

The Rooted Church Philosophy of Ministry: The 3-Sided Gospel ¹

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Only Christ's church has been entrusted with the gospel – the very power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). We seek to be rooted in the single most important truth there is to know: the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). We seek to proclaim to the world what is of first importance: that Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3). We seek to boast in nothing except the cross of Jesus (Gal. 6:14). We seek to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). The gospel is true and beautiful and powerful, and God's glory is both its heart and its goal. This is why we say we're God-centered and gospel-driven. We want to make much of God, and we're enabled to do that through Jesus' work on the cross.

The Rooted Church exists as a local expression of the universal Church, and therefore is charged with accomplishing the very weighty task of holding out the gospel with boldness, trusting that the sovereign God will make a foolish sounding message good news to people in Fort Worth and beyond (2 Cor. 4:2-6). The heart of any church should be to help people trust and treasure God and his glory above all else through the power of the gospel; that is, to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). But how?

When large crowds followed Jesus, he told the people to take seriously the idea of being his disciple, and to plan accordingly. He explained, "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it" (Luke 14:28)? Put another way, we should plan with the end in mind. We must determine just what it will take to faithfully follow Jesus. In the same way, we as a church must plan well to ensure that we are accomplishing our God-given task. I don't think it's best to just gather people together and "let the Spirit move" (though we want that to happen). We want to be intentional. We want to think through how we can best lead others to love and follow Jesus. We must have in place a biblically faithful philosophy of ministry by which we can envision, plan, carry out, and evaluate our work. Failing to do so, according to Jesus, means we rightly deserved to be mocked (v. 29-30).

Admittedly, it must be said that making disciples is a tough process to plan and measure. God deals most basically with our hearts, an area in which the normal tools of measurement (such as those offered to us by the social sciences) are of little help. Believers aren't to look to the things that are seen (and often measurable) but to the things that are unseen (and often immeasurable; 2 Cor. 4:18). How can we quantify the unseen? How can we measure spiritual growth? Just what constitutes success? Did Jeremiah's preaching yield visible repentance and growth? Did Steven's ministry in Acts 7 show immediate fruit? Did Judas look any different from the other disciples?

We acknowledge that God's work in us, the work of God the Father mediated through God the Son and applied by God the Spirit, is often beyond our comprehension and measurement. After all, who can presume to peer into the mind of God and know what he's doing (Rom. 11:33-34)? In any given church at any given moment is he hardening people? Regenerating them? Growing

¹ This is a brief paper describing just how central we think the gospel is to life and to the church. In a nutshell, you can call this our "philosophy of ministry" because it describes what we believe the Bible says the heart of ministry should be and how people actually change.

them? Preparing them for revival? Preparing them for judgment? Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a man who throws seed into a field, goes away and sleeps, but then comes back and finds a grown plant, though “he knows not how” (Mark 4:27). Or as the apostle Paul puts it, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Cor. 3:6). Very often, we simply can not discern when and where the Spirit of God is at work. Just ask Nicodemus what Jesus told him (John 3:8).

Scripture does, however, give us a standard of measurement. Jesus tells us that we know a tree by its fruit (Matt. 7:17-19). James says similarly that faith without deeds is dead (James 2:26). And Paul commends the Thessalonians based on the “report” he had heard about how they had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). The turning of the Thessalonians must have looked like something in order to yield a report.

Genuine trust in the gospel effects change. It alters externals. You can see it. Paul says as much in the same passage of 1 Thessalonians: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3). Their faith worked. Their love labored. Their hope endured.

Notice, however, that Paul is also clear in this passage about what produced their faith, love and hope:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit (1:2-6).

Did you catch that? Paul presumptuously tells the believers in Thessalonica that “we know... (God) has chosen you.” How can he be so sure? He can be sure because of three necessary things that took place: the truth of the gospel was preached (“our gospel came to you *not only* in words”), the renewing power of the Spirit accompanied it (“also in power and in the Holy Spirit”), and the resultant life was lived out among them (“you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake”). As a result, the gospel message produced fruit; namely, faith, love, and hope (it also produced conviction, imitation, and joy in spite of suffering).

