

Christless Christianity

Colleagues,

Bill Moorhead is Senior Pastor at Pacific Hills Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Back in the early 1970s we met as student and prof in the classroom at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. We've stayed in touch. He even brought me out to Omaha a year or two ago to do a Crossings gig with his congregation. He sends me stuff every now and then. Short while ago he told me about Horton's book on "Christless Christianity." I'd never heard of it. So in old professorial pattern I "assigned" it to him as a book review. Here's what he sent me this week.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A member of my parish gave me a copy of Michael Horton's "Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church" (Baker Books, 2008, 270 pages, hardcover) this past November. Until then I had never heard of Michael Horton. Well, I had, but the Michael Horton I know is on my Board of Elders. Aside from that fact, what caught my eye immediately once the book was in my hands were the words "alternative gospel." I am a regular reader of Thursday Theology, so those words rang all kinds of familiar bells and piqued my interest.

I began reading the book almost as soon as I received it. It didn't take me very long—just a couple of pages, in fact—to realize that something is really bothering Michael Horton. He wrote Christless Christianity to let us know what that "something" is. He doesn't beat around the bush. His concern is the whole American church, but he is particularly concerned about conservative American evangelicalism, that place in the

American Protestant spectrum wherein Horton himself dwells (see <http://www.whitehorseinn.org/> and <http://www.christlesschristianity.org/> for more information). His claim (almost a mantra for being stated so repetitively throughout) is that there is an “American captivity” of the church. Further, such a captivity is known by its fruits: our needs and comforts, where “everything is measured by our happiness,” rather than God’s rescue operation in Christ, have become the focus of the American church’s ministry, particularly its preaching. Horton’s term for this malady is very similar to, if not identical with, what regular Thursday Theology folks read and hear about: an alternative (and anathema) gospel.

Such is Horton’s basic and straightforward thesis. The American church is captive (Horton spins his language here from Luther’s Babylonian Captivity of the Church) to another gospel, which Horton terms “moralistic, therapeutic deism,” a term he borrows from sociologist Christian Smith. “The theological term for this malady is Pelagianism. [I]t is our most natural theology,” states Horton. He even picks up on Augustine’s “incurvatus in se” [sinners are humans “curved back into themselves”] as he lays out his criticism of both American evangelicalism and liberalism. Therefore, the American church’s message is Christless and no gospel at all. Maybe, Horton hedges, we haven’t yet arrived at truly Christless Christianity, but we are well on our way, conservative and liberal alike. Comparing it to Muzak, Horton states that the narcissistic message of American Christianity “has simply become trivial, sentimental, affirming, and irrelevant.” It is a message of “do more, try harder.”

I can second Horton’s motion from my own experience. I have served my current parish for over 31 years, and although I lay NO claim to having it all together in the pulpit, I can certainly recognize a chaotic, if not Christless, sermon when I hear one. Over my 35 years in the ministry I have become

increasingly concerned about the phenomenon. I usually, and unfortunately, have this experience in gatherings of Lutherans where homiletical offerings are kerygmatically challenged. (Hey, can't we do better in front of our peers?) So much Law, so little, so VERY little, Gospel. So much Gospel turned into Law. So much confusion of, or worse yet, so much ignorance of the two kinds of righteousness (see Luther's sermon of 1519). I've walked away on many such occasions wondering, "Where's the hope? Where's MY hope?"

Horton cites many examples of the kerygma problem in American evangelicalism: Robert Schuller (Self-Esteem: The New Reformation), George Barna, Joel Osteen (Become a Better You), Joyce Meyers, Rick Warren (The Purpose-Driven Life), and others. Their common thread in Horton's view is their pragmatic, self-help (no Savior really needed) approach that renders all of them theologically and kerygmatically vacuous. Horton's diagnosis is that they do not offer what is really needed: the "great exchange", the sweet swap as Bob Bertram termed it. There is no condemnation of the Law, no killing off of the Old Adam. And therefore no real rescue. Sin is not total depravity, but trivialized as moral imperfection. God becomes a commodity. Quoting Joel Osteen from his appearance on Larry King Live, Horton reinforces the point: "But I don't have it in my heart to condemn people. I'm there to encourage them. I see myself more as a coach, as a motivator to help them experience the life God has for us."

Horton's antidote for all this malady? Preach the real Gospel! If I remember correctly, that's pretty much Jerome Burce's point in Proclaiming the Scandal. If there's a problem, don't go trying to find a false solution. Proclaim the Gospel! Let it do its job.

One final personal point. In a schedule pinch, I completed the

rough draft of this review this past Monday morning while waiting for my wife to complete a scheduled appointment. I was in a waiting room. I finished writing, or so I thought, and then laid the pages aside momentarily before rereading them for any possible tweaks. Before doing that, however, I happened to scan across the top of the coffee table in front of me. It was strewn with various magazines, including a Victoria's Secret catalog and the October 20, 2008, issue of Newsweek. I picked up the Newsweek and began thumbing through it. (Yes, I did.) And there it was. Page 16. "Belief Watch. Columnist Lisa Miller." A piece on Victoria (!) Osteen. Miller pulled no punches, stating "the theology driving all [their] success is thin." "All of this is fine (Victoria Osteen's home-spun advice about "Christian" wifely-and other-behavior), in the pages of a women's magazine or a self-help book. But what has God got to do with it?" Michael Horton would answer, "Not much!"