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**THE GOSPEL COALITION**

PASTORAL PENSÉES

# Motivations to Appeal to in Our Hearers When We Preach for Conversion<sup>1</sup>

— D. A. Carson —

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**M**ost of us, I suspect, develop fairly standard ways, one might even say repetitive ways, to appeal to the motivations of our hearers when we preach the gospel. Recently, however, I have wondered if I have erred in this respect—not so much in what I say as in what I never or almost never say. What follows is in some ways a *mea culpa*, plus some indication of why I think the topic should be important for all of us.

Before I survey the motivations themselves, I should specify that because the gospel is to be preached to both unbelievers and believers, the motivations that here interest me may be found among both parties. Nevertheless, I shall tilt the discussion toward those motivations of *unbelievers* to which we should appeal when we preach the gospel to them, aiming, in God’s mercy, at their conversion.

## *1. A Survey of Possible Motivations*

The eight motivations I am about to list are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Several may, and often do, coexist at one time and in one person. In no particular order of importance:

### **1.1 Fear**

The Letter to the Hebrews insists that people are kept all their lives in fear of death but that the coming of the Son of God as a human being, a son of Abraham, set in train the destruction of him who has the power of death, namely, the devil himself (Heb 2:14–18). With respect to this particular fear, then, the preaching of the gospel promises a *reduction* in fear. On the other hand, in various ways Jesus tells his hearers to fear him who has power to destroy body and soul in hell (Matt 10:38). Not a few of the parables end in a simple polarity: gathered into barns or burned (Matt 13:30), entering the home of the wedding feast or being shut outside where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 22:10–13), and so forth. Some apocalyptic images depict people calling for the rocks and mountains to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb (Luke 23:30; Rev 6:15–17). Belonging to the same theme are

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a lightly edited manuscript from a paper presented on May 19, 2010 at The Gospel Coalition’s Pastors’ Colloquium in Deerfield, Illinois.

texts asking us, rhetorically, where the profit lies if we gain the whole world but lose our own souls (Matt 16:26), or the insistence that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:31).

Obviously it is possible to preach the wrath of God in such an angry and self-righteous fashion that we bear a much closer resemblance to Elmer Gantry than to Jesus Christ. On the other hand, in addition to the example of Jesus and the apostles, we have occasional examples from church history where God has used the appeal to the fear of judgment in powerful ways. The best known witness is doubtless Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which I reread some weeks ago to remind myself how biblical most of it is.

### 1.2. The Burden of Guilt

I specify "the burden of guilt" instead of "guilt" because I prefer to use the latter for one's moral and legal status before the holy God. In other words, one may *be* very guilty and not feel guilty, that is, not labor under any burden of guilt. If one is in fact guilty but feels nothing of the burden of guilt, the objective guilt is not a motivation for conversion. Until one cries, in these words or something similar, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps 51:4),<sup>2</sup> one is not strongly motivated by the burden of guilt. On the other hand, that guilt, rightly perceived, can be a crushing burden and thus a powerful and desperate motivation for relief.

