And, oh, have we slipped! How many [that is, how few – Piper was being ironical, rhetorical] are the churches today where the dominant experience is the precious weight of the glory of God?

Let me underline what Newbigin said:

I suddenly saw that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the centre was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that... I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, and not in the glory of God.

Notice how Newbigin was grieving that evangelicals put personal salvation in the forefront, even before God himself. The men of the modern gospel, however, put attracting and

¹¹ Do not miss this in the Kempston extract: 'One life... what's it all about?'

¹² Quoted by Tim Stafford: 'God's Missionary to Us', *Christianity Today*, Dec. 9th, 1996.

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amusing¹³ 'the community' through their programmes 'in church' top of the agenda, above God!

No wonder Piper could say:

And, oh, have we slipped! How many [that is, how few – Piper was being ironical, rhetorical] are the churches today where the dominant experience is the precious weight of the glory of God?

I make no apology for repeating that extract. Indeed, I echo and underline his words.

Bob Hayton was another to be stirred by the thought:

I read the above quote in John Piper's book *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (p118), and felt I just had to comment on it. Man-centeredness can be successfully cloaked in a religious and even conservative garb, and therefore it is even more dangerous.¹⁴

Spot on!

To continue. Piper referred to the debate which took place nearly 500 years ago between John Calvin and Cardinal Sadoleto:

Here's what Calvin said to the Cardinal: '[Your] zeal for heavenly life [is] a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God'. In other words, even precious truth about eternal life can be so skewed as to displace God as the centre and goal. And this was Calvin's chief contention with Rome. It comes out in his writings over and over again. He goes on and says to Sadoleto that what he should do – and what Calvin aims to do with all his

¹³ That is, providing interesting and enjoyable occupation – not necessarily something funny (but not excluding it, either). The word's derivation is both interesting and highly significant. It comes from the 'late 15th century (in the sense of "delude, deceive"): from the Old French *amuser* "to entertain, deceive", from *a-* (expressing causal effect) + *muser* "to stare stupidly"'.
¹⁴ Bob Hayton: 'Man-Centred Christianity?'

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life – is ‘set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God’.¹⁵

This reference to Calvin and Sadoleto merits further attention. Let me explain.

In 1539, Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, Cardinal Bishop of Carpentras, France, wrote to the magistrates and citizens of Geneva, urging them to return to the Roman Catholic faith. John Calvin replied. The polemical interchange between the two men hinged on the very issue I am raising here. Consequently, I want to quote from the exchange of letters between Sadoleto and Calvin. But before I do, having already quoted John Piper’s remarks, let me now quote Lester DeKoster’s comments on the debate between the two men. The issue in hand will be obvious at once:

Sadoleto pens a shrewdly calculating address to self-interest. More precious to each of us, he says, than any other possession is our immortal soul or everlasting self; more crucial, therefore, than any other decision we can make is that governing our final destiny. Shall we live for ever in the presence of God or endure the torments of hell?

Such is the papist position. Our first concern must be ourselves, our everlasting destiny, our eternal salvation. This trumps everything. In other words, self-interest is in the driving seat. It is all about ‘me’; things have become egotistical.

Before I set out DeKoster’s comments, let me point out how far we have degenerated from the papist position. Let me repeat that; it bears repetition. We have degenerated from the papist position of Calvin’s day! The papists at that time were concerned with the sinner’s eternal welfare. Today’s gospel, however, is designed to satisfy ‘the community’s’ present needs (as seen by ‘the community’, that is) – needs or desires such as dealing with money, provision of fast food,

¹⁵ John Piper: ‘The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and His Preaching’.

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entertainment, diversions, fun, the fixing of problems, and such like! Oh, and heaven at the end – as long as we attend the courses the church has designed for us, tick the boxes, and sign up to Jesus! Today's fleeting pleasures, nevertheless, rule the roost! And contemporary evangelical churches and their leaders encourage it!

But why are we surprised? In the last letter he penned, Paul warned us to expect it:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2 Tim. 3:1-4).

He had already spoken of it. When writing to the Philippians he referred to those who have 'minds set on earthly things' (Phil. 3:19).

