

Christ the Center

a meditation on Christ, the ultimate treasure of our joy in Evangelism

Mark Olivero, July 2017

“Christ is the centre of Christianity; all else is circumference.”

John Stott

Home is where we wish to be. Where is home? We believe that home is where we sense that we are fully ourselves. Thus, home is not simply a place. Home is to belong. Man's greatest desire to love and be loved. That desire is what fills his sense of home.

What plagues us is that we can think we are home and are not or we can think we have found it, but unaware we are still far from it. There are too many distractions which become substitutes for true home. Many of them may be good, but they're still not home.

Yahweh God has made a cosmos in which man's true home is not a continent, not a country, an address, not even a set of ideas, of doctrines or philosophy per se. Man's true home is his heart in God's heart. That was the desired and designed existence granted to man by the Sovereign LORD. This is what makes Christianity distinct from all other religions and what shows Christianity to be real with reality. The triune God in Christ is home.

Yet, we have both within the Church and without found lesser hearts in which to center our home, to make a place for our joy other than the Great Heart of God. So in the Christian church methods may be good and insightful, but when evangelism methods are not centered in Christ we end up trying to win with our method. The method becomes an end.

So, in Evangelism what or who is home to our heart? Are we aiming to win a debate point? Are we overwhelming them with information? Are we aiming to convince, persuade, even entertain, those outside Christ? It is Christ they need to see, not our methods.

Our “method” should be Christ for he is the fountain and treasure of our joy. **Our “method” should be Christ for he is the fountain and treasure of the Evangel.** When Christ came to us he did not come with a new method in hand. He came offering himself. *Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God’* (see John 6:68-69).

No wonder John Stott was thoroughly convinced that “Christianity is Christ. The person and

work of Christ are the rock upon which the Christian religion is built. If he is not who he said he was, and if he did not do what he said he had come to do, the foundation is undermined and the whole superstructure will collapse. Take Christ from Christianity, and you disembowel it; there is practically nothing left. Christ is the centre of Christianity; all else is circumference.” (John Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 21).

Christianity is Christo-centric. At least it should be, but in many places and churches and minds it is not Christo-centric. The fullnesses of who Christ is fill every doctrine of the Church. So then, why should not every Gospel conversation, every hour spent in Apologetics, every defense of a Christian worldview, every plea for Christian ethics, discipleship or whatever be soaked in the aroma of he who has *the words of eternal life*?

We are grateful that God has disclosed himself in the beauties of the natural world. But in his Word he discloses his mind and heart. In Scripture we are immersed in word wonder, but not just words. In God’s divine Revelation he shows himself. In the abundance of what God is saying we can miss what he most wants us to know. What if God were to say but one word to all mankind? If God said only one word in all of history what one word would it be?

If God were to speak but one word it would be ‘Christ.’ What about love? you may ask. To speaking of love divine God must bring you to see the face of Christ. What about wisdom? To speaking of perfect wisdom God must reveal Christ. What about science? Science is the work of knowing and there is no knowing without the Logos, the Christ. This is why the apostle says, *For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory* (see 2 Cor 1:20). Christ. Yes!

God invites us into his joy, joy of the triune God, by inviting us to see, to learn, to live, to be Christo-centric. In Evangelism we do best when we invite others into our joy in Christ.

1 - The way we learn the Scripture should be Christo-centric

When we open the Bible we open ourselves to the Christian Scriptures. The OT may have been written in Hebrew and the NT in Greek, but all of it is Christian. Genesis is just as Christian as is the Gospel of John. Christ is in the first chapter of the Bible just as much as he is *in the beginning* of John 1. We should not wait to think of or speak of Christ till Matt 1:1.

“If you leave out Christ, you have left the sun out of the day, and the moon out of the night, you have left the waters out of the sea, and the floods out of the river, you have left the harvest out of the year, the soul out of the body, you have left joy out of heaven, you robbed all of it's all. There is no gospel worth thinking of, much less worth proclaiming, if Jesus be forgotten. We must have Jesus as Alpha and Omega...” (C. H. Spurgeon).

When we are Christo-centric in our learning of Scripture we will keep our focus on him in

our sharing the Gospel. If questions or objections come at us from every direction, we will keep pointing the unbeliever to Christ. They do not need a better argument. They need Christ. For example, if an atheist wants to keep saying he doesn't believe God exist, then no worries. Tell him of Christ. What he needs most is not more evidence. He needs Christ.

If Muslim wants to keep saying the Quran does not allow for Christ to be the son of Allah, then no worries. Tell him of Christ all the more. What he needs most is not more debate about this or that. He needs the loveliness of Christ. The Quran names Jesus Christ far more than it does Mohammed. That should make any Muslim deeply curious about Jesus. Lead them to want to dwell long on thoughts of Christ in the Gospels. The Quran says so.

With Spurgeon can learn to say, "From every text of Scripture there is a road to Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now, what is the road to Christ? I have never found a text that did not have a road to Christ in it." Without a long focus on Christ our thots on the OT will likely fit in a synagogue as well as in a church.

Christ is the I AM come in the flesh. Christ is Yahweh himself in our midst. Thus, when we read the OT we should not think of it as containing some predictions about Messiah. It is that, but much more. Yahweh's name is mentioned over 6,800 times in the OT. Those are 6,800 mentions of the I AM, the triune God who reveals himself to man in the Son Yahweh. The Father we can only know through the Son in both the OT and the NT. We can have fellowship with Father, Son, Spirit, but only because of the Son. He is the One of Yahweh triune who embodies and presents their blessed charity of Persons to us all through.

