

Cultural Christianity

August 3, 2014

We live in a world at war. Israel is at war with Hamas. Radical Islam flies planes into our buildings and blows up subway trains in Europe. One of our greatest fears is these warning factions get ahold of a WMD — a weapon of mass destruction.

I want to tell you about a weapon of mass destruction that can do more damage than most weapons in existence today. Historically, it is one of the greatest weapons of mass destruction. It is nothing more than a piece of paper, a counterfeit bill.

For almost 2,000 years countries tried to destabilize the economy of their enemies by spreading counterfeit currency. For example, during the Civil War, the north destabilized the south by spreading counterfeit Confederate currency. Jefferson Davis, president of the southern Confederacy, shared this to the Confederate congress in 1862.

“Soldiers of the invading armies are found supplied with large quantities of these forged notes as a means of despoiling the country people, by fraud out of such portions of their property as armed violence may fail to reach.”¹

One of the most effective ways to destroy a country by destroying confidence in its currency. Counterfeits work because they mimic the real deal but have no real value.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/1862/08/24/news/rebel-congress-message-jeff-davis-retaliation-upon-north-recommended-increase.html>

Today the same thing is happening in the church. There are counterfeit gospels that are destroying the church by mimicking the real deal but their subtle differences leave them with no real value.

In this series on *Alternatives to Christianity* we looked at world religions and false belief systems around us. The more we learned about them, the more obvious their counterfeit status became.

Today, as we finish up this series, we will look at another false belief system. It is such a good counterfeit to the gospel that it may have duped many of us into believing it.

About ten years ago, a sociologist named Christian Smith from the University of North Carolina did extensive research on 3,000 Christian teenagers and young adults across America.² He discovered most Christian teens and young adults that grew up in the church didn't believe in biblical Christianity. They believed in a close counterfeit to it called Cultural Christianity. To describe the subtle but important differences of this counterfeit he gave it a fancy name. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. That is a long name. Let me summarize what it means.

- **Deism** means God exists but he is not involved in everyday life. God is distant and doesn't care. Instead of being a father who is involved in the everyday life of his children, he is like a grandfather who only stops in a few times a year. When he visits, he gives gifts but for the most part is uninvolved in everyday life.

² <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>

- **Therapeutic** means God wants me to be happy. The purpose of life is not to honor God in the hard times and the good times. It is to have a good time. The purpose of life is to be happy. If I am not happy, something must be wrong. I am out of God's will.
- **Moralistic** means God wants me to be good. What matters is not my sin and my relationship with God but my good behavior. The goal of life is to be a good moral person, not to have our broken relationship with God restored.

This morning we will spend time looking at two parts of this counterfeit cultural Christianity that many of us inadvertently have bought into. We are going to look at Moralism and Therapeutism to see how these subtle counterfeits for the biblical gospel trick us.

The best way to spot a counterfeit is to spend time studying the real thing. As we finish up this series, which has talked about so many false religions and false gospels, let's begin by looking at the truth, the real gospel.

What is the gospel?

The gospel is an specific announcement about what God has done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to save us from our sin, restore us to a relationship with him and bring great glory to God's name through all of it.

One of the clearest statements of the gospel is found in 1 Corinthians 15.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 (ESV)

Interestingly, inserted with the gospel story are hints that this simple statement of truth doesn't stand alone. It is part of a bigger story. The good

news of Jesus happened *in accordance with the Scriptures*. There is a backstory to the main story. The Bible gives us the rest of the backstory to the simple gospel statement. Whenever we share the gospel today, I recommend we give the rest of the story that Jesus fits into. We are in a post Christian culture where people don't know the rest of the story. If they don't have the rest of the story it is easy to misunderstand the role Jesus plays in the main story so we can fall for counterfeit gospels. What I want to give you is a simple four step plan to share the gospel and give the rest of the story. Follow along with me.

Where did we come from? — Creation

[In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1 \(ESV\)](#)

The Bible starts off in Genesis by telling us God spoke. He created everything. He created the rabbits, elephants, horses, puppies, whales, catfish and lobster. He made everything and said it was good. For the last work of his creation God made two humans, Adam and Eve. They were the pinnacle of his creation. They were designed to live together in perfect relational harmony with one another and with God. Adam and Eve were to reflect God's glory and, like their creator, they were to rule over creation. The Bible says everything was good. Everything was right. The world was a place created for human flourishing where we could live with joy in the presence of our maker worshipping God, loving him and loving one another.

[Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Psalm 90:2 \(ESV\)](#)

Right from the beginning we see that God is powerful. God is not creation but he is over creation. God is not an impersonal force like in Star Wars but he is

personal. We were created to have a relationship with him. God is glorified by our submission to his gracious reign.

What has gone wrong? — Fall

Adam and Eve rejected God's rule. Because they represented all of humanity, their actions affected all of humanity. Their action of rebellion against God was called sin. Their actions affected everyone on the planet that came after them because Adam and Eve were representative heads for all of humanity.

...as it is written: "[None is righteous, no, not one; Romans 3:10 \(ESV\)](#)

The Bible tells us Adam and Eve's sin didn't just affect their relationship with God but it also affected their relationships with one another. Their sin also affected the entire Earth. As a result of sin we have thorns, thistles, diseases and death. Work is hard and not always a joy.

Sin, our willful rebellion against God and one another, is something we don't like to talk about. Today we talk about making mistakes. We think of ourselves as victims of suffering and evil not as the creators of it. The Bible tells us a different story. Sin is serious rebellion. Each one of us is guilty of sin. It is choosing ourselves and our ways over God and his ways. Sin is not just what we choose to do wrong, it is what we fail to do right. It is trying to find our worth and value in something other than God and our relationship with him.

As a result, we constantly fight against God. We fight with one another. We fight for recognition. Our pride keeps others at arm's length because we think we are better than others.

The evil of our sin draws God's white-hot eternal wrath which ultimately lands us in the lake of fire. The lake of fire was originally prepared for the devil and his angels as a just response to their rebellion against God. Since we joined in the rebellion, it is also the just response for our rebellion. Nothing about God's eternal wrath in the Lake of Fire is undeserved. It is just punishment for rejecting God and enthroning ourselves in his place.

In a twisted piece of irony, on the one hand we long for God's wrath and setting all the wrongs right and justice against sin being served. On the other hand, we wince at the thought of God's wrath because we know that we deserve it.

What is the solution? — Redemption

God, who is justified in pouring out his eternal wrath upon us for our sin, determined to turn the evil and suffering we caused into our good that would bring him glory. God determined to redeem the world and a people he has chosen.

The Bible is the story of how God is doing that. It begins in Genesis with God promising a descendant of Eve would eventually crush Satan's head. In Genesis 12, God sets apart Abraham and sends him to a Promised Land. God promised Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed by his seed. Abraham and Sarah never have their promised child. Although Sarah's womb is as good as dead, God enables them to conceive. Sarah has a figurative type of resurrection in her dead womb. The story continues as God's people end up in exile and bondage in Egypt for 400 years. Through no merit of their own, out of

God's pure love, he rescues them and sets them free, leading them to the Promised Land. There are problems. The law that was given for their good to lead them toward life only exposes their sin, and their sinful nature sees the law and it makes them want to commit sin. The sacrifices for sin are never enough to actually pay for sin. The death of a goat or a bull cannot pay for a man's sin. There is no sacrifice that is given for intentional sin, only unintentional sins. The kings of Israel and Judah, which were to rule the nations, demonstrate their inability to lead their own lives and their own country, much less lead Israel in ruling the world. When the Old Testament closes, there is a definite pattern developed for God's people: Rebellion, exile, return, rebellion, exile, return. God's people are at a dead end.

When the New Testament begins, at just the right time, God comes to his people, not as a judge of their sins but as a suffering servant for their sins. God comes to renew the world and restore his people. Submitting to his father's will, even death on a cross, Jesus undoes the curse of Adam. He takes the punishment for sin. He reconciles us to God and inaugurates a new kingdom. Jesus, through his death and resurrection, puts God's plan of a completely new creation into motion. When we ask Christ to forgive our sins and seek to make him Lord of our lives, we begin participating in God's new creation.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,
1 Peter 3:18 (ESV)

What is our future? — Restoration

God promises to renew the whole world. As Christians are restored to a relationship with God through Jesus, we live in the present in anticipation of the future. We look forward to a new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13) where righteousness dwells; heaven and earth will be combined and God will dwell with his people forever without sin. There will be no more sickness, no more pain, sorrow, or suffering, no hidden tears and unanswered prayers.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Revelation 21:3–4 (ESV)

As Christians, we are citizens of the kingdom that is coming. We become the very presence of that future in the world today. In the future, Christ will return to judge sin and evil. He will usher in righteousness and peace. He will purge the world of evil once and for all. We long for that day because that is what we were made for. We should fear this day because of sin, but we can face this day without fear because of Jesus, who has paid for all of our sin.