Paul further warned us that pagans will want – and find – teachers who will oblige them in their craving for carnal satisfaction:

The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions [or desires], and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Such are the days in which we live.

To return to Calvin and Sadoletto. In reply to the papist, said DeKoster:

Calvin sounds the keynote of the Reformed understanding of Christianity by immediately discounting self-interest (even self-interest in heaven) as sound motivation. Man is made by God, for God's purposes in history. The Bible is replete with evidence that God's purposes may not accord with man's conception of immediate advantage. By obtruding itself between God's will and man's response, self-interest becomes reaction, and leads to repression and stultification.

DeKoster broadened the point:

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The Cardinal's Church [that is, the Roman Catholic Church] has placed its own interests above those of both God and [the] believer, and stands against reformation and progress.¹⁶

So much for DeKoster's comments on the debate. You can see its contemporary relevance.

Now to let the two protagonists have their say.

First, Sadoletto. Remember, he was writing to the magistrates and citizens of Geneva:

That we may begin with what we deem most seasonable, I presume, dearest brethren, that both you and I, and all else besides who have put their faith and hope in Christ, do, and have done so, for this one reason; that is, that they may obtain salvation for themselves and their souls – not a salvation which is mortal, and will quickly perish, but one which is ever-during [that is, everlasting] and immortal, which is truly attainable only in heaven, and by no means on earth.

In other words, the only reason – not merely the prime reason, please note – the only reason we trust Christ is that thereby we obtain salvation. No other motive comes into it.

Sadoletto pressed on, hammering home this notion of self-interest:

How important it is, how deeply it concerns us to secure our soul and its salvation, because our soul is our whole selves, is properly our good and only good, while all other goods are foreign to us, and disjoined from us, and cannot in any degree be enjoyed, if we fail of obtaining this, which is first and truly ours. In order to defend and preserve the interest of their souls, so many most glorious martyrs of Christ in former times have cheerfully laid down this mortal life.

¹⁶ Lester DeKoster in his 'Foreword' to John C.Olin (ed.): *A Reformation Debate: John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto...*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp1-2.

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He continued:

Since these things are so, dearest brethren, since our salvation, since our true life, since eternal felicity, since ourselves, in short, ought to be, in the first place, and above all things, dear to us, since if we lose ourselves we shall never more find anything that is truly ours – that is, to delight or belong to us – since no heavier loss, no more fatal evil, no more dreadful calamity, can befall us than the loss and perdition of our souls, how great zeal, I ask, with what care and anxiety of mind, ought we to guard against exposing our life and salvation to this great danger? You will surely grant and concede to me that nothing more pernicious and fearful can happen to anyone than the loss of his soul. I presume you will therefore grant also that there is no event against the occurrence of which we ought to guard with greater zeal and diligence.¹⁷

Calvin replied:

As to your preface, which, in proclaiming the excellence of eternal blessedness, occupies about a third part of your letter, it cannot be necessary for me to dwell long in reply. For although commendation of the future and eternal life is a theme which deserves to be sounded in our ears by day and by night, to be constantly kept in remembrance, and made the subject of ceaseless meditation, yet I know not for what reason you have so spun out your discourse upon it here, unless it were to recommend yourself by giving some indication of religious feeling. But whether, in order to remove all doubt concerning yourself, you wished to testify that a life of glory seriously occupies your thoughts, or whether you suppose that those to whom you wrote required to be excited and spurred on by a long commendation of it (for I am unwilling to divine what your intention may have been), it is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God.

Calvin was saying that he was unable to fathom Sadoletto's motive in stressing self-interest. He rather thought that he

¹⁷ Olin pp32,36,38.

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was trying to show how 'spiritual' he was. Leaving that to one side, however, for Sadoleto to encourage men to cultivate and gratify self-interest as their prime motive – actually, as we have seen, Sadoleto had talked of self-interest as the *only* motive for man – makes him, Sadoleto, guilty of abominable ('not very sound') theology.

