

Proclamation and Discipleship: A Matter of Belonging

The joys of being in this ministry are great – we watch kids come alive to Christ and the transformation is evident and impactful. We have also at times been heartsick over our friends who have “committed their life to Christ” and who have fallen away. Perhaps there’s one who never makes the transition from the Say-So¹ at camp to a life of discipleship; maybe it’s the one who is a faithful Campaigner² for a year or more, but then “falls off the wagon” and spirals into a lifestyle of licentiousness, exhibiting behaviors much worse even than before their decision for Christ. As in the parable of the sower, there is certainly a mystery in all of this. Yet surely, in our commission to make disciples, we are not to sit idly by and pessimistically expect some kind of attrition as part of the deal. Follow-up is certainly crucial, including helping kids take their baby steps with Christ and introducing them to the community of faith. Good stewardship, however, doesn’t just involve us following up with the kids who have been under the sound of the gospel (whether they’ve responded or not), it also entails taking pains to make sure we are proclaiming the gospel most faithfully in the first place. It’s time we took a hard look at what we are communicating with our adolescent friends and how what kids are hearing from us might either contribute to or erect obstacles for healthy discipleship. In assessing this connection between proclamation and discipleship, we will review the content of the gospel before elaborating on the implications for discipleship.³

Creation and Purpose. In his messages to kids at camp, Jim Rayburn was fond of saying, “God made you for himself.” It serves to remind us that proper gospel proclamation must be anchored in the Genesis message. God created us for a relationship of communion with himself. His creation was good. In his God-given freedom, man chose to rebel against the One who knew best and loved most. Despite the sting of unrequited affection, God’s attitude toward his beloved never changed. Not caught by surprise and not to be denied, God in his foreknowledge had planned from all eternity that he would wage war against the sin that ruptured the filial relationship he desired. Out of his great love, God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, through whom all things were made, came in the likeness of sinful flesh to re-gather up all of creation in himself, destroying sin and death.⁴ Yes we are still plagued by our Adamic history with sin and by its *claim* (however unfounded) on our lives. The good news is that, despite the prevalence of sin and the escalation of evil in this world, sin is on its way out, evil doesn’t have a future, and we have been claimed by Another, the Second Adam. In Christ God has reconciled the world to himself, not counting men’s sins against them.⁵ From the beginning, God has fundamentally been against sin, not sinners. He has made each one for himself, and he is a jealous God. If we, in our proclamation

¹ The “Say-So” has become a fixture at Young Life camp. Based on Ps 107:2 (“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so”), it’s the time when kids are invited to stand up at the final all-camp meeting of the week and say that they have decided to commit or re-commit their lives to Christ.

² “Campaigners” is the original YL word for teenagers interested in going deeper and who attend regular small group bible studies/discipleship groups.

³ I did not discuss in these white papers Young Life’s relationship with the church in matters of proclamation and discipleship, which is a whole other subject.

⁴ Jn 1:3; Rom 8:3; Eph 1:10; 2 Tim 1:10

⁵ 2 Cor 5:19

ministry, try to articulate original sin outside of this context of original belonging, we are perpetuating a false message that truncates the scriptural witness and teaches the “Fall” as a primary (before Creation) not a parasitic, or secondary, doctrine.

Person of Christ. When God wanted to reveal himself to the world, he did so most specifically through Jesus Christ, “the visible expression of the invisible God.”⁶ It is crucial for us to follow suit, lifting up Jesus Christ and communicating his self-giving love and condescension from the Scriptures. More than ever, today’s generation has an attitude problem. What I mean by that is that they don’t realize what *God’s attitude is toward them!* Their guilt and shame leads them to imagine a vengeful God who is out to get them. They don’t know the kindness, gentleness, love and acceptance of God exhibited in Jesus Christ. They don’t know about a God who coaxes the worst guy in town down out of a tree so he can hang out at his house. They don’t know how he went out of his way to make friends with a woman of ill-repute, knowing before-hand that she was shacking up with a guy and had had five husbands before. They don’t know how he reached out and touched a man racked with leprosy before he healed him, or how he saved the life of a prostitute. As we paint an accurate picture of God in Jesus we find our defensive friends disarmed. While all human projections about God fall short, because our Creator has visited us as a man we can engage in accurate God-talk. It is the incarnation that firstly makes our faith unique; the transcendent one becomes tangible, the infinite steps into the finite. While the world’s religions teach haphazard truths about God, only Christ is God in the flesh.

