



A Transforming Gospel: A Challenge to Western Christians

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And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write . . . “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked . . . be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door. . . . Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” (Rev 3:14–22)

Christians who actually read the book of Revelation tend to be fixated with the apocalyptic materials that begin in chapter 4. Vivid, powerful, and sometimes frightening visions of the end of the world are captivating, indeed. But there is also much to be learned from the initial section of this book, the “seven letters” to the churches in Asia, especially in their diagnoses of “what ails” various Christian communities. For Christians in the West, a careful consideration of one of these letters, the one to the Christians in Laodicea, can be applied to our current situation. In general, we Christians in the West have become “lukewarm” in our

In what, then, does the power of the gospel consist? The gospel may be many things, but if it is not centered around the power of God to transform and recreate human persons, then this proclamation of this gospel is only lukewarm, or worse.

Christian faith, much as the Laodiceans. What does it mean to be “lukewarm?” It means that, by and large, Western Christians have lost sight of, and confidence in, the power of the gospel message—a “hot” gospel with power to transform our lives and communities. Too many of us and our congregations are “lukewarm,” without spirit or substance.

In Christ, we are made a new creation, and this is the transforming power that gives us hope and confidence. Christian theology can be many other things, but if it loses sight of the centrality of this transformative power, then all the other things are worthless.

The Christian gospel, the good news of God’s love in the person of Christ Jesus, is the proclamation of the power of God to transform our lives, our communities, and our world through God’s call to us for our repentance and forgiveness. In Christ, we are made a new creation, and this is the transforming power that gives us hope and confidence. Christian theology can be many other things, but if it loses sight of the centrality of this transformative power, then all the other things are worthless. As Paul Hinlicky writes: “the gospel is abidingly the powerful word of God to make a new beginning in human affairs that is effectively primary . . . in the life of the church in its mission in the world.” It is not just another ideology or another idea alongside a set of other religious choices; the gospel is the primary lens through which all of creation is viewed. Hinlicky continues, stating that the gospel frames this question:

What is our true need and plight that we should need *this* incarnation of God, *this* revelation of the justice of God, this Christ *crucified* for our sins and *raised from that Godforsaken death* to make us right again with God (Gal 2:21)? Posing *this* question, the gospel will not then be hijacked by other projects, retooled as religious ideology dressing up preexisting human ideas about our problems and prospects.

The gospel is an “unsurpassable divine *yes!* both radical and transformative.”¹ God’s gospel promise is not less than the power to recreate; it is anything but lukewarm.

So what then has happened to Western Christians that so many of us have become lukewarm? As Hinlicky suggests, we have allowed the gospel of Christ Jesus to be “hijacked” by other elements. As the critique to the Laodiceans suggests, we have been lulled to sleep by our riches and prosperity, pretending that we are self-sufficient and powerful. Christianity in Europe is stone-cold, and as a living faith-option, it is held to by a small minority of believers. The situation in

¹ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 9.

the United States is somewhat different; outwardly, organized Christian faith is still greatly present there, the churches are modestly filled, and Christian rhetoric is often to be heard. But on so many levels there are warning signs that all is not right, and there is a general feeling among American Christians of a malaise, an impending decline, that might be more apparent in some groups than others but that is widespread. “Lukewarm” is a term rightly applied to this context.

Where the gospel is “hot” and transformative these days is in the Global South. It is important to neither idealize nor denigrate these Christians, who struggle with their faith and their world just like many others of us. However, many of these new Christians have been captured by something deeply powerful in the gospel of Jesus Christ, something that transforms their lives. This power is what drives them. Western Christians brought a “hot” and transformative gospel to the Global South in the last two centuries—these missionaries were driven people, convinced that millions of people were dying without hearing the power of the Christian gospel, and they were willing to devote their lives (and give them, often times) so that others would know this good news. Now, perhaps in some cases, the stereotypes of these missionaries were valid, but give the Christians of the Global South some credit—they are intelligent people—they could see the amazing power of the Christian gospel itself, even if its messengers were not always perfect people.

Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America inhabit a world that can be very dangerous. Many live in situations where hostile religious, social, and political forces threaten them directly. They have little use or patience for Western Christians, living in safety, lecturing them on their versions of pluralism, toleration, and interreligious dialogue. The only way they can stand up to these sometime murderous forces is to have a strong, bedrock faith—an exclusive trust that “Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Christians from the Global South look at us in the West and must wonder: what happened to that same Christian faith in the West? Christians in the contemporary West, even with (because of?) our power and wealth and advantages, seem timid and weak and unsure—on the defensive—worried and without the ability to proclaim the power of Christ.

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The challenge of the booming Christianity in the Global South to Christians in North America and Europe is not one of power or leadership or ideology. What these new Christians say to us in the West is this: “Why is your faith so lukewarm? Where in your lives is the gospel power transforming you? Do you really believe what you proclaim, to the exclusion of all other gods that might be vying for your

allegiance? In short, do you believe that Jesus Christ, and him alone, is the Savior of the world? If so, prove it.”