It is a truism of much Reformed theology, not least Puritan theology, that the law must do its work before grace can do its work. Without an adequate dose of the former, the latter is likely merely to heal the wounds of the people slightly (to use King James English). That Puritan heritage influenced many who were, strictly speaking, outside that heritage. For example, John Wesley's advice to a young minister on how to preach the gospel in any new situation is replete with this perspective.<sup>3</sup> The text to which many in this tradition appealed was Gal 3: the law is our παιδαγωγός to bring us to Christ, for the law was added to turn sin into transgression, to make us see our fault, to shut us up under condemnation (Gal 3:19–25). Careful exegesis of Gal 3 has often shown, of course, that this interpretation is substantially mistaken: Gal 3 is less interested in the psychological and moral profile of the person transitioning from guilt to grace, than in unpacking the place of the Mosaic law in redemptive history. Nevertheless, the Puritan vision of the place of the law is not as off-base as some think. For even if Paul's primary point in Gal 3 is to locate the law's rightful place in redemptive history, over against the place that many Palestinian first-century Jews thought it should have, the conclusion one must inevitably draw is that God took extraordinary pains to establish and nurture the law-covenant across a millennium and a half as *preparatio Christi*. Total ignorance of this OT background is one of the reasons that so many in contemporary culture feel almost no burden of guilt when they are first confronted with the Bible, with Jesus, with the gospel. In fact, nurtured on a spongy epistemology, many hear the law's demands and conclude, at least initially, that the God who thought this lot up is not worth respecting, for he must be a manipulative and power-hungry despot. Still, at some point the burden of guilt catches up with many people, and it can become a powerful motivation in their conversion.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from *Today's New International Version* (TNIV), © 2005.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, "To an Evangelical Layman," in *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 26: Letters II: 1740–1755* (ed. Frank Baker; Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 482–89.

### **1.3. Shame**

A glance at the literature shows how difficult it is to distinguish absolutely between guilt and shame. Some cultural anthropologists speak of “shame cultures” as if such cultures know little of guilt, and of some traditional Western cultures as if they are guilt-ridden but know little of shame: the two kinds of cultures are sometimes treated as if they are categorically disjunctive. Some in the field of psychiatry assert that guilt arises from what we do, while shame arises from what we are, but that is certainly not a biblical distinction. In the Bible we may be guilty and feel guilty for what we are, and equally we may be ashamed of what we do.

In popular parlance, I suspect that shame has more to do with losing face, primarily (though not exclusively) in horizontal relationships. Nevertheless, if one loses face before one’s family or peers, it is usually because one has done something “wrong” as judged by those peers, so it is hard to see why guilt feelings do not also intrude. Similarly, one may be genuinely guilty of some sort of moral breach and be ashamed of what one has done. Initially Adam and Eve are naked and unashamed: they have nothing to hide. But when sin changes everything, does Adam hide from God because he feels guilty or because he feels ashamed? Must one choose? Nevertheless, there does appear to be a slight difference in focus between the two: shame has to do with losing face, often objectively, and hence feeling shamed. Such loss of face commonly springs from one’s own faults, but of course it may spring from something one has endured—like David’s envoys who are ashamed of losing half their beards at the hands of the Ammonites and whom David therefore consoles by instructing them to remain at Jericho until their beards grow back (2 Sam 10:1–5). They have lost face, but of course in this instance they are not guilty of anything.

Many have argued that in a culture like ours, which protests that it is unmoved by the law’s demands and that refuses to admit to guilt feelings because it refuses to admit to guilt, a better way to unpack the nature of sin is to unfold the nature of idolatry rather than the nature of law. Idolatry is bound up with corrosive relationships, with de-godding God, with shameful distortions and substitutions; and, it is argued, these evils are more easily admitted among yuppie postmoderns than are the evils of transgressing law. In other words, shame is more readily acknowledged than guilt.

### **1.4. The Need for “Future Grace”**

When John Piper unpacks this category, he has primarily Christians in view. Historically, however, a great deal of evangelism has been carried out by urging people to prepare to meet God, to receive the grace now that alone prepares a sinner for resurrection-existence in the new heaven and the new earth. Where is the profit in gaining the world and losing one’s soul? Where there is widespread belief that one must finally give an account to a holy God who does not grade on the curve, this sort of appeal carries quite a lot of weight. The motivations to which one appeals are a mixture of fear (which I have already mentioned) and the desire to be found right, just, before this God, acceptable to him.

