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Review of Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*. Part One¹

John M. Frame

Abstract

Michael Horton's *Christless Christianity* claims that contemporary evangelicalism is so corrupt in its doctrine and preaching that it is close to rejecting Christ altogether. In this two part review article, I argue that Horton's basis for this evaluation is itself doctrinally questionable and that he misrepresents the targets of his criticism. I describe ten assumptions Horton makes that have no basis in Scripture or in any of the major theological traditions. If we reject these assumptions (as we certainly should), we will find that Horton's critique of evangelicalism is wide of the mark, and that it is Horton's own rather idiosyncratic brand of Protestantism that deserves our critical attention.

The title of this book is alarming, certainly by design. But the subtitle is even more so. Does it mean that the whole American church (all traditions, denominations, locations) is committed to an 'alternative Gospel?' Or is it that, though part of the American church upholds

¹ Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2008.

the true, biblical gospel, there is within that church a movement (evidently a significant movement) to the contrary?

We should keep in mind that such language makes the most serious indictments. To be Christless is to be doomed to Hell (John 3:36). And if someone preaches an 'alternative gospel,' contrary to the gospel preached by the apostle Paul, he is to be accursed (Gal. 1:8-9). People who preach 'another gospel' are not Christian friends who happen to disagree with us on this or that matter. Rather, they have betrayed Christ himself. The whole church ought to rise up against such persons and declare that they are not part of the body of Christ and that they have no part in the blessings of salvation. Indeed, if they do not repent, they have no future except eternal punishment.

In my view, many Christians (especially those in the conservative Reformed tradition that Horton and I both inhabit) use this sort of language far too loosely, even flippantly. It is time we learned that when we criticize someone for preaching 'another gospel' we are doing nothing less than cursing him, damning him to Hell.

But Horton actually indicates to his readers that these charges are not to be taken seriously. So Horton backs away from the serious language of his title: '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.' (20)

So evidently 'Christless Christianity' is not *the* gospel of the American church. Many of its members are assuredly not Christless. Further, 'Second, I am not arguing in this book that we have *arrived* at Christless Christianity but that we are well on our way.' (20)

Whew! Evidently Christless Christianity is not *yet* the gospel of the American church, though we are on our way to adopting it.

This is something of a 'bait and switch.' Horton scares us to death with his brash title, telling us that we are headed for Hell. But then he backtracks and says he didn't really mean it.

Since Horton spends a great part of this book telling us that we have lost seriousness about the issues of God's law and gospel, we should hold him also to a high standard of seriousness. To say that we are under God's curse, and then to turn around and say, 'well, not really,' is not to meet such a standard. We might conclude that

Horton is not joking here about holy things, but he is 'well on his way.'

In any case, what is it that, according to Horton, has put us 'well on our way' to denying Christ? We might expect that Horton sees a rebirth of the liberalism J. Gresham Machen complained about in *Christianity and Liberalism*,² in which Christ is merely a teacher and example, not the Son of God who died and rose to save sinners. In various updated forms, liberalism is still with us, to be sure. But that is not Horton's concern in this volume. Rather, he says that for us to drift toward Christless Christianity,

There need not be explicit abandonment of any key Christian teaching, just a set 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. (20)

Notice how far we have come. From 'Christless Christianity' and 'alternative gospel,' to 'well on our way,' we are now exploring 'subtle distortions and not-so-subtle distractions,' even 'good things' that detract from Christ.³

What are these subtle distortions? Evidently, what Horton is concerned with is an *emphasis*. The metaphors of 'looking away from' Christ and putting something else on 'center stage' have to do with the *emphasis* we put on Christ.

Now arguing about emphasis in theology is tricky and, as Horton admits, subtle. And it's even trickier if we argue by way of metaphors. If a person trusts Christ as Lord and Savior, the person in one sense will always have him on 'center stage.' That's what lordship means. The Lord is the one before whom we bow, whom we acknowledge as having supreme power, authority, and personal

² Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923. Horton mentions Machen's work on 176-77 of the volume under review.

³ We shall see that he elsewhere complains about the bad news of God's law being lightened by being mixed with good news. But here he is saying that there are good things mixed in with the terrible bad news that the church is headed for Hell.

presence in our lives.⁴ His actions and words are more important to us than any others.

But in our continuing sinfulness, we do sometimes 'look away' from Christ, in the sense that we are tempted to sin, and we do sin. When that happens, have we pushed Jesus from 'center stage?' Not in the sense mentioned in the last paragraph. The Lord can never be displaced. Nothing can separate us from his love, not even our own sin. But 'center stage' is a metaphor, and perhaps in some contexts it can designate, not the position of lordship, but a position of relative emphasis. If the latter, then it is indeed possible for us to push Jesus away from center stage.

