

The Transforming Power of the Gospel

Steve Childers

I am a recovering Pharisee. I love the praise of man more than the praise of God. I naturally substitute a knowledge about God or a knowledge about godliness for truly knowing God. Over the years I have developed several intricate strategies and spiritual disciplines to cover up the lack of spiritual reality in my heart. I can defend the truths of the Gospel, but I often fail to experience its transforming power in my life.

The depth of my Pharisaism was exposed several years ago while I co-taught a Doctor of Ministry class at RTS/Orlando. During one session, my colleague (the late C. Jack Miller) realized how many of the pastors and Christian leaders in our class seemed discouraged and spiritually defeated. I, too, was struggling –just doing a great job of disguising it in front of the class.

Observing the pain all around him, he took me aside and suggested I divide the class into groups of three and lead them in sharing the Gospel with each other. I was stunned. “Why?” I wondered. Did he think some of these people weren’t really Christians? I could see stopping the class to share needs and pray but not to evangelize each other.

As he explained, however, I realized how faulty my reasoning had been. I had assumed that the Gospel was for non-Christians alone and had little or no relevance to the Christian life once someone was converted. I began learning that day that the Gospel is not just a gate I must pass through one time, but a path I should walk each day of my life.

It’s a painfully common story. We begin the Christian life well but gradually find ourselves increasingly experiencing little or no true spiritual transformation. Although we still believe sound doctrine and practice spiritual disciplines, our hearts seem unchanged. Our relationship with God has grown cold and distant.

We know something is wrong but we’re not sure what it is. No real joy abounds in our lives; we no longer truly sense God’s presence or power. Ultimately, we know we are forgiven, but in the midst of our daily lives we have no authentic power over temptation. What is the answer?

Good News!

The good news for Christians is that a divine remedy for our cold and hardened hearts is available! And that remedy is found in the transforming power of the Gospel, the goal of which is not just our regeneration but also our transformation into the image of Christ. Its purpose is not merely to forgive us, but to change us into true worshippers of God and authentic lovers of people.

However, we often reduce the Gospel to “God’s plan of salvation” for lost people to be saved from sin’s penalty, not realizing that it is also “God’s plan of salvation” for Christians to be saved from sin’s power. The same Gospel message that saves sinners also sanctifies the saints.

A few years ago, a major leader in the Navigators ministry revealed to a gathering of hundreds of Christians that he had discovered his own view of the Gospel had been truncated for most of his ministry. “Imagine,” he said, “drawing a time line of your life. A dot on the extreme left represents your birth; a dot on the extreme right represents your death. Picture a cross in the center, signifying your conversion. What one word would summarize your greatest need from birth to conversion? Most of the group replied, “The Gospel”.

“Now,” he continued, “give me just one word summarizing your greatest need from your conversion to your death.” Some said “growth,” others said “sanctification.” The leader confessed that for most of his ministry he would have agreed with those choices.

Being a Navigator, he said his choice would probably have been “discipleship.” “But today,” he confessed, “that word would be “Gospel.” After decades of active discipleship, he realized that his view of the Gospel had been virtually disconnected from living the Christian life. Now he is convinced that the Gospel is needed just as much after conversion as it is before.

The Bible teaches that our salvation encompasses all three tenses: Past—We have been saved from sin’s penalty (Eph. 2:8); Present—We are being saved from sin’s power (Phil. 2:12); and Future—We will be saved from sin’s presence. (Rom. 13:11).

In order to understand more fully how the Gospel saves us as believers and thereby changes our hearts, we must first learn to reject the counterfeit spiritual remedies being freely dispensed today.

Counterfeit Remedies

The Nominalist response to a lack of spiritual transformation in the heart of a Christian is to say “Don’t worry about it.” That’s just part of being human. Don’t you know we’re under grace and not law?” The Nominalist believes that spiritual growth is optional. But the Bible teaches that any long-term friendship with sin should alert us to the deadness of our hearts and, perhaps, to our unsaved state. True Christians don’t surrender; they “...press on toward the goal.” (Phil. 3:14)

A second prescription we must reject is that of the Passivist, who believes that, as Christians, we make no real contribution to our spiritual transformation except to relinquish control of our lives to God. To solve our spiritual battles we just need to “let go and let God”. This view can easily lead us to spend our entire lives chasing one false hope or experience after another in search of “something

more" to make our faith more fulfilling. Instead of seeking "something more", we must learn how to understand and draw upon all that we already have "in Christ". (Col. 2:9,10)

A final false solution is that of the Moralist, whose motto is: "Just try harder!" This view is packaged to look a lot more sophisticated and spiritual than that, but if you listen closely you still will hear one core message: try harder to spend more time in the Word and prayer--try harder to be a better witness--try harder not to be angry or worry--try harder to be a more loving spouse or parent.

