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Christless Christianity

*The Alternative Gospel of the
American Church*

Michael Horton



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Liberating a Captive Church

Here we are in the North American church—conservative or liberal, evangelical or mainline, Protestant or Catholic, emergent or otherwise—cranking along just fine, thank you. So we’re busy downsizing, becoming culturally relevant, reaching out, drawing in, making disciples, managing the machinery, utilizing biblical principles, celebrating recovery, user-friendly, techno savvy, finding the purposeful life, practicing peace with justice, utilizing spiritual disciplines, growing in self-esteem, reinventing ourselves as effective ecclesiastical entrepreneurs, and, in general, feeling ever so much better about our achievements.

Notice anything missing in this pretty picture? *Jesus Christ!*

Jesus Christ indeed. In Flannery O’Connor’s wild, wickedly funny novella, *Wise Blood*, her antipreacher preacher, Hazel Motes, preaches a “Church without Christ” where nobody sheds blood, and there’s no redemption “’cause there ain’t no sin to

redeem,” and “what’s dead stays that way.”¹ I always thought O’Connor’s book an outrageous, wildly improbable satire. Then Mike Horton comes along and names the “Church without Christ” as our pervasive ecclesial reality. Horton accuses us of achieving what has never transpired in the entire history of Christendom. Somehow we’ve managed to preach Christ crucified in such a way that few are offended, a once unmanageable God suddenly seems nice, and the gospel makes good sense—as we are accustomed to making sense. We just can’t stand to submit to the machinations of a living God who is determined to have us on God’s terms rather than ours, so we devise a god on our own terms. Flaccid, contemporary Christianity is the result.

This is a tough book, but well written, fast paced, and wonderfully grounded in classical Reformation Christianity. Our poor old, compromised, accommodating church is here subjected to withering theological critique. Here the roots of our current theological malaise are exposed and we see the wrong turns we took when we began taking ourselves more seriously than God. The boredom and conventionality of the contemporary church are assaulted. Michael Horton diagnoses our trouble in stunning, unavoidable candor. Therapeutic, utilitarian deism is named, nailed, and defeated with the best weapon God has given us—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Presumptively evangelical Christianity is exposed as the latest recruit to the cause of insipid, culturally compromised liberalism. I am judged in the process. Robert Schuller’s vapid ecclesiology is us all over. My sermons are only slightly less silly and compromised than Joel Osteen’s. *Mea culpa. Mea culpa. Mea culpa.*

But this book is not all critique. Horton mounts a wonderfully hopeful argument. His sermon is not only tough but also invigorating and empowering. In the process of reading this Jesus-induced polemic, you will be recalled to the power of the gospel. God forgive us for selling out our great intellectual

treasure—the gospel of *God with us*—for a mess of psychobabble and pragmatic, utilitarian, self-help triviality.

Horton joyfully reminds us that theological thinking is so much more interesting than all of the distractions that keep us busy but malnourished. The peculiar Good News of Jesus Christ is better than anything William James or Charles G. Finney and their innumerable heirs have to offer. The determination of God in Jesus Christ to love sinners and to enlist them in the invasion that is his kingdom is so much more relevant to our true condition than our inclination to meet the felt needs of narcissistic North American consumers.

Have a wonderful adventure reading this book. Enjoy being enticed into the strange new world of vibrant Christianity in Horton's spirited gospel recovery operation. In the process, you will be liberated from our cultural captivity so that again you will be free to worship, in word and deed, the risen Christ.

Let's put Christ back in Christianity.

William Willimon
Bishop of the United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Alabama

Christless Christianity

The American Captivity of the Church

What would things look like if Satan really took control of a city? Over a half century ago, Presbyterian minister Donald Grey Barnhouse offered his own scenario in his weekly sermon that was also broadcast nationwide on CBS radio. Barnhouse speculated that if Satan took over Philadelphia, all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, “Yes, sir” and “No, ma’am,” and the churches would be full every Sunday . . . *where Christ is not preached.*

It is easy to become distracted from Christ as the only hope for sinners. Where everything is measured by our happiness rather than by God’s holiness, the sense of our being sinners becomes secondary, if not offensive. If we are good people who have lost our way but with the proper instructions and motivation can

become a better person, we need only a life coach, not a redeemer. We can still give our assent to a high view of Christ and the centrality of his person and work, but in actual practice we are being distracted from “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). A lot of the things that distract us from Christ these days are even good things. In order to push us off-point, all that Satan has to do is throw several spiritual fads, moral and political crusades, and other “relevance” operations into our field of vision. Focusing the conversation on us—our desires, needs, feelings, experience, activity, and aspirations—energizes us. At last, now we’re talking about something practical and relevant.