But what exactly does *that* mean? What does it mean to 'look away from' Jesus, or to push him (metaphorically!) from 'center stage?' Certainly Horton does not want to say that we need to be thinking 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus' through every waking moment. Certainly Scripture doesn't require that. God's creation is good, and it is perfectly legitimate to think about that creation sometimes and not always of him. It is right that we think often of Jesus, but also of bananas, symphonies, and international affairs. To do that is surely not to push Jesus from center stage, or to look away from him. Horton admits this:

Of course I am not denying... that Christians should have an interest in pressing issues of the day or that there is an important place for applying biblical teaching to our conduct in the world. But with Lewis I am concerned that when the church's basic message is less about who Christ is and what he has accomplished once and for all for us and more about who we are and what we have to do in order to make his life (and ours) relevant to the culture, the religion that is made 'relevant' is no longer Christianity. (145-46)

But 'basic,' 'less,' and 'more' are relative terms. How much is too much? How much is just enough? Must every preacher spend a certain percentage of his time on Christ and the fundamental gospel, and another percentage on other things? Or may the percentages vary from week to week? Some churches have maintained the policy of

⁴ I have developed this concept of lordship in the books of my *Theology of Lordship* series, particularly *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), Chapters 1-7.

having a gospel invitation in every service. Is that a good thing?

Is there a precise way to measure what the proper emphasis ought to be? One sometimes hears that preachers fail to emphasize exactly what Scripture emphasizes, in the same degree that Scripture emphasizes it. This is a little closer to Horton's actual argument. But a little reflection will make it evident that such a complaint is incoherent. No preacher can possibly emphasize exactly, precisely, what Scripture emphasizes. This is the case, not only because of our human frailty (nobody can calculate the Bible's emphasis precisely) but because of the very nature of preaching. Preaching is not the Bible; it is a communication of the Bible. The only way a preacher could maintain precisely the same emphasis as Scripture would be for him simply to *read* Scripture from the pulpit, from Genesis to Revelation, in the original languages. But preaching is not the reading of Scripture. Its words are not the same as those of Scripture. The preacher takes the words of Scripture and puts them into different words, in order to communicate with, to edify his congregation. Edifying a congregation may, and often does, require the preacher to give certain topics an emphasis different from that of Scripture itself. And it always involves *applying* biblical teaching to extra-biblical situations, to our lives.

Given the difficulty of formulating a normative emphasis for preaching, or for a church's ministry, given the 'subtlety' of the question, I would think that we should moderate somewhat the language of our critique. We should be wary of cocksureness and dogmatism. We ought to discuss these matters in an atmosphere of brotherhood, charity, and civility. Certainly we should hold back on extreme language like 'Christless' and 'alternative gospel.'

But we must get still more specific. What kind of wrong emphasis is Horton concerned about? Horton's main complaints, I think, can be grouped around a number of twofold distinctions:

1. God and Ourselves

Horton says,

...The focus still seems to be on us and our activity rather than on God and his work in Jesus Christ. In all 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... we end up saying very little that the world could not hear from Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, or Oprah.(18)

...we are focused on ourselves and our activity more than on God and his saving work among us... the 'search for the sacred' in America is largely oriented to what happens inside of us, in our own personal experience, rather than on what God has done for us in history. (18)

...God and Jesus are still important, but more as part of the supporting cast in our own show. (20)

So the wrong emphasis in his view is an emphasis on ourselves rather than on God and his work of saving us from sin in Jesus Christ. In Horton's view, modern American churches proclaim God as a means to human happiness (69).

As we have seen, this talk of 'focus' or 'emphasis' is very vague, so these kinds of charges are very difficult to prove. And given the radical nature of Horton's charges (or at least his language) we ought to demand a rigorous case.

He claims that these charges are based on 'recent studies' (20), and he says that he will 'offer statistics supporting the remarkable conclusion that those who were raised in 'Bible-believing' churches know as little of the Bible's actual content as their unchurched neighbors.' (22)

If there are any actual statistics in this book, I must have missed them. What Horton provides are quotes from sociologists, historians, and psychiatrists, mostly secular, who say some of the same things he does. He quotes *Newsweek* (35), Karl Menninger (35), Robert Jay Lifton (35), Philip Rieff (36), Neil McCormick (36), Marsha Witten (48) Philip Lee (170), and others. He devotes a number of pages to Harold Bloom, who, he says, is sympathetic to Gnosticism rather than Christianity (170-75). But he never presents their raw data or presents a critical analysis of the arguments from which these people reached their conclusions.⁵