In other words, Paul rejoices over what’s happening in Thessalonica not only because of the external outcomes in the lives of the believers, but because he knows these outcomes were produced by God’s ordained means: the preaching and teaching of the truth of the gospel; the inward, identity-transforming Spirit-work of the gospel; and the kingdom-minded, missional lifestyle of the gospel.

Paul knows that God uses all three of these in conjunction to effect life change in his people. We agree, and we call this a 3-sided view of the gospel.

The Bible often describes the gospel from these 3 different perspectives.² This is why Jesus can talk about the gospel as “justification” (Luke 18:14), “being born again” (John 3:3), and “entering the kingdom” (Matthew 18:3) all at the same time. They’re not different messages; it’s one message from three different perspectives.

Let’s summarize what’s been said so far and give it some memorable terms. To change lives God uses:

- **Gospel Proclamation** = The objective, historic news and truth of Jesus and his work on the cross is clearly proclaimed through words, either spoken or written.
- **Gospel Transformation** = God’s Spirit transforms us inwardly, giving us a new life and a new identity. Believers are now adopted children of God.
- **Gospel Mission** = The reversal of values in the new creation, the kingdom of God. God’s people live a counter-cultural, mission-minded, kingdom way of life.

A Few Warnings

There are a few things we must keep in mind. First, neither Paul nor any biblical author guarantees that the preaching of the Word (Gospel Proclamation) will produce evident fruit. Think of Jesus’ parable of the soils. Sometimes the Word will go out and produce real fruit, but sometimes it will produce temporary fruit or even no fruit, as with the seed that falls among thorns, rocky soil or on the path. Second, the invisible, identity-changing work of the Spirit (Gospel Transformation) is just that, invisible and not subject to measurement. Third, the living out of a gospel-changed, kingdom-minded life (Gospel Mission) can, in some measure, be faked. We all know of people whose lives change, perhaps even drastically, yet who end up having never met Jesus at all.

How, then, can the faithful and prayerful preaching of the Word be an accurate measurement of growth if it doesn’t necessarily result in fruitful living? How can we determine the work of the Spirit if it is invisible? How can the externals of a person’s life serve as an accurate measurement of maturity if they can be faked? The truth is that none of these things taken alone can serve as our standard of measurement. Instead, just as Paul did, we must strive to ensure that all these things occur in conjunction: that we proclaim, are being renewed by, and live in line with the message of the gospel so that it might bear fruit in the lives of others. And conversely, that the fruit we witness in the lives of our people is the result of hearing the gospel, being internally transformed by the gospel, and seeing the gospel lived out in us and others.

² We see this triperspectival view of the gospel throughout scripture. See, for example, Paul’s prayer for the believers in Colossae in Colossians 1:9-10, “From the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Gospel Proclamation), so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him (Gospel Transformation), bearing fruit in every good work (Gospel Mission)”; the three-fold charge of ministry given to Titus by Paul: Titus 1:5-2:1 (Gospel Proclamation), 2:2-15 (Gospel Transformation), 3:1-11 (Gospel Mission); the three offices of Christ: prophet (Gospel Proclamation, as in Deut. 18:15, Matt. 17:5, John 1:17-18), priest (Gospel Transformation, as in Gal. 4:4-5, Heb. 7:26-27, 1 John 2:1-2), and king (Gospel Mission, as in Matt. 28:18, John 18:36-37, 2 Tim. 4:18); and in Jesus proclaiming himself to be “the Way and the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6; Interestingly, this three-fold revelation is mentioned within the context of the knowledge of God, as verse 7 indicates, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also”); as well as in other places such as the Reformed view of the necessary constituents of the local church: preaching (the proclamation of the Word), the administration of the sacraments (the experience of the Word), and church discipline (the protection of the Word among the flock).

Our Philosophy of Ministry

Here, then, is our guiding philosophy of ministry: **genuine, God-oriented growth always and only occurs through God-ordained means, namely, Gospel Proclamation, Gospel Transformation, and Gospel Mission.**

We must labor to ensure that our doctrine and our preaching are faithful to Scripture and are centered on Jesus and the cross; that individually we are being transformed daily to find more and more of our identity in what God thinks of us through Christ; and that we are living out grace-saturated, missional lives in our everyday relationships and communities. We examine ourselves to ensure this type of growth is present, and we examine our people to see if the externals of their lives are aligned with what they have learned, what they have experienced, and what they have witnessed in us.

