

The Need For Gospel Renewal

Timothy Keller, adapted from his new book Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City.

Gospel renewal is a life-changing recovery of the gospel. Personal gospel renewal means the gospel doctrines of sin and grace are actually experienced, not just known intellectually. This personal renewal includes an awareness and conviction of one's own sin and alienation from God and comes from seeing in ourselves deeper layers of self-justification, unbelief, and self-righteousness than we have ever seen before. There is a new, commensurate grasp of the wonder of forgiveness and grace as we shed these attitudes and practices and rest in Christ alone for salvation. Perhaps we have previously said that we were "resting in Christ's work, not our own work" for salvation, but when we experience gospel renewal, we have a new clarity about what this means in our mind and a new experience of actually doing it with our heart.

Corporate gospel renewal — what has sometimes been called "revival" — is a season in which a whole body of believers experience personal gospel renewal together. Over time, all churches, no matter how sound their theology, tend to lose sight of the uniqueness of the gospel and fall into practices that conform more to other religions or to irreligion. Their doctrinal instruction loses sight of how each doctrine plays a role in the gospel message, and their moral instruction is not grounded in and motivated by the finished work and grace of Christ. The leaders of the church must always be bringing the gospel to bear on people's minds and hearts so that they see it as not just a set of beliefs but as a power that changes us profoundly and continually. Without this kind of application of the gospel, mere teaching, preaching, baptizing, and catechizing are not sufficient.

Richard Lovelace was a student of the history of revivals. He sought to discover what, for all their apparent differences, they had in common. He concluded that while Christians know intellectually that their justification (acceptance by God) is the basis for their sanctification (their actual moral behavior), in their actual "day to day existence...they rely on their sanctification for their justification...drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience."

In other words, revivals and renewals are necessary because the default mode of the human heart is works-righteousness — we do not ordinarily live as if the gospel

is true. Christians often believe in their heads that “Jesus accepts me; therefore I will live a good life,” but their hearts and actions are functioning practically on the principle “I live a good life; therefore Jesus accepts me.” The results of this inversion are smug self-satisfaction (if we feel we are living up to standards) or insecurity, anxiety, and self-hatred (if we feel we are failing to live up). In either case, the results are defensiveness, a critical spirit, racial or cultural ethnocentrism to bolster a sense of righteousness, an allergy to change, and other forms of spiritual deadness, both individual and corporate. In sharp contrast, the gospel of sheer grace offered to hopeless sinners will humble and comfort all at once. The results are joy, a willingness to admit faults, graciousness with all, and a lack of self-absorption.

Because we don’t really believe the gospel deep down — because we are living as if we save ourselves — our hearts find ways of either rejecting or reengineering the doctrine (as in liberal theology) or of mentally subscribing to the doctrine while functionally trusting and resting in our own moral and doctrinal goodness (as in “dead orthodoxy”). As a result, individuals and churches experience a slow spiritual deadening over the years, unless some sort of renewal/ revival dynamic arrests it.

Gospel renewal does not simply seek to convert nominal church members; it also insists that all Christians — even committed ones — need the Spirit to bring the gospel home to their hearts for deepened experiences of Christ’s love and power. Some inside the church need to be converted from clear unbelief; others need to see, to their surprise, that they’ve never been converted; still others need to sense their spiritual stagnation.

In commenting on “the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:5), Martin Luther says the gospel is for us “the principal article of all Christian doctrine . . . Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.” If it were natural or even possible for our hearts to operate consistently from the truth and in the life-giving power of the gospel, we wouldn’t need to have it beat into our heads continually. We wouldn’t need a persistent, balanced, revivalist ministry of gospel renewal. But of course it isn’t possible; and so we do.