In the absence of serious argument, I default to my habitual

⁵ Remarkably, one of his recurring arguments is that the 'American church' has given improper weight to secular psychology. If this is true, should we not regard Horton's argument as a symptom of this very error?

skepticism toward critiques of evangelicalism by non-evangelicals. Horton may think that the very lack of Christian faith among these writers makes them more credible. I beg to differ. To accept conclusions as radical as Horton's, I need to see at least one careful study by a mature evangelical believer, who is also a careful statistician, and who shows me his/her work. For statistical science is not religiously neutral. When *Newsweek*, for example, says that Christians are seeking 'peace of mind' (35) why should we assume that the reporter is able to distinguish between a mere psychological comfort and the peace that Scripture promises to God's people (John 14:27, 16:33, Rom. 1:7, Phil. 4:7)? When the reporter notes that Christians seek 'personal transformation' (35), why should we assume that he understands the difference between psychological healing on the one hand and biblical regeneration and sanctification on the other? And why should we assume that he understands the relationship between sanctification and psychological healing? A mature evangelical Christian sociologist would at least have these distinctions in mind, and he might understand the ambiguities of the language he cites. But I have no reason to attribute such discernment to Horton's authorities. We need to remember that the issue here is not only factual (what the churches do) but doctrinal (whether their activities are biblical). So I must ask, by what authority do secular sociologists, historians, and psychologists make judgments about Christian doctrine and preaching?

If Horton had taken the trouble, he might have at least asked the churches and pastors being studied how they would reply to these allegations. With the exceptions of Robert Schuller and Joel Osteen, who even Horton must regard as extreme examples, he has not seen fit to do this.

Speaking, perhaps presumptuously, for 'the American church,' let me attempt a reply. For what it is worth, my own perception of American evangelicalism is very different from Horton's. My observation is anecdotal (just like his, in the final analysis), but based on around 55 years of adult observation in many different kinds of churches including the much maligned mega-churches. In most every evangelical church I have visited or heard about, the 'focus' is on God in Christ. There has been something of a shift over the years in what Horton would call a 'subjective' direction. But that is best described

not as unfaithfulness, but as a shift toward more application of Scripture to people's external situations and inner life. There is a greater interest in sanctification (not just justification), on Christianity as a world view, on believers' obligations to one another, on love within the body of Christ, and in the implications of Scripture for social justice.

I don't see this as wrong, or unbiblical. Indeed, I think this general trend is an improvement over the state of affairs fifty years ago. Scripture is certainly concerned about these matters, and we ought to teach and learn what it has to say. Indeed, a 'focus on God' that neglects scrutiny of ourselves does not honor God at all. As Calvin says on the first page of his *Institutes*, we cannot know ourselves without knowing God, and we can't know God without knowing ourselves. And Calvin (rather unlike Horton) says that he doesn't know which comes first. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says as its answer to Question 1, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, *and enjoy him forever.*' (Emphasis mine.) So it is possible to have a *God-centered* view of human experience and subjectivity, a human 'focus' that detracts not one bit from a biblical God-centeredness.

Consider Psalm 18:

I love you, O LORD, my strength.
 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
 My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
 My shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
 I call on the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
 And I am saved from my enemies.

Like many Psalms, this song includes lavish use of the first person singular personal pronoun, 'I,' 'me,' 'my' — maybe 75 occurrences. But will anyone claim that this Psalm is anything but God-centered?

The God of Scripture is not Moloch. He does not demand human sacrifice as the price of honoring him. Misery is not his goal for us. Rather, he delights in delivering and sanctifying his people. 'Focus' is not a zero-sum game, where every bit of attention to God must detract from man and vice versa.

So, contrary to Horton, there is a sense in which God *is* a means to our happiness. Not, of course, a *mere* means. He is not only a means, not primarily that, but he is certainly that. Scripture presents

redemption as precisely a means to our happiness. The story of the Bible is the story of how God came into a fallen world to save human beings from sin and give them happiness with him. Eternal happiness, certainly, but also the blessings of this life. The 'blessed' of the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12) is sometimes translated 'happy.' Our happiness is based on our reward in heaven (v. 12), but the thought of that reward brings rejoicing in our present life (v. 12). So the New Testament is full of exhortations to rejoice (e.g. Phil. 4:4), not to be anxious (Phil. 4:6-7), to enjoy the peace of God (Phil. 4:7). Jesus even promises his disciples 'now, in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life' (Mark 10:30). The Psalms speak often of a covenant God who rescues his people from danger and leads them into green pastures, beside still waters. Proverbs says that keeping God's commandments brings length of days and years of life and peace (Prov. 3:1-2). Paul speaks of the contentment God gives to him in the midst of hardships (2 Cor. 12:9-10). The promise of prosperity to those who honor their parents continues under the new covenant (Eph. 6:1-3). Compare 1 Tim. 4:8, 1 Pet. 3:8-12.

