

The Need for Explicit Christ-centered Communication

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This essay focuses on an important aspect of verbal communication that is required for it to be clearly Christ-centered. The key factor in this communication is the extent to which the Christian story—whose center and hero is Jesus—is presented as the integrating factor—the meaning center—of all of life. First I will explain what this means, and then offer three models for how this has been attempted.

A Meaningful Life

Christ the Integrator

From one perspective, life is made up of unities, diversities, and how they are related to each other.¹ In this way it is a reflection of the Trinity, in whom unity and diversity are equally ultimate and important. Neither the “threeness” nor the “oneness” of the Trinity is more important than the other. The uniqueness of the three is not sacrificed to unity, nor is unity sacrificed to uniqueness.

The integrating factor in life is the center that gives meaning to all its many levels of unities and diversities. For example, a family is a unity with diverse members. How does a family maintain harmony and still enable each member to become all that he or she can become individually? On another level, there are many families in a given nation. From this perspective the nation is the unity, and the families are the diverse members. How do these relate to each other in ways that promote harmony but are also just and loving for each individual family? From another perspective, the nations are the diverse members of the unity that is the human race. How can the nations relate to each other in just and loving ways so as to be in harmony?

In the Bible there is only one legitimate option here: Jesus Christ the Lord is the center and head. All things in heaven and earth will be brought together under one head—Jesus Christ.² It is only in him that the offices of prophet, king and priest find unity without elevating one office over the others. So in him the faithful words, powerful works and holy character of God come together. In him there is no such thing as truth at the expense of love, or love at the expense of justice. Justice and love come together in the cross. Righteousness and peace kiss each other.

This is not a balance between truth, love, righteousness and justice. The word “balance” usually means “the mean between the extremes.” In other words, in order to achieve balance you have to back off each end of the continuum. Less truth, less love and less justice are brought to the table so that none of them overpowers the others. Christ does not bring a balance between love and justice. Rather, in him both are fully expressed. Justice is fully paid and none of God’s love is withheld from his people. What he promises he is able to fulfill with justice and with love. This we see supremely in the cross and resurrection. Christ is the only one who can bring meaning to all of life.

Idols as Pseudo Integrators

However, there are many illegitimate—but often persuasive—options for providing meaning: idols of all kinds. Idols are pseudo-Christ. They are aspects of the created order that pretend to provide the integration and meaning that only Christ himself can give.

For example, the Enlightenment was not capable of such integration. It elevated (privileged) reason and truth as the integrating factor, thus making them idols. As a result, emotion and love were

¹ Philosophically, we would speak of universals, particulars, and relations.

² Ephesians 1:9-10

demoted. On the other hand, Romanticism rightly defended the importance of love and emotion, but in the process elevated these to the level of integrating factor, thus demoting reason and truth. Idols always exaggerate their own importance, while demoting other aspects of creation.

As further examples, look at how modernism elevated control through reason to the level of an integrating factor. As a result, efficiency through technology has become a predominant characteristic of our Western culture. Relationships are not unimportant, but have been demoted to a secondary place. Latin America, on the other hand, has traditionally lifted relationships to the level of integrating factor. Efficiency is not unimportant, but has been demoted to a secondary place. In a similar, but slightly different way, postmodernism has made an idol out of relationships. It rightly argues that since everything is related to everything else, we shouldn't privilege anything. But in the process it privileges relations. Relativity is the result. Christ is the only one who can hold all things together.

Rather than embrace Christ-centeredness, however, humanity has come up with an alternative: conversion from one idol to another, or going back and forth between idols. Discovering how a certain idol has dominated and distorted your life, and finding an idol that offers everything your previous idol denied, can feel like a conversion experience.

Priority versus Idolatry

I am not arguing here that it is wrong to give priority to some aspect of creation. Christ-centeredness allows for and encourages differences of culture and of personality. I distinguish between prioritizing and privileging. The former is normal and allows for diversity among people and cultures, while the latter is idolatrous. How do you know if your emphasis is a priority or an idol? Look at the fruit it produces. If your emphasis on relationships leads you to say "yes" to everyone in order to maintain harmony, or if it leads you to habitually avoid confrontation of people with the truth, then you have an idolatrous tendency at work.³ An over-emphasis on relationships devalues the importance of truth.

Three Models of Christ-centeredness

The Addition Model of Christ-centeredness

There are many Christians who for all practical purposes have what I call an addition model of Christ-centeredness. In this model there is a large area of life that is taken for granted and unexamined. People live and work pretty much the way the rest of the surrounding culture does, either because it seems consistent with Christianity or neutral. To this unexamined way of life and work, however, they add certain practices like church attendance, "being nice" behaviors, church jargon, and advocating a position on certain issues (like abortion). I don't mean to imply that everything the surrounding culture does is to be rejected. The problem is that a Christian worldview is not brought to bear on this unexamined area of life except in a superficial way.