This also means that the success of our church is not based on attendance, budget, or number of small groups. It is not even based on the maturity of our people. (Remember, God alone gives growth. If we do everything required of us to the best of our ability, but God does not bring growth, have we still not succeeded? Remember also the ministry of Jeremiah). Rather, success is defined by the degree to which we are faithful in applying the gospel from all three perspectives to ourselves and our people.

The Christian must be understanding and relying on the truth of the gospel, must be under the renovating and renewing power of the gospel, and must be living out the mission of the gospel. When we see this as evidenced by faith, love, and hope, we rejoice and thank God.

Ministry, or disciple-making, then, is a pretty straightforward thing. No fancy scheming or manipulating necessary. Just bring the gospel to bear on people's lives. Teach the truth. Pray for the Spirit to work. Live it out plainly. And trust God to make it all happen (2 Cor. 4:2-6).

We certainly can't say this is the only way to view ministry; the only "model" to follow. But we do find it to be solid and biblical. Most importantly, it's centered on the gospel. And when you stop and look at the big picture, this is really the way it must work. Any system, any philosophy, any church must have Jesus and the cross at its center. If a church is centered on anything else, that church has usurped the centrality of the gospel for something else. John Stott says it well in *The Cross and Christian Ministry*:

Western evangelicalism tends to run through cycles of fads. At the moment, books are pouring off the presses telling us how to plan for success, how "vision" consists in clearly articulated "ministry goals," how the knowledge of detailed profiles of our communities constitutes the key to successful outreach. I am not for a moment suggesting that there is nothing to be learned from such studies. But after a while one may perhaps be excused for marveling how many churches were planted by Paul and Whitefield and Wesley and Stanway and Judson without enjoying these advantages. Of course all of us need to understand the people to whom we minister, and all of us can benefit from small doses of such literature. But massive doses sooner or later dilute the gospel. Ever so subtly, we start to think that success more critically depends on thoughtful sociological analysis than on the gospel... We depend on plans, programs, vision statements - but somewhere along the way we have succumbed to the temptation to displace the foolishness of the cross with the wisdom of strategic planning... I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central

place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry.³

³ John Stott. *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, Grand Rapids, MI. Baker: 1993, 25-26.

Appendix A: A Further Explanation of the 3-Sided Approach

Allow me to explain a bit more our 3-sided, or triperspectival (as Christian philosopher John Frame calls it), approach to the gospel, since it informs so much of what we want to do at The Rooted Church. While it may sound like epistemological blather (epistemology = the study of how we know what we know), it really is quite useful. We think it's important to have a balanced, well-rounded view of God, the gospel, the Christian life and the church. This can be tough to do because we are limited, finite creatures who are only capable of seeing something from one perspective at any given moment. Not so for God. John Frame explains:

God knows absolutely everything, because he planned everything, made everything, and determines what happens in the world he made. So we describe him as omniscient. One interesting implication of God's omniscience is that he not only knows all the facts about himself and the world; he also knows how everything appears from every possible perspective. If there were a fly on my office wall, my typing would look very different to him from the way it looks to me. But God knows, not only everything about my typing, but also how that typing appears to the fly on the wall. Indeed, because God knows hypothetical situations as well as actualities, God knows exhaustively what a fly in that position would experience - if such a fly were present - even if it is not. God's knowledge, then, is not only omniscient, but omniperspectival. He knows from his own infinite perspective; but that infinite perspective includes a knowledge of all created perspectives, possible and actual. But we are different. We are finite, and our knowledge is finite. I can only know the world from the limited perspective of my own body and mind.⁴

God knows that we are not him. He sees all things from all perspectives, but he has created us to see things from only one perspective at a time. Even if we walk around a tree to view it from many different angles, we are still only seeing one perspective at any one time. Still, God knows that we benefit when we see things from multiple perspectives. The four gospels are four perspectives on the same events. The same history is recorded in Kings and Chronicles, each from a different perspective. The Ten Commandments may be considered ten perspectives on the same basic ethic (deca-perspectival).⁵

We also benefit from multiple perspectives when it comes to our relationship with God. We need to know the Bible which reveals God, we need to know ourselves as we have experiences with God, and we need to know the world in which we know God. In each of these we are examining our life with God, but we are doing so from a different perspective. We can label these three perspectives as follows:

Normative Knowledge = knowing scripture (the authoritative standard, the object of our knowledge, the "norm")

Existential Knowledge = knowing yourself (our internal experiences, the subject of our knowledge, our "existence")

⁴ John Frame. *A Primer on Perspectivalism*. Available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/PrimerOnPerspectivalism.htm

⁵ John Frame. *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Phillipsburg, NJ. Presbyterian and Reformed: 2008, 75-89.