Calvin went on:

For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves. As all things flowed from him, and subsist in him, so, says Paul (Rom. 11:36), they ought to be referred to him.

Calvin, of course, was not denying that the gospel does call upon sinners to trust Christ for salvation, nor that everlasting salvation is a benefit whose worth cannot be overstated. But this is where we need to be scripturally clear and precise:

I acknowledge, indeed, that the Lord, the better to recommend the glory of his name to men, has tempered zeal for the promotion and extension of it, by uniting it indissolubly with our salvation. But since he has taught that this zeal ought to exceed all thought and care for our own good and advantage, and since natural equity also teaches that God does not receive what is his own unless he is preferred to all things, it certainly is the part of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul. I am persuaded, therefore, that there is no man imbued with true piety, who will not consider as insipid that long and laboured exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God. But I readily agree with you that, after this sanctification [of the name of God], we ought not to propose to ourselves any other object in life than to hasten towards that high calling; for God has set it before us as the constant aim of all our thoughts and words and actions. And, indeed, there is nothing in which man excels the lower animals unless it be his spiritual communion with God in the hope of a blessed eternity. And

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generally, all we aim at in our discourses is to arouse men to meditate upon it and aspire to it.¹⁸

Yes, said Calvin, of course, the desire for eternal bliss is a great motive, a biblical motive, and sinners must be urged and encouraged to trust Christ for salvation. Yes, but, even in this they must be made to realise that all things – not least, their eternal salvation – are for the glory of God. *That* must be the motive of all motives for all things.

And that, too often, is the missing note today. The modern gospel puts 'you' – not God – at the centre, the welfare of man before the exaltation of the triune God. Indeed, it gives me, at least, the impression of putting religious-but-fundamentally-carnal satisfaction above the glory of God. Recent research conducted in the USA has discovered that this is now an identifiable mindset amongst teenagers. As Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, on the basis of their research, commented:

What appears to be the actual dominant religion among US teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.¹⁹

And, of course, it does not stop with teenagers! Is it any wonder such people have arrived at such a distorted view of God? Distorted? Yes, indeed. This modern approach has been dubbed 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism'. For 'moralistic', read 'noble, upright, decent, principled', and for 'Therapeutic', read 'beneficial, health-giving'. The Deist god is benign and distant. Deism has been described as 'enlightened emptiness'; more precisely, it has been said that Deism holds that:

¹⁸ Olin pp58-59.

¹⁹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Eyes of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, 2005, quoted by Albert Mohler: 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism – the New American Religion'.

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1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.²⁰

For a growing number, this is fast becoming authentic Christianity.

In the following extract from a sermon by Rick Peterson, for 'America' read 'much of the West'. His trenchant comments get to the heart of the matter:

Many today would also follow [the Lord] Jesus [Christ], except they are too busy to do so right now (Luke 14:15-24). Consequently, 'another gospel' (so-called) has to be created for such people; a gospel in which following [the Lord] Jesus [Christ] is simply not required. There is no 'leave all, rise up, and follow [the Lord] Jesus [Christ]' in modern, American Christianity. 'Just ensure I will get to heaven when I die'. This was the cry of the first-century 'righteous', also. 'Just tell me what I must do to inherit eternal life' (Luke 18:18-23). It is following [the Lord] Jesus [Christ] that defines a disciple, not the desire for heaven. But that's the deal offered by American, moralistic religion: believe in Jesus; do your religious duty (especially financial giving), and you will go to heaven when you die. And, of course, the church will do its best to entertain and inspire you between now [and] until the time you go to heaven. This brand of religion is a stench in the nostrils of God, just like that of the apostate religion of ancient Israel (Isa. 65:5). And it is a stench for God because it deflects our attention away from [the Lord] Jesus [Christ] and back upon ourselves.²¹

²⁰ See Wikipedia.

²¹ Rick Peterson: 'New Wine in New Wineskins'.

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If I may add a personal note. I recall the reaction, several years ago, to my address at the baptising service of a young man recently converted (he is still going on in Christ). His brother, a modern evangelical, complained that my discourse was too solemn. I had taken as my text the words of Christ: 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (Luke 9:23). Too solemn, indeed!