As provocative as Barnhouse’s illustration remains, it is simply an elaboration of a point made throughout the history of redemption. Wherever Christ is truly and clearly being proclaimed, Satan is most actively present in opposition. The wars between the nations and enmity within families and neighborhoods is but the wake of the serpent’s tail as he seeks to devour the church. Yet even in this pursuit, he is more subtle than we imagine. He lulls us to sleep as we trim our message to the banality of popular culture and invoke Christ’s name for anything and everything but salvation from the coming judgment. While undoubtedly stirring his earthly disciples to persecute and kill followers of Christ (with more martyrdoms worldwide in an average year now than in any previous era), Satan knows from experience that sowing heresy and schism is far more effective. *While the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, the assimilation of the church to the world silences the witness.*

I think that the church in America today is so obsessed with being practical, relevant, helpful, successful, and perhaps even well-liked that it nearly mirrors the world itself. Aside from the packaging, there is nothing that cannot be found in most

churches today that could not be satisfied by any number of secular programs and self-help groups.

Christless Christianity. Sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it? A little shallow, sometimes distracted, even a little human-centered rather than Christ-centered from time to time, but *Christless*? Let me be a little more precise about what I am assuming to be the regular diet in many churches across America today: "do more, try harder." I think that this is the pervasive message across the spectrum today. It can be exhibited in an older, more conservative form, with a recurring emphasis on moral absolutes and warnings about falling into the pit of worldliness that can often make one wonder whether we are saved through fear rather than faith. Heaven and hell still figure prominently in this version. Especially on the "high holy days" of the American church calendar (that is, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Father's Day, and Mother's Day), often complete with giant American flags, a color guard, and patriotic songs, this sterner version of "do more, try harder" helped get the culture wars off the ground. At the same time, more liberal bodies could be just as shrill with their "do more, try harder" list on the left and their weekly calls to action rather than clear proclamation of Christ.

Reacting against this extreme version of fundamentalist and liberal judgmentalism, another generation arose that wanted to soft-pedal the rigor, but the "do more, try harder" message has still dominated—this time in the softer pastels of Al Franken's "Stuart Smalley" than in the censorious tone of Dana Carvey's "Church Lady," both of *Saturday Night Live* fame. In this version, God isn't upset if you fail to pull it off. The stakes aren't as high: success or failure in this life, not heaven or hell. No longer commands, the content of these sermons, songs, and best-selling books are helpful suggestions. If you can't get people to be better with sticks, use carrots.

Increasingly, a younger generation is taking leadership that was raised on hype and hypocrisy and is weary of the narcissistic (i.e., “me-centered”) orientation of their parents’ generation. They are attracted to visions of salvation larger than the legalistic individualism of salvation-as-fire-insurance. Yet they are also fed up with the consumeristic individualism of salvation-as-personal-improvement. Instead, they are desperately craving authenticity and genuine transformation that produces true community, exhibiting loving acts that address the wider social and global crises of our day rather than the narrow jeremiads of yesteryear.

Despite significant differences across these generations and types of church ministry, crucial similarities remain. The focus still seems to be on us and our activity rather than on God and his work in Jesus Christ. In all of these approaches, there is the tendency to make God a supporting character in our own life movie rather than to be rewritten as new characters in God’s drama of redemption. Assimilating the disruptive, surprising, and disorienting power of the gospel to the felt needs, moral crises, and socio-political headlines of our passing age, we end up saying very little that the world could not hear from Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, or Oprah.

Besides the preaching, our practices reveal that we are focused on ourselves and our activity more than on God and his saving work among us. Across the board, from conservative to liberal, Roman Catholic to Anabaptist, New Age to Southern Baptist, the “search for the sacred” in America is largely oriented to what happens inside of us, in our own personal experience, rather than in what God has done for us in history. Even baptism and the Supper are described as “means of commitment” rather than “means of grace” in a host of contemporary systematic theologies by conservative as well as progressive evangelicals. Rather than letting “the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching

and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16), the purpose of singing (the “worship time”) seems today more focused on our opportunity to express our own individual piety, experience, and commitment. We come to church, it seems, less to be transformed by the Good News than to celebrate our own transformation and to receive fresh marching orders for transforming ourselves and our world. Rather than being swept into God’s new world, we come to church to find out how we can make God relevant to the “real world” that the New Testament identifies as the one that is actually fading away.