Jesus Christ is the gospel. The gospel is not “person, need/sin, cross, appropriation.” I am constantly challenged by Rayburn’s belief that Jesus Christ is “all Young Life is all about” and that every message should contain to some degree all four “components” of the gospel.⁷ In other words, “keep it personal!” let kids feel the Savior’s embrace in every talk. Young Life is at its best when a leader stands up and shares a Jesus story out of the gospels, painting the scene and beautifully fitting her contemporary adolescent hearers into it, praying that kids will, with the leper for instance, feel the healing touch of the Savior. Within themselves these stories carry the truths of grace, sin and redemption – the theology of the cross and resurrection which they anticipate. Where we often make a turn for the worse, I would submit (and I’m thinking especially of a camp setting), is in what’s known as a “sin talk.”

Sin. Every message should focus on lifting up Jesus Christ. We are in danger of fragmenting the gospel when we lose the Person of Christ in any given message. This often happens when we preach about sin, where we resort to theological points (Rom. 3:23, Rom. 6:23a, Is. 53:6a) without the context of the Person. How easy it is to lose Christ on the Roman Road! Have you ever noticed the subtle depersonalization that occurs at times when, after building a wonderful foundation developing the Person of Christ, in the sin talk we focus on “God,” *sometimes without even mentioning Jesus Christ.* In Young Life we

⁶ Col 1:15

⁷ As per eye-witness Mal McSwain, this is something Rayburn came to late and implemented in his last full set of talks to kids at camp.

define ourselves as personal and relational evangelists; it is at the point of the sin talk where we and the God portrayed often become most impersonal.

Traditionally the sin message is awkward to begin with because we try to talk about sin from a pre-cross perspective, or as if the victory had not yet occurred. We make an effort to establish everyone's lost-ness before moving ahead to the good news. Unfortunately, interpreting mankind out of the Old Adam threatens to unravel everything that we've tried to establish about the unconditional acceptance and extravagant love of God exhibited in the Person of Jesus Christ. It's like all of a sudden we are making sin the ultimate reality of our being, as if God has given up on the original plan and let sin create a whole new, different and more fundamental reality. Original sin is allowed to obliterate original belonging. Christ is then preached as providing a possibility of our belonging, if we satisfy certain conditions, instead of one to whom we belong period. As Colossians 1 so beautifully explains, it is Christ, the Creator and Redeemer of the world, who reinforced and re-established our original belongingness. If we lose our ontological moorings, we begin to define man simply in terms of his shame, guilt and wretchedness without the context of the *imago dei*, the God-given dignity of man. In the words of John Calvin, "God does not delight in the degradation of man," or as the country preacher put it, "God don't make no junk."

If we let the counterfeit ultimate reality of sin usurp our starting point, without noticing it we are sending a message that sin is more sovereign than God; sin and Hell become the rule and grace and filial belonging the exception. Those are strong words, but upon reflection we can see that if we give sin too much credit, it puts God in a defensive position of being the one who reacts. God *reacts* to procure a *possibility* of our belonging; this is an anemic gospel compared to the declaration "You belong to God, and he has in Christ reconciled you to himself, therefore be reconciled to him!" (See 2 Cor. 5: 18-20; Col. 1:19-20). If we're not careful our gospel will become a humanistic one - a message based on how we can get to God instead of how he has come to us, a message centered on individual decision instead of on the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. He is "the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe" (I Tim. 4:10).

I mentioned above the awkwardness of preaching on sin in a time-warp fashion, as if the cross had not already occurred. We use the chairs or the bridge illustration to portray "the breach," our separation from God and our need to be reconciled to him. We do this because we want our explanation to be logically sequential and rational. After all, "you have been reconciled to God, therefore be reconciled to God!"⁸ doesn't make much cognitive sense! By doing this, however, we act as if the healing of the breach is really contingent on each person's individual decision (this translates into "Christ died to save you *if* you commit your life to him or say 'the prayer'"); we ignore the fact that this breach has been healed by Christ on our behalf already. By focusing so much on the subjective aspect of salvation, the objective truth of mankind's justification has been shuffled to the background or off of the canvas completely. Salvation becomes a sort of humanistic relativism, i.e. it becomes true for me when I believe it, but not before.

⁸ 2 Cor 5:20

In light of God's amazing grace and what he has accomplished for all in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the grim character of man's rebelliousness becomes most apparent. Only in the fresh air of grace can we really smell sin's heinous stench. Now sin, instead of being described as a reality totally separating man from God and his original purposes, is more accurately defined as a refusal of God's love and a rebellious standing against God's claim on our lives. The mystery of iniquity is encapsulated in Peter's haunting characterization of the false teachers who were "denying the sovereign Lord who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1). How could one neglect such a great salvation? Yet the essence of sin is the egotistical pride of denying what Christ has accomplished on one's behalf, and therefore one's need for the Savior. It is a vain attempt to "live life under your own steam," as Rayburn was fond of saying. Sin is living a lie. One cannot undo what Christ has done, but one can deny the truth of what Christ has accomplished on his behalf all the way to Hell.