It is amazing, certainly, that God, who deserves all praise, worship, and service, comes into history to serve us in this way. In Luke 12:37, Jesus says, 'Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.'

Horton himself (194) stresses this verse in articulating his view of worship. He complains that in the worship of Willow Creek Community Church there is no reference to 'God's activity in serving his people' (194). I shall discuss this issue at a later point. But if this is a biblical representation, then it is not unbiblical to say, or even to emphasize, that God is concerned to bless human beings.

To say this does not at all compromise God's transcendence, holiness and majesty. Indeed, it honors these. One reason God is worthy of praise is that he is big enough to know and care about every detail in the universe and particularly the affairs of his people. Horton complains that the concept of God in the American church

has become 'vacuous' (23)⁶ because the church focuses on such things as, 'Discipleship, spiritual disciplines, life transformation, culture transformation, relationships, marriage and family, stress, the spiritual gifts, financial gifts, radical experience of conversion, and end-times curiosities...' (26)

Except possibly for the last item, it seems to me that everything on this list is a concern of Scripture itself and deserves to be emphasized in the church in some degree. We can argue about the exact degree, but that argument is not likely to be fruitful. These are matters that God cares about. Horton may think that to preach on them is something different from preaching Christ, but a more biblical assessment is that these are implications and applications of the work of Christ, and that we are not preaching Christ fully unless we preach on these applications. God sent his Son to die for real people, for us, and that salvation changes every aspect of our lives. So we live by every word that comes from the mouth of God, not only by those that are about Christ in some relatively direct fashion.

Now, certainly there is a kind of selfishness that detracts from biblical discipleship. Scripture warns of this (Luke 12:21; cf. Matt. 6:19-20). The self can be an idol, something we worship in place of God. Choosing an object of worship is certainly a zero-sum game. If Horton can show that the emphasis on human beings in the modern church amounts to idolatry, then his alarming language may be appropriate. But to show that, and to distinguish it from a legitimate concern with the self, is a task requiring some hard reflection, and I have not found that in *Christless Christianity*.

Scripture also rebukes Christians for our tendency to neglect others in order to please ourselves (Rom. 15:1). This is a sin, and it does detract from our faithfulness to God. But not every concern with

⁶ This may be unfair, but I sometimes get the impression, here and in Horton's other books, that many of his judgments of evangelicalism are based on aesthetic criteria of a rather elitist kind. He has a certain idea of what is 'profound,' the opposite of vacuous, and he wants a religion that keeps God out of the areas of life he considers trivial. But in the Bible, God delights in relating to the trivial. He cares about the falling sparrows, numbers the hairs of our heads, melts the snow in the spring, feeds all the animals in the world. And he cares about the griefs and joys of his people.

self is selfish. It is wrong to covet, but not every desire for earthly goods is coveting. It is not wrong to desire food (Matt. 4:2), drink (John 19:28-29), sleep (Luke 8:23), sex (Gen. 2:22-23, Song of Solomon), children (Gen. 30:22-23, 1 Sam. 1:17, Ps. 127:3-5), or a better dwelling (Prov. 24:27). Horton takes no trouble to make such distinctions, thereby losing credibility for his attack on the American church.

2. Scripture and its Application

Showing how the teachings of Scripture are related to us is what I call 'application.' In this sense, preaching, teaching, and theology are all kinds of application. The application of Scripture shows us how Scripture ought to change our beliefs, actions, feelings, indeed every aspect of human life (1 Cor. 10:31). As I mentioned earlier, preaching cannot possibly have the precise emphasis that Scripture has, for its work is not to replicate Scripture but to apply Scripture to its readers.

In this sense, it is wrong to distinguish 'interpretation' from 'application' in preaching.⁷ Often people think that interpretation shows the original thrust of the biblical words to its original audience, while application relates the passage to us today. But a closer look reveals that even in expounding the 'original thrust of the biblical words' we are putting those words into categories that are meaningful to modern hearers and readers. There is no point in the preparation of sermons and lessons at which we can ignore the contemporary audience.

