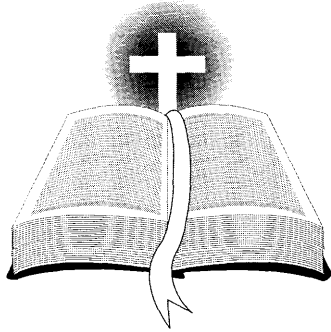


CHAPTER SIX



CHRIST: THE HEART OF THE MESSAGE OF HOPE

Bill Gates of Microsoft, claimed by many to be “man of the century,” is referenced 25,000 times on the World Wide Web. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, appears 146,000 times. But he’s the only topic of conversation in heaven! Frankly, Christ is the “man of the ages,” the one who therefore must dominate every message of hope, day by day.

Our only hope as a nation is to flood the church—and even more importantly, the movement of prayer ascending in the church—with heralds of the hope of revival. These heralds must be, heart and soul, singularly messengers of Christ—the *whole* Christ.

Consumed with Christ

In C. S. Lewis’s *The Silver Chair*, one of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, a dreadfully thirsty little girl named Jill finds herself tempted by a stream of water that is guarded by a fearsome looking lion named Aslan (the Christ figure in the Narnia series). So overcome by thirst, “she almost felt she would not mind being eaten by the lion if only

she could be sure of getting a mouthful of water first.” Jill asks and receives permission to come and drink. The lion’s voice frightens her so much, however, that she is not sure she wants to risk advancing to the stream.

“Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?”

“I make no promise,” said the Lion. . . .

“Do you eat girls?” she said.

“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. . . .

“I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion. “There is no other stream.”

It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward. . . .¹

Here’s the tension every Christian should feel within when we hear prospects of revival proclaimed, if proclaimed properly. Around Christ flows a river of blessing sufficient to quench our deepest thirst, as well as the longings of a whole generation. We are invited to drink with abandon. But he will consume us in the process! Or rather, we will be consumed with him. Is this the vision of Christ offered in your message of hope? It should be.

From her years of ministering to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, Mother Teresa cautions, “If the words we speak do not bring the light of Christ, they only serve to make the darkness worse.”² That’s true anywhere. If our message is not a message of Christ and his all-consuming life, then it will leave people with less hope and more despair than if we had never come.

Obviously, therefore, the *content* of our message is a very serious matter. There’s nothing more practical we can do to ensure its proper delivery than to determine that Christ will always be the heart of all we share. “When Jesus Christ fascinates—and the Interpreter Spirit specializes in making Jesus fascinating—we will be constantly seeking to find and we will be constantly finding, imaginative ways to proclaim him—and him only—to our time.”³

Christ Is Our Hope

Return to Zechariah 9. What God announced to prisoners of waterless pits that transforms them into prisoners of hope is the message of Christ's triumphal entry (vv. 8–11)—not only into Jerusalem, but among the nations and into the hearts of his people (9:13–10:12). It is a message of massive revival centered on Jesus. That's the decree! He, and he alone, is their assurance that God will restore to them “twice as much” (9:12).

What, after all, is life without hope? And what is hope, in the end, without Christ? All of God's promises are “Yes!” to us in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). By his resurrection we've been born again to a living hope (1 Peter 1:3). Every prophetic vision ever given entails greater revelations of who Jesus is (Rev. 19:10). Therefore, the more comprehensive our message of Christ, the more convincing the hope we offer our hearers, and the more compelling our call will be for them to pray and prepare for revival.

Hope reigns because Christ reigns. Hope is a person (1 Tim. 1:1) who comes into the midst of his church to guarantee and lead us into the fulfillment of every glorious prospect God has ordained (Col. 1:27). God offers no hope beyond who Christ is. The eternal past has known no other future but Jesus, and the eternal future knows no other past except him. Of course he's the heart of our message of hope! How could it be otherwise?

In a sense, the whole Reformation was about this truth, about lifting people out of a despairing vision of themselves into the most magnificent vision possible of who Christ is.⁴ Recall the stunning christological texts of Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, or Hebrews 1: Can you imagine taking these texts and substituting any other name in heaven or on earth for the name of Jesus?⁵ Our doctrine of revival must paint a vision that is preeminently about Christ himself. What more can we ever do for our hearers if we don't do this? We've done them no favor if we rally them to seek a God-given spiritual awakening but with a limited vision of a diminished Christ. The absurdity of such an effort needs no comment. If it is a full revival we want, then a full Christ must be its declared hope.