The gospel is an invitation, but it is so much more than that. It is a declaration of the truth in love. By standing in our place Christ now stands against us in the very best sense. This is what Rayburn called "a meaningful confrontation." Jesus Christ lovingly calls us into question; he declares that all personhood is now defined by himself. He is the center of reality and in him all things hold together. Jesus Christ has re-oriented the world in himself. To persist in sin, then, is to refuse personhood and to insist on individualism, blindness, and confusion – to be *dis*-oriented. It becomes more and more clear that we cannot really understand what sin is without the cross, any more than we can truly understand darkness without the light. We cannot really know we're lost until we know we have a home.⁹

Does this kind of proclamation make us "soft on sin?" Emphatically not! Quite the contrary, once we know the value of man to God, we see how perverse sin is, how contradictory it is to the *imago dei*. God went to extravagant lengths to purify the pervasive corruption of Adamic or "original" sin in his prized creatures. Jesus Christ did not come to justify sin, but to justify the sinner, and the Savior had to become sin himself in order to do it. That is not cheap grace but costly, observed Bonhoeffer: "Behold the man sentenced by God, the figure of grief and pain. That is how the Reconciler of the world appears. The guilt of mankind has fallen upon Him, it casts Him into shame and death before God's judgement seat. This is the great price which God pays for reconciliation with the world." The great gospel story, again in Bonhoeffer's words, is that by and in Christ all humanity has been "loved, condemned and reconciled."

In dealing with sin, God's justice will not be denied. God's justice serves his love; it involves taking what is wrong and making it right. Nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than at the cross, where we see the self-giving love of a marvelous God in solidarity with us at the deepest level, taking on the consequences of our warped, sinful humanity in order to bend it back from within into alignment with his filial purposes. In Christ God designed to crucify Adamic humanity in order to save and recreate it, uniquely re-fashioning man for himself. Our identity is now found in him alone. God's Word says, "You are not your own, you have been bought with a price"(1 Cor. 6:19-20). In the face

⁹ C. Baxter Kruger

of this, sin now reveals itself as a rugged individualism which answers to “You are not your own,” with “Yes I am – I belong to me.”¹⁰

I am more and more convinced that we need to give kids this end in the beginning. Why do we persist in a sin talk that leaves kids hanging, sometimes for more than thirty hours, before we tell them the glorious chapter of the cross? Do we think more time means more conviction, or that dwelling on their unworthiness will give them a better appreciation for the cross? It’s like we are counting on the sin talk to produce spiritual displacement, forgetting that it’s God’s kindness that produces repentance¹¹- by the Spirit. If for a dis-oriented individual one’s very view of sin is a product of sin, thirty hours just gives the Father of Lies more time to convince these kids that sin is not a refusal to participate in God’s love for them but behavioral short-comings for which they should be ashamed. (i.e. “I really should quit smoking that stuff”). In other words, the gravity of sin cannot be rightly digested by kids unless it’s presented in sandwich form, between two slices of belonging. To omit the foundational piece of original belonging or the grace of Calvary is to risk perpetuating a mis-construal of sin in the mind of kids, one that defines sin behaviorally instead of relationally. A preaching of the gospel that does not define sin in this context invariably leads to an unhealthy view of sin and grace in discipleship.

In biblical proclamation of the gospel, the sin problem and the solution are never separated. It is artificial to pull Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23a out of context and omit what comes after the comma in both. Again, are we building our proclamation on isolated TMS points, or on the person of Jesus Christ? Are we to imagine that Paul would intend for us to talk about sin as isolated from the Christ event? This apostle who endeavored to preach nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified? I would venture to say that for Paul the cross is the best possible sin talk. It’s in the hellacious cost of the cross and the staggering love of God for sinners that we see most poignantly the depth of our sin.

The Cross. The Great Physician didn’t come to offer medicine to an ailing humanity. Rather, the doctor became the patient.¹² Sin, death and the devil took him as far they could take him, but they couldn’t keep him there. Sin had so intertwined itself in our being and corrupted our state of original belonging that we were virtually unrecognizable as children of the Father. Mankind was past being reformed – truly incorrigible. It was here, at our deepest level of alienation, that Christ became sin and then snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, thereby reestablishing our belonging and reconstituting our relationship with the Father (2 Cor. 5:21; 2 Cor. 8:9; Jn.11:51-52). This is what Luther, Calvin and the Church Fathers called the wondrous exchange: “becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him.” The Incarnate One has “brothered” us so that we might share in his sonship, so that by the Spirit of Sonship we might as co-heirs participate in his intimate cry of “Abba Father.”