The distinction between Scripture and its application, and the important role of each, seem to elude Horton in this book. There is a constant polemic in the book against people who try to 'make Jesus and the gospel relevant to people in our own time and place' (144). But certainly, when most people talk about making the gospel relevant, what they mean is simply applying it in the sense above. But Horton senses something nefarious about this project. He replies to such people,

But what does it say about Jesus Christ if the relevance of his person and work cannot stand on its own? Sure, Christ came as 'the Lamb of God who

⁷ Compare my longer discussion of the relation between interpretation and application in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 81-85.

takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29), but can he help me get that promotion at work or relieve my stress? (144-45)

In the first place, yes, Jesus can help me get a promotion and he can relieve my stress. As we saw in the previous section, God is concerned about human happiness, even in the details of our lives. But why does Horton need to take 'relevance' only in this sort of way? Making Scripture relevant is also finding contemporary words⁸ to describe and illustrate justification by grace through faith alone, a project Horton himself often engages in.

What does Horton mean by his question, 'what does it say about Jesus Christ if the relevance of his person and work cannot stand on its own?' Here, he evidently fails to distinguish between objective and subjective relevance. Objectively, Jesus is relevant to us, whether we preach and teach about him or not. But 'making him relevant' as the phrase is generally used, is about subjective relevance, namely helping people to understand and apply the objective relevance of Christ. 'Making him relevant' *communicates* his objective relevance for all to appreciate, in their own languages, in their own cultural and individual situations.

Does Horton really think that we should make no effort to apply, to communicate the relevance of Christ to people today? He has little sympathy with those who are concerned about communicating the gospel. He quotes George Barna, who says that Jesus was a 'communications specialist' and commends Jesus' various methods of communicating with people. Barna makes various comparisons between Jesus' communications methods and those of modern advertisers. Horton replies, 'The question that naturally arises in the face of such remarks is whether it is possible to say that Jesus made anything new.' (47)

I confess I cannot find any reasonable correlation between Barna's remarks and Horton's reply, unless Horton is rebuking all interest in communication. Barna's comparisons between Jesus and modern advertisers are a bit crass, but not entirely wrong. There are parallels between divine communication and human communication. But even

⁸ All translation is application. If we are forbidden to make the text relevant or apply the text, then we are shut up to reading Scripture to our congregations in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

if we reject Barna's examples, it seems to me that for the sake of the gospel we ought certainly to take pains in learning how best to communicate it. That's what the preaching departments of seminaries, including the seminary where Horton teaches, try to do. If we forswear all interest in communication, these departments have no reason to exist. The notion that 'God's relevance stands on its own' will not help young preachers as they struggle to learn how to communicate with their congregations.

Horton is particularly adamant against those who preach to 'felt needs': 'Only when God's law—his holiness, majesty, and moral will—creates in us a sense of our moral offensiveness to God does the gospel communicate deeper answers that our felt needs and cheap cravings only mask.' (34)

Evidently, felt needs and cheap cravings are not far apart for Horton. Why? 'We need to recover that sense so pervasive in other periods: namely, that even Christians do not know what they really need or even want and that attending to their immediate felt needs may muffle the only proclamation that can actually satisfy real needs.' (240; compare 97, 246)

I agree with Horton that this can happen. But I don't think that it necessarily happens. Many felt needs of people today are recognized in Scripture as real needs: the need for good marriages, confidence in the future, personal integrity, for example. Others, such as the need for political harmony, a safe environment, good education are not specifically addressed in Scripture, but are certainly subject to the application of biblical principles. When churches show that the gospel addresses these needs, they can accomplish a lot of good. They should make clear, of course, that these needs are rooted in deeper needs, or they will not be addressing the felt needs adequately. But I don't think the answer is to forbid the church from talking about anything that people are presently concerned about.

The communication and application of Scripture are essential to the church's ministry. It is unbelievable that Horton seems to be discouraging them.

3. God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Horton's aversion to communication sometimes seems to arise from

an erroneous view of the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Horton says,

No more *translating* the gospel! The gospel is an offense at precisely the same points and for the same reasons as always. Efforts to translate the gospel into contemporary language actually aim at making the gospel not only more understandable but more believable. The problem is that the gospel is so counterintuitive to our fallen pride that it cannot be believed apart from a miracle of divine grace. (240)

This comment is terribly confused.⁹ It seems to be saying that since salvation is by grace we need not make any effort to translate it into contemporary language. Should we, then, preach in Hebrew, or Greek, or Serbo-Croatian? Should we make the gospel as obscure as possible so as to avoid catering to fallen pride? Should we present it as something irrational, in order to maintain the offense of the cross? Perhaps we should not preach at all, in order to let God do the work.

