

Why We Need Gospel Renewal

GOSPEL RENEWAL • PRE-READING 01

The gospel is not only the message by which people become Christians. It is also the message through which Christians continue to be renewed. Gospel renewal occurs when the truths of sin and grace move from being ideas we can explain to realities that shape our loves, our choices, our relationships, and our sense of who we are.

A person may know the vocabulary of grace while still living as though acceptance must be earned. We can confess that salvation is a gift and yet measure our worth by spiritual performance, career success, the approval of others, or the appearance of a well-ordered family. Renewal begins when the gospel reaches these deeper places.

The Gospel Must Be Experienced, Not Merely Understood

Keller describes personal gospel renewal as a recovery of the gospel that changes life. We become newly aware of our sin, including the self-justification and unbelief beneath outwardly respectable behavior. At the same time, we become newly aware of the beauty and sufficiency of Christ. Neither awareness can stand alone. Seeing only sin produces shame or defensiveness; speaking only of acceptance without facing sin can make grace seem trivial.

In the gospel, the holiness of God and the mercy of God meet. We do not minimize our wrongdoing in order to feel loved. Nor do we try to make ourselves worthy of love before approaching God. Christ has already accomplished what we could not. We can therefore be more truthful about ourselves because our acceptance does not rest on our ability to defend ourselves.

A Change at the Level of the Heart

Outward behavior can change without a person becoming more loving, free, or humble. Someone can stop a harmful habit because it threatens their reputation. Another can become diligent in religious practices because they fear rejection. These may look like improvements, but the heart can remain organized around fear, pride, or control.

The gospel addresses not only what we do but what we are seeking through what we do. Why do we need to win an argument? Why does criticism feel unbearable? Why can a disappointing day make us feel worthless? Such reactions can reveal that something other than God has

become the foundation of our identity.

This does not make obedience unimportant. Rather, it gives obedience a new foundation. Instead of obeying to secure God's favor, believers obey because they have been received in Christ. Gratitude, love, and trust begin to displace anxiety and self-protection. The change is not less demanding; it is deeper and more enduring.

Renewal Is More Than a Religious Event

Keller distinguishes gospel renewal from attempts to manufacture spiritual excitement. Emotional intensity, large gatherings, dramatic stories, and increased activity may accompany renewal, but none proves that it has occurred. The central question is whether people are turning from self-reliance toward Christ, growing in holiness, and loving God and neighbor more fully.

A church can be busy without being renewed. Likewise, an individual can accumulate knowledge, commitments, and service opportunities while remaining spiritually exhausted. Genuine renewal is the Spirit's work through the gospel, not the result of a technique or an atmosphere we can produce.

The Ordinary Christian Life

The need for renewal is not limited to moments of crisis. The gospel must continually challenge the stories we tell ourselves: that we are what we accomplish, that failure makes us unlovable, that other people's praise can finally make us secure, or that our goodness places God in our debt.

Because our hearts repeatedly return to these false sources of security, Christian growth involves repeated repentance and renewed faith. We keep returning to the finished work of Jesus—not because his work is incomplete, but because we are slow to live in its freedom.

The result is a different kind of life: honest about sin without despair, confident in grace without complacency, active in love without the need to prove ourselves. This is the renewal the gospel offers.

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