Jesus Christ has accomplished it all on our behalf. There is nothing left for us to accomplish; he has done it. One of my favorite illustrations of the atonement is that of “the

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis

¹¹ Rom 2:4

¹² J.B. Torrance

toy boat.” You have probably heard it. The boy carefully crafts his toy sail boat and tests it on the waters of the nearby lake, only to watch it float away from him and over the edge of a dam, in spite of his passionate plea: “Come back, little boat, please come back,” he cries. His heart aches for his lost boat, until one day he sees it in the local pawn shop. The boy spends every last cent he had to buy it back, and upon leaving the store he exclaims, “Now little boat, you’re twice mine, I made you and I bought you back!” Mankind has been created by Christ and ransomed by his blood (1 Tim. 2:4; Col. 1:20; Eph. 2:13). This is wonderful news – news of twice belonging!

The thrust of the cross is not to get us out of Hell but to preserve us for a relationship, *the* relationship, that makes sense of life. There is a right way to talk about Hell, but I am convinced that a little dose of Hell preached in the wrong way goes a long way toward distorting kids’ image of God, encouraging them to run from a Place instead of to a Person. Again to quote Calvin, “A man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing he belongs to God.” Calvin was sure that to use scare tactics to win converts was wrong, for if one sees God only as “Avenger and Judge” he will repent to the wrong God! When one fails to understand God as holy love in his inmost being, and perceives him more as angry judge than as merciful Savior, “repentance” only cements him more deeply in his sin. “Once stricken by the dread of God’s wrath,” states Calvin, “he remains caught in that disturbed state and cannot extricate himself from it.” Is it any wonder that kids intimidated or emotionally manipulated across the threshold seem to be stuck in a revolving door when it comes to the assurance of their salvation? They are never quite sure what God thinks of them.

In this vein, I think another thing that contributes to a depersonalization of the gospel is our over-reliance on legal language in talking about sin and the atonement. We forget that sin is primarily a relational issue, not a legal one. Our relationship with God is not defined by whether or not we can satisfy his perfect standard. God is not first and foremost a judge who makes up rules and metes out penalties. He is not a stern, impossible-to-please taskmaster. Yet this is the image we give of God when we use courtroom language to frame the gospel.

Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God,” and “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form”(Col. 1:15, 2:9). He is the Creator by whom and for whom all things were made. Through a Christo-centric lens we see from Genesis to Revelation that God’s primary purpose for mankind is primarily a filial and not a legal one. Jesus Christ reveals God’s attitude towards sinners as it has always been. The incarnation did not reflect a change in God’s attitude towards us, but was to prove God’s pure love for us to the extent of dying for us when we were his enemies. We can trust the picture of God we see in Jesus; there is no God behind God, an angry judge peering ominously over Jesus’ shoulder!

Is has been taught that kids “have to meet Moses before they can meet Jesus.” Are we to imagine that Paul insisted on teaching Gentiles the law before they could appreciate the gospel? Surely not. Throughout Galatians Paul warns against reversing grace and law. The law must be preached in the context of Jesus Christ, not by working our way from the Ten Commandments to the Cross in our message. It is through the advent of Jesus Christ,

Redeemer *and* Creator, that we recognize God's covenant with his creatures to have been a covenant of grace from the beginning. And it was in the person and work of Christ that God chose to exercise his right to make righteous all those who fall short of his glory (Rom. 3:23-24).

Let us not forget that the juridical metaphor is only one of several biblical metaphors for the atonement. Paul used it to illustrate the breaking and mending of man's relationship with God. He was certainly not saying that this is the primary metaphor for the atonement, or that our relationship with God is first and foremost a legal one. If we set up sin and subsequently the atonement in legal terms, when Jesus "pays the penalty" for us it can often be implied that he is doing so to satisfy the wrath of a distant Father, and again it leaves us insecure about God's inner disposition towards us. The truth is, of course, that he doesn't just tolerate us because of a judicial transaction that was made, he embraces us at great cost to himself.

Talk about sin should in no way cause us to split the Father and the Son's heart on the matter, as if the Father took out his anger on the Son, or as if the Son didn't have full ownership in the mission to save the world. As alluded to earlier, cleavage between Father and Son is often introduced at the point of the sin talk, where we shift from the relational paradigm, emphasizing the love and compassion of Christ, to the legal paradigm, portraying God as judge (and putting Jesus on the "back burner"!)

When we then "insert" Jesus back into the second paradigm, which has overshadowed the first, Christ's death is often perceived as an instrument to appease the Father. This is why implementation of the legal paradigm is risky and should be handled very delicately. In my mind, it should only be used if it becomes clear that the Judge is none other than the One judged in our place.¹³

Appropriation. Of course "justification" is itself a legal term; "reconciliation" is a much more relational way of talking about the atonement with kids. Because "justification by faith" is a phrase oft-used in evangelical circles, however, we must address the confusion it has caused in the proclamation sphere. We believe in justification by grace alone. The corollary to this is justification by faith, and we often use these to mean the same thing, that is, justification NOT by works. We must not, however, understand the latter phrase, justification by faith, to mean that we are not justified until we have faith! That would make faith itself a work, something we have to accomplish to be right with God. The bottom line is that every human being has been justified in Christ, by grace (Rom. 3:24; 5:18). This is the truth we are called to participate in by the Spirit, so when a person comes to faith, he or she in believing is not accomplishing salvation.