### **1.5. The Attractiveness of Truth**

Frequently the apostles declare that they bear witness to the truth, that they declare the truth, that they do not peddle the truth, that they cannot do other than speak the truth, that they speak the truth plainly in the eyes of all, and so forth (e.g., John 19:35; Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 4:2; 11:10; 13:8). The assumption, of course, is that by the grace of God, the truth itself is attractive to some. Cornelius was such a man. He was a good deal more eager to hear the truth, at least initially, than Peter was to declare it. For those

with eyes to see and ears to hear, the truth can be self-attesting; for others, like some of Jesus' opponents in John 8, the truth is precisely what is detested: "Because I tell you the truth, you do not believe" (John 8:45; cf. also Isa 6, cited in Matt 13 and elsewhere). To draw an analogy: the one gospel can be a wonderful aroma to those who are being saved and a disgusting stench to those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:18). So also the truth can appear wonderful to those who by grace begin to see its beauty and compelling nature, while actually causing offense and unbelief in those who are perishing.

When I was a young man, many university missions spent a lot of time defending, say, the deity of Christ or his resurrection from the dead. The widespread assumption, both among the evangelists and among many of the student hearers, was that if one accepted the truth of these claims, one was already on the path toward becoming a Christian. This assumption sustained quite a lot of evidentialist apologetics. The approach is flawed in several ways, of course. James reminds us that the devil knows and believes such truths, but such "faith" does not save him (James 2:19). Granted, however, the need for grace to enable the "natural" person to perceive the truth, one cannot deny that one of the motivations in people as they begin to "close" with Christ (to use an old Puritan expression) is the attractiveness of the truth. While some in Athens sneered, others, in some ways already hooked by what the apostle Paul was saying, wanted to hear him again on these matters (Acts 17:32). They were drawn to the truth.

### **1.6. A General, Despairing Sense of Need**

It is pretty clear from the Gospel accounts that many who pursued Jesus did not do so out of a well thought-through theology (e.g., law precedes gospel, and they were under deep conviction of sin), but out of desperation fed by their most acutely perceived need. Witness the woman with the history of hemorrhaging (Matt 9:20–21), the two blind men by the side of the road calling for the Son of David to have mercy on them (Matt 9:27), the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:25–28), and many others. In some cases, of course, Jesus responds to such needs yet also pushes on a little farther to deal with the sin in their lives (the Samaritan woman [John 4:10–18], the man by the pool of Bethesda [John 5:5–14]). Moreover, it does not follow that everyone who is healed by Jesus is "saved" in the fullest theological sense of that word. For instance, nine of the ten healed lepers do not have the courtesy of gratitude, let alone saving faith (Luke 17:11–19). Yet where there is a whole-hearted and desperate plea to Jesus, even absent much theological understanding, it is wonderful to see how embracing Jesus is.

Pastoral experience supports this assessment. Many of us have witnessed people turning to Christ with remarkably little exact theological knowledge. The knowledge comes later. Why these people come, at least initially, is that they need help, need it desperately, and turn to Jesus. This may prove to be part of a broader, whole-life turning to Jesus. Their initial motivations, however, are all bound up with desperation.

### **1.7. Responding to Grace and Love**

Both Testaments repeatedly emphasize the matchless love and grace of God. Some are drawn to Christ when they begin to glimpse the Father's love for this damned world in sending his Son to the cross, and the Son's love in accomplishing his Father's will. One suspects that the appellation Mary and Martha had for their brother Lazarus—"the one you love," they say to Jesus (John 11:3)—reflects a common experience: so many felt peculiarly loved by Jesus, even the Fourth Evangelist himself (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). Paul cannot talk long about justification and the cross-work of Christ without breaking out with an adoring exclamation such as "who loved me and gave himself for me"

(Gal 2:20). Whether it is the love of the proverbial father for his prodigal sons (Luke 15:20–24) or the assertion that Christ loved the church and gave himself for her (Eph 5:25, 29), whether it is the gut-wrenching portrayal of the love of God in Hosea or Paul’s prayer that believers might have the power, together with all the saints, to grasp the limitless dimensions of that love (Eph 3:17–19), the response to the love of God is one of the most powerful motivations people experience, not only when they first close with Christ but also when they mature in Christ.