Situational Knowledge = knowing the world (our everyday surroundings, the occasion of our knowledge, the “situation”)

Human knowledge, then, can be understood in three ways: as knowledge of God’s norm, as knowledge of ourselves, and as knowledge of the world. None can be achieved without the others.⁶

None of us sees things perfectly from all three perspectives. Each of us will tend toward one of the three. John Frame explains, “Some people are normativists, always seeking justice. Others are situationalists, wanting to be committed to a cause or activity beyond themselves. And some are existentialists, focused on their own feelings.”⁷ While one tendency is not better than another, each is limited since the person “knows” from primarily one perspective. Instead, we should strive to view things, especially our life with God, triperspectivally. Doing so helps us to see more clearly things as they really are, to understand and appreciate the views of others (since often our differences of opinion stem from a difference in perspective), and guards us from the errors that come when we only see one side of an issue.

The Trinity is a great example of how this works. Frame comments:

Although all three persons (of the Trinity) are active in every act of God, there seems to be a general division of labor among the persons in the work of redemption. The Father establishes the eternal plan of salvation, the Son executes it, and the Spirit applies it to people. It was the Father who sent the Son to redeem us, the Son who accomplished redemption, and the Spirit who applies the benefits of Christ’s atonement to believers.⁸

We may view our salvation as it relates to God the Father, who is the authoritative architect of salvation (normative); we may view it as it relates to God the Spirit, who enables us to trust in Christ and experience life transformation (existential); or we may view it as it relates to God the Son, who came to the earth at a particular time and in a particular place to accomplish our redemption (situational). Most often we will think of our salvation from only one of these perspectives, thus limiting our appreciation for just how wide the scope of our salvation really is. Each of the three perspectives is infinitely important and necessary if we are to have a right understanding of who God is and how he works. It’s also necessary if we are to be people who value and worship God in all his fullness.

Rather than use the thorny terms “normative,” “existential,” and “situational,” we prefer the analogous phrases “Gospel Proclamation,” “Gospel Transformation” and “Gospel Mission.”⁹ Consequently, the gospel may be viewed as:

⁶ In fact, each includes the others. They are completely interrelated. To know God is necessarily and simultaneously to know something about the world he created and something about yourself. To know the world is to know something about yourself and something about God. To know yourself is to know something about God and something about the world.

⁷ John Frame. *A Primer on Perspectivalism*.

⁸ John Frame. *The Doctrine of God*, Phillipsburg, NJ. Presbyterian and Reformed: 2002, 748.

⁹ We whole-heartedly believe that a church must never value a model of ministry over Christ and the cross. To be clear, we aren’t committed to a model, we are committed to the gospel. The 3-sided, or triperspectival, approach is simply an explanation of the gospel.

News/truth to be believed = **Gospel Proclamation**, as in 1 Cor. 15:1-4 (normative)

A radical change of identity = **Gospel Transformation**, as in Rom. 6:6-7 (existential)

An alternative kingdom way of living = **Gospel Mission**, as in Gal. 2:14 (situational)

We believe that some local churches have an unbalanced view of the gospel because they fail to understand and balance all three perspectives. Many Christians, particularly in the United States, view the gospel only as Proclamation. That is, the gospel is primarily news to be believed. These Christians may assent to the facts of the gospel and even pray a prayer for salvation, but will fail to experience a radical new identity or live as part of a kingdom-minded counter-culture. Emphasizing only this perspective leads to an unbalanced and unhealthy understanding which limits the gospel to “individual personal salvation” and often results in a self-centered and consumerist mentality. Other Christians view the gospel primarily as Transformation, focusing only on personal experience. These believers may be highly concerned with having emotional experiences, but they lack sound doctrine and do not live sacrificial, missional lives. Still others focus only on Mission, including social action and justice, yet fail to think about the gospel correctly or experience its identity-transforming power.