There is a place for personal response to the objective truth of humanity's justification and redemption in Christ. This is not robotic determinism; the fact that God has chosen every human being in Christ does not make it unnecessary for one to choose Him. The beautiful mystery is that God's sovereignty is not compromised, nor is man's responsibility. Just as in the negative sense original sin does not make us less responsible for our own individual sin, in the positive sense the fact of everyone's justification and redemption in Christ does not make one personally uninvolved. In the perfect freedom of the Holy Spirit one may

¹³ Karl Barth

repent and believe in Jesus Christ. The “scandal of particularity” is that the Spirit draws different people to Christ at different times in different ways.

It is said that when Charles Spurgeon was asked when he was saved he often replied, “I was saved 2,000 years ago on a hill called Calvary.”¹⁴ Spurgeon was making the point that it is important when we think of salvation to think not primarily of our existential decision but of what Jesus Christ has done to decide on us. Jesus Christ died for the world. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Yes, we were all there. We all belong. There are three moments in the one act of salvation, just as there are three persons in the one God. Each person has been a child of God in the heart of the Father from all eternity, each became a child of God when the Son “brothered” us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension, and each of us may become a child of God when the Holy Spirit seals in our faith and personal experience what has already been accomplished in Christ.¹⁵ We simply do not participate in the first two “moments” of our salvation. Is it possible in our proclamation that we have made the second moment contingent on the third, making the cross only retroactively applicable? I’m afraid we have often been guilty of just such an anthropocentric de-mystification of salvation. In other words, we have, in true modern post-Enlightenment fashion, ignored the first and “stolen” the second moment of our salvation and revolved everything around a human’s individual response(which often includes leaving the Spirit out as well!).

In the past, I have certainly been a “de-mystifier” myself; in order to make the gospel more understandable and logical, I have tended to cheapen the cross by concocting a middle way, saying that Christ died for everyone in a general sense, but not everyone is actually justified in him or reconciled to him. I am convinced the cross cannot be cut that thin. The other logical alternative is to say that Christ didn’t die for everyone, which is just as bad. We must hold on to a robust theology of the cross; Christ redeemed and reconciled all of mankind(Col. 1:20; II Cor. 5:19) A corresponding robust theology of the Holy Spirit will protect us against universalism, which is a ‘blanket’ salvation that does not adequately address sin or repentance and that depersonalizes people by violating their Spirit given freedom to respond to the gospel of grace. In other words, universalism locks people into a system instead of emphasizing a reciprocal relationship with the Savior that can only come by the Spirit.

I am convinced that if we preach the grace and truth of what Christ has accomplished in our place as our representative and substitute, kids will, by the Spirit, be awakened to that reality. The Spirit then, while not adding to the reality of reconciliation accomplished by Christ, actualizes the reality from our side, personalizing and particularizing the gospel to individual persons. Born from above, we believe in our belonging and are fitted for a life of discipleship. With grateful and joyful hearts we experience the blessings and benefits of being His. In the Spirit of adoption we belong to Christ in a special way.¹⁶ We recognize

¹⁴ This anecdote came to me by word of mouth. A sentiment echoed by many over the years, it is consistent with Spurgeon’s theology and his taking of Christ’s finished work with utmost seriousness. Anyone who is saved, was saved at the cross. On this point the Baptist Spurgeon was thoroughly Calvinist.

¹⁵ J.B. Torrance

¹⁶ Not more special to God, but deeply assured, as in “He is the savior of all people, *especially* those who believe” (1 Tim 4:10, italics added).

that God has been *for* us from the beginning, and the Spirit assures us that he will always be for us. This critical truth, that one belongs to Christ *before* he or she believes, should be continually reinforced with young disciples. It's good to know that our frequent failure and un-belief cannot "un-belong" us!

In this post-modern age we must retrieve a boldness characteristic of a big view of Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished, refusing to underestimate the claim Christ has staked on every kid. Jesus Christ has re-oriented the world in himself. To persist against the grain of the new creation inaugurated by him is an exercise in futility. Again, Rayburn summarized it well: "Gang, life won't work right without Jesus Christ."