This sounds as though human effort necessarily compromises God's sovereignty. But that is a serious theological error. In some areas, God does all the work and we do nothing, examples being creation out of nothing and the gift of saving grace in Christ. But in many other areas, God works through created means, particularly through the work of human beings. For example, it is God who will gather his elect to himself; but, according to the Great Commission, he will do this through human beings who go and make disciples of all nations. Certainly that includes translating, interpreting, applying, and communicating the gospel message. In this case, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not a zero-sum game, in which each detracts from the other. Salvation is God's work from first to last. But in part of that process he employs human beings to do his

⁹ Consider the sentence, 'efforts to translate the gospel into contemporary language actually aim at making the gospel not only more understandable but more believable.' Response: (1) I don't know if this comment is true as a description of the usual motives of Bible translators or teachers. (2) Certainly there is a sense in which a truth is more believable when it is better understood. (3) More understandable/believable than what? It would be wrong to try to make the gospel more understandable OR believable than it is in the Bible itself. But it is certainly not wrong to make it more understandable or believable than it is in previous translations. This kind of unclarity abounds in Horton's book.

work. And that employment brings glory to him, rather than detracting from his glory.

Another dimension of the sovereignty/responsibility issue arises in Horton's critique of Joel Osteen. I will certainly not defend the main thrust of Osteen's preaching, and I think many of Horton's criticisms of him carry weight.¹⁰ Osteen is surely preoccupied with realizing human potential rather than with sin and grace. (Of course, what he speaks of is God-given human potential and God-redeemed human potential, not autonomous human potential, as we might assume from Horton's discussion.) But Horton seems to want to take the critique farther. He says that for Osteen, 'God may be the source of this blessing [accomplishing our dreams—JF] in an ultimate sense, since he set things up, but whether we actually receive God's favor and blessings depends entirely on our attitude, action, and obedience.' (84)

I think the word 'entirely' overstates Osteen's position, but certainly he does believe that our attitudes, actions, and obedience are necessary to receive the full blessings of God's grace. Here I think Osteen is quite right, though Horton associates his position with Pelagianism and Gnosticism. Scripture often teaches that obedience is the road to the fullness of God's blessing, indeed that obedience is the mark of a living faith. See Matt. 5:1-12, 43-45, 6:2-6, Gal. 5:6, James 2:14-26. Paul presents the proper balance: '...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil. 2:12b-13).

God's work in Christ is sufficient for our salvation. But there is also the 'working out' of salvation, its application to all aspects of human life. God works sovereignly in both aspects of salvation. But in the second aspect he employs our efforts, our attitudes, actions, and obedience to achieve his sovereign purposes. Certainly it is not wrong to say that the best life for a human being now (to allude to the title of Osteen's book) is a life in which we grow in obedience. Nor is it

¹⁰ As I read through this discussion, however, I often found myself saying, 'Mike, pick on somebody your own size.' Osteen has no theological training and should not be asked to compete with a Ph.D. in a theological arena. A gentle critique of his main emphasis might be more appropriate.

wrong to say, as I indicated earlier, that there are earthly blessings as well as heavenly blessings to those who live God's way.¹¹ Further, it is not wrong to say that we should 'think positively' about God's favor on us and his good purposes for us, even though all of us are called to endure suffering. Nor is it wrong to say that since we are created in God's image and receive gifts of the Spirit we have 'potential' we should seek to realize.

In Osteen's preaching and writing, there is not nearly enough emphasis on the source of this potential in God's saving grace. But Horton scarcely acknowledges at all that such potential exists, that there is biblical ground for thinking positively about ourselves, or that our obedience plays a role in appropriating the blessings of salvation. If he did, he would give Osteen at least some small degree of credit, rather than reading him in the worst possible sense, as a pure representative of Pelagianism. So, rather than a carefully thought-out critique of Osteen, Horton merely presents an opposite extreme.

For Horton, again, the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is a zero sum game. Any recognition of human effort detracts from God's sovereignty, and vice versa. I cannot regard this understanding as biblical.