### **1.8. A Rather Vague Desire to Be on the Side of What Is Right, of What Is from God, of What Is Biblical, of What Is Clean, of What Endures**

I know that sounds terribly vague. If I had to attach one word to what I am talking about, it would probably be the motivation of hope. Consider the encounters with Jesus in John 1:19–51. The Baptist’s disciples begin to follow Jesus because their master had pointed to him. They clearly hope he is the one to come. The christological confession at Caesarea Philippi (“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” [Matt 16:16]) is part of this hope, of course—even though the context shows the apostles at this point have no category for a crucified Messiah. The same sort of longing, with even less theological understanding, is reflected in the desire of Zacchaeus to entertain Jesus in his home (Luke 19:6). I am not trying to specify exactly when the apostles or Zacchaeus were converted. I am pointing out merely that at least part of their motivations in pursuing Jesus, at least initially, lay in their desire to see if he really would fulfill Scripture-anticipation, if a good and powerful man would come to the home of a corrupt civil servant. They hoped so. Transparently, such hope can merge with other motivations already listed: people may hope for release from the burden of guilt, hope to be justified by God on the last day, hope that things will turn out well both short-term and in eternity.

So I turn now from this survey of possible motivations that people display when they turn to Jesus and offer:

## ***2. Four Theological and Pastoral Reflections on This Survey***

1. *We do not have the right to choose only one of these motivations in people and to appeal to it restrictively.*

Consider an analogy. It has become common to speak of half a dozen distinguishable models of the atonement. I do not much like the rubric, but I shall use it for the sake of convenience. Many is the recent book that argues that since all these “models” are grounded in Scripture, we are free to choose the one we prefer. But that is precisely what we are not free to do, unless we conceive of Scripture as little more than a case-book, an inspired volume of cases, warranting readers to glom onto those few cases, and only those cases, that seem to fit their own situations or preferences most closely. If we hold to a more traditional and faithful understanding of Scripture, then to the extent that the various models of the atonement are warranted by Scripture, we must hold to all of them—and then work out how each is related to the others, what holds them together, where there is a priority among them that is established by Scripture itself, and so forth. But we dare not choose merely one or two of them.

So also here. Insofar as these diverse motivations enjoy biblical precedent or even biblical warrant, preachers do not have the right to appeal to only one or two motivations as if they were the only legitimate ones. We ought to appeal, at various times, to all these motivations—and, again, work out how each is related to the others, what holds them together, and where there is a priority among them that is

established by Scripture itself. But we do not have the right to appeal constantly to, say, fear before God, without also on occasion appealing to other biblically illustrated and sanctioned motivations.

*2. On the other hand, we may have the right to emphasize one motivation more than others.*

In the same way that the structure and emphases of Paul's evangelistic addresses could change, depending on whether he was addressing biblically literate Jews and proselytes (Acts 13) or completely biblically illiterate pagans (Acts 17), so the particular motivations to which we appeal may vary according to our knowledge of our audience. In a somewhat similar vein, if we are addressing biblically literate but unregenerate people, some of our appeal will presuppose that they know the Scriptures at some level, that many of them, say, will be convinced that there is a judgment to be faced, a heaven to be gained, a hell to be shunned and feared. By contrast, if we are addressing biblically illiterate people, then although all those themes will at some point have to be introduced, our initial appeals may sound quite different. Some motivations are of course unworthy, and we should never appeal to them. For example, "Come to Jesus, and you will receive a lot of cargo,"<sup>4</sup> or "Turn to Jesus, and you will always be free of trouble." Where motivations are not unworthy, however, and especially where they are biblically sanctioned, we may find it particularly appropriate to appeal to certain motivations rather more than others.

It would be easy to go through the list I laid out and conjure up situations where it is the part of prudential wisdom to appeal to one or two motivations rather more often than to all the rest. Had we time, it would be an excellent exercise to envisage the kind of audience that ought to find us appealing to primarily this or that motivation in our hearers.