To our adolescent friends, then, we can proclaim, "God loves you too much to live without you. The Savior of the world lived, died and rose to save you because you were lost. He is the Lord of the universe and of your life; he has forgiven you, therefore repent and believe!" A good illustration of this approach is in Acts chapter 2, where Peter tells the gospel story of the man Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and now raised to the right hand of the Father, where he has poured out the Holy Spirit on all people. Luke narrates that when the people heard this, "they were cut to the heart and said... 'what shall we do?'" Peter tells them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. He didn't say if you repent and are baptized you will be forgiven. He was saying repent and walk in the truth of your forgiveness; submit to the verdict of guilty implied in the cross, where you all at once have been loved, condemned and forgiven in Christ.

Obviously, repentance and forgiveness go hand in hand, but forgiveness is not contingent on repentance. On the contrary, as Calvin expounded, forgiveness is logically prior to repentance.¹⁷ To invert this and to say, "If you repent you will be forgiven," is to put the imperatives of obedience ahead of the indicatives of grace (the unconditionally gracious disposition the Father has towards his lost ones retrieved by the Son). Forgiveness in the Forgiver is the free gift that has been unconditionally given. All may now receive it in repentance, but not *because* of repentance. Everyone belongs unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ by virtue of creation and redemption. To say to kids, "You belong if..." is to say "You don't belong."

When we had forfeited our right as his children, God restored the right in Christ. We can now by the Spirit embrace Christ as he has embraced us, empowered to live in him as never before (Jn. 1:12). Again, Christ embraces us before we embrace him; "This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins," and "not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (I Jn. 4:10; 2:2). This must be kept at the forefront of all proclamation. As we shall continue to note, confusing the indicatives (we are beloved, forgiven children of God) with the imperatives (love God, repent, obey) in proclamation has disastrous carry-over for discipleship.

Implications for Discipleship

In what I have written on proclamation, I hope some applications for discipleship have already become apparent. I'd like to elaborate on what I think are a few key points. It constantly amazes me how little assurance our adolescent friends have of their salvation. As we've mentioned, a wrong proclamation can lend itself to a shaky assurance, as if their relationship with God is a fragile settlement with a reluctant God that could crumble at any time. Young believers need to know that their belonging to God is not something that is grounded on their own existential decision. As we have explained, this is something anchored in the Father's heart from all eternity. God has been for them all along, and this faithfulness was not nullified by the Fall. No good or true Father is only "for" his son or daughter *if* and when he or she is for him! If kids detect any kind of reluctance on God's part, any question about whether God is unconditionally for them from the very beginning, this may lead to a perceived split in God's character: he's loving part of the time and just part of the time, he's for me part of the time, against me part of the time, or he's for some people and against others. God is love, he can be no other. His character of holy love always remains intact, and his discipline, justice and wrath serve his love, with believers and unbelievers alike. In other words, he does not fiddle with the knobs, "turning down" his love to "turn up" his wrath.

Of course the best evidence of God's faithful attitude of love toward us is expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's why even in Campaigners, and especially in Campaigners, we must continually fight the battle of upholding Christ's full divinity and humanity, recognizing that we tend to err on one side or the other. We have already mentioned the importance of trusting that Jesus is "the exact representation of God's being"(Heb. 1:3).

In regards to his humanity, we also have to emphasize with kids that Christ took the same starting point as any person, humbly refusing the prerogatives of Godhead, and submitting himself to all the trials and temptations of the human predicament. Only when we're convinced that Jesus Christ is really human can we relate to him. At the same time, despite a life time of struggle, Christ did what no other person could do: live a life of unbroken communion with the Father in the power of the Spirit. From this a life of perfect obedience issued forth. This is crucial, for it is only because Christ assumed our fallen, corrupt flesh and sanctified it as he went that we can have any hope for a sanctified life.¹⁸ Our only hope for obedience is to participate vicariously in his(Gal. 2:20). He doesn't call us to blaze our own trail but to follow Him on the road he paved for us as a man walking in our shoes. Where we fail, he succeeded, where we disobey the Father, he obeyed. Thankfully, the Father accepts Christ's perfect life of Sonship in place of ours; our lives are "hidden with Christ in God."¹⁹ The greatest news for us all is that Christ put our name on his answer!²⁰

This is why our relationship with God should always be seen as becoming who we already are in Christ. Understanding the "already" part is crucial for living a life free of the performance syndrome. Unfortunately, if we make the legal metaphor primary over the filial(a relationship of belonging) in our proclamation, this performance framework will

¹⁸ Jn 17:19

¹⁹ Col 3:3.

²⁰ C. Baxter Kruger

inevitably be carried on into discipleship. In other words, if we depend on the legal paradigm to demonstrate to kids how they can't please God, it's only natural that they will define pleasing God legalistically as young believers as well. They may be inclined to see obedience as the keeping of rules instead of a grace-motivated life springing from a love affair with the Savior. Legal metaphors emphasize what we do apart from relationship more than who we are in relationship, *acting over being*, the imperatives of a powerless law over the indicatives of transforming grace. Who are we? God's children, Christ's siblings by the Spirit. By grace we are included in the trinitarian life of God. God doesn't love us because we are good, but because we are his!