How much and how grievously the unbeliever who participates in the modern church activities loses by all this! He might, no doubt, be satiated with sausage rolls, awash with coffee, feel perfectly at ease in the church, be assured of getting the last rites in death²² (if he ever thinks about it, or, under the modern regime, is ever confronted with it) – yet all the time he is on the broad road that leads to destruction, introduced to it and kept there by the church, which does all it can to encourage him to continue to stride out along that broad road, sleep walking into eternity, sausage roll in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other, and a free Sunday newspaper (given him in church) tucked in his pocket!

* * *

And it is not only the unbeliever that suffers; consider how the modern gospel and the 're-engineered' church treats believers.

Let me start with something written a hundred years ago by Oswald Chambers, who surely hit the nail on the head when he said:

If I brood on the cross of Christ, I do not become a subjective pietist, interested in my own whiteness; [rather,] I become dominantly concentrated on Jesus Christ's interests.²³

²² See my *Deceit*.

²³ Oswald Chambers: 'The Consecration Of Spiritual Energy'.

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What did Chambers mean when he spoke of not becoming 'a subjective pietist'? Pietists²⁴ stressed scriptural doctrine in combination with individual devotion to God through Christ *and* a vigorous life of progressive sanctification. Chambers was rightly arguing that believers make spiritual progress when they set their hearts and minds – not on self, their interest, their liberty, and so on – but on Christ.

The relevance of this to us is obvious at once. Today, a growing number of believers not only do not talk in terms of piety,²⁵ but the concept does not even appear on their radar; rather, their great concern is their self-esteem, their sense of fulfilment, their happiness, their well-being. This is not the manner in which Scripture speaks! This modern doctrine will not produce Christ-likeness. Christ-likeness is God's ultimate end in the salvation of his elect (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:21). Christ – not man – is all (Col. 3:11).

In 1869, John McCarthy wrote to James Hudson Taylor:

How then [are we] to have our faith increased? Only by thinking of all that [the Lord] Jesus [Christ] is, and all that he is for us. His life, his death, his work, he himself as revealed to us in the word, [is] to be the subject of our constant thoughts. Not striving to have faith, or to increase our faith, but a looking off to the faithful one, seems all we need; a resting in the loved one entirely, for time and eternity.²⁶

Incidentally, when the modern teachers do eventually wake up to what their system is producing, I have no doubt that they will do as others have done so often in the past, and revert to legal preaching to try to drum up some sort of

²⁴ Pietism originated in Germany in the late 17th century with Philipp Jakob Spener.

²⁵ The thesaurus for 'piety' suggests 'goodness, faithfulness, godliness, holiness, piousness, devoutness, obedience', and such like.

²⁶ Ruth Broomhall: *James Hudson Taylor: Called by God into the Heart of the Dragon*, CWR, Farnham, 2018, pp148,226.

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conformity by believers to the biblical pattern of Christ. But that, too, will fail. Law will never produce Christ-likeness.²⁷

But to return to the present. Take those courses which are set up for believers, courses which address those taking part in terms of *your* liberty, *your* satisfaction, *your* fun, *your* excitement, *your* fulfilment, *your* self-esteem. For instance, consider 'The Freedom in Christ' programme. Those who participate are confronted with this question right at the start:

Who am I?

Then comes:

What's it about?

Then:

OBJECTIVE: To realise that deep down inside we are now completely new creations in Christ, 'holy ones' who are accepted, secure, and significant.

After a while the participants are asked whether or not they are Christians, following which they are encouraged to become one, encouraged in terms such as these:

What is a Christian? Someone who chooses to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and has made a definite decision to put him in charge of their life. If you are not certain that you are a Christian or you know you are not, and you want to take that step, you can do it right now. It's not complicated. But it will transform you from the inside out. No one is too bad or has gone so far away from God that they are disqualified. It's open to absolutely everyone. No exceptions.

A model prayer is suggested:

Thank you, Jesus, Son of God, for dying in my place to take away all of my sin. Right now I accept your gifts of life and forgiveness. I choose to make you Lord of my life so that I can become someone completely new. Thank you that I am now your holy child and that I belong to you.