Most Americans believe in God, affirm that Jesus Christ is in some sense divine, and believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Evangelical pollster George Barna found that 86 percent of American adults describe their religious orientation as Christian, while only 6 percent describe themselves as atheist or agnostic.¹ Judging by its commercial, political, and media success, the evangelical movement seems to be booming. But is it still *Christian*?

I am not asking that question glibly or simply to provoke a reaction. My concern is that we are getting dangerously close to the place in everyday American church life where the Bible is mined for “relevant” quotes but is largely irrelevant on its own terms; God is used as a personal resource rather than known, worshiped, and trusted; Jesus Christ is a coach with a good game plan for our victory rather than a Savior who has already achieved it for us; salvation is more a matter of having our best life now than being saved from God’s judgment by God himself; and the Holy Spirit is an electrical outlet we can plug into for the power we need to be all that we can be.

As this new gospel becomes more obviously American than Christian, we all have to take a step back and ask ourselves whether evangelicalism is increasingly a cultural and political

movement with a sentimental attachment to the image of Jesus more than a witness to “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). We have not shown in recent decades that we have much stomach for this message that the apostle Paul called “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense,” “folly to Gentiles” (Rom. 9:33; 1 Cor. 1:23). Far from clashing with the culture of consumerism, American religion appears to be not only at peace with our narcissism but gives it a spiritual legitimacy.

Before I launch this protest, I should carefully state up front what I am *not* saying. First, I acknowledge that there are many churches, pastors, missionaries, evangelists, and distinguished Christian laypeople around the world proclaiming Christ and fulfilling their vocations with integrity. I apologize in advance for not telling this other side of the story, with its truly remarkable exceptions. However, I doubt that they will mind, since many of them register similar worries about the state of Christianity in America.

Second, I am not arguing in this book that we have *arrived* at Christless Christianity but that we are well on our way. There need not be explicit abandonment of any key Christian teaching, just a series of subtle distortions and not-so-subtle distractions. Even good things can cause us to look away from Christ and to take the gospel for granted as something we needed for conversion but which now can be safely assumed and put in the background. Center stage, however, is someone or something else.

I will refer to recent studies demonstrating that it does not really matter any longer whether one has been raised in an evangelical family and church—understanding the basic plot of the biblical drama and its lead character is as unlikely for churched as for unchurched young people. God and Jesus are still important, but more as part of the supporting cast in our own show. More interested in our own thin plots, we are losing our confidence in what English playwright Dorothy Sayers called

“the greatest story ever told.” So much of what I am calling “Christless Christianity” is not profound enough to constitute heresy. Like the easy-listening Muzak that plays ubiquitously in the background in other shopping venues, the message of American Christianity has simply become trivial, sentimental, affirming, and irrelevant.

Third, I am not questioning American Christianity at the level of *zeal*. The call of Christian leaders to “deeds, not creeds” is doubtless motivated by a serious concern to be witnesses to Christ in a broken world. I do not question the sincerity of those who say that we have the correct doctrine but are not living it out. Rather, I simply do not agree with their assessment. I think our doctrine has been forgotten, assumed, ignored, and even misshaped and distorted by the habits and rituals of daily life in a narcissistic culture. We are assimilating the disrupting and disorienting news from heaven to the banality of our own immediate *felt needs*, which interpret God as a personal shopper for the props of our life movie: happiness as entertainment, salvation as therapeutic well-being, and mission as pragmatic success measured solely in terms of numbers.

So, in my view, we *are* living out our creed, but that creed is closer to the American Dream than it is to the Christian faith. The claim I am laying out in this book is that the most dominant form of Christianity today reflects “a zeal for God” that is nevertheless without knowledge—particularly, as Paul himself specifies, the knowledge of God’s justification of the wicked by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from works (Rom. 10:2, see vv. 1–15).