On another level, this addition model can often be seen in the development of "Christian views" of some issue—like leadership or management or strategic planning. Theories on these issues are taken from the social sciences and sometimes Bible verses that purportedly support the theories are put forward. It is common to hear people justify this view by saying, "All truth is God's truth." The

³ However, unless you interact regularly with people and cultures that have different priorities, it will be nearly impossible to identify the negative fruit.

implication is that you might find the theory in the Bible, or you might find it in general revelation. However, the critiquing function of God's Word is minimized. I certainly believe that Christians can learn much from the social sciences. However, in the addition model there is usually little understanding of what difference Christ makes other than the addition of a Christian ethic. There is little understanding of the ways in which a Christian worldview should critique models from the social sciences.⁴

The addition model can also be seen in many Christian schools. The basic philosophy of education is borrowed from secular models, while Bible classes and prayer are added to make it a "Christian" education. The secular model may have much to offer, but its usefulness is taken for granted. Instead of critiquing the secular model, Christianity simply adds basic ethics, Bible classes and prayer.

In my opinion, the addition model is not Christ-centered at all. But it is very common even among Christians.

The Christ-the-Helper Model of Christ-centeredness

Another typical view of Christ-centeredness is what I call the "Christ-the-helper" model. He is the one who enables men, and gives them power. Of course, Christ is indeed our helper, and there is a lot of truth to this model. One of its most typical manifestations is in sermons that claim to be Christ-centered. The basic format goes like this:

1. There is a problem caused by sin
2. You should do such and such to deal with the problem
3. You don't have the strength in yourself to deal with the problem.
4. Christ will help you. He can give you the strength to do what you should do but don't have the power to do.

The main problem with this model is that it is usually not strong enough by itself to challenge a non-Christian worldview. The primary characteristic of a Christian worldview is that Jesus Christ is the hero of history, culture and life. Non-Christian worldviews also have their heroes, and these vary in different times and places. In our own culture, movie stars and sports players are some of the main heroes. This worldview argues forcefully that to be somebody you should be like them. On another level—and depending on the circles in which you work and live—anyone who is successful at what they do is considered to be a hero. So in our circles, if you are the pastor of a large and growing church, you are a hero—someone to be invited to speak at conferences and to be emulated.

This model assumes that everything we do is for God's glory, not ours. Sometimes it even talks about how this is true. But it doesn't reckon with the power of our culture upon us.

How easily we buy into our culture's worldview! We are so affected by it—even in ways we don't realize—that presenting Jesus only as the helper of weak men can easily be misinterpreted through the grid of our cultural worldview. Because the Jesus-the-helper model doesn't strongly and explicitly challenge the culture's worldview, it's message can easily be co-opted into our culture's plausibility structures: you are (potentially at least) the hero, and Jesus can help you be hero-like. Just think of how people reacted to Jesus when he multiplied the bread and fish to feed thousands of people. According to John, they wanted to take him by force and make him their king. But they saw Jesus

⁴ Critique is usually limited to ethical issues such as, "Does this model involve any cheating, stealing, or any other obvious sin?"

more as their helper than as their hero. That's why he said to them, "Don't seek the bread that perishes, but the bread that endures to eternal life."

I'm not saying this is the intention of the Jesus-the-helper model. If you have a strong Christian worldview, you can listen to a sermon or read a book written from this point of view, resist the temptation to misinterpret it—and so you can benefit from it. There is a sense in which simply saying "love one another" is a Christ-centered message if you have the right context in which to understand it. My argument is that the worldview of our culture presses in on us so much that most people will not be able to do this. It is not because the Christ-the-helper model isn't true that it tends to be ineffective, but because it doesn't go far enough given the extent of the influence of our culture's worldview on us.

The Christ-the-Hero Model of Christ-centeredness

While any statement you take from Scripture—or one that is consistent with it—is Christ-centered, even Christians will not necessarily hear it as such. To increase the likelihood of a Christ-centered message being heard as such, we must be as explicit as possible in our communication. This means not only communicating our message, but along with it, challenging erroneous paradigms through which it is likely to be misunderstood. It means presenting our message in the context of Christ being the hero of history, culture and life. The Bible is not primarily a set of instructions on how to live. Rather, it is the proclamation of the story whose hero is Jesus. This not only challenges bad interpretive paradigms that make us the (potential) heroes, but also gives greater clarity to our message by providing the right vantage point from which to understand every aspect of the message of Scripture. It calls us to give up idolatrous centers of meaning and to love Christ.