²⁷ See my *Four*.

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Whereupon those who have used the prayer are told:

If you have sincerely taken that step (whether you did it today or 80 years ago), all of the statements we read in the 'Who I Am In Christ' list now definitely apply to you!

And this list has these headings:

I am accepted. (I am..., I am..., I am...)

I am secure (I am free from..., I am assured that..., I am free from..., I cannot be...)

I am significant (I renounce the lie that..., [but] in Christ I am significant, I am...)

Those who have taken the step are encouraged to meet with a fellow-respondent and repeat the list the one to the other – and are advised on how to do it in order to make it effective, effective in ramming it home, enforcing and convincing each other of the truth of the statements in the list, and getting them both to feel the reality of those statements.

Moreover, the course goes on to speak of:

FOCUS TRUTH: Before we became Christians we were driven by the need to be accepted, secure and significant. Now, in Christ, we are spiritually alive children of God who are accepted, secure and significant.

The participants are encouraged to witness to others:

WITNESS: How do people generally try to deal with their strong need to feel accepted, significant and secure? How would you explain to a non-Christian neighbour that ultimately these are found only in Christ?

And so on.

The system gives me the unmistakable impression that the spiritual life of the believer revolves around his having a high view of his worth and significance, the believer himself being at the centre of the universe. Oh yes, Christ is spoken of, but the stress is on 'me', on 'self'.

The result, as David Wells said, is that:

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...God... [the] majestic and holy... being... has disappeared from the modern evangelical world.²⁸

In fact, I would go further and say that many evangelicals have virtually *removed* God from their system – or, at the very least, their system is lowering God.²⁹ It is not so much:

‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit’, says the LORD Almighty (Zech. 4:6).

As:

‘Not by might nor by power, but by my programmes’, says the gospel marketer.

And it is all playing into what makes the natural man tick. The natural man loves self. As Martin Luther said, the great pope is Pope Self.

Self is the essence of idolatry – what I can do, what I think I need. As Paul declared, sinners (putting his words in the present tense):

...exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve the creature [not least, self] rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

And as God said through Jeremiah:

I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshipping what their hands have made (Jer. 1:16; see also Isa. 2:8).

The modern church, looking to the world for its principles, is ending up with the world’s gods; that is, the idols of the age. And as Timothy Keller noted:

The idols... of Western cultures are individual freedom, self-discovery, personal affluence, and fulfilment.³⁰

²⁸ David F. Wells: *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1993, p300.

²⁹ See my ‘Glance’.

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Keller set out the pagan principle:

Most people spend their lives trying to make their heart's fondest dreams come true. Isn't that what life is all about, 'the pursuit of happiness'?³¹

But herein lies a warning note. Despite the above, Keller is a leading proponent of the very thing I am writing against!³² Principle and practice must be kept in step!

Alas, modern evangelicals use the church to encourage pagan desires and to satisfy them – which is nothing short of idolatry. Although the underlying motive may be good – evangelism of the unconverted (as I have said, I hope it still is) – the means employed amount to the encouragement of idolatry.

God through Jeremiah – who was raised as a prophet to rebuke Judah for its apostasy and idolatry – put his finger on the spot:

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so... (Jer. 5:30-31; see also Jer. 23:14; Hos. 6:10; Mic. 2:11).

The leaders were doing and teaching evil, leading the people into paganism and idolatry, and that was horrifying to God. Even worse – the crowning sin – God's professing people condoned the practice because they loved it so much!

Sad it is to say it, but I fear that many evangelicals today who are taking up the principles and practices being put forward by the 're-engineers' of the *ekklēsia* are doing so with such alacrity because – never mind what Scripture says, forget the doom-laden preachers' warnings – they love it that

³⁰ Timothy Keller: *Counterfeit Gods: When the Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down*, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., London, 2009, xix.

³¹ Keller p1.

³² See my *Relationship*.