Fourth, there are a lot of issues I would like to address about our American captivity that will not be taken up here. Most of these issues I have treated elsewhere, especially in *Made in America*, *Power Religion*, and *Beyond Culture Wars*.² The idols that identify the Christian cause with left-wing or right-wing political

ideology are merely symptoms that Christ is not being regarded as sufficient for the church's faith and practice today. As the media follows the growing shift among many younger evangelicals from more conservative to more progressive politics, the real headline should be that the movement is going back to church to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ rather than becoming a demographic block in the culture wars. So my focus in this book is on whether Christ is even being widely proclaimed in the nation where half the population claims to be evangelical.

Where the gospel is not taken for granted, it is often a means to an end, like personal or social transformation, love and service to our neighbors, and other things that in themselves are marvelous effects of the gospel. However, the Good News concerning Christ is not a stepping-stone to something greater and more relevant. Whether we realize it or not, there is nothing in the universe more relevant to us as guilty image-bearers of God than the news that he has found a way to be “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). It is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16), not only for the beginning, but for the middle and end as well—the only thing that creates the kind of new world to which our new obedience corresponds as a reasonable response.

In the following chapters I offer statistics supporting the remarkable conclusion that those who are raised in “Bible-believing” churches know as little of the Bible's actual content as their unchurched neighbors. Christ is ubiquitous in this subculture, but more as an adjective (*Christian*) than as a proper name. While we swim in a sea of “Christian” things, Christ is increasingly reduced to a mascot or symbol of a subculture and the industries that feed it. Just as you don't really need Jesus Christ in order to have T-shirts and coffee mugs, it is unclear to me why he is necessary for most of the things I hear a lot of pastors and Christians talking about in church these days.

I do not think we realize the extent of our schizophrenia: annually decrying the commercialization of Christmas by the culture while we assume a consumer-product-sales approach in our own churches every week. We lament the growing secularization of American society while we ensure that the generations currently under our care will know even less than their parents and be less shaped by the covenantal nurture that sustains life in Christ over generations. While calling our capitulation to a narcissistic culture *mission* and *relevance*, we charge secularists with emptying public discourse of beliefs and values that transcend our instant gratification.

While we take Christ's name in vain for our own causes and positions, trivializing his Word in all sorts of ways, we express outrage when a movie trivializes Christ or depicts Christians in a negative light. Although professing Christians are in the majority, we often like to pretend we are a persecuted flock being prepared for an imminent slaughter through the combined energies of Hollywood and the Democratic Party. But if we ever were really persecuted, would it be because of our offensive posturing and self-righteousness or because we would not weaken the offense of the cross? In my experience, substantiated by countless stories of others, believers who challenge the human-centered process of trivializing the faith are more likely to be persecuted—or at least viewed as troublesome—by their church. My concern is not that God is treated so lightly in American culture but that he is not taken seriously in our own faith and practice.

Killing Us Softly

My argument in this book is not that evangelicalism is becoming theologically liberal but that it is becoming theologically vacuous. Far from engendering a smug complacency, core evangelical

convictions—centering on “Christ and him crucified”—drove three centuries of evangelical missions. The ministry of John Stott, a key leader of this postwar consensus, has embodied this integration of Christ-centered proclamation with missional passion. Yet when asked in a recent issue of *Christianity Today* how he evaluates this worldwide movement, Stott could only reply, “The answer is ‘growth without depth.’”³

There certainly are signs that the movement’s theological boundaries are widening—and I will touch on a few examples in this book. Furthermore, vacuity and liberalism have typically gone hand-in-hand when it comes to the church’s faith and practice. Liberalism started off by downplaying doctrine in favor of moralism and inner experience, losing Christ by degrees. Nevertheless, it is not heresy as much as silliness that is killing us softly. God is not denied but trivialized—used for our life programs rather than received, worshiped, and enjoyed.

Christ is a source of empowerment, but is he widely regarded among us today as the source of redemption for the powerless? He helps the morally sensitive to become better, but does he save the ungodly—including Christians? He heals broken lives, but does he raise those who are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1 NKJV)? Does Christ come merely to *improve* our existence in Adam or to *end* it, sweeping us into his new creation? Is Christianity all about spiritual and moral makeovers or about death and resurrection—radical judgment and radical grace? Is the Word of God a resource for what we have already decided we want and need, or is it God’s living and active criticism of our religion, morality, and pious experience? In other words, is the Bible God’s story, centering on Christ’s redeeming work, that rewrites our stories, or is it something we use to make our stories a little more exciting and interesting?