That is the gospel message. I encourage you to use this simple four-part structure when it comes to sharing about Jesus. It gives the backstory that many people don't know. It also protects us from being duped by the counterfeit gospels around us. Now let's look at how the counterfeit gospels subtly distort this good news.

What is the therapeutic gospel? (Jesus is here to make me happy.)

Imagine an elderly woman who walks into a medical clinic with a nasty cough. The doctor gives her medicine and tells her it will help, but that it is only treating the symptoms. It isn't treating the cause. If she wants to get rid of the cough, she needs to stop smoking. A few weeks later she is back with the same nasty cough. She claims the medicine isn't working. She asks the doctor what she should do. He tells her to throw away her pack of Marlboros.

In the same way the "make me happy gospel" confuses the symptoms of sin with the cause of sin. It says Jesus came to treat your symptoms — a troubled marriage, anxiety, anger and addictions — rather than he came to treat the disease of sin which causes troubled marriage, anxiety, anger and addictions. Let me show you different ways this counterfeit gospel shows up in the church.

The Happy Meal Gospel

How many of you like the McDonald's Happy Meal? The brilliance of the Happy Meal is not the greasy chicken and soggy fries. It is not the free toy in every box. The brilliance of the Happy Meal is that it sells the promise of happiness. For an exhausted mom and dad with a bored child, the promise of happiness works every time. In the same way, more and more Christians believe that Jesus is their Happy Meal. He came to make us happy. The most important thing in life is happiness. Peace of mind has become the goal of life rather than peace with God.

Many Christians live for the false promise of happiness rather than the true promise of peace with God. Let me show you what this looks like. In many

of the divorce counseling sessions I have, a husband and wife sit on opposite ends of my couch. They exchange glances that cut like cold, sharpened steel. We often go to Malachi to remind them what God says about divorce. God hates divorce. After reading those verses I ask them, “What do you think God wants you to do in this difficult time in your marriage? Does God want you to get a divorce?” Many times people will say, “I don’t know. I know God wants me happy. I am not happy in my marriage. I need a divorce because God doesn’t want me this stressed.” That is the end of the discussion. They believe the goal of life is not honoring God in the tough times. Their goal in life is their happiness. If *God wants me happy* is the measuring stick for your decisions, you have fallen for a counterfeit. Look what the Bible says:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:6–7 (ESV)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2–4 (ESV)

God doesn’t always want us happy. God wants us to learn to be happy in him instead of circumstances. Sometimes a tough marriage is the anvil God uses to grind off the sharp edges of our selfishness and find our happiness in the giver of life, not our happiness in the gifts he has placed in our lives.

Have you fallen for the Happy Meal gospel? If life is hard, God has a reason for it. We may not see it or understand it but we can trust him. When we

get to heaven and see what God was up to, we will only confirm that God is good, wise, and kind.

How do you know if you have fallen for the Happy Meal gospel? Check your prayer life. What do you pray for? Are your prayers about God making you happy or are they about how your life can better reflect God in the tough times you face?

The Prozac Gospel

I see this false gospel with many of the television preachers and celebrities. This is Joel Olstein. What this counterfeit gospel tells us is that our sin is a lack of self-esteem. The real problem is that we don't feel good enough about ourselves. Sin is not thinking highly enough of yourself or robbing somebody else of his or her self-worth. The Bible says our sin may lead to a lack of self-esteem. This counterfeit says our sin is low self-esteem. It is confusing the symptoms with the cause. Instead of understanding that sins leads to feelings of guilt and shame, sin becomes having feelings of guilt and shame.

What does the Bible say about this? On the one hand, we are loved by God beyond our wildest dreams. We are the most blessed beings in the universe. We learned that in Ephesians. This counterfeit forgets the front of the gospel story about our sin. While we are incredibly loved, we are also incredibly rebellious against God. Sin is serious stuff. Sin deserves our eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire which was originally prepared for the devil and his angels. Sin deserves the greatest display of God's wrath that will ever take place

in the universe, not the greatest display of his undeserved love, which is what we receive.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. Isaiah 64:6 (ESV)

The Bible is clear. The problem is not that we feel guilty, it is that we are guilty. The problem is not that we have too low a view of ourselves, it is that we have too high a view of ourselves and too low a view of God and our sins. The problem is not that our hearts are empty but rather than our hearts are filled with cancerous, sinful desires.