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way, and that – so they try to kid themselves – excuses all. If so, they should remember the climax of God's complaint against Judah through the prophet:

...but what will you do when the end comes? (Jer. 5:30-31).

And it was not only Jeremiah! Scripture – God – always challenges and confronts idolatry and the love of it. God never panders to it, never accommodates to it. His word is replete with warnings against it – in both old and new covenants (Lev. 19:4; 26:1; 1 Sam. 15:23; 1 Kings 21:26; 2 Kings 17:12; Isa. 45:16; 48:5; Ezek. 23:7,30-39,49; 1 Cor. 5:10-11; 6:9; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Pet. 4:3; 1 John 5:21; Rev. 21:8; 22:15, for instance).

God is insistent:

I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols (Isa. 42:8).

And it was not only so in old-covenant days. God will never share his glory with those pagan principles and clever schemes countenanced by the world which are being imported into the *ekklēsia* today!

As he has said:

My glory I will not give to another (Isa. 48:11).

And the reason? As God had explained long before through Moses, he cannot abide men boasting in anything or someone other than himself; that is, when they say such things as:

...our hand is triumphant, it was not the LORD who did all this (Deut. 32:27).

No! But the fact is, when believers, having lost faith in the weapons that God has appointed for the advance of the gospel in the days of the new covenant (Zech. 4:6; 2 Cor. 10:3-5), run to the world to learn from them how to evangelise, and thus devise schemes based on pagan principles to organise that evangelism, their apparent success

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can so easily lead them to do as the pagans so often do and ascribe the glory to their cleverness and the smart systems they have devised (Hab. 1:15-16). As far as the ephemeral results go, they would, of course, be right to ascribe them to their works, but as for any real work of the Spirit – well, that will be in spite of their schemes, not because of them!

We need to be constantly reminded of Paul's declaration to the Romans, and make it our principle in everything:

None of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord (Rom. 14:7-8).

In short, everything should be – everything has to be, everything will be – for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

Let me summarise what I see as wrong with this first use of 'you':

- The modern gospel is more concerned with man (anthropology) than with God (theology).
- The modern gospel confuses 'needs' and 'wants'; it deals with our perceived desires, what we see as our 'needs', not, as it should, with what God requires of us.
- The modern gospel is designed to bring us a sense of satisfaction, fulfilment and pleasure, not to stress our duty to obey God's commands.
- The doctrine, preaching and church life of the modern gospel is geared – 'engineered' – to meet the consumers' desires. Consumers have to be satisfied. Their perceived needs must be met. Their perceived needs are paramount.
- The modern gospel will satisfy pagan pleasures; it will not produce lives transformed into Christ-likeness.

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- The modern gospel is a man-pleasing, not God-fearing, doctrine.
- The modern gospel majors on 'helpful' doctrine, 'helpful' practice, all leading to man's self-esteem and creature satisfaction.

Nothing highlights the contrast between the modern gospel and Scripture better than the way Paul set about telling the Romans what he meant by 'the gospel'. Where did he begin? With 'the community' and its perceived 'problems' – as perceived by them, that is? Not at all! He opened thus:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith' (Rom. 1:16-17).

And look how he went on:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned

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natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-32).

And so he went on...

Comment is surely superfluous. Compare the apostle's approach with the modern style. The contrast is stark!

Let me draw this section to a close with an illustration against myself. When I was taking my A level Physics practical examination in preparation for university, I had to do an experiment with a telescope. I was puzzling over it when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I glanced round to see the examiner pointing at the other end of the telescope! Too many people make that mistake when they read the Bible; they read it back to front, upside down. Too many – and, it seems to me, a growing number – set up their churches and preach the gospel like that. They start (and end) at the wrong end. They start and end with man; Scripture starts and ends with God. 'In the beginning God' (Gen. 1:1) is not just the opening phrase of Genesis, nor merely the start of the Bible. It is the start and end of all things – including the gospel; especially the gospel.

Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters (Rom. 8:29).

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Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14).

The day cannot dawn too soon for us to get back to the fundamental biblical principle that God, not man, is the centre and sum of the universe. Everything – and I mean everything – must be subservient to that!