In Hebrews, for example, Paul calls a persecuted church to press on in courage and hope (3:6) because their eyes are fixed on the Christ ahead of us (12:1–2), the center of the universe (1:1–3), who is the “better hope” (7:19) for all the ages to come (12:22–29). “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,” Hebrews charges us (10:23), because he is coming, bringing the consummation with him (10:25, 37–39). In the power of the Spirit, the future has already begun (6:4–5). God simply wants to pour out more and more of it through Jesus (4:14–16; 13:20–21).

In *The Majestic Tapestry*, church historian Robert E. Webber speaks of his own “conversion” to this higher view of Christ and the need to keep such a vision central in all ministry. He writes:

My view of the work of Christ was severely limited. It wasn't that I didn't believe the right truth. I simply didn't understand how far-reaching and all-inclusive the work of Christ really was. When I discovered the universal and cosmic nature of the work of Christ, it was like being born again. I was given a key to a Christian way of viewing the whole world, a key that unlocked the door to a rich storehouse of spiritual treasures, treasures that I am still handling in sheer amazement.⁶

While researching his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey entered into the same personal awakening. He reached the conclusion that he was a Christian for two basic reasons—because he lacked any good alternatives and because of who Jesus is. Drawing from Martin Luther, he likens Christ to the focal point of a fine painting being examined by a magnifying glass. The object in the center of the glass stays crisp and clear, while around the edges the view grows increasingly distorted. “For me, Jesus has become the focal point. I learned in the process of writing this book to keep the magnifying glass of my faith focused on Jesus.”⁷ Jesus is also the focal point—the magnifying glass—for every agent of revival, for every message of hope. In the end, either we preach Christ in all of his magnificence—how in him the sovereign initiatives of grace envelop our lives—or we end up delivering a message that's mainly about human potential and abilities, “with Christ brought in only to boost us and help us achieve that potential.”⁸



Heralds of revival are actually ambassadors of the cross, because the only hope we offer is defined by Calvary—the utter necessity of divine intervention as the only hope for our human, sinful state. Revival is simply another manifestation of the message of the cross. The Reformation argued the difference between a “theology of glory,” where we attempt higher spirituality by our efforts toward God, and a “theology of the cross,” in which we confess ourselves to be constantly bankrupt, always desperate for God’s initiative in Christ. If we are to know the glory of Christ, he must infuse us with fuller revelations of himself. That’s why revival—a spiritual awakening—is the single greatest blessing the church can anticipate between the cross and the second coming.

Quite naturally, Christ occupies the heart, the center, the focal point of every revival. Because he makes it possible. Because he’s what it’s all about. Therefore, if we lack interest in revival, it may really mean, in the end, that we lack vision for (or understanding of) the centrality of Christ and his cross in all the ways of God.

Three Dimensions of the Message of Hope

In *The Hope at Hand*, I discussed three dimensions of a Christ-centered revival, which correspond to the three dimensions of every message of hope. The words I use to describe the impact of revival are *focus*, *fullness*, *fulfillment*. Here’s what I wrote:

(1) In revival there is a *new focus* on Christ’s person (who he is *to us*, especially his character as God’s Son) and on his passion (who he is *for us*, especially in his death, resurrection, and ascension). As a result, (2) we experience together in new ways *the fullness of his life* over us (as he rules *over us* as Lord and Head of the church) and in us (as he *indwells us* with resurrection power). (3) All of this presses us into new involvements in the *fulfillment of Christ’s mission* where we live, and among the nations, as he carries out his purposes (*through us*), and as he establishes his preeminence among many peoples (going *out ahead of us* to lead his global cause to victory and to bring about the consummation of all things).⁹

Focus, fullness, fulfillment—no outline could be more practical for helping you design any message of hope from the Scriptures. To use a technical theological term, these words “exegete” biblical renewal.