So what happened to the Christian gospel in the West—how did it lose its “heat?” The roots of this issue go back several hundred years, to the beginnings of the modern era. In western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some intellectuals began to question many of the aspects of traditional Christian understandings of God, first obliquely and later directly and forcefully. In the minds of these critics, their modern rationality was offended by the traditional portrayal of a God who seemed to often act in irrational ways. They could not wrap their rationality around divine miracles and the supernatural, especially the idea of a triune God who entered into history in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Theirs was a God of pure reason, a rational God who created the world and imbued it with natural reason and natural law that was accessible to all; one did not need special, divine revelation to understand it. In other words, deism.

In reaction to this intellectual challenge, an increasing number of Christian theologians and others began to reconceptualize the biblical God along these rationalistic lines. In an important (and somewhat neglected) book theologian William Placher described the roots of this sweeping theological change:

Christian theologians increasingly thought of God as comprehensible in human terms, as the First Cause of the universe (who might or might not subsequently intervene in its affairs) and as the support of human efforts at moral improvement. Their imagining of God primarily as a cosmic ruler and supporter of ethical standards put the divine on the side of most of the dominant forms of social order. Neither revelation or grace, with their disruptive potential, was central to their understanding of the divine.²

Although the driving force of this movement was to “make” God more rational, the end result of such thinking was to rob God, and the Christian faith, of their potency. In their systems, God no longer had the potential to break into the world with power to transform it; this was no longer necessary, because the world itself was already on the path to moral transformation, and God was seemingly nothing more than a cosmic “coach,” urging greater efforts from the sidelines.

Many of the traditional Christian theologians of this age began to mold their theologies to fit this fundamentally altered description of God, a process that Placher refers to as the “domestication of transcendence.” Although most of them did not go so far as eliminating the traditional categories of Christian theology, their embrace of this essential deism led them to rework many of the inherited Christian categories along lines that they hoped would be acceptable to the rationalist intellectuals. Although there are many that could be cited, the most obvious

² William A. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster, 1996), 178.

example of this new “liberal” theology was the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his 1799 work, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. The subtitle of this work says it all; Schleiermacher was a pastor and court theologian among the intellectuals in Berlin and knew firsthand their antipathy to the traditional Christian understanding of God. In these “speeches,” Schleiermacher attempted to show these despisers that God and religion were nothing more than the highest forms of the world they imagined. To do so, Schleiermacher posited a theology that essentially sprung from the interior of the educated person.

What I assert and what I should like to establish for religion include the following: It springs necessarily and by itself from the interior of every better soul, it has its province in the mind in which it reigns sovereign, and it is worthy of moving the noblest and most excellent by means of its innermost power and by having its innermost essence known by them.³

This strategy of reaching out to the rationalistic despisers of religion was based on a romantic vision of finding God within and religion as the means of fulfilling that which was already inside the human person. But this did not work; if the power was already inside themselves, then these rational intellectuals saw no need for an external, potent God to do anything. Why bother with religion at all if everything needful were already inside the human person? There are many forms of achieving internal human potential, and religion is one of the lesser of these forms of the realization of human self-potential. This strategy reduced Christianity to a form of therapy and self-actualization, and not a very good one, at that.

The similar dynamic was at work as Christianity was transplanted to North America. Christianity in colonial America was a bewildering hodgepodge of various Christian movements and denominations, a situation that many found disturbing and potentially dangerous, as these groups competed with one another. Though Europe tried to establish the familiar patterns of state-supported religion in North America, these attempts were doomed to failure because of both practical and theoretical pluralism; there was no one dominant form of Protestant Christianity for the state to support, and the deist leaders of the country thought this a good thing. The space left for organized religion, then, was for it to be the moral compass and teacher for the “unenlightened” masses, predicated on the idea that all religions basically taught the same morality derived from nature. Educated deists could find this in themselves, but the masses had to be taught, and this was the job reserved for the churches. Instead of a political establishment of religion (as in Europe), America formed a “cultural” establishment of religion, a vaguely generic form of Reformed Protestantism, modified by Arminianism.

³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 17.

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In this cultural establishment of religion in America, religion was seen as good, and everyone should have one. The theological *content* of that religion was generally unimportant, as long as whatever religious system you chose fulfilled its primary task of teaching that common morality. This new American form of religion (mainly Christian) was soon known for its positive energy, the Christian task of building the kingdom of God on earth (post-millennialism) energized by revivalistic forms of conversion. Since religion and society itself were working side-by-side, there was little need of outside divine power to intrude into the world to change things. The nation saw itself as bringing about God’s kingdom, with America playing the messianic role in the transformation of the world, along our own religious, political, and cultural lines.