Conservatives and liberals moralize, minimize, and trivialize Christ in different ways, of course, with different political and

social agendas, showing their allegiance either to elite culture or popular culture, but it is still moralism. According to Methodist bishop William Willimon,

Lacking confidence in the power of our story to effect that of which it speaks, to evoke a new people out of nothing, our communication loses its nerve. Nothing is said that could not be heard elsewhere. . . . In conservative contexts, gospel speech is traded for dogmatic assertion and moralism, for self-help psychologies and narcotic mantras. In more liberal speech, talk tiptoes around the outrage of Christian discourse and ends up as an innocuous, though urbane, affirmation of the ruling order. Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved.⁴

Liberals may have pioneered the theory that there is salvation in other names than Jesus Christ, but no group in modern history has wanted the general public to pray nonsectarian prayers—that is, with or without Jesus Christ—as much as the conservative evangelicals. When it comes to *getting God back into our schools*, we can even leave Jesus behind.

Jesus has been dressed up as a corporate CEO, life coach, culture-warrior, political revolutionary, philosopher, copilot, cosufferer, moral example, and partner in fulfilling our personal and social dreams. But in all of these ways, are we reducing the central character in the drama of redemption to a prop for our own play?

Like the liberals of yesteryear, a growing number of evangelical leaders are fond of setting Jesus's teaching on the kingdom—especially the Sermon on the Mount—over against the more doctrinal emphasis found especially in Paul's epistles. Many celebrate this emphasis on Christ-as-example rather than Christ-as-Redeemer as the harbinger of *a new kind of Christian*, but is it really an old kind of moralist? Regardless of whether Christ's

death is regarded as a vicarious sacrifice, discipleship—*our* cross-bearing—becomes the more interesting topic. Never mind that disciples are people who learn something before they set out to make a splash by their zealous activity. Again, I'm not saying that these brothers and sisters are liberals but that there is no discernable difference for our witness whether we ignore or deny the message of Christ and his cross. When the focus becomes "What would Jesus do?" instead of "What has Jesus done?" the labels no longer matter. Conservatives have been just as prone to focus on the former rather than the latter in recent decades.

Religion, spirituality, and moral earnestness—what Paul called "the appearance of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5)—can continue to thrive in our environment precisely because they avoid the scandal of Christ. Nobody will raise a fuss if you find Jesus helpful for your personal well-being and relationships, or even if you think he was the greatest person in history—a model worthy of devotion and emulation. But start talking about the real crisis—where our best efforts are filthy rags and Jesus came to bear the condemnation of helpless sinners who place their confidence in him rather than in themselves—and people begin shifting in their seats, even in churches.

Discipleship, spiritual disciplines, life transformation, culture-transformation, relationships, marriage and family, stress, the spiritual gifts, financial gifts, radical experiences of conversion, end-times curiosities that seem to have less to do with Christ's bodily return than with matching verses to newspaper headlines, and accounts of overcoming significant obstacles through the power of faith. This is the steady diet we're getting today, and it is bound to burn us out because it's all about us and our work rather than about Christ and his work. Even important biblical exhortations and commands become dislocated from their indicative, gospel habitat. Instead of the gospel giving us new thoughts, experiences, and a motivation

for grateful obedience, we lodge the power of God in our own piety and programs.

I do not expect to get everything right. Some of my judgments may turn out to be too sweeping or ill-informed. I hope not, because these issues are too important to be treated casually. Readers will certainly find a lot of good news interspersed between the bad news in this book, but I admit from the outset that on balance it is not a cheerful missive. I'm counting on the indulgence of readers to wait for this book's more constructive sequel. If this book will have only raised questions that provoke us to deeper analysis of our witness in the world today, it will be sufficient.

My aim is not to target any particular wing, movement, person, or group. We are all victims as well as accomplices in our captivity. In fact, my sense of urgency is motivated by my impression that "Christless Christianity" is pervasive, crossing the conservative-liberal spectrum and all denominational lines. In fact, when I wrote up some of the thoughts in this book for an article in a magazine recently, a Catholic editor exclaimed, "He's writing about us!"

Actually, I *am* writing about "us"—all of us who profess the name of Christ both as ministers and witnesses. It would be easier if we could identify one particular writer, circle of writers, or movement as an isolated nemesis. However, no tradition is free of this captivity, including my own, and no person, including myself. There is therefore no position of antiseptic purity that I can pretend to occupy, from which I can mop up the rest of the floor. The most that any of us can do is to say with Isaiah, as he beheld a vision of God in his holiness, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5).