In fact, if you study texts of the great “revival prayers” of the Scriptures—including Jesus’ extended prayer in John 17 (and even what’s known as the Lord’s Prayer)—you will find that these three concepts are the consistent heart-cry every time. “Show us your glory!” Focus. Only Christ embodies all that glory. “Fill us with your power and presence!” Fullness. As that happens, we are seen to be nothing less than the body (community) of Christ. “Release us to advance your kingdom victoriously!” Fulfillment. Christ is the one we serve, promote, proclaim. Our mission goes forward as it amplifies his ministry through us, and vindicates it afresh “with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4).

That’s how the church prayed in Acts 4, and that’s how it preached in the ensuing chapters. Whole cities were captivated by their vision of Christ as a result. How can Christians today labor for less?

Message or Mascot?

Unfortunately, the way Christ is heard or seen in many of our churches falls short of this. For many of our people, he is very much (using Stephen Carter’s term) a “hobby,” not much different from building model airplanes or bowling.¹⁰ In many of our churches, the Christ we preach may actually trivialize God, making him into “a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences.” We have “pared God down to more manageable proportions.”¹¹

Our domestication of Christ, coupled with our privatization of the gospel, renders him no bigger to us than personal dreams, daily relationships, inner emotional needs, or church agendas—in other words, our ongoing struggles for survival. Many have chosen to come to Christ, but only as far as we have to come in order to get our needs met. “If you listen to much of our preaching, you get the impression



that Jesus was some sort of itinerant therapist who, for free, traveled about helping people feel better.”¹²

I ask you: Who is the Jesus being proclaimed in our land? In your church? To your family? How much of our message about him—and, as a result, any discussion of spiritual awakening to him—rises essentially out of market-driven ministries that make the “customers” the controlling factor in what message we peddle? How often has Christ simply formed our product, packaged for maximum sales? Says missionary theologian Leslie Newbigin, “I suddenly saw that . . . someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the center was fundamentally the Self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that.”¹³

In other words, as I often say, Christ is more or less evangelicalism’s *mascot*. Let me illustrate. I attended a high school that was football crazy, with a stadium seating twenty thousand. The school produced nearly twenty-five state championship teams, and our teams were voted national champions more than once. Called the Massillon Tigers, our mascot was a student dressed up as a tiger—wearing real tiger skin, in fact. At times in the midst of a game—if we were falling behind or if the crowd needed to be stirred to cheer the team on to victory or when it served the coach’s purpose—the uniformed mascot would run his stripes onto the field. Seeing the tiger doubled our determination to put bold plays into action, to fight and struggle, to win the game on our terms. Time-out was called. The mascot appeared. The crowd cheered. The team regained courage and resolve. Then the mascot disappeared to the sidelines to await another crisis. Immediately everyone felt better, and the game proceeded.

While visiting churches on some Sunday mornings, I’ve felt that Jesus is also being deployed as our mascot. Once a week we trot him out (so to speak), to cheer us up, to give us new vigor and vision, to reinforce for us the great things we might do for God, or to reignite a celebration of the victory we know we will win. For the rest of the week, however, he’s pretty much relegated to the sidelines. Even during Sunday school, worship, or sermons, I’ve noted how references to him serve mostly to buttress teachings on “How to Have a Healthy Family,” or “Godly Ways to Handle Your Finances,” or “Our Responsibilities in World Evangelism.” Our songs may mention him (or may

not), but great hymns or choruses designed to unfold the scope of his character, his reign, and the abounding hope he brings are few and far between.

In a sense, we've been diverted from him with inordinate affections. We prize ambitions of the evangelical enterprise more than we embrace Christ as our Prize. "The erosion of a Christ-centered faith threatens to undermine the identity of evangelical Christianity . . . real revival and genuine reformation will not be built on flimsy foundations."¹⁴

This awful deficiency threatens all who wish to become Messengers of Hope. We must labor more than we might guess to keep Christ as the heart of our message and to be sure our hearers know that's what we're doing. We must be the magnifying glasses of which Luther and Yancey spoke. The H.O.P.E. approach to giving a message of hope, to be explored more deeply in the next four chapters, is of virtually no significance, no matter how effectively we may employ these devices, unless . . . unless when we're finished, people are looking only at Christ, beholding him as the summation of the revival we seek.