We can hear only so many pep talks on trying harder by our own human effort to change before we find ourselves lapsing into either a lifestyle of spiritual denial or despair over the glaring lack of inward reality in our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Gal. 3:3)

Our Core Problem: "Heart Idolatry"

The reason the above prescriptions inevitably leave people unchanged and in either denial or despair is because they all bypass the heart. Our root problem is not an external, behavioral problem—it's a problem of the heart.

True spirituality is not only a matter of the mind and the will—it is also a matter of the heart. In his classic work, *Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards writes, "A person who has a knowledge of doctrine and theology only—without religious affection—has never engaged in true religion."

One of the primary reasons my heart is not more transformed is because I have allowed, what the Puritans called, "the affections of my heart" to be captured by idols that grip me and steal my heart affection away from God.

We were all created in God's image to be creatures who must worship something. This is why the essential character of our sin should always be seen as "heart idolatry." The first and second commandments, "You shall have no other gods before Me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol", remind us of the very dangerous and natural tendency we all have to be idolaters.

The modern idols that capture our hearts' affections today are not the graven images of Baal or Molech, but are things like approval, reputation, possessions, power, pleasure, control, relationships, sex or money. When we allow the affections of our hearts to be captured and corrupted by idols the outcome is always the same, a lack of God's transforming power and presence in our lives.

The Divine Remedy: Repent and Believe in the Gospel

How, then, does the Gospel transform our idolatrous hearts? Through repentance and faith. Jesus' message was simple but life-changing, "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mk. 1:15). The Apostle Paul made clear that repentance and faith were meant to be ongoing in the life of the believer when he wrote, "...just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in Him."(Col. 2:6)

Coming to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith is meant by God to be more than a mere one time event by which we are saved from sin's penalty. Repentance and faith in Christ is also the God-ordained process by which we are to be continually coming back to Jesus Christ daily, moment by moment, to be saved from sin's power and have our hearts transformed.

Through repentance we pull our heart affections away from our idols and, by faith, put them back on Jesus Christ. One of the reasons we don't experience more of God's power and presence in our lives is because we have not sufficiently studied the idolatries of our own hearts and don't realize how subtly idols capture our heart's affections. We must all learn to ask, "What idol does my heart presently crave?"

Once identified, we must be willing to take radical action against our idols, sapping the life-dominating power they have over our hearts. In Romans 13:14 Paul wrote, "...make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires". All that is idolatrous before our eyes must have its vivid appeal drained out of it. The Puritans called this mortification.

Repentance, however, is only half of our responsibility in transformation—the negative, defensive side of the equation. The other responsibility given to us in Scripture is the positive, offensive strategy called faith.

Faith involves learning how to set the affections of our mind and heart on Christ. God does not want a relationship of impersonal, religious servitude. Instead, God wants us to enjoy Him and want Him more than all of our idols.

Faith requires a continual rehearsing and delighting in the many privileges that are now ours in Christ. We grow in our experience of God's transforming presence, power and joy only as we learn to fill our minds with, reflect upon and act in accordance with our many spiritual blessings in Christ.

When you were united to Christ through faith, you were given a very rich and remarkable spiritual inheritance in Him. Like a child born into a royal family, it takes time for you to realize the full extent of the riches of your birthright. Each doctrine related to the Gospel helps us understand the many facets of what we now have in Christ.

The Good News is that even though you may have glaring inconsistencies in your walk with God, if you are in Christ, you can still claim certain wonderful truths by faith. So what exactly is this Good News we are to be claiming by faith?

You Are Forgiven!

No matter how great our fear of punishment or how condemned we may feel, because of Christ's shed blood, we who are in Christ don't have to be crushed under the guilt of our failures anymore. Instead of continually punishing ourselves for our sins, trying to earn forgiveness, or attempting to measure up to a host of perfectionistic standards, we must learn to claim by faith God's promise of His eternal forgiveness through Christ's blood. (Col. 2:13) Thinking that our behavior causes us to phase in and out of His favor will short circuit our growth in grace.

You are Accepted!

No matter how debilitating our fears of rejection or our feelings of disapproval may be, because Christ's perfect righteousness has now been credited to our account through faith in Him, we are absolutely accepted. (2 Cor. 5:21) We no longer need to fear rejection. We no longer must win the approval of others or hide all our weaknesses. Now we don't always need to be defending and building our reputations. We can stop trying to be something we aren't and admit to God and others that we are sinners. Now we can move toward others with a bold, Christ-like love—without fear of rejection.

You are Adopted!