4. The Objective and the Subjective

The above discussion casts some light on another theme of this book, one which Horton develops in many of his writings. Horton often emphasizes his view that the gospel focuses (again, note the relative term) on the 'outer' rather than the 'inner,' what happens outside of us, rather than what happens within us, the objective rather than the subjective. He quotes Goldsworthy,

The pivotal point of turning in evangelical thinking which demands close attention is the change that has taken place from the Protestant emphasis on the objective facts of the gospel in history, to the medieval emphasis on

¹¹ I fully acknowledge the deficiencies of 'prosperity theology.' But those deficiencies should not force us to the opposite extreme of denying that obeying God brings blessings in our earthly life.

the inner life. The evangelical who sees the inward transforming work of the Spirit as the key element of Christianity will soon lose contact with the historic faith and the historic gospel. (152)¹²

As he accused Osteen of Pelagianism, Horton has a historical category for those who focus on the inner life:

Gnosticism identified God with the inner self, but Christianity has focused all of its resources on God outside of us, who creates, rules, judges, and saves us in our complete personal and corporate existence. It stands to reason that in the Gnostic scheme the inner self could stand above (even over against) not only the external church but its external ministry of preaching and sacrament, discipline and order, catechesis and communion. After all, it is not the public, historical, visible, and messy world that concerns Gnostics but the private, spiritual, invisible, and manageable world of the inner spirit. (186)

So those who ‘focus’ on the inner life are ‘Gnostics,’ or perhaps ‘well on their way’ to Gnosticism. Horton is not sparing of the ‘Gnostic’ label for anyone who gives attention to the inner life. (Osteen is both Pelagian and Gnostic, as Horton sees him.) I think this is quite inappropriate. Gnosticism, as Horton says, ‘identified God with the inner self.’ Do we really want to say that Osteen does this? Or any other evangelical preacher Horton discusses?

In general, it is wrong to discuss ‘subtle’ (Horton’s term) questions by the ruthless application of historical models. Horton is, of course, primarily a historian, so he leaps to analogies with historical movements like Pelagianism and Gnosticism. But these movements themselves took varied forms, and neither is a perfect match for any movement existing today. It is not fair to bring up such a historical movement as if it presents a complete parallel (and therefore serves as an adequate critique) of some modern development. Issues like this, especially issues that could result in someone being called ‘Christless,’ deserve more careful reflection than this. But in this book, it seems that any time someone reflects on the inner life, Horton plops the Gnostic label on him.

When Chuck Smith says ‘We meet God in the realm of our spirit,’ Horton finds Gnostic influence (178). That is extremely doubtful. The

¹² Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), 137.

distinction of spirit and body is biblical (though theological use of it requires some clarification), and it has been common in all traditions of the church including the Reformed. The 'spirituality of the church' has been a significant concept in American Christianity, and though I have some problems with it I suspect that Horton approves of the notion. I don't accuse Horton or others who agree with this concept of Gnosticism. He should not accuse Chuck Smith either.

Later he implies that it is Gnostic to say, as in the gospel song, that Jesus lives 'within my heart' (182). But the Westminster Confession of Faith 18.2 mentions as its third ground of the assurance of salvation that the Spirit witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:15-16). Jesus does indeed live in us in and through the Spirit. Is the Confession Gnostic?

Biblically, this loose attribution of Gnosticism to anyone who focuses on the inner life is quite wrong. As I indicated earlier, Scripture is about both God and man. In Scripture, God seeks his own glory, and he also seeks human happiness. The two don't contradict one another. It is not a zero-sum game. Psalms like Psalm 18 that reflect most deeply on human need of God are among the most God-centered. God delights in the happiness of his people.

Much of that happiness is what we might call 'inner' happiness. God grants relief from anxiety (Phil. 4:6), inner peace (verse 7). David deals with his anxiety over evildoers in Psalms 37 and 73, working out his 'envy' of the arrogant (73:3). He concludes that it is good for him to 'be near' to God (verse 28). (If that statement weren't in the Bible, Horton would certainly accuse it of Gnosticism.) Jesus tells his disciples not to let their heart be troubled (John 14:1). The fruit of the Spirit is a revolution in our inward character (Gal. 5:17-24). Need we argue that true faith in God is a matter of the heart (Matt. 23:25-26)?

By his Spirit, Christ is *in* us (Rom. 8:10-11, Col. 1:27) and works in us (Phil. 1:6, 2:12-13). He *does* 'live in our heart' by the Spirit. Against Horton's emphasis in Chapter Five, our relation to Christ is fully personal. Is this Gnosticism? Perhaps the Gnostics took such language and distorted it for their own purposes, the destruction of the creator-creature distinction. But for the most part Horton writes as if it is wrong (Gnostic) even to reflect on our inner relationship with God. Clearly the distinction between Gnosticism and biblical inwardness requires a more careful analysis than Horton provides. What is

needed here is not only the gifts of a historian, but also the gifts of systematic theologians and exegetes.