We're on a Campaign

In Acts 1:8, Jesus sent out witnesses, not just *for* him but *unto* him. Bottom-line service to God for all believers is the preaching of his Son (Rom. 1:9). Every Messenger of Hope should say that "when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man" (Gal. 1:15–16). To speak out "the unsearchable riches of Christ," and to make crystal clear to everyone "the administration of this mystery" (Eph. 3:8–9)—what a privilege! Only through "the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery" (Rom. 16:25), will our hearers be established by God in their understanding of every hope before us. Our job is to multiply prisoners of hope as we "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

As suggested earlier, it's somewhat like campaigning for a presidential candidate. We want to highlight our leader's strengths and



accomplishments, fill people with hope about what he is able to accomplish, articulate the compelling promises that make up his platform, help people envision what it would be like for him to be completely in charge, and incite them to appropriate action (which means focusing daily discipleship on him and the prospects of revival in him). Messengers of Hope campaign for Christ, declaring that he who is Lord indeed is ready to awaken us to his presence *in deed*, in the midst of our need.

Christ and Consummation

Over the years a helpful word for me, in defining the comprehensive dimensions of proclaiming Christ as our hope, has been *consummation*. My next book, *Christ and Consummation*, will focus exclusively on this. For now, let me summarize what I've discovered.

The word *consummation* means to complete something in every detail, to give the ultimate manifestation, to bring about the climax or grand finale, to be fully engaged in something, to consume or be consumed by something totally. Biblically, this is what Christ is always prepared to do. As C. S. Lewis's Aslan makes clear, he is determined to be all-consuming, and to have us consumed with him. That's where he's headed as he takes us into God's future for our lives, for the nations, and for the whole creation. He is our destination. The climax of all our hopes is lodged in him. He will one day be the center of *the* consummation. Even so, he wants to be the consuming issue in all of our lives right now. Revival powerfully reveals God's commitment to this. So should our message of hope.

Only Christ encompasses and amplifies all of God's promises from Genesis to Revelation. He guarantees their full flowering; he will complete them. In that sense, history is teleological—focused on the end. The sweep of human events—including events in the church and around the church in every generation—are moving us toward the day when Christ's preeminence will be manifested unchallenged throughout the universe. The Christ with whom we are united is, right now, “the presence of the future.”¹⁵



Therefore, every message of hope we share with others must highlight how God's promises are all shaped by the horizon of the consummation itself. Consider these two passages:

Nevertheless, when everything created has been made subject to God, then shall the Son himself be subject to God, who gave him power over all things. Thus, in the end, shall God be wholly and absolutely God.

1 Corinthians 15:28 PHILLIPS

For God has allowed us to know the secret of his plan, and it is this: he purposed long ago in his sovereign will that all human history should be consummated in Christ, that everything that exists in Heaven or earth shall find its perfection and fulfillment in him.

Ephesians 1:10 PHILLIPS

Here's my question: Can we ever herald the true Christ to our own generation if our message falls short of this vision? Does he want to give us less than abundant approximations of this vision in our own day? After all, the Spirit regularly takes the glories of Christ ascended and reveals them to us, showing us things to come (John 16:13–15). Can we do less whenever we speak of Christ? With him there is always so much more. The Holy Spirit brings dramatically near to us a wide hope, because it's embodied entirely in Christ. He's the air we breathe. Though perhaps not yet chronologically near, all hope is *christologically* near, as near as the Jesus who indwells his church right now.

Think of the consummation as God's "final revival." It's the greatest renewal imaginable—a renovated heaven and earth (2 Peter 3:10–14), covered with a knowledge of Christ like waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). From the final revival, therefore, all other revivals must take their cue. In principle, no prophecy exists in Scripture about the consummation that is not capable of being realized (at least in some measure) within history. Just look at the explosion of wonders and miracles all through the Book of Acts. Of course, the perfect manifestation of revival requires the ultimate intervention of God, which we call the second coming of Christ. However, anytime when God invades his church with a surprisingly refreshing



outpouring of the Spirit, he brings to us “approximations of the consummation” (my personal phrase for revival, discussed in *The Hope at Hand*). We taste of the final revival, when the Lamb will shine on us forever from the midst of the throne (Rev. 21:22–24; 22:3–4).