He comes to us not only as Savior. He comes as Sovereign Savior. He comes as Redeemer who is the Everlasting Ruler. He comes not only as Eternal Priest. He is true Melchizedek, the priestly King and the kingly Priest. The whole of Scripture is The Christ Epic. Like Aragorn we may see him in shadow form early on (Strider), but later he appears in brilliant light, the King in his beauty. He has always been the King. He is King now. He rules in covenant love.

King. Creation. Conflict. Cross/Resurrection. **Kingdom**
(covenants New Covenant)
> **the Christ Epic** <

The Gospel we proclaim is not a ticket to the after life. The Gospel we proclaim announces that *Iesous Kurios*, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord over Target. He is Lord over Wade Hampton Boulevard. He is Lord over South Carolina, Lord over the US. He is Lord over London, Lord over Mecca, Lord over Tokyo, Lord over Berlin. Jesus is Lord over Heaven and earth.

When our minds and hearts are soaked with the *Visio Christi* (vision of Christ) across all the Scripture we will surprise ourselves with how easily we bubble over with talk of Christ to

anyone, family, friends, a stranger or whomever he brings across our path.

2 - The life of the church should be Christo-centric

Michael Horton writes in *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*, that “In my view, we are living out our creed, but that creed is closer to the American Dream than it is to the Christian faith. The claim I am laying out in this book is that the most dominant form of Christianity today reflects ‘a zeal for God’ that is nevertheless without knowledge—particularly, as Paul himself specifies, the knowledge of God’s justification of the wicked by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from works.” We should be willing to examine ourselves, our church life, our home life, our individual lives for how much of Christ might go missing. Is he assumed to be there?

We can appear quite moral and yet be weak on joy in Christ. We can be politically active for just causes and yet be weak on joy in Christ. We can be a strong defender of key doctrines of the Church and yet be weak on joy in Christ.

What is our mission? What is the mission of the Church? Is our mission to go into all the world and proclaim the Republican platform? Is our mission to go into all the world and proclaim Democratic platform, Libertarian platform, the Independent political cause? We are free to have an opinion, even strong opinions, on politics, worldviews, sub-cultural movements, etc., but these are not the Gospel. There are so many variations on politics, varied Christian worldviews or sub-cultural concerns that it is difficult to keep track.

“The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God” (Martin Luther, 95 Theses, #62). Christ is in himself the Person of that grace and Gospel.

The Church’s mission is to proclaim Christ. This is hard to do if the life of the Church has tunnel vision for defending its own sub-culture, Christianly though it may sound. Our unified life is to live centered around Christ. He is our Chief Shepherd. Christ is the sweet spot of our life, our Gospel, our future. The Church lives and moves in him. People who are captivated by the loveliness of Christ will speak lovely things about him to the world.

3 - The Evangel and thus Evangelism should be Christo-centric

“Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way” (Karl Barth). And, “It is not ours to imagine that by our own choice or initiative we can constitute ourselves Christians, but rather to take refuge from our own frail decisions in God and His firm decision of grace which has already overtaken us in Christ. It is God’s steadfast, eternal decision that undergirds our feeble and faltering decisions and enfolds them securely in His own. The whole of our salvation depends upon

the faithfulness of God to His own Word, and He does not tire of being faithful." T.F. Torrance, *When Christ Comes and Comes Again*

"...the truth is that from the beginning God has given himself, and at present gives himself more fully, that we may contemplate him in the face of his Christ. It is therefore not lawful that we turn away and become diverted even in the smallest degree by this or that. On the contrary, our minds ought to come to a halt at the point where we learn in Scripture to know Jesus Christ and him alone, so that we may be directly led by him to the Father who contains in himself all perfection" (Calvin).

Talk of Intelligent Design is not how we enter the Kingdom of God. Talk of worldviews is not how we enter the Kingdom of God. Talk of politics is not how we enter the Kingdom of God. Talk about the "sacred cows" of our particular group is not how anyone enters the Kingdom of God. 'Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' (see Mark 10:15). We come empty. Thus, we should help the sinner see his emptiness before God that he may be readied to look to Christ in faith and repentance.

"For nothing counts with God, except His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who is completely pure and holy before Him. Where He is, there God looks and has His pleasure." Martin Luther

"It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, to be Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest and King, the Head and Savior of His Church, the Heir of all things, the Judge of the world; unto whom He did from all eternity give a people, to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified." Westminster Confession of Faith

God does not reconcile the world to himself by Intelligent Design, by the age of the earth, by Moralism, by conservative rhetoric or liberal rhetoric, by persuasive arguments for a how we think the world should be according to our worldview. In Evangelism we should not seek to convince the lost that they need a new lens. They need don't need a new lens. They need new eyes. Dead men cannot see. The Gospel alone is Good News that calls humanity into a sweet life lived together under *Iesous Kurios*. They need this new life by the Spirit.

"God's way of saving men is to send out His servants to tell them the gospel, and the Church has been charged to go into all the world for that very purpose." (J. I. Packer). "All the world" includes places and people we see everyday. The mission field is here wherever here is. If our passion is Christ, if our joy is Christ, our "method" will be joy in him.

"Let me urge you to do whatever it takes to make the gospel your passion. Ask God to change your heart so you can personally affirm for your own life the words of Galatians 6:14 – "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Mahaney, *Living The Cross Centered Life*, 16).