Of course, if we preach a free gospel and reconciliation, justification and redemption in Christ as an unconditioned gift, we will be opening ourselves up to the charges of the legalizers who will warn us of giving a license to sin. Frankly, this will be a positive sign; the gospel *is* too good to be true! (If the gospel includes conditions, tear this paper up and throw it away!). Against the idea of license, we can say with Paul, "by no means!"²¹ But true obedience can only be motivated by grace, issuing out of a thankful sense of belonging, an assurance by the Spirit of our true identity. We are called to obey in the Spirit, and even to suffer, with joy. As Martin Luther said, we simply don't do God's will until we delight in it. I like to say that discipleship is not about the *supposed to's* but the *want to* because of the *belong to*.

As in proclamation, the indicatives must be emphasized above the imperatives – the more we are reminded of who we are in Christ, the more our behavior will reflect our true identity.²² This is obviously Paul's tact throughout his letters, as in these examples from Philippians with the indicatives in italics: "I press on to make it my own *because Christ Jesus has made me his own*"(3:12), "Work out *your salvation* in fear and trembling, for *God is at work within you to will and to act according to his good purpose*"(2:12-13). Regarding the latter verse, it's great to know that we work out what God has already worked in! When grace becomes just as important in sanctification as it is in justification—when in Christ we realize we are "home before we start" – we are free to be catapulted into the works God has prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10).

As Paul taught, when we are motivated to love God as he loves us and to be faithful as he is faithful, we will fulfill the law! Unconditional grace does not weaken the law. By contrast, to attempt to "strengthen" the law by making God's love conditional is to weaken it. Kids neither respect a Father whose love is conditioned nor love him. Any "obedience" rendered to such a Father would not be heart-felt. The best way to get a kid to be committed to God is to stress God's commitment to her!²³ We need not be afraid to gamble on the character of God, knowing that once kids get an accurate picture of God's gracious character and love, He is going to win the desires game.

A grace-law as opposed to a law-grace emphasis in proclamation and in discipleship will help us to avoid the performance syndrome so destructive to believers. Even if salvation

²¹ Rom 6:2, 15.

²² Neil Anderson

²³ Gary Deddo

by grace is grasped, a sneaky sanctification by works mentality often manifests itself in young believers. Our message must not connote “saved by grace, now Hi, ho, it’s off to work I go.” It must not be “discipleship for the Type A,” the one who can make the 6:30am Campaigners and who can string together 50 straight quiet times. We have to be very careful about reinforcing the performance identity of these so-called “fast ships” who are often made the poster children of our mission.

An undue reliance on discipleship “tools” without a context of the indicative feeds the wrong thing in us. The greatest help we can give young believers is to train their eyes to see the indicatives in Scripture, to see all of the imperatives in the light of his love (“When God says no he always has a bigger YES in mind!”), the how-to’s in the context of the Who, the commandments in relation to the character of God(c.f. Exodus 34:6). Discipleship is about belonging not performing; it should teach us how to “be” before how to “do.” And as reflected in the model of Jesus and Paul, it’s better caught than taught. It’s not about taking twelve guys through a manual. It’s about life on life; it’s slow not fast. When an aging Dawson Trotman was asked how many people he had disciplined in his lifetime, he said “two.”

What are we calling kids to do? To repent and to believe in the Lord, and in his unconditional love. We are not calling them to commit their lives to God but to trust in His “committedness” to them – a disciple is not one, primarily, who is committed but who is “committed-to” and knows it. Our commitment to God is only as strong as the weakest link, and if that link depends on us, we are in trouble!²⁴ We can tell young believers, “hold onto Jesus, he is holding on to you.” We can be assured that Christ will be more committed to them than they could ever be to him. Sometimes we will feel his commitment most severely, for he disciplines those he loves.

May we in Young Life always, in proclamation and discipleship, keep repentance and belonging together. When the Good Shepherd wanted to teach about repentance, he told the parable of the lost sheep.²⁵ Where is the repentance in this story? What can a lost, cowering sheep do to repent? Repentance is in humbly believing that we are the lost sheep, harassed and *helpless*, and that we have been carried home on the Golgothic shoulders of the Shepherd. Repentance is acknowledging we’re wrong while believing we belong.

Learning to believe is a life-long process. That’s why discipleship could almost be called journey evangelism. In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “He who is believes is obedient, and he who is obedient believes.” He is saying that it’s when we really believe in our unconditional adoption as children of God that we will obey. The problem is not that the gospel is too free, but that we often don’t believe it! We can, with our young friends, throw ourselves constantly before Jesus, crying out, “I believe, help my unbelief!”²⁶ And, in failure after failure, instead of running away from God in our guilt and shame, we can approach God boldly, knowing that we belong. Here, in the cauldron of unconditional love, true transformation takes place.