On 178, Horton cites Philip Lee as saying,

Whereas classical Calvinism has held that the Christian's assurance of salvation was guaranteed only through Christ and his Church, with his means of grace, now assurance could be found only in the personal experience of having been born again. This was a radical shift, for Calvin had considered any attempt to put 'conversion in the power of man himself' to be gross popery.¹³

There is so much wrong with this quotation, I must number my objections. (1) This is another example of many in Horton's book that try to resolve theological issues by history ('classical Calvinism' vs. 'popery') rather than Scripture. (2) To speak of being born again as a ground of assurance is not to put conversion in the power of man. The new birth is precisely not in the power of man, and Calvin would never have said that it was. (3) Certainly Christ is the ground of our assurance, but how does he assure us? To say that he assures us only through the external institution of the church is as papist as can be imagined. (4) The actual Reformation ground of assurance is three-sided, as in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18.2: the 'divine truth of the promises of salvation,' the 'inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made,' and 'the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God.' (5) Lee's statement says nothing about the promises, which are central. (6) The other two grounds mentioned in the Confession are inward and subjective. Both have clear biblical support. See 2 Pet. 1:5-11, Rom. 8:16-17.

Horton also quotes Lee as saying that the new birth was the opposite of 'rebirth into a new and more acceptable self'; it was the death of the old self and its rebirth in Christ.¹⁴ Certainly the new birth involves our death and resurrection in Christ, but that resurrection is to 'newness of life' (Rom. 6:4). The old self dies, but the new self is certainly more acceptable: acceptable to God and to discerning believers.

¹³ Philip Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 144.

¹⁴ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 255.

Salvation in the Bible is not only justification, being declared righteous for Christ's sake, but also sanctification, being transformed from within by the Spirit of God. Horton does refer occasionally to sanctification in the book. He notes rightly (62) that sanctification, like justification, comes through the gospel (here as opposed to 'gimmicks'). Later he says, 'when faith alone receives the gift, it immediately begins to yield the fruit of righteousness.' (109) True enough, as far as it goes. But unlike justification, sanctification is not simply given to us once for all. Scripture does not tell us merely to receive passively the gift of sanctification. Rather, there is a race to be run and a battle to be fought. Scripture constantly exhorts us to make efforts, to make the right choices. As I emphasized in section 3, there is not a zero sum here between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Rather, God energizes our efforts and brings them to fruition. We work out our own salvation, knowing that God is working 'in' us.

Scripture refers over and over again to sanctification and the inner life. Horton's references to it are almost entirely negative. If the argument about Christless Christianity is an argument about focus, it seems to me that Horton's own focus needs rethinking.¹⁵

¹⁵ A few words on the general relationship between objective and subjective reality. These are distinct concepts, but they are not separable, as if we could have one without the other. 'Objective' usually refers to the way things really are, apart from how we would like them to be. 'Subjective' refers to our own perception of the objective. These are opposites in a way: it is important that our understanding of God's world be objective, rather than merely a reflection of our inner imaginations. If our thinking is merely subjective, and not objective, then it does not conform to truth, and it cannot be trusted. But we cannot have one without the other. The only way we can perceive or understand objective reality is by means of our subjective faculties (senses, reason, intuition, etc). And our subjective faculties are themselves objective realities, aspects of our nature that must be taken account of. The notion that we can have 'objective' knowledge, assurance, etc. without any subjective involvement is nonsense. Similarly there is no objective salvation from sin unless our inner life, too, is saved and transformed. Salvation in Scripture re-creates the whole person (2 Cor. 5:17, 1 Thess. 5:23).

5. Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory

Another way Horton discourages the application of Scripture to our inner life and to our everyday life is by the Reformation contrast between theologies of glory and of the cross.

Horton explains that God intends to glorify his people 'up ahead' (91) but not in this life. (I agree that in general our glorification is part of the next life rather than this one. But I wonder if Horton has considered in this regard John 17:22, 2 Cor. 3:18, Eph. 3:13, 1 Thess. 2:20, 1 Pet. 1:8? As elsewhere in this book, Horton oversimplifies.) In this life we 'share in Christ's suffering and humiliation.' To accept such suffering is to hold the theology of the cross. To seek glory on earth is to hold a theology of glory. It is 'the offering of the kingdoms of the world here and now' (96). In a number of places, he equates the theology of glory with Gnosticism. We recall Horton's criticism of anyone who seeks happiness from God here and now. They are, in his estimation, Gnostics, or theologians of glory.

But I argued in section 1 that God does in fact grant blessings to his people in this life. Certainly greater ones await, and we must not expect God to give us everything at once. But it is not fair for Horton to slap the label 'Gnosticism' or 'theology of glory' on anyone who seeks a closer walk with God, a more godly inner life, or God's intervention in the ordinary problems of life.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Part Two of this review article will appear in the next issue of *Ecclesia Reformanda*.