*3. Nevertheless, the comprehensiveness of our appeal to diverse motivations will reflect the comprehensiveness of our grasp of the gospel.*

Once again, let me draw an analogy first before establishing my point. For the last fifteen or twenty years, many of us have wrestled long and hard with the doctrine of justification, judging that something essential to the gospel is at stake in the current discussions. The result, however, is that we have sometimes so tied the gospel and conversion to the question of our right standing before God that we have downplayed the new birth. We have emphasized Christ's bearing our guilt and the nature of imputation without correspondingly emphasizing the regenerating work of the Spirit and the gospel as the power of God, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, in transforming our lives, in our becoming part of the new creation. Suppose, then, that we managed to emphasize both of these elements of conversion appropriately (let us call them the forensic and the transformative). We might, of course, then tumble into neglect of the running biblical tension between our joy in the kingdom of God now already operating in the reign of King Jesus and the joy that awaits the consummation of that kingdom in the resurrection-existence of the new heaven and the new earth. Understanding this tension will engender hope, thereby reinforcing all the motivations that spring from a godly anticipation of what God has promised that still lies ahead. In other words, while the exigencies of our pastoral location during these past twenty years have demanded that we focus on forensic elements of the gospel and conversion, a robust biblical theology demands that part of our ministry be taken up by the biblical exigencies, the shape of the gospel itself, the rich and complex nature of its outworking in conversion and in the spiritual maturation of the believer and of the church.

So also this matter of choosing the motivations to which we appeal—choices that largely shape our sermons. For pastoral reasons, we may decide, for instance, that our particular audience, with its endless frustrated and idolatrous relationships and its suspicion of law-categories, needs a heavy emphasis on

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. neo-Melanesian "cargo cults," or our own health, wealth, and prosperity gospels.

the generosity and freedom of God's grace: our God, as Tim Keller likes to put it, is an overwhelmingly prodigal God.<sup>5</sup> Well and good. But the Bible itself depicts Jesus inciting fear in the hearts of people with his insistence that the God with whom they have to deal "can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). Again, Jesus openly appeals to motivations that seek eternal rather than temporary and material rewards. He does not hesitate to elicit awareness of guilt and to invoke shame: Who goes home justified, the Pharisee or the publican (Luke 18:9–14)? Who gives more, the wealthy givers or the widow with her two mites (Mark 12:41–44)?

So while we may, for pastoral reasons, initially choose to appeal to certain motivations and not others, it is surely the path of biblical faithfulness so to teach and preach the Word of God that we awaken new motivations in the hearts and minds of our people as we unpack the complex richness of the glorious gospel of our blessed God. If instead we find ourselves constantly appealing to the same two or three motivations while ignoring others, it is probably because our choices are too much shaped by our perceptions of local cultural needs and too little shaped by the richness of the biblical gospel. Sooner or later, our people may read their Bibles with limiting and even dangerous blinkers that we ourselves have given them.

*4. To put this another way, all of the biblically sanctioned motivations for pursuing God, for pursuing Christ, say complementary things about God himself, such that failure to cover the sweep of motivations ultimately results in diminishing God.*

Thus, the motivations characterized by fear are bound up with the truth that God is holy, that he is rightfully our Judge, that he gathers some into his presence and casts others into outer darkness, that his knowledge of us is perfect, extending not only to a grasp of our motives but even to a full-bore knowledge of what we would have done under different circumstances (a form of so-called "middle knowledge"). The burden of guilt reminds us that God does not grade on the curve, and unless we are justified by the one who is himself just while justifying the ungodly, there is no hope for us.

And so we could work through the list. The point to be made is simple: any failure to appeal to the full range of biblically exemplified and biblically sanctioned motivations not only means that there are some people we are not taking into account, but, more seriously, that there are elements in the character and attributes of God himself that we are almost certainly ignoring.

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008).