This is what I call the "Christ-the-hero" model of Christ-centeredness.⁵ Yes, Christ is our helper. But he didn't come to help us become heroes that our culture would recognize as such. Rather, he came to make us like himself. He is the greatest hero of all time, and when we see his glory we long to become like him—which involves participation in his sufferings and death as well as in his resurrection.

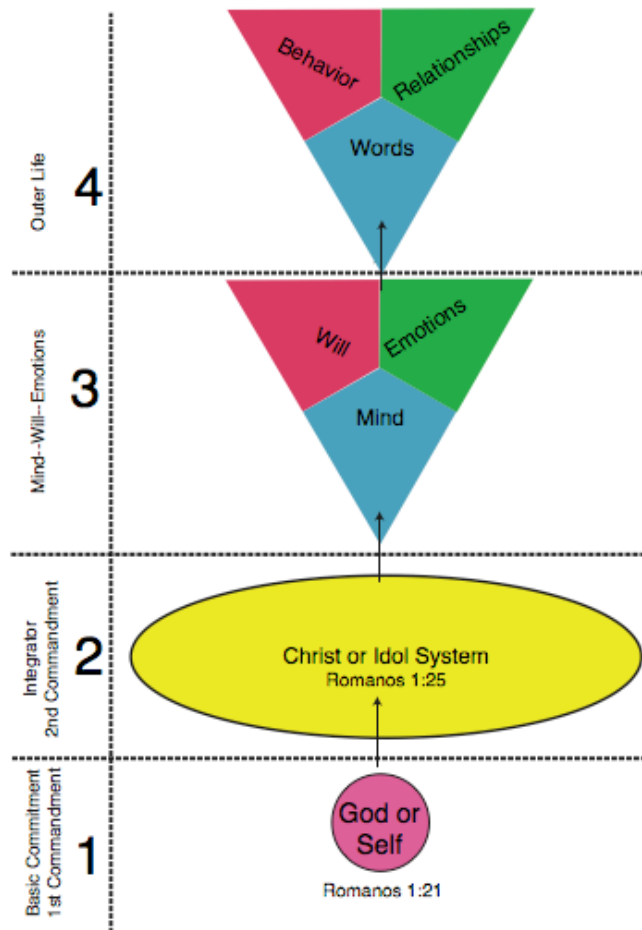
There are so many aspects of Christ's heroism—and so many ways they can be applied—that every sermon, book or message will be different. All aspects of his heroism come together in Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and his pouring out of the Holy Spirit. After we hear a message we should not leave so much looking at ourselves and how we measure up as looking at Christ—and being overawed by his glory. After hearing a sermon, ask yourself: "Who came across as the hero?" The speaker? The institution he represents? The congregation? Some biblical character? People from another time or place? Every message should leave us saying, "Wow! Jesus is my hero! I want to be like him and serve him."

The following diagram illustrates the difference between the previous model (Christ-the-helper) and this one. In the Christ-the-helper model, the focus is on levels three and four. Christ helps us know, do and be, both internally and externally. As I said before, this is important, and should not be left out. However, it must be viewed in light of levels one and two. Christ, whom God has sent for us, is our hero. So don't fall prey to pseudo-Christ, which are idols. It is often thought that idolatry is just one sin among many: for example, that some people have idols, while others steal or lie. I want to

⁵ Edmund Clowney Harvie Conn and S. G. De Graaf are good examples of people who communicate Scripture in this way.

assert, however, that idolatry is behind every sin. Idols point us away from Christ and try to take his place as the center of meaning and life.

When we present Christ as the hero we are challenging our culture's view of who the hero is or could be. When we present Christ as the hero, contrasting that with our culture's perspective on who the hero is, we lessen the likelihood that people will misinterpret our message. They will be less likely to think we are saying that Christ can help them be the hero.⁶ Presenting Christ as the hero will cause some people to leave, but others will fall in love with Jesus. A healthy church is one that experiences a kind of revival (hopefully ongoing) because it begins to see more clearly than before the implications of the gospel—whose center is Christ the hero—for the often hidden cultural idolatries that we have become so used to that they have seemed normal to us.



Conclusion

We live in times in which the church has been greatly captivated by the culture. In times like these, Christ-centered communication requires that we be explicit about how Christ

⁶ It is true, however, that as we become like him we also reflect his heroism.

challenges cultural idols that pretend to give meaning to life. Our message must be presented in the context of Christ the hero.