

BOOK REVIEW
of
Michael Horton,
Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church,
BakerBooks, 2008.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

No one would argue that any of us are immune to the influences of the culture in which we live. The question that Michael Horton raises in *Christless Christianity* is just how much has American culture influenced the American evangelical church? In the minds of some, America is a Christian nation, and patriotism and Christianity go hand and hand. Being a Christian is part of being a good American. Others, in my opinion more perceptive and informed, would claim that America is in as much need of evangelization as any other country, and that whatever Christian roots America may have, it is now following after other gods. Horton would be, in my opinion, in the latter camp, and is concerned that American culture has greatly influenced the American Church to the point that there is little room left for Christ within it. All who are concerned about true religion, and those who take the teachings about being salt and light within the culture seriously, will likely find this book to be valuable. For many of us, this may be a difficult book to read, for it asks us to critically evaluate our culture and the many voices that claim to be Christian within it. Nevertheless, I think the exercise to be well worth while and rewarding to those who will hear him out.

Horton is the J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California. He received a B.A. degree from Biola University, an M.A. degree from Westminster Seminary California, a Ph.D. degree from Wycliffe Hall, Oxford and Coventry University, and also completed a Research Fellowship at Yale Divinity School. He is ordained in the United Reformed Churches in North America and has served two congregations in southern California. He is the editor of *Modern Reformation* magazine, and is host of the nationally syndicated radio program, *The White Horse Inn*. He has written or edited about twenty books, including *The Agony of Deceit: What Some TV Preachers Are Really Teaching*, *Made In America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism*, *Power Religion: The Selling Out of The Evangelical Church*, *Beyond Culture Wars: Is America A Mission Field or Battlefield?*, and *Where In The World Is The Church: Understanding Culture & Your Role In It*.

The book *Christless Christianity* contains seven chapters. Chapter 1 is titled *Christless Christianity: The American Captivity of the Church*. Chapter 2 is titled *Naming Our Captivity: Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism*. Chapter 3 is titled *Smooth Talking and Christless Christianity*. Chapter 4 is *How We Turn Good News into Good Advice*. Chapter 5 is *Your Own Personal Jesus*. Chapter 6 is *Delivering Christ: The Message and the Medium*. Chapter 7 is titled *A Call to the Resistance*.

In Chapter 1, Horton, who has been a critical observer of the American scene for quite some time, writes “I think that the church in America today is so obsessed with being practical, relevant, helpful, successful, and perhaps even well-liked that it nearly mirrors the world itself. Aside from the packaging, there is nothing that cannot be found in most churches today that could not be satisfied by any number of secular programs and self-help groups.” Commenting further on how patriotism and evangelical faith may well be often confused, Horton writes “Heaven and hell still figure prominently in this version. Especially on the ‘high holy days’ of the American church calendar (that is, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Father’s Day, and Mother’s Day), often complete with giant American flags, a color guard, and patriotic songs, this sterner version of ‘do more, try harder’ helped get the culture wars off the ground.” “As this new gospel becomes more obviously American than Christian, we all have to take a step back and ask ourselves whether evangelicalism is increasingly a cultural and political movement with a sentimental attachment to the image of Jesus more than a witness to ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2).” Perhaps you think he is exaggerating and doesn’t really mean it in quite such strong terms, but the remainder of the book develops these thoughts in detail.

In Chapter 2, Horton claims that American evangelicalism is primarily moralistic, therapeutic deism. Horton writes that “evangelicals are as likely as mainliners today to talk pop psychology, politics, or moralism instead of the gospel.” Horton quotes George Barna as follows: “the spirituality of America is Christian in name only”. According to Horton, “The challenge before us as Christian witnesses is whether we will offer Jesus Christ as the key to fulfilling our narcissistic preoccupation or as the Redeemer who liberates us from its guilt and power.”

In Chapter 3, Horton claims that evangelicals give lip service to true Christianity while actually leading the way in secularization of the faith. He writes: “Not only have evangelicals caught up with their liberal rivals in accommodating religion to secular culture, they are now clearly in the lead. No secular self-help guru comes close to the sales of evangelical rivals.” Horton gives a great deal of space to analyzing the “ministry” of Joel Osteen (he gives some space also to Kenneth Copland, T. D. Jakes, Benny Hinn, and Joyce Meyer). He concentrates on Osteen because of the phenomenal success, in terms of numbers, of Osteen, but also because he so clearly, according to Horton, displays the characteristics that Horton criticizes in his book. Horton writes, “There is no *condemnation* in Osteen’s message for failing to fulfill God’s righteous law. On the other hand, there is no *justification*. Instead of either message, there is an upbeat moralism that is somewhere in the middle: Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful.” “Osteen seems to think that we are basically good people and

God has a very easy way for us to save ourselves – not from his judgment, but from our lack of success in life – with his help.” “While Osteen is hardly unique, his message is one of the clearest examples of moralistic, therapeutic deism. Is it possible to have evangelism without the evangel? Christian outreach without a Christian message?” “Osteen’s outlook may resonate with Americans steeped in a sentimentalized version of the Pelagian heresy of self-salvation. But it is not Christianity.” “You do not need Christ for the things that Osteen and many other preachers today promise. You do not need the Bible, just Tony Robbins. You do not need the kind of redemption that is promised in the Gospels. It is not even clear why you would need God simply to have a more positive outlook on life.”

In Chapter 5, Horton claims that “While evangelicals talk a lot about truth, their witness, worship, and spirituality seem in many ways more like Mormon, New Age, and liberal nemeses than anything like historical Christianity.” Then he approvingly quotes Curtis White: “We would prefer to be left alone, warmed by our beliefs-that-make-no-sense, whether they are the quotidian platitudes of ordinary Americans, the magical thinking of evangelicals, the mystical thinking of New Age Gnostics, the teary-eyed patriotism of social conservatives, or the perfervid loyalty of the rich to their free-market Mammon. We are thus the congregation of the Church of the Infinitely Fractured, splendidly alone together. . . . Aren’t these all the false gods that Isaiah and Jeremiah confronted, the cults of the ‘hot air gods’? The gods that couldn’t scare birds from a cucumber patch? Belief of every kind and cult, self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement of every degree, all flourish. And yet God is abandoned.”

In Chapter 6, Horton summarizes what he thinks should be the message presented in Christian churches. “The faithful ministry of Word, sacrament, and discipline *is* the mission (Matt. 28: 19-20). A church that is not outward looking, eager to bring the Good News to the ends of the earth, is not really bringing it to those already gathered into Christ’s flock. A genuinely *evangelical* church will be an *evangelical* church: a place where the gospel is delivered through Word and sacrament and a people who witness to it in the world. It will be a place where believers and unbelievers alike will be recipients of God’s Good News.” “Preaching is central, not because we value the intellect to the exclusion of the emotions and the will, but because it is God’s action rather than our own. The God who accomplished our salvation now delivers it to us.”

In Chapter 7, the last chapter, Horton appeals to true Christians to resist the secularization of the church. “It begins by challenging not only weak views of God, sin, and grace but the plausibility structures, paradigms, or worldviews that make biblical views increasingly incomprehensible even for most laypeople and pastors. In the Christian discourse of resistance, God is the speaker. It is time to start listening to God’s voice in Scripture again, taking our covenant Lord more seriously than we do ourselves and the wider secular audience that needs to be saved from its *self-talk*.”