At The Rooted Church, we don't condemn Christians who fall into the above categories because we recognize just how difficult it can be to emphasize all three perspectives equally and maintain a balanced view. We, too, fail to be as balanced as we ought. Still, we are committed to understanding, experiencing and living out all three sides of the gospel. This 3-sided model of the gospel informs everything we do as it relates to the structures and strategies we employ as a church: how we view leadership, how we preach and teach, how we make disciples, how we evaluate growth and maturity. Following this pattern ensures that we are well-rounded in all these areas and that we are always cognizant of all the multi-layered implications of the gospel.

Appendix B: A Biblical Example of the 3-Sided Gospel – 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As Paul describes, when a person becomes a Christian, a follower of Jesus, one who starts to trust and treasure Jesus above all else – however you choose to say it – the gospel affects him in three main ways.

1. First, he agrees with and begins to appropriate the *truth* of the gospel. Listen to how Paul describes the gospel as the true story of an historic event that took place: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself...that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...” And later in verse 21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” What a fantastic summary of the truth of the gospel! This is **Gospel Proclamation**.

When a person relies on the gospel he begins to align all his thinking with the truth of the cross. Just as Jesus said the whole Bible revolves around him (Luke 24:27), the Christian begins to think about everything as revolving around Jesus. Paul elsewhere calls this being “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). This means, first and foremost, that the Christian begins to develop rock-solid theology. He learns his Bible in order to think biblically about who God is, how he works, what he has accomplished at the cross: justification, redemption, reconciliation, atonement, propitiation; he rethinks marriage, family, government, the Church, money, economy, business, art, sex, sports, leisure time. He is training to see all of life through gospel-centered lenses. *The way he thinks about everything completely changes!* This is a life-long endeavor.

2. Second, he recognizes and begins to live out the *identity-transforming power* of the gospel. Listen to how Paul describes the gospel as a radical change of identity: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” And earlier in verses 14-15, “For the love of Christ controls us...that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” This is **Gospel Transformation**.

When a person believes the gospel he begins to realize and live out of the new identity he’s been given at the cross. Formerly he found his identity in everything *but* Jesus: work, money, power, fame, status. Like John says, “All that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away...” (1 John 2:16-17). Without Jesus all he lives for is “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes.” And when he gets these things he has no choice but to boast about them because they define who he is and who he wants to be. But it’s an identity that is passing away. Jesus gives a new identity as an adopted son of God. The Christian no longer needs to boast about himself and his things. All that matters now is what God thinks of him through

Christ. He is training to see himself as God sees him: a humbled, forgiven sinner who has been reconciled to a holy God through the power of the gospel. *The way he views himself completely changes!* This is a life-long endeavor.

3. Third, he begins to live out the *mission* of the gospel. Listen to how Paul describes the gospel as a mission that is to be carried out in all places: “All this is from God...who gave us the ministry of reconciliation...Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” This is **Gospel Mission**.

When a person believes the gospel he begins to live out an intentional, mission-minded lifestyle, continuing to advance the mission of the cross. He views himself as a missionary to the people that God has placed in his everyday surroundings. He doesn't look only to “professional” ministers or even the local church to do ministry, but instead expects them to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). He looks for opportunities in his neighborhood, his kids' sport teams, the guys he plays golf with, the coffee shop he stops at, the gym where we works out. He strives to build relationships where he can show grace and live out the gospel in front of unbelievers. Though he has a job, a wife, a family, and hobbies, he is training to see his primary mission as “the ministry of reconciliation;” living out a life that has been reconciled to God and appealing to others to do the same. *His mission in life completely changes!* This is a life-long endeavor.

The Holistic Christian Life

If you read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 carefully, you'll notice that all three aspects are interwoven. When the gospel is proclaimed people are transformed. When they are transformed they can't help but live lives that are on mission. That mission is to live out and proclaim the gospel. As a result people are transformed... It's a gospel-centered, life-giving cycle that never gets old. This is a snapshot of what the Christian life ought to be. It's not compartmentalized, it's gospel-saturated.

These are the kind of people we are striving to be. Put another way, this is the kind of *church* we want to be. As we live this way *together* we bring glory to the God “who through Christ reconciled us to himself” and is “reconciling the world to himself.”