William Carey, a father of modern missions, understood this when he published his research on the unevangelized in 1792. Having prayed nearly seven years for revival in a concert of prayer in Northampton, England, he confronted his denomination’s annual meeting as a Messenger of Hope. Drawing from texts in Isaiah on revival—most of them related to the final revival—he wrote and spoke a most arresting vision. Armed with missiological statistics, he first argued for a christology big enough to take to the nations, as well as to mobilize the church to action. In the end, his message created a hope that broke the missionary log-jam on both sides of the Atlantic.

My point in all of this? We have a God who wants to do so much more for us, both now (approximations) and in the final revival (consummation). How? Through the Person at the center of the final revival and of every other revival. That’s why the Spirit’s mission to us is to accelerate, intensify, deepen, expand, extend, and increasingly fill out for every generation of believers all that Jesus is meant to be for us. He longs to renew us today with substantial installments of that supreme epoch when all our hopes will reach their climax.

Peter teaches that Christ, when properly proclaimed, becomes a “morning star” (2 Peter 1:19), alerting us that dawn is about to break upon us from God (see also Rev. 22:16). As a Messenger of Hope, the most practical suggestion I can make is this: Every time you deliver the hope, be sure that Jesus is more than ever a Morning Star for those who hear you. If you do this, then you will truly become an agent of revival.

Practical Questions to Help You

As you set to work teaching the Scriptures (in whatever capacity), consider the following set of questions. They can help you unlock any passage on hope, making it a more Christ-centered message for those to whom God sends you. For each text, ask the following:

What specific facets or dimensions of hope does this passage set before us? Base your study on the three key dimensions of revival: Does it promise a sharper God-given *focus* on the person of Christ? Does it offer a deeper experience of the *fullness* of Christ in our life together? Does it point toward a greater *fulfillment* of the mission of Christ where we live and beyond?

In what sense is Christ himself the summation of the hope described in these verses?

How will this hope, centered on Christ, be ultimately expressed in the consummation? What will it look like then? How does this help me better understand the hope—especially for my generation?

Why must Jesus be the center of the hope at any point of its expression, but especially when it reaches its climax? Why is he so critical to the outworking of this hope?

To what degree is God willing, able, and ready to give us right now approximations of all this hope promises? How might this hope find new manifestations in our lives right now? What would this look like?

If God were to unleash a fresh work of revival in our church or throughout the whole body of Christ in a way that provided significant experiences of the hope offered in this passage, what might happen? What would be the impact on individuals? On families? On churches? On a whole nation? In what sense might this revival be called a general awakening to Christ?

Specifically, based on this text, how should we begin to pray and prepare for a work of revival right now?

Dis-illusion Them

As Oswald Chambers remarked in *My Utmost for His Highest*, the church needs to come under “the discipline of dis-illusionment.”¹⁶ Christ is the touchstone for all reality. “These [religious rituals] are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Col. 2:17). We need to study him and him preem-



inently, until we discard all illusions arising out of discipleship not centered on him for who he *really* is. When our hearers are similarly dis-illusioned, they are ready to embrace the hope of revival, the hope of shadows turned to reality. That's our job. To dis-illusion them. That's one incomparable blessing brought to others by every true agent of revival.

Survey the issues raised in this chapter. Ponder the challenge of helping the church rethink who is at the center of its message of hope. Then reflect on two final questions: How would you describe the emphasis Christ receives in the messages *you* bring to God's people by preaching, by teaching, by counseling, by parenting, and by your very life? Second, would you like to make any changes in the emphasis of your messages in order to make Christ more the heart of the hope you share? If so, how would you do this?

We enjoy saying the Lord gives us the living bread.

Look to God, be faithful to God, and say no more. . . . God comes in you to do. Humble yourselves that Christ may be your portion.

Speaking from a sign of God, a cleaver. The day of the Lord never comes till the signs of the Lord appear. Man in God's hand is a sign. Thou art my battle axe, my weapon of war. God's wonders coming, doing a strange work. Ministers of God preaching the word out of season and in season.

God standing a wonder in man. Who can hinder God; His wonders are telling. We delight to see Jesus in signs. Confirming us out from snares, Jesus, great God at hand. His word telling about his ways bring us out from the mystery of evil. Watching for his wonders; telling God, I believe.

Charles Harrison Mason,
"An Exhortative Invocation" (1919),
taken from *Conversations with God:
Two Centuries of Prayers by African-Americans*