²⁴ T.F. Torrance

²⁵ Lk 15: 1-7

²⁶ Mk 9:24

Knowing the committedness of God toward our young friends will give us the necessary boldness to encourage them in the area of assurance and in the all important area of accountability. On the one hand we can encourage a life-style of a fresh start, the practice of quick repentance within the safe confines of the Saviors arms. We can “put a crown on their head and help them grow into it,” constantly calling them to become who they already are. At the same time we can confront them in love, saying like Paul to the Corinthians, this is who you are, act like it! In our tough love and unconditional friendship with them, we can help dispel any thought that they might disqualify themselves from their status as God’s child – it is God who put them there. Only if Christ can be unexalted and unresurrected can they be unhitched from him!

I’ll bring this paper towards a close with a story. Last summer, while in my role as camp speaker, I was approached by a concerned leader and her young friend Sheila. Sheila wore a grim expression, and she was dressed totally in black. As the three of us talked, Sheila defiantly described her life in the occult, her nocturnal sojourns to graveyards and the comfort she derived from communication with the dead. When I asked her about her thoughts concerning God, she mentioned that she had gone to church when she was young and had prayed a prayer of commitment, but that she didn’t believe “that stuff” anymore. In my heart, as I listened, I felt the Lord saying, “this is my daughter.” I looked Sheila in the eyes and I relayed to her, “Sheila, you are not a child of darkness, you are a child of the light. You don’t belong to Satan, you belong to Jesus. You can’t scare him off. You can’t shake him – he is the hound of heaven who never loses your trail.” She listened to me intently as I talked about the Prodigal Son, “God has his ways of reminding you that you belong to him, and when you come to your senses and reach back out for him, you will know that, by his Spirit, he has been holding on to you all along.” “I’m afraid,” I continued with a gentle smile, “that you are doomed – doomed in a good way! You simply can’t be disowned.” The last words I said to her, words that actually elicited a pleasant crack in her own countenance, were these: “I’ll see you in heaven.”

A week or two later I received a call from the leader, who ecstatically described the transformation she had seen in Sheila’s life shortly after their arrival back home, and the way that this young daughter was growing in Christ. While the circumstances are different for each, there are many “Sheilas” out there (many of us have had our own “Sheila-season”), folks who languish in the far-off country because it’s easier for them to get God out of their mind than to really absorb the unconditional nature of their belongingness. In other words, they may think, “Well, I can’t go back to God, so I better just make the best of it on my own.” God’s grace in Jesus Christ *is* so free and unthinkable; that’s why we need to pound it into kids’ heads. Maybe we will see a change in this excruciating pattern of kids making umpteen re-commitments to Christ.

We began with the premise that proclamation should be evaluated not just on whether kids become Christians but on the basis of what kind of issues they deal with after becoming Christians, the working framework they exhibit as young believers. The story about Sheila serves as a litmus test of our individual evangelical creed regarding proclamation and

discipleship. Some will think my response to her is beautiful, others will warn that is reckless.

In our dealings with kids, will adopting a grace-law stance as opposed to a law-grace stance always “work?” No, kids *will* take it as license at times. If we love someone unconditionally they will take advantage of us at times, they may even walk all over us. Their behavior may get much worse. They may embarrass us. But we are not called to manipulate them into being faithful; we must withstand the temptation to walk by sight, not faith, or to break out the crowbar of shame in order to find some kind of leverage.

When kids abuse the Lord’s grace, it is not our job to defend his honor by pouring on the guilt and condemnation. The Lord can take care of his own reputation. Yes, kids will abuse the kind patience and mercy of God, but God has obviously deemed it worth the humiliation and risk. He knows that true love can only take place in an atmosphere of freedom, and, as Eugene Peterson says, he is a God who waits to be wanted.

Certainly we can and should warn our young friends of the intrinsic cost of going against the grain of God’s love. We can say to them, no matter what, “God’s love for you will not change direction, but it *is* out to change *your* direction!” At the same time we can constantly remind them that, no matter how far they stray from home, the Father’s front porch light is always on in anticipation of their return and that Jesus, their brother, is praying for them. It is when they, by the Spirit, recognize their foolishness and return home that a free, joy-full love affair with God can flourish.

We teach our little children the words, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so, little ones to Him belong....” Are we to tell them that when they get to be a certain age this is no longer the case? Are we to tell them they belong to Jesus *if*...? No, the Good Shepherd has laid down his life; he has collected his lost sheep. The lost sheep are ***His***. This is the truth we are calling our teenage friends to, and that we are praying by the Spirit of truth they will see. They are liked, they are loved, they belong to Him. Every kid, everywhere, for eternity.²⁷

²⁷ A Young Life slogan at the time.