This is why God sent Jesus. The real problem that needs to get fixed is our sinfulness that breaks our relationship with God and one another, not our self-esteem which makes us feel more important than God and one another. If the problem was self-esteem, God would have sent Oprah or Dr. Phil to sit on a soft couch and talk to us about our feelings. The problem is sin so he sent his own son, who died on a rough-hewn cross to pay for the guilt of our sin.

The implication of the false Prozac gospel is important. If you believe the Prozac gospel, that God is there to make you feel better about yourselves, we will think Jesus is about our glory and we will magnify ourselves rather than God. In God's amazing love and mercy, he sent Jesus so we should magnify God instead of ourselves. It is popular to get that backward.

Home Depot Gospel

This counterfeit is telling people they should come to Jesus because he will make life better. If your life stinks, God can turn it around. Come to Jesus

and he will help you make home improvements. Jesus is here to add a few accessories.

Think of it this way. This spring, a number of us had flooding in our basements. Some of you had friends and neighbors over to your houses helping you rip out the drywall, tear up the carpet and bleach down the studs. Imagine if your friends showed up to help you repair the disaster but instead of tearing drywall out of your molding basement, they began working at your front door. They worked hard all week. When they were done, they built you a screened-in front porch. It is beautiful porch. The problem is that while they made home improvements, they never solved the real problem in your home — the disgusting basement.

In the same way, it is a false gospel to present the Home Depot Jesus. Don't tell people to ask Jesus into their lives to make them rich, fix their marriages or guarantee them jobs. Jesus came to fix the problem of sin, the moldy rotten heart on the inside of us that is in rebellion against God. Jesus didn't come to improve my life by adding accessories. He came to fix the sinful heart that is killing me.

If we buy into the "Jesus came to make me happy mentality," we become disillusioned in suffering. We think God came to deliver us from trials and suffering, when in reality God loves us too much to only give us comfort and prosperity. Our savior was a suffering servant. That means we will also pass through times of suffering if we are going to look like him.

What is the moralistic gospel? (Jesus is here to make me good.)

Earlier in this series, we talked about the Mormons. While they have beliefs that aren't based on the Bible, to be honest, Salt Lake City, Utah, is a nice community. The economy is booming. People are pleasant. Children are polite. Alcoholism is low and most people go to temple on Sunday. Utah is filled with good people, but it is one of the most spiritually dark places on the planet because Christ is missing. Many Mormons see the goal of their religion is to live a good upright moral life. Morality isn't the problem. It is only a symptom of the problem, which is sin.

This is what Christian Smith's study discovered. Most teenagers think all religions are essentially about making people good and moral. In the church, we have subtly shifted into thinking the same way. We tell people that Jesus came to die for our sins but it is up to us to change our lives. Sin management becomes working harder on our own strength, just like a good Mormon. Good Christians make themselves into good and moral people. That isn't the gospel. That is a counterfeit. Christianity is not about our goodness and the good works we do, it is about the goodness of Christ demonstrated in what he has already done.

If we become Christians that try on our own strength to be good people, this is a counterfeit. The good news of Jesus is not that he saves us from our sins, so then we try to work on our behavior on our own; the good news of the gospel is that Jesus saves us from our sins and he gives us new hearts. In relationship with him he turns away our desires for sin and replaces those

desires with a desire to please the God who loves us. Behavior change is not the focus of the gospel but the result of the gospel. Good works are the fruit of what God has done. If we are struggling with sin, the answer is not trying harder. The answer is to walk closer with God, read our Bibles, pray and grow in knowing Jesus. As that happens, God changes the desires of our sinful hearts into the desire and strength to please him.

Tim Keller says it this way:

“Religion operates on the principle ‘I obey — therefore I am accepted by God.’ But the operating principle of the gospel is ‘I am accepted by God through what Christ has done — therefore I obey.’”

Salvation comes not through willpower but through God’s will and power. The more we grasp how much Jesus loves us and how undeserving we are of that love, the more life changes naturally.

Conclusion

The true gospel message is about God. It is about him being the creator, our fall and God choosing to redeem us not because we deserve it but because of his incredible love. The true gospel climaxes in God’s total restoration of his chosen people and this planet. That is what we living looking for.

Don’t be tricked by the counterfeit gospels. Life is not about being happy due to our circumstances. It is about being happy in God’s incredible love that we don’t deserve in spite of our circumstances. Even when life is hard, we know God has a reason that someday we will understand.

Don’t be tricked into believing the goal of life is to be good moral people and that we manage our sin on our own strength, like a good Mormon. How we

live isn't something we force ourselves, it is something that comes out of who we are. It is an expression of gratitude to God that comes from being loved beyond our imaginations.



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