Of course, there were always those retrograde forms of religion that held to or rediscovered the disruptive and transformative power of traditional Christian understandings of God, and these forms of religion were deeply disturbing to the leaders of the American religious consensus. There were upstart groups of Christians who emphasized or “tapped into” the transformative power of the Christian God, such as the Pentecostals in the early twentieth century, and these groups would have to be controlled or denigrated by the elites as “holy rollers” or backwards rural folk. The missionary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was another irruption of God’s power, but many of those caught by this power of God took their zeal overseas. Those who doubted the established post-millennial schema were dismissed as ignorant fundamentalists, whose quaint and disturbing ideas could readily be denigrated. The mainline Protestant leaders of the American cultural establishment of religion would not allow any kind of upstart religiosity to disturb the bargain they had made with the culture; they were to be the providers of deistic moralism, in return for social respectability and support.

This bargain generally held until the 1960s, when new and explosive social forces blew apart the general consensus. The key to the mainline cultural establishment of religion was based on an optimistic, post-millennial reading of social progress, that more rational (and socially respectable) religion would lead to the general advancement of society and, in religious terms, movement toward the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. But the revolutions of the 1960s and later generally did not need the religious consensus that had been forged and saw no reason to privilege mainline religious groups, who were left to try to catch up and prove their relevance to the larger, secular social project. If the morality that the churches were to inculcate was generally available to the larger public by means of general knowledge and social convention, what then made religion

necessary? The movements toward social betterment did not need the backing of religion to advance their causes. If it were possible to save the environment, end racism, or provide for the general welfare (among many other things) without the intervention of organized religion, why then should one bother to be a churchgoer or member? Organized religion was then perhaps a useful ally to these progressive movements, but hardly necessary; the world could be saved without it.

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As well, the optimistic, progressive vision of social progress (religious and secular) has also come under great question. By this metric, the twentieth century was supposed to be a time of ever-increasing social advancement and benefit to all. And to be sure, much has changed in the last one hundred years to improve the lives of many people. But all this progress has hardly improved the basic nature of human persons, and the last century was brimming full of human brutality and evil, magnified on an industrial scale never possible in centuries previous. The horrors of the twentieth century have continued into the twenty-first and show no sign of abating. They say we are living in a postmodern age (whatever that means), in which the enlightenment optimism about human and social progress has been disproved without anything concrete to replace it.

So where does this leave contemporary people? Many continue clinging to the shreds of the old paradigm, hoping against hope that humanity can somehow find its own way out of the horrors that we are able to create. Some have retreated into cynicism, self-centeredness, or apathy. Interestingly, some have been drawn into alternate visions of power and potency, into worlds of fantasy, enchantment, and mystery, or even into alternate virtual realities where human nature and human societies can be magically altered. Some of these alternate visions are utopian and others dystopian, but none of them can fundamentally change the underlying problem, which is us. Flawed and sinful human nature is the one constant that transcends all. If there is going to be a way that things are improved for the better in this world, that change will have to come from a power outside humanity and begin with our own personal transformation.

This transformation can only come from God, the one who created us and who has promised to re-create us (and this world). And this re-creation can only come about by divine power, a power to transform and overcome our innate and self-destructive human sinfulness. This is what the proclamation of a “hot” gospel does; it is the power of God to begin the work of fundamental transformation within the persons who hear this promise and who give their lives to the God whose promise of transformation is true and reliable. Nothing short of this

transformation will do; a lukewarm proclamation of the gospel simply refuses to radically confront us with the necessity of change. If the gospel is only an aid to human moral progress, based on the innate goodness supposedly inside of ourselves, then it is no gospel at all. Only a gospel that promises the power of human transformation through God's new creation has any potency.

This transformative power of the gospel, this "hot" gospel, is what has been sweeping the nations of the Global South and causing the remarkable growth of Christianity in many areas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This same power has been at work in the United States in the past fifty years or so on a smaller basis, through those churches and Christian movements that have discovered (or rediscovered) the "hot" power of the gospel. While the mainline religious groups have lost their members and power, upstart (retrograde) groups have grown, including the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic Christians. Insofar as they have tapped into the transformative power of the Christian gospel, they have prospered; when they have lost sight of this, they have begun to wither. In their insightful study of American religious life, sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark put it this way:

Humans want their religion to be sufficiently potent, vivid, and compelling so that it can offer them rewards of great magnitude. People seek a religion that is capable of miracles and that imparts order and sanity to the human condition. The religious organizations that maximize these aspects of religion, however, also demand the highest price in terms of what the individual must do to qualify for those rewards.⁴

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The "hot" gospel, the good news of the transformative power of God in Jesus Christ, is the center of the Bible and traditional Christianity. It comes through most vividly in the writings of Paul, where he often talks about the power of the gospel to make of human beings a new creation in Christ Jesus. Paul writes:

⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 282.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. (Rom 1:16)

Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. (Eph 3:7)⁵

So if the churches of North America are to remain strong and to grow, they must move out of their lukewarm stupor and rediscover the heat of the transformative gospel of Christ Jesus, the “hot” gospel they once had and can have again. This will not be easy, but with a God “that makes all thing new,” it can well happen. ⊕

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⁵ These ideas are found throughout Paul’s writings; see also 1 Cor 1:17, 1 Thess 1:5, and 2 Tim 1:8, among others.