No matter how deeply we may have been wounded or damaged by the lack of love from others in our past, we are now deeply loved. We have been adopted as children of God and given all the rights and privileges that were previously granted only to the Father's one natural Son, Jesus. (1 Jn. 3:1,2) We don't need to live or feel like spiritual orphans anymore. God does not see us as merely pardoned criminals, but as His very own sons and daughters! We now have immediate access into the Father's presence, the promise of His provision for our every need and the privilege of His discipline for our good.

You Are Free!

No matter how defeated we may now feel in our battle with sin, we are no longer in bondage to it. Although sin's influence will always be with us, its dominion over our lives has now been broken through the cross. Although we were once slaves to sin, the Good News is that we are now free from that old master. (Rom. 6:5-18) We are now called by God to claim the freedom from sin's domineering power over our lives. No matter what our current struggle, true hope exists for lasting change.

You Are Not Alone!

No matter how alone or powerless we may feel in this life, we are not alone. Through faith in Christ we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to come alongside us, to comfort us, to encourage us and to empower us to live the life

God has called us to live. (Jn. 16:5-15) As we learn to “live by the Spirit” God’s Word tells us we “will not gratify the desires of our sinful nature.”(Gal. 5:16)

Claiming The Good News By Faith

It has been said that a stone lying in the sun can’t help but grow warm. In the same way as we learn to expose our stony hearts to the warmth and light of the Gospel we can’t help but be transformed. We should be preaching this Good News to ourselves and others constantly so that no matter what our struggles and fears may be, we can be encouraged, strengthened and changed by hearing God’s voice repeating these eternal truths to our hearts.

As Christians we are called by God to a lifestyle of radical obedience. But our efforts to obey God perfectly will inevitably lead us into denial or despair if we do not learn how to cultivate a lifestyle of ongoing repentance and faith in the Gospel.

The law of God has no power to change us. Only the Gospel transforms lives. We are destined to be powerless if we do not allow the Gospel to penetrate deeply enough into our lives to transform our core character—to save us not only from sin’s guilt and penalty, but also from sin’s corruption and power over our lives.

In the Gospel we see the multi-colored splendor of our new life in Jesus Christ and find the divine remedy for the heart that has been wounded by conviction of sin. In the Gospel we find the streams of living water that well up in the heart of a believer who keeps coming to Christ in faith (Jn. 7:37,38). As we learn to drink deeply from the well that is Christ we will experience the transformation of our hearts and find the living waters of the Holy Spirit flowing through us into other lives. This well never runs dry. Here are the springs of personal, corporate and national revival!

All God asks is that we continue to draw near to Him in repentance and faith through the cross of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..."(Gal. 6:14) It has been said that grace, like water, always flows to the lowest place—the foot of the cross.

It is here that we humble ourselves, cast away all our pride and self-sufficiency and admit what we really are to God. It is here that we find the supernatural power, courage, and strength to be more like Jesus Christ.

About the Author

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Dr. Steve Childers is the founder and president of Pathway Learning with the mission to help underserved church leaders plant and develop healthy churches that transform lives and communities around the world.

For 22 years, he served as a resident professor of practical theology at RTS-Orlando, teaching evangelism, discipleship (spiritual formation), church planting, church renewal, missions, and leadership.

Prior to being a professor, Steve planted and pastored two churches—urban and suburban for 15 years. He has helped train thousands of church leaders around the world using his church leadership training curriculum, translated in several languages.

He is a graduate of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, and Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando. He has also studied global missions and leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary in Los Angeles.

Steve and his wife Becky live in Orlando, Florida, and have three adult daughters and four grandchildren.

About Pathway Learning

We help underserved church leaders plant and develop healthy churches that transform lives and communities around the world.

What Problem Do We Want to Solve?

There are millions of gifted and called church leaders, especially in the non-Western world, who do not have access to the training and tools they need to start and develop churches that have effective ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and mercy. They can't afford to leave their families and churches to learn in a new language and culture.

What is Our Solution?

In response, we've developed an innovative blend of online and onsite curriculum that provides underserved church leaders access to affordable, practical, seminary-level training and tools in their language and adapted to their culture. Our courses use the latest educational technology and focus not only on developing the church leader's knowledge, but also on the character and practical skills they need to be effective in ministry.

Our Strategy: Kingdom Partnerships

We establish strategic kingdom partnerships with church leader training organizations, such as indigenous denominations, networks, mission agencies, seminaries, and churches, to help *them* be more effective in training *their* church leaders to plant and develop healthy churches. This allows us to leverage our ministry to have the greatest possible impact.

Come Help Change the World!

We're looking for new partners to help us bring this solution to more church leaders around the world. There are three ways you can partner with us:

- Become a prayer partner, praying for our ministries around the world.
- Become a giving partner, supporting us financially.
- Become a ministry partner that uses our resources to help equip your church leaders.

Learn more at www.